Role of multinational buyers in ensuring worker voice through social dialogue: an exploratory study of the export oriented garment industry

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Abstract

Purpose – This study aims to explore how multinational lead buyers can play an active role in ensuring worker voices in garment supplier factories where workers have limited space to raise their voices, and how buyers' involvement increases the possibilities of worker voices mitigating barriers to social dialogues and enhancing mutual interests of buyers and workers in garment factories.

Design/methodology/approach – Using a qualitative research approach and multiple embedded case study method, this study considered buyer–supplier dyads as the unit of analysis, i.e. two multinational lead buyers and their four corresponding suppliers in the garment industry of Bangladesh. Focus group discussion and key informant in-depth interviews were techniques applied to collect factory-level data, and within and cross-case analysis techniques were applied to develop an overall understanding.

Findings – The results of this study reveal that the opportunities for workers to voice their concerns through social dialogue in garment supplier factories are limited due to various obstacles. Similarly, the role of multinational lead buyers in addressing these issues is found to be less than ideal. This study also shows that buyers can take short-term and long-term initiatives to ensure social dialogues. Moreover, this study presents how social dialogues can meet the expectations of multinational buyers and their garment suppliers.

Research limitations/implications – While this study focuses exclusively on the garment industry, similar scenarios also exist across a multitude of other industries. Thus, future research could extend this study's scope to various sectors, providing a more comprehensive understanding of the general state of

worker voices in Bangladesh. This study stands to make significant contributions to literature in the fields of global value chains, human relations and international business. It will pose critical perspectives on how upstream value chain suppliers can fortify worker rights through social dialogue, and elucidate the means and motives for lead buyers to play a more active role in this endeavour.

Originality/value – This study is distinct in its approach, integrating buyer–supplier roles to pave the way for enhanced worker voice opportunities through social dialogue in garment supplier factories.

Keywords Worker voice, Social dialogue, MNCs, Garment industry, Bangladesh

Paper type Research paper

1. Introduction

Recent studies reported that workers in export-oriented garment supplier factories in Bangladesh have limited space to raise their voices through social dialogues (Latif and Vang, 2021; Schreiber, 2021). Bangladeshi garment factory workers have no effective platform to use to expedite their voices to secure their interests (Alamgir and Alakavuklar, 2020). Although labour unions are widely accepted as a platform to ensure workers' well-being through social dialogues between workers and supplier management (Ashraf and Prentice, 2019; Alamgir and Banerjee, 2019), numerous garment exporters in Bangladesh strategically circumvent the establishment of labour unions within their factories (Anner, 2020). Accordingly, it hinders garment workers' fundamental rights to raise their voices and limits their negotiating and bargaining power with the management to ensure their well-being (Latif *et al.*, 2021; Anner, 2020). In this scenario, it is crucial to bolster social dialogue opportunities to ensure that worker voices are heard in supplier factories. Furthermore, the involvement of multinational buyers is essential in promoting workers' voices, especially in factories where formal labour unions are absent. In addition, multinational corporations (MNCs) are consistently under pressure to secure worker voices and rights within supplier factories in emerging markets. Garment suppliers, facing limited capabilities and various challenges, find it difficult to initiate development measures in the buyer-driven garment industry of Bangladesh without the support of multinational lead buyers (Hoque, 2022; Rana *et al.*, 2019; Sinkovics *et al.*, 2018; Fernandez-Stark *et al.*, 2011). Therefore, buyers need to be involved in this process to ensure worker voices through social dialogues in supplier factories. In light of this, pertinent questions arise:

- Why are garment workers unable to voice their concerns in the buyer-driven garment industry?
- What is the necessity and method for multinational buyers to involve themselves in the social dialogue process where workers have limited capacity to assert their voice?
- What current role do buyers play to facilitate social dialogues between workers and their management, and what role should they assume in the future?

The current study aims to address these research questions.

Social dialogue is a process of discussion and negotiation between employers and workers, designed to foster harmonious relationships within the workplace by providing a platform for workers to raise their voices (Lévesque *et al.*, 2018). Social dialogue has already demonstrated effectiveness by ensuring workers' equality and well-being and reducing gender discrimination and sexual harassment within the garment industry (Sultana *et al.*, 2020; Turker and Altuntas, 2014). Social dialogue can also ensure industrial democracy in garment supplier factories (Reinecke and Donaghey, 2021). Worker voices through social dialogue are also useful in increasing efficiency, productivity, product quality and flexibility (Hoque *et al.*, 2022; Latif *et al.*,

