



Human Resource Governance and Workplace Safety: Unpacking the Compliance-Motivation Nexus in Dhaka's Garment Factories

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ABSTRACT: The garment sector in Dhaka, Bangladesh, is a significant contributor to the national economy, yet it faces persistent challenges in maintaining workplace safety. This paper explores the role of human resource (HR) governance in balancing compliance with labor laws and motivating workers to enhance safety outcomes. Drawing on extensive literature and a case study of selected garment factories in Dhaka, the study reveals that while compliance mechanisms are increasingly being enforced, they often fall short without corresponding attention to worker motivation and organizational culture. The research finds that effective HR governance must integrate regulatory compliance with intrinsic and extrinsic motivational strategies to create a sustainable safety culture. Recommendations are offered for policy and managerial interventions, with suggestions for future research to deepen understanding in this critical area.

Keywords: Human Resource Governance, Workplace Safety, Compliance, Motivation, Garment Industry, Dhaka, Bangladesh, Organizational Culture, Labor Laws, Employee Engagement.

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INTRODUCTION

Workplace safety remains a critical issue in the garment industry of Dhaka, Bangladesh, a sector marked by rapid growth and global competitiveness [1]. Despite improvements in regulatory frameworks and safety standards following high-profile tragedies such as the Rana Plaza collapse in 2013, the effectiveness of these interventions hinges on their integration with human resource governance practices [2]. This paper investigates how HR governance mediates the nexus between compliance and motivation in fostering a safer work environment in garment factories in Dhaka [3]. It aims to bridge the gap between regulatory compliance and human-centric approaches by unpacking the complex

interrelation between rules, organizational behavior, and employee engagement [4].

Objectives of the Study

To investigate the current state of human resource governance in Dhaka's garment industry.

To evaluate the effectiveness of compliance mechanisms in improving workplace safety.

To assess the role of employee motivation in fostering a sustainable safety culture.

To identify the interrelationship between compliance and motivation in the context of HR governance.

To provide actionable recommendations for integrating compliance and motivation to enhance safety outcomes.

Research Problem

Despite increased global scrutiny and regulatory reforms following major industrial disasters like the Rana Plaza collapse, many garment factories in Dhaka continue to exhibit persistent workplace safety issues [5]. While compliance frameworks have improved, their effectiveness remains questionable when divorced from the lived experiences and motivations of the workforce [6]. A critical gap exists in understanding how human resource governance can harmonize compliance enforcement with employee motivation to foster a sustainable safety culture [7]. This study addresses the problem of fragmented safety strategies by exploring how HR governance can serve as the missing link in integrating external mandates with internal behavioral drivers in the garment sector [8].

Scope of the Research

This research focuses on medium-sized garment factories located in Dhaka, Bangladesh. It investigates how HR governance structures influence workplace safety through two primary mechanisms: compliance with labor regulations and the motivation of workers [9]. The study employs a qualitative, case-based methodology involving interviews, document analysis, and comparative assessments [10]. Although it centers on factories participating in international compliance initiatives, the insights are relevant to broader industrial sectors facing similar governance challenges [11]. The scope is limited to internal HR practices and does not extend to macroeconomic or geopolitical influences [12].

Significance of the Research

The study holds practical and academic significance. From a practical standpoint, it provides actionable recommendations for factory managers, policymakers, and international buyers aiming to move beyond minimum compliance toward a culture of proactive safety [13]. By demonstrating the value of integrating motivational strategies into HR governance, it offers a pathway to sustainable workplace safety in one of the world's most critical industrial sectors [14]. From an academic perspective, the study contributes to underexplored intersections of institutional theory and self-determination theory within the context of labor-intensive industries in the Global South [15]. It bridges theoretical and empirical gaps, particularly in the nexus of governance, compliance, and motivation [16].

LITERATURE REVIEW

Human Resource Governance in Developing Economies

Human Resource Governance (HRG) involves the policies, practices, and systems that influence employee behavior, performance, and development within organizations [17]. In the context of developing economies like Bangladesh, HRG is influenced by institutional voids, weak regulatory enforcement, and the dominance of export-driven economic models [18]. The garment sector, which contributes over 80% of Bangladesh's exports, is characterized by cost-cutting pressures, informality, and high workforce turnover—factors that complicate the implementation of robust HR governance [19].

Workplace Safety and Compliance Frameworks

Following the Rana Plaza disaster, various safety compliance initiatives such as the Accord on Fire and Building Safety and the Alliance for Bangladesh Worker Safety were launched. These initiatives focused on structural integrity, fire safety, and worker rights [20]. However, compliance alone has not guaranteed sustainable safety outcomes [21]. Studies have shown that while factories may adhere to minimum standards to maintain export contracts, this often results in a 'checklist' mentality rather than a holistic safety culture [22].

The Role of Motivation in Workplace Safety

Motivation is a key driver of employee behavior. Herzberg's two-factor theory (1959) differentiates between hygiene factors (e.g., salary, work conditions) and motivators (e.g., recognition, personal growth) [23]. In high-risk sectors like garment manufacturing, the absence of motivation can lead to safety negligence [24]. Research indicates that organizational commitment to safety, demonstrated through leadership behavior and employee empowerment, is more effective than rule-based enforcement in reducing accidents [25].