2021; Bryson *et al.*, 2006). Given that numerous stakeholders have emphasized the importance and necessity of a decent work environment in the upstream segment of the global garment value chain, there is a pressing need for worker voices to be heard in garment supplier factories. This is because worker voices are an essential component of decent work conditions (Christ *et al.*, 2020; Hoque and Rana, 2020; Soundararajan *et al.*, 2018; Bryson *et al.*, 2006). However, despite being crucial players in the global garment value chain, garment suppliers are not always receptive and supportive of avenues for worker voice-raising, such as labour unions. They do not want union-type initiatives as they suspect unions will increase workers' wages and other fringe benefits and instigate counter-productive work behaviour, such as unrest, theft, strike, etc. (Hoque and Shahinuzzaman, 2021; Anner, 2020). Against this backdrop, multinational lead buyers in the downstream part of the global garment value chain need to play an active role in ensuring worker voices through social dialogues. Moreover, multinational lead buyers tend to place more emphasis on aspects such as working conditions, working hours, workers' living wages, occupational health and safety and issues related to child labour in garment supplier factories rather than on promoting the escalation of worker voices through social dialogues (Egels-Zandén, 2007). This critical buyer—supplier relational governance for social dialogues and worker voices in the global garment value chain remains largely unexplored or inadequately explored to date. This study illuminates this under-researched area, focusing particularly on the bipartite social dialogues between employers and workers, namely, dialogues between garment suppliers and workers. In addition, it examines the role of multinational lead buyers in facilitating these dialogues within garment supplier factories.

Following a qualitative research approach and multiple embedded case study method, this study selected two multinational garment buyers and their four suppliers in Bangladesh. Both focus group discussion (FGD) and face-to-face in-depth interviews were used to collect data related to buyers' role in raising worker voices through social dialogue. Narratives were developed based on the collected data, and the narratives were used for within and cross-case analysis. This study explores that multinational lead buyers' role is not optimal for ensuring worker voices in their sourcing partners in upstream of the global value chain (GVC). This study also identifies the short- and long-term strategies that multinational lead buyers could consider to facilitate raising worker voices in garment supplier factories. Moreover, this study demonstrates how social dialogues can meet the expectations of buyers and suppliers, outlining the benefits of social dialogues. The findings of this study contribute to the ongoing debate about forming unions or restricting them in garment supplier factories. In addition to that, the study findings contribute to the GVC, human relations and international business literature by showing how buyers and suppliers can play their due roles to ensure worker voices through social dialogues and why lead buyers need to play an active and critical role in meeting the mutual benefits of buyers and suppliers. Indeed, this study is unique in its approach, as it combines the roles of both buyers and suppliers to expand the scope and opportunities for social dialogue within garment supplier firms. Examining both aspects, this study provides a more comprehensive insight into how these interactions can be used to promote better working conditions and employee representation in the garment value chain.

The remainder of this study has been structured as a review of relevant literature in Section 2, methodology of the study in Section 3, findings and analysis in Section 4 and discussions in Section 5. Finally, the conclusion of the study is presented in Section 6.

2. Literature review
2.1 Worker voices
Voice is a multidimensional construct (Dyne *et al.*, 2003). LePine and Van Dyne (1998, p. 854) defined voice as a "nonrequired behavior that emphasizes expression of constructive

challenge with an intent to improve rather than merely criticize". Dyne *et al.* (2003) viewed voice not as an organizational process, but instead as a behaviour exhibited by workers or employees. LePine and Van Dyne (1998, p. 853) addressed voice behaviour as "speaking out and challenging the status quo with the intent of improving the situation". Worker voice refers to workers' work-related communications with managers and supervisors (Latif and Vang, 2021). It is a means for employees and workers to have a say regarding different organizational matters (Wilkinson *et al.*, 2021). While workers occasionally voice their constructive ideas, thoughts, opinions and views, contributing to work and its organizations, there are times when they remain silent, refraining from sharing their thoughts or ideas (Dyne *et al.*, 2003). Silence and voice are two opposites based on worker behaviour (Sherf *et al.*, 2021; Dyne *et al.*, 2003). Dyne *et al.* (2003) stated that silence is not an absence of voice; it is, instead, in different forms and driven by workers' different motivations. They identified three types of employee/worker silence: acquiescent silence, i.e. "withholding relevant ideas, information, or opinions, based on resignation" (p. 1366); defensive silence, i.e. "withholding relevant ideas, information, or opinions as a form of self-protection, based on fear" (p. 1367); and prosocial silence, i.e. "withholding work-related ideas, information, or opinions with the goal of benefiting other people or the organization – based on altruism or cooperative motives" (p. 1368); and three types of employee/worker voice: acquiescent voice, i.e. "the verbal expression of work-related ideas, information, or opinions – based on feelings of resignation" (pp. 1372–1373); defensive voice, i.e. "expressing work-related ideas, information or opinions – based on fear – with the goal of protecting the self" (p. 1372); and prosocial voice, i.e. "expressing work-related ideas, information, or opinions based on cooperative motives" (p. 1371). While acquiescent silence is based on fear, defensive silence is based on the feeling of workers' limited ability to make a significant difference (Morrison and Milliken, 2000).

Worker voices can come in different institutionalized forms (e.g. trade unions, work councils, direct hall meetings, etc.) to solve collective problems (Cazes *et al.*, 2019). Moreover, a worker's voice is important for innovation, continuous learning and improvement (LePine and Van Dyne, 1998). Workers can solve organizational and personal problems by raising their voices indirectly or consulting directly with their management (Cazes *et al.*, 2019). However, workers' implicit beliefs restrict them from raising their voices in their workplaces, particularly in the garment industry (Latif and Vang, 2021). Implicit belief is an individual-level tacit and stable belief of an employee or worker (Detert and Edmondson, 2011). This implicit belief develops throughout an employee/worker's life and acts as a hurdle to raising their voice (Morrison, 2014; Detert and Edmondson, 2011). Detert and Edmondson (2011) identified that psychosocial voice barriers affect workers' intention to raise their voices (Subhakaran and Dyaram, 2018). Detert and Edmondson (2011) identified five implicit voices that hinder employees/workers from raising their voices:

- *presumed target identification*, i.e. managers/supervisors consider worker voices as their criticism;
- *complete/solid solutions to speak up*, i.e. workers need comprehensive knowledge and understanding to recommend any improvement;
- *do not bypass the boss upward*, i.e. workers' voice raising is considered as a dishonour/disloyalty to their supervisor/manager;
- *do not embarrass the boss in public*, i.e. a supervisor/manager does not prefer to receive any negative information in front of any other staffs; and
- *fear of negative career consequences of voice*, i.e. voice raising may hurt their career growth (Latif and Vang, 2021).

Though workers may not often voice their opinions, their infrequent contributions are not always valued by their supervisors (Islam *et al.*, 2020). Consequently, workers often harbour a fear of voicing their concerns or objections to the decisions of their supervisors and managers (Latif and Vang, 2021; Wilkinson *et al.*, 2021). Workers often refrain from voicing their concerns due to this fear and ingrained beliefs (Besieux *et al.*, 2021), which are influenced by their national, social and organizational cultures (Morrison, 2014; Kish-Gephart *et al.*, 2009). Research suggests that individuals in high-power distance cultures tend to experience greater fear in expressing their opinions compared to those in low-power distance cultures (Kwon and Farndale, 2020; Lee *et al.*, 2017; Kish-Gephart *et al.*, 2009; Morrison and Milliken, 2000), where supervisors are more receptive to employee input in decision-making (Kwon *et al.*, 2016). Furthermore, individuals in positions of power may exhibit more discretion and assertiveness in their behaviour (Lee *et al.*, 2017; Pfeffer, 2013), shaping workers' perceptions of engagement with management (Lee *et al.*, 2017). However, worker voice-raising is necessary to ensure long-term sustainable improvement of labour standards (Pike, 2020).

2.2 Worker voices and social dialogue

Social dialogue has been proven significant in ensuring worker voices (Latif and Vang, 2021; Kuruvilla, 2006). A fundamental pillar is providing a decent working environment with workers' freedom of speech in any organization (Sultana *et al.*, 2020; Bryson *et al.*, 2006). Lévesque *et al.* (2018) stated that establishing dialogues between management and worker representatives is significant and beneficial for any firm. Banarjee (2008) suggested dialogues and engagement with all stakeholders. International Labour Organization (ILO, 2018) addressed social dialogue as "all types of negotiation, consultation or simply an exchange of information between, or among, representatives of governments, employers, and workers, on issues of common interest relating to economic and social policy". It is "a process, in which actors inform each other of their intentions and capacities, elaborate information provided to them, and clarify and explain their assumptions and expectations" (Rodrigues *et al.*, 2002, p. 25). Social dialogue "can exist as a tripartite process, with the government as an official party to the dialogue or it may consist of bipartite relations only between labour and management (or trade unions and employers' organizations), with or without indirect government involvement" (Kuruvilla, 2006, p. 178). Based on the intensity of dialogue, social dialogue is classified as "exchange of information", i.e. just sharing information about a matter without any real discussion; "consultation", i.e. involving in a detailed in-depth discussion on the matter; and "negotiation", i.e. consultation with decision-making power (Ishikawa, 2003). The meaning of social dialogue varies from context to context (Alam *et al.*, 2022; Ishikawa, 2003). It can occur at different levels: international, national/local, regional, sectoral and firm levels (Ishikawa, 2003). For instance, Reinecke and Donaghey (2021) found workers have limited abilities and opportunities for social dialogues and voice raising in the garment supplier firms in Bangladesh. Antal and Sobczak (2007) presented the significance of social dialogue between workers' representatives and the management of firms in France. Although social dialogues can ensure worker rights in workplaces, their effectiveness depends on the capacity to mobilize the capabilities of managers and workers (Lévesque *et al.*, 2018). However, social dialogue can improve any adversarial relationships between value chain partners (workers and supervisors/managers) through mutual understanding of any problem/crisis and exploring alternative solutions to the problem (De Prins, 2022; Ebbinghaus and Philip, 2001). Halme *et al.* (2020) addressed worker involvement through social dialogue as an indicator of social performance. Social

dialogue is an effective way of reducing social tensions and conflicts between managers and subordinates (Kabir *et al.*, 2022; Haque and Yamoah, 2021; Nechanska *et al.*, 2020).