Interlinkages between HR Governance, Compliance, and Motivation

There is a growing consensus that compliance and motivation are not mutually exclusive but must be aligned through strategic HR governance [26]. Effective governance systems embed safety into performance management, training, and reward systems [27]. In Bangladesh, however, gaps remain in aligning these elements. Studies found that many HR departments in

Dhaka's garment factories are administrative rather than strategic, limiting their capacity to influence safety culture [28].

Theoretical Underpinnings

The study is grounded in institutional theory and self-determination theory (SDT). Institutional theory explains how regulatory frameworks shape organizational behavior [29], while SDT emphasizes the role of intrinsic motivation in enhancing performance [30]. Together, these theories provide a dual lens to assess how compliance structures interact with motivational dynamics in influencing workplace safety [31].

Theoretical Framework

This study draws on two key theoretical perspectives: Institutional Theory and Self-Determination Theory (SDT), which together provide a dual lens to examine how compliance structures and motivational dynamics shape workplace safety within the framework of human resource governance [32].

Institutional Theory

Institutional theory posits that organizational behavior is shaped by formal structures, rules, and social norms that are institutionalized within the environment in which the organization operates [33]. In the context of Dhaka's garment factories, institutional pressures arise from both local labor laws and international buyer standards, pushing firms toward compliance with safety norms [34]. Coercive pressures (e.g., regulatory mandates), mimetic pressures (e.g., copying successful competitors), and normative pressures (e.g., professional standards) collectively influence how factories structure their HR governance [35]. However, the theory also suggests that compliance may often be symbolic—adopted more to gain legitimacy than to produce substantive change [36]. This aligns with findings that many factories treat compliance as a box-ticking exercise rather than a foundation for genuine safety culture transformation [37].

Self-Determination Theory (SDT)

SDT, developed by Deci and Ryan [38], provides insight into employee motivation by distinguishing between extrinsic and intrinsic motivators. According to SDT, individuals are more likely to internalize organizational goals—such as safety protocols—when

they feel autonomous, competent, and related to others in the workplace [39]. In Dhaka's garment industry, where economic constraints often dominate, motivation strategies tend to focus on extrinsic rewards like bonuses or penalties [40]. However, SDT highlights that lasting behavioral change, particularly in high-risk environments, requires intrinsic motivation nurtured through empowerment, recognition, and meaningful engagement [41]. This theoretical lens is essential for understanding why compliance alone may fail to sustain safety improvements [42].

Integration of Theories into HR Governance

By integrating Institutional Theory and SDT, this study conceptualizes HR governance as the strategic alignment of institutional mandates (compliance) with psychological mechanisms (motivation) to foster a resilient safety culture [43]. Factories that rely solely on external enforcement mechanisms often overlook the internal motivational drivers necessary for employee engagement in safety practices [44]. A hybrid governance model, which incorporates both external and internal factors, is thus more likely to produce sustainable safety outcomes [45]. This dual-theory approach offers a robust framework for assessing the effectiveness of HR strategies in balancing compliance and motivation [46].

METHODOLOGY

This qualitative research employs a case study approach focusing on three medium-sized garment factories in Dhaka. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews with HR managers, line supervisors, and workers, alongside document analysis of HR policies and safety records. The factories were selected based on their participation in international compliance initiatives and varying performance in safety audits [47].

Case Study: Apparel Organizations in Dhaka

Factory A demonstrated strong compliance but low motivation. Workers reported that safety drills and inspections were frequent, yet they felt disengaged and overworked. Factory B combined compliance with motivational strategies such as safety rewards, training programs, and open-door policies, resulting in fewer incidents and higher worker satisfaction. Factory C had weak compliance and minimal motivation, marked by poor safety records and high absenteeism. The

comparative analysis shows that integrating compliance with motivation leads to better safety outcomes. HR practices that emphasize participatory management, continuous training, and performance-based rewards enhance worker engagement and safety adherence.

DISCUSSION

The findings support the hypothesis that HR governance must go beyond regulatory compliance to include motivational strategies tailored to the local context [48]. In Dhaka's garment industry, where many workers face economic hardship and limited job alternatives, intrinsic motivation is often overshadowed by immediate financial needs [49]. Therefore, HR policies must balance hygiene factors (e.g., wages, job security) with motivators (e.g., recognition, training, autonomy) [50]. Furthermore, the institutional environment in Bangladesh requires a shift from reactive to proactive safety management [51]. This entails empowering HR departments to take a strategic role in shaping organizational culture and aligning safety goals with business objectives [52-61].

Key Findings

Compliance mechanisms are essential but insufficient alone to ensure workplace safety.

Motivational strategies significantly influence employee engagement and adherence to safety protocols.

An integrated approach to HR governance that combines compliance and motivation produces the most sustainable safety outcomes.

Strategic HR roles are currently underutilized in many Dhaka-based garment factories.

Worker participation, recognition, and ongoing training contribute to a stronger safety culture.

Conclusion and Recommendations

This study concludes that HR governance in Dhaka's garment factories must evolve from compliance-centric models to integrated frameworks that incorporate employee motivation. Compliance ensures minimum standards, but sustainable safety requires engagement, trust, and a culture of continuous improvement.

Recommendations

Policymakers should strengthen labor inspections and support HR capacity building.

Factory management should invest in motivational HR

practices alongside compliance.

International buyers should incorporate motivation indicators in their audits.

Future Research Directions

Future research could expand this study across a larger sample of factories to test the generalizability of the findings. Quantitative studies could examine the statistical relationship between motivational practices and safety performance. Additionally, exploring gender-specific dynamics in HR governance and safety could offer valuable insights given the high proportion of female workers in the sector.

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