2.3 Global value chains and the role of multinational buyers in raising worker voices through social dialogue

GVCs have become a dominant feature of world trade and investment, encompassing all economies, including developing, emerging and developed ones. The production process of goods and services of MNCs, starting with sourcing raw materials to finished products, is increasingly becoming fragmented and carried out in locations with necessary skills and materials available at competitive cost and quality (Lévesque *et al.*, 2018; Kowalski *et al.*, 2015). MNCs apply coercive power and threats to less powerful value chain partners to relocate their production (Lévesque *et al.*, 2018). Against this backdrop, GVCs have emerged as a blessing to developing countries because these countries have the opportunity to participate in the value chains. As opposed to what was required in the past, within the value chain, a country can specialize in one or several activities in which it has a comparative advantage. While GVCs have created enormous opportunities for developing countries, nothing is an unmixed blessing. The opportunity to create jobs and income comes with the cost of employee exploitation, deprivation and a lack of employee rights (Nikulin *et al.*, 2022), with women being the most vulnerable in these countries (Palpacuer, 2008). Another challenge comes from the powerful multinational global buyers to meet their strict demands and standards (Touboulic and Walker, 2016). Increasingly, MNC buyers prefer to work only with suppliers that comply with labour, social and environmental standards (Villena and Gioia, 2020). MNCs anticipate socially responsible behaviour and have thus developed code of conduct (COC) for their suppliers, such as Nike, H&M, Puma and other renowned buyers have private COC intending to improve the working environment in supplier firms within their GVCs (Kashmanian, 2018; Lévesque *et al.*, 2018; Williams *et al.*, 2015). These COCs clearly outlined worker participation scopes and opportunities, and suppliers must comply with the COCs to secure future orders. As the buyer–supplier relationship is linked to the working environment, social dialogue based on better working conditions in a supplier factory strengthens buyer–supplier relational governance (Hoque and Rana, 2020). When lead buyers find that their sourcing suppliers are giving opportunities to workers to participate and contribute in decision-making and problem-solving, they rate suppliers positively and consider for future business relations (Huq *et al.*, 2016). For example, H&M, a fashion retailer, categorizes their most compliant buyers as platinum suppliers, entering into three-year contracts with them. These contracts guarantee a fixed order volume over the three years and ensure that workers in supplier factories receive a living wage (Clean Clothes Campaign, 2016). Moreover, MNCs leverage their value chain position as lead actors to foster workplace social dialogues (Reinecke and Donaghey, 2021). As the garment industry is buyer-driven (Fouji and Hoque, 2021) and most garment suppliers depend entirely on buyers to secure orders, only buyers can force suppliers to give opportunities to the workers to raise their voices.

Given the challenges that suppliers from developing countries may face in meeting these standards, buyers tend to impose rigorous scrutiny and measures to compel the suppliers to uphold and enhance their working conditions (Soundararajan *et al.*, 2018). Besides the powerful multinational buyers, these issues concern the attention and interests of various other actors in the GVCs, including local government, buying houses/sourcing agents, non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and civil society (Donaghey *et al.*, 2014; Levy, 2008). Despite pressures from different actors and especially from the lead buyers to pay special attention to working conditions and labour-related issues by adopting standards and

certifications to promote workers' social welfare, such practices have not contributed much to this reform (Soundararajan *et al.*, 2016). Among the reasons why multinational buyers could not realize many benefits from installing these practices, the liability of foreignness is the strongest one (Soundararajan *et al.*, 2018), which limits the buyers' monitoring and ensuring such practices in these countries at arm's length. While most suppliers follow or pretend to follow the formally monitored part of the standards, they tend to bypass other essential and informal components of the code (Hoque *et al.*, 2016; Sinkovics *et al.*, 2016, 2018). For example, one study by Egels-Zandén (2007) confirmed such practices by Chinese toy suppliers. While these suppliers adhere to formally monitored codes concerning aspects such as working hours, the minimum wage, elimination of child labour, employment contracts and health and safety education, they can often overlook or marginalize other important issues. These might include the voice of the workers, their bargaining power and other forms of workers' rights, which are equally crucial for a fair and balanced work environment. Indeed, the inherent challenges and barriers related to foreign operations, such as geographical distance and a lack of personal involvement, can cause buyers to lose visibility over the processes at the supplier level. This "liability of foreignness" may lead to a lack of oversight or understanding of the actual conditions in which the workers operate. Against this backdrop, social dialogue from the perspective of MNC buyers and their intrinsic interests in pacifying potential supply chain problems offers great promise (Villena and Gioia, 2020). Currently, MNC buyers are facing challenges from their end consumers as the consumers are demanding a standard workplace with the necessary worker rights and benefits in supplier factories where garment products are produced in developing countries (Anner, 2020). Thus, buyers can show their responsibilities and initiatives for worker well-being, ensuring participation in decision-making and voice-raising through social dialogue for their problem-solving (Perry *et al.*, 2015).

3. Methodology

The study makes use of a qualitative research approach and a multiple-embedded case study method (Eisenhardt, 1989; Miles *et al.*, 2014; Yin, 2014) to gain a deeper understanding of the current state of worker voices in the garment industry, the hindrances to raising workers' voices in garment supplier factories and the role of multinational buyers in guaranteeing workers' voices through social dialogues in garment supplier factories. The research also looks into the mutual benefits this approach provides for both buyers and suppliers.

3.1 Study context

The export-oriented buyer-driven garment industry of Bangladesh is the context of this study. The industry is characterized as buyer-dominated because multinational lead buyers hold significant influence, using their discretion to select sourcing suppliers from developing countries and define the terms of their business relationships, thereby influencing suppliers' operations (Anner, 2020). Due to power imbalances, Bangladeshi suppliers must meet multinational buyers' expectations to ensure future orders (Rana *et al.*, 2019). The industry is considered as a context for a few reasons:

- working conditions and workers' lives in garment factories are the key concerns for many stakeholders, particularly for multinational buyers and suppliers;
- following the tragic incidents at Rana Plaza and the Tazreen Factory, lead buyers have started to give special attention to the well-being of workers; and
- workers' voice raising is not significant in the industry.

The garment industry is the leading source of export earnings for Bangladesh, and the country holds the second position among global garment exporters (Faroque *et al.*, 2022; Faroque *et al.*, 2021a; Hoque and Rana, 2020). The industry contributes 83% to the country's total export earnings, demonstrating its significant role in the nation's economy (Hoque, 2021). In 2021–22, this industry earned US$42.613bn from garment exports (BGMEA, 2022). The industry comprises more than 4000 garment suppliers registered in the Bangladesh Garment Manufacturers and Exporters Association (BGMEA), and more than four million workers rely on this industry for their living, and more than 80% of those workers are female (BGMEA, 2022). Despite being operational for more than four decades, the garment industry continues to struggle to establish a healthy working environment in supplier factories (Hoque and Rana, 2020). The precarious working environment in factories is a key issue for multinational lead buyers and other stakeholders (Hoque *et al.*, 2022). However, workers have limited rights and space to raise their voices and settle with management to improve working conditions (Latif and Vang, 2021). Workers are also responsible for limited voice-raising as they have limited knowledge, skills and experience (Maalouf and Hoque, 2022). Despite providing a COC to foster a cooperative management environment in supplier factories, multinational lead buyers have taken limited initiatives to guarantee worker representation through social dialogues (Hoque *et al.*, 2022). Recently, the Ethical Trading Initiative (ETI), a tripartite alliance comprising companies, NGOs, and trade unions, has been working to facilitate social dialogues in supplier factories in Bangladesh. ETI collaborates closely with garment suppliers to amplify worker voices in factories through various training programmes aimed at enhancing the knowledge and skills of managers, supervisors and workers.

3.2 Data collection

Data were collected through two focus group discussions (FGD1 and FGD2) at the office of one of the authors in Dhaka (see Table 1) and in-depth interviews with garment workers,

FGDs	Participants	Gender	Designation	Company/firm/ institute of participants	Experience in garment industry/ academia (year)
FGD1	FP11	Male	Merchandising manager	Large composite knit company	16
	FP12	Male	Production manager	Large woven company	21
	FP13	Male	Quality assurance manager	Large composite knit company	22
	FP14	Male	Industry expert	Consultancy firm	15
	FP15	Male	Academic	A university in Europe	30
FGD2	FP21	Male	Operation manager	Large garment company	18
	FP22	Male	HR, admin and compliance manager	Large knit and woven company	25
	FP23	Male	Merchandising manager	Large woven company	16
	FP24	Male	Industry expert	A freelance consultant	14
	FP25	Male	Academic	A fashion and textile-focused university in Bangladesh	19

Table 1.
Brief description of focus group discussions

Source: Authors' own work

supervisors and managers in garment supplier factories and at their head offices, and with buyers' representatives at their host country offices in Dhaka, Bangladesh (see Tables 2 and 3).

Two European buyers and their four corresponding large garment suppliers in Bangladesh were selected as case companies for detailed investigation through in-depth interviews. The buyers assisted in getting access to supplier factories. While sourcing information from supplier firms via buyers' assistance could potentially create bias amongst respondents, this issue was mitigated by cross-verifying the data collected from one manager with the responses from other managers. The two buyers have established a long presence in Bangladesh and maintain a longstanding relationship with the four supplier cases under consideration. To maintain anonymity, the two multinational buyers were designated MLB1 and MLB2, and the four suppliers were labelled GS1, GS2, GS3 and GS4 (refer to Tables 2 and 3 for details).

A total of ten respondents participated in FGDs, and eight buyers' representatives, 28 workers, four supervisors and 12 managers (see Table 4) were interviewed in four garment supplier factories using an interview guide (see Appendix).

Data were collected from the respondents based on the three pre-selected broad themes: "social dialogues and worker voices", "barriers of social dialogues and worker voices" and "lead buyers' role for increasing worker voice through social dialogue". The open-ended interview guide was developed considering these three themes and used to collect data from managers in supplier firms, workers in supplier factories and the representatives of MNC buyers at their local offices. Therefore, broad theme selection is deductive and sub-theme development is inductive. The participants of FGDs freely shared their views and opinions in a friendly setting. All in-depth interviews at buyers' offices were conducted in English, and interviews with workers, supervisors and managers were conducted in both Bangla and English as some of the interviewees were comfortable in English and others in Bangla, particularly supervisors and workers (Sinkovics and Penz, 2011; Welch and Piekkari, 2006). The interviews were completed between 2021 and 2022. Some in-depth interviews and two

Suppliers	Establishment (year)	Business orientation	Product type	Production line (no.)	Human resources	Production capacity/per month
GS1	2006	Full export	Woven	24	3,145	6,00,000 pieces
GS2	2005	Full export	Woven	18	2,286	2,50,000 pieces
GS3	1999	Full export	Knit	110	8,424	15,00,000 pieces
GS4	2013	Full export	Woven and knit	14	1,500	3,00,000 pieces

Source: Authors' own work

Table 2.
Brief description of suppliers

Buyer	Establishment (year)	Country of origin	Ownership type	Product type	No. of brands	Net sales turnover (2017–18)	No. of suppliers in BD	No. of markets served
MLB1	1947	Sweden	Public Ltd.	Fashion wear	9+	€19.7 bn	200+	71
MLB1	1975	Denmark	Private Ltd.	Fashion wear	20+	€3.3 bn	100	70

Source: Authors' own work

Table 3.
Brief description of lead buyers

Buyer and supplier	Informants	Code
MLB1	Country responsible	MLB11
	Strategic Sourcing Manager	MLB12
	Quality Assurance Manager	MLB13
	Quality Assurance Coordinator	MLB14
	Sustainability Manager	MLB15
MLB2	Public Affairs Manager	MLB21
	Merchandising Manager	MLB22
	Business Development Manager	MLB23
GS1	Production Manager	GS11
	HR, Admin and Compliance Manager	GS12
	Merchandising General Manager	GS13
	Line Supervisor	GS14
	Workers	GS1W
GS2	Production Manager	GS21
	Quality Assurance Manager	GS22
	HR, Admin and Compliance Manager	GS23
	Line Supervisor	GS24
	Workers	GS2W
GS3	Operation Manager	GS31
	Quality Assurance Manager	GS32
	Admin, HR and Compliance Manager	GS33
	Line Supervisor	GS34
	Workers	GS3W
GS4	Production General Manager	GS41
	Quality Assurance General Manager	GS42
	Admin, HR and Compliance Manager	GS43
	Line Supervisor	GS44
	Workers	GS4W

Table 4.
Brief description of
in-depth interviewees **Source:** Authors' own work

FGDs were recorded on an audio device with permission from the interviewees, and other interviews were written down in a notebook. Bangla interviews were transcribed and translated into English and then re-translated into Bangla again to ensure data validity (Miles *et al.*, 2014). All audio-recorded information was transcribed from the device.

3.3 Data analysis
Data were analyzed following the qualitative data analysis techniques suggested by Nag *et al.* (2007), Corley and Gioia (2004), Miles *et al.* (2014) and Yin (2014). Data gathered by FGDs were analyzed manually to develop a broader initial understanding of buyers' role and contribution to supplier initiatives and efforts to facilitate workers' voices through social dialogues. The preliminary understanding and insights were extended further through face-to-face in-depth interviews. Narratives were developed for each case company based on the collected data from managers, workers and buyers' representatives, and the narratives were shared with interviewees to confirm the validity of the collected data. Authors read the narratives repeatedly to be familiar with and understand the core meaning of the collected data and to develop sub-themes under each broad theme (Miles *et al.*, 2014). To develop an overall understanding, the developed narratives were used for within and cross-case analysis (Cloutier and Ravasi, 2021; Eisenhardt, 1989; Yin, 2014). Through within and cross-case analysis, researchers identified and compared similarities and dissimilarities

found in each case's narratives (Yin, 2014). Only representative *verbatim* codes were used to reflect the three broad themes of social dialogue, worker voices and buyers' initiatives and sub-themes under each broad theme (Nag *et al.*, 2007; Corley and Gioia, 2004). As tables increase the transparency and trustworthiness of qualitative data, we used necessary tables for the suitability of data presentation (Cloutier and Ravasi, 2021).

4. Findings and analysis

4.1 Current state of social dialogue practices and worker voice in garment supplier factories
The Bangladesh garment industry encompasses numerous world-class supplier firms equipped with the necessary amenities for worker well-being, crucially including worker involvement and contribution in decision-making processes. Even so, worker voices through social dialogues are not optimal in many garment supplier factories. In many supplier firms, management still follows a top-down decision-making approach rather than participatory decision-making. Thus, garment workers' space for frequent sharing of ideas, opinions and views is limited. Although labour union is a common platform for protecting worker interests, many garment suppliers do not give their workers any space to create labour unions in their factories as they think it may negatively impact their regular operations. The industry experienced many counterproductive worker behaviours due to the limited space for workers to raise their voices. However, garment suppliers are obliged to form a "Worker Participation Committee (WPC)". This WPC is a recognized platform for workers to share their problems, grievances and ideas. Yet, WPC is more formal than acting as an effective bargaining agent to protect workers' rights and interests (see Table 5).

Although workers want to share their ideas and opinions with their superiors to solve problems, they cannot do that due to the absence of any effective platform for sharing. Moreover, workers do not get any motivation to raise their voices; instead, sometimes, they are forced not to raise their voices. However, each factory floor has a complaint box, allowing workers to communicate their concerns or issues anonymously (see Table 6).

Although buyers are keen on workers' well-being, freedom of speech, eliminating gender discrimination and social compliance in supplier factories, workers, in most cases, cannot contact any lead buyers directly to share their problems. Therefore, buyers know the

Respondent	Code	Representative verbatim quote
FGD participant	FP11	"We cannot share any problems directly with our managers; instead, we have to share through our representatives in the WPC"
HR, Admin and Compliance Manager	GS12	"Garment workers do not like to speak up due to fear of losing jobs or negative impact on their jobs"
Worker (female)	GS2	"If we face any problem related to the production process or health and safety in our factory, we must report to our supervisor. We cannot directly talk to our top management"
Quality Assurance Manager	GS22	"Although I appreciate workers for their suggestions for reducing quality defects, only a few workers come to my room to share suggestions, ideas or complaints"
Production General Manager	GS41	"Our female workers are less interested in sharing any ideas or making any complaint than male workers"

Source: Authors' own work

Table 5.
Respondents' quotes

Respondent	Code	Representative verbatim quote
HR, Admin and Compliance Manager	GS23	"Although we inspire our workers to share their problems with us, they are usually silent"
Worker (male)	GS1W	"Our management is not interested in listening to us, and they do not believe we can share any new ideas"
Worker (female)	GS3W	"Although we do not complain to our supervisor usually, we complain to him in extreme cases when we cannot solve a problem by ourselves"
Worker (female)	GS34	"We do not like to complain against our supervisor as our managers will listen to him, not us"
FGD participant	FP14	"Though workers mainly complain about sexual harassment and occupational health and safety, they have limited suggestions to improve productivity"
Admin, HR and Compliance Manager	GS43	"We encourage workers to share problems and set complaint boxes at each shop floor so that they can easily complain anonymously"
FGD participant	FP21	"Supplier management does not like to see workers raising voices for any issue, even if it is their due right"

Table 6.
Respondents' quotes

Source: Authors' own work

workers' issues through routine audits and documentation that suppliers must maintain to comply with buyers' COC. Other key stakeholders, such as the Bangladesh Labour Ministry and multilateral entities like the ILO, provide guidelines to garment suppliers for safeguarding labour rights and welfare. Yet, none of these stakeholders appear fully committed to the implementation of these prescribed welfare measures, nor do they ensure regular auditing or control mechanisms (see Table 7).

4.2 Barriers to social dialogues and worker's voice in garment supplier factories
Workers face various obstacles when attempting to voice their concerns in garment supply factories. The inability to raise these issues is a responsibility shared by the factory management and the workers. Moreover, the passive roles of various stakeholders, particularly multinational lead buyers, contribute to the limited opportunities for workers to voice their concerns. Consequently, social dialogues and worker voices are not highly visible in garment supplier factories (see Table 8).

Although workers have many issues to share with management, they cannot share those due to their lack of understanding or partial knowledge about a problem. Furthermore, they lack the proper know-how to communicate effectively with management for support or issue resolution. The majority of workers, being illiterate or having only completed primary education, often feel inferior or hesitant to communicate and share their concerns with management (see Table 9).

Workers are not free to share any problems directly with the management as they have to primarily report to their supervisor for any issues in a production line on the factory floor. Thus, they cannot bypass supervisors to participate in any decision-making process. Supervisors may react negatively if workers attempt to communicate directly with management or bypass them (see Table 10).

At times, supervisors caution their workers against revealing any information regarding their conduct or practices in front of top management and buyers' representatives. Even supervisors do not like to receive any complaints in front of co-workers. They encourage workers to report any issues directly to them, particularly those of a negative nature, instead of taking these matters directly to higher management (see Table 11).

Respondent	Code	Representative verbatim quote
Worker (female)	GS3W	"We are not authorized to communicate with any buyers' representatives without approval from our top management, which impedes our scope and ability to share our grievances directly with the buyers"
Worker (female)	GS4W	"Before talking to a buyer's representative, our supervisors tell us what we should and should not share"
FGD participant	FP23	"Only those garment workers who are selected by supplier management are nominated for training, workshops and knowledge sharing at buyers' offices"
Strategic Sourcing Manager	MLB12	"Although we are concerned about workers' interests, we cannot frequently visit supplier factories; instead, we visit according to our predetermined schedule"
Quality Assurance Manager	GS22	"Although our assigned quality assurance team talks to buyers' representatives to share any garment quality-related issues, they also visit the shop floors to talk to workers"
Worker (male)	GS4W	"If buyers want to talk to workers, our supervisors select who will talk to buyers' representatives, and only selected workers can talk in the presence of the supervisors and managers"
Public Affairs Manager	MLB21	"We are collaborating with many development partners to ensure worker participation in supplier factories"
Merchandising Manager	MLB22	"As we are aware of the limited space of worker voices in some of our sourcing factories, we are trying to create a transparent platform so that workers can share their problems directly"

Source: Authors' own work

Table 7.
Respondents' quotes

Respondent	Code	Representative verbatim quote
FGD participant	FP12	"I do not think that worker representative has a strong voice to bargain with the management to solve their problems"
FGD participant	FP25	"Garment workers cannot share their opinions due to their position, low level of education and poor knowledge of how to approach the management"
Worker (female)	GS1W	"We often feel undervalued by our supervisors, who seem to underestimate our potential to contribute meaningful ideas and suggestions. For example, our supervisors often think that our complaints are baseless and ill-motivated"
Worker (male)	GS3W	"Our supervisors and managers sometimes react angrily or even shout when we try to raise any issue. They want to stop us from raising voices against them"
Sustainability Manager	MLB15	"We are serious about social dialogues in supplier factories. We force suppliers to ensure social dialogues in their factories although many garment suppliers do not voluntarily create opportunities for worker voices"
HR, Admin and Compliance Manager	GS23	"The UK's ethical trading initiative (ETI) is collaborating with us to enhance social dialogue within our factory. They are assisting us in recognizing the significance of worker voices in mitigating unrest and worker dissatisfaction"

Source: Authors' own work

Table 8.
Respondents' quotes

Respondent	Code	Representative verbatim quote
Supervisor	GS24	"Although sometimes workers come to me to share a suggestion or claim, they cannot articulate the matter correctly"
FGD participant	FP11	"Most garment workers are unskilled or have only on-the-job training and experiences. Thus, they are not mature and capable enough to share opinions and thoughts with their management"
Worker (female)	GS3W	"We feel shy to share any ideas, and do not know when and where to share ideas"
Worker (male)	GS3W	"My co-workers never appreciate me complaining; instead, they always discourage me from sharing any issues with supervisors or managers"
Production General Manager	GS41	"Garment workers should have a better understanding of a problem before suggesting any solution"

Table 9.
Respondents' quotes

Source: Authors' own work

Respondent	Code	Representative verbatim quote
Supervisor	GS24	"As a production line boss, I expect respect from all workers. It is a dishonour for me if anyone ignores me or talks directly to our managers"
FGD participant	FP24	"Still, the garment industry of Bangladesh maintains a hierarchical top-down management system, and workers have minimal space to access the top management"
Worker (female)	GS3W	"No workers can stay in a garment factory keeping a hostile relation with supervisors"
Production General Manager	GS41	"Line supervisors discourage line workers to share any problems with us"

Table 10.
Respondents' quotes

Source: Authors' own work

Workers constantly face the threat of job loss if they lodge complaints against supervisors or managers. They also worry that their work life would become more challenging if they were to lodge complaints about their supervisors. Consequently, they often refrain from voicing their concerns about their supervisors and managers to secure their current employment positions (see Table 12).

4.3 Lead buyers' current roles for increasing worker voice through social dialogue
Multinational lead buyers, retailers and brands in the downstream part of the global garment/apparel value chain are more concerned about the working conditions in the export-oriented garment industry in Bangladesh, particularly after the Rana Plaza building collapse in 2013 and the Tazreen Fashion fire blaze in 2012. As freedom of speech is a pre-condition of a decent work environment, lead buyers, retailers and brands want to ensure worker voices in garment supplier factories in upstream of the global garment/apparel value chain. Lead buyers always check whether suppliers are giving a necessary opportunity to workers to share their opinions and thoughts (see Figure 1). However, their roles are not optimal due to the liability of foreignness (see Table 13).

Respondent	Code	Representative verbatim quote
Worker (female)	GS1W	"Our supervisors do not like to receive any negative comment against them, especially in front of other supervisors or workers"
FGD participant	FP12	"Workers' suggestions are an ego issue for supervisors as worker voice raising means that workers have a better understanding than supervisors"
Line Supervisor	GS34	"A worker can share his/her problem directly and personally with me. I do not see any logic to sharing any silly matters with managers"
Line Supervisor	GS44	"If workers do not see my interest, I will not be concerned about their interests. If workers humiliate me in front of managers, I will not work with them in the future"

Source: Authors' own work

Table 11.
Respondents' quotes

Respondent	Code	Representative verbatim quote
Worker (female)	GS2W	"Sometimes we do not know what makes our supervisor angry. Thus, we are always confused about sharing anything with him"
Worker (male)	GS4W	"As I am happy with my current job and its benefits, I do not want to lose my position by complaining against our supervisor"
FGD participant	FP24	"Garment workers are recruited on a temporary contractual basis. Thus, they have limited ownership and empowerment in any company. Accordingly, they do not like to contribute to any development initiative of the company, creating a hostile relationship with supervisor or co-workers"
Line Supervisor	GS34	"Our supervisors are not receptive to criticisms and will directly penalize us for lodging any complaints against them"

Source: Authors' own work

Table 12.
Respondents' quotes

To receive continuous orders from lead buyers, export-oriented garment suppliers must comply with the labour and social standards of lead buyers' COC (see Figure 1). To secure worker well-being, they must also ascertain various social welfare initiatives in supplier factories. If buyers find a factory in a dissatisfactory condition, sometimes they directly cancel orders, and sometimes they give threats to cancel orders. Thus, suppliers must comply with lead buyers' expectations to qualify for further orders (see Table 14).

Multinational lead buyers regularly check the availability of different indicators of social dialogues in garment supplier factories, such as the availability of the WPC, welfare officers, worker representatives in WPC, providing suggestion boxes, helplines, etc. (see Figure 1). In cases where buyers identify deviations from their standards within factories, they prepare a Corrective Action Plan for their suppliers to help rectify the situation and improve conditions. If suppliers fail to improve the situation within the deadline, they face different challenges from the buyers. However, lead buyers tend to merely dictate terms to suppliers rather than jointly taking responsibility for the resolution of certain problems with them (see Table 15).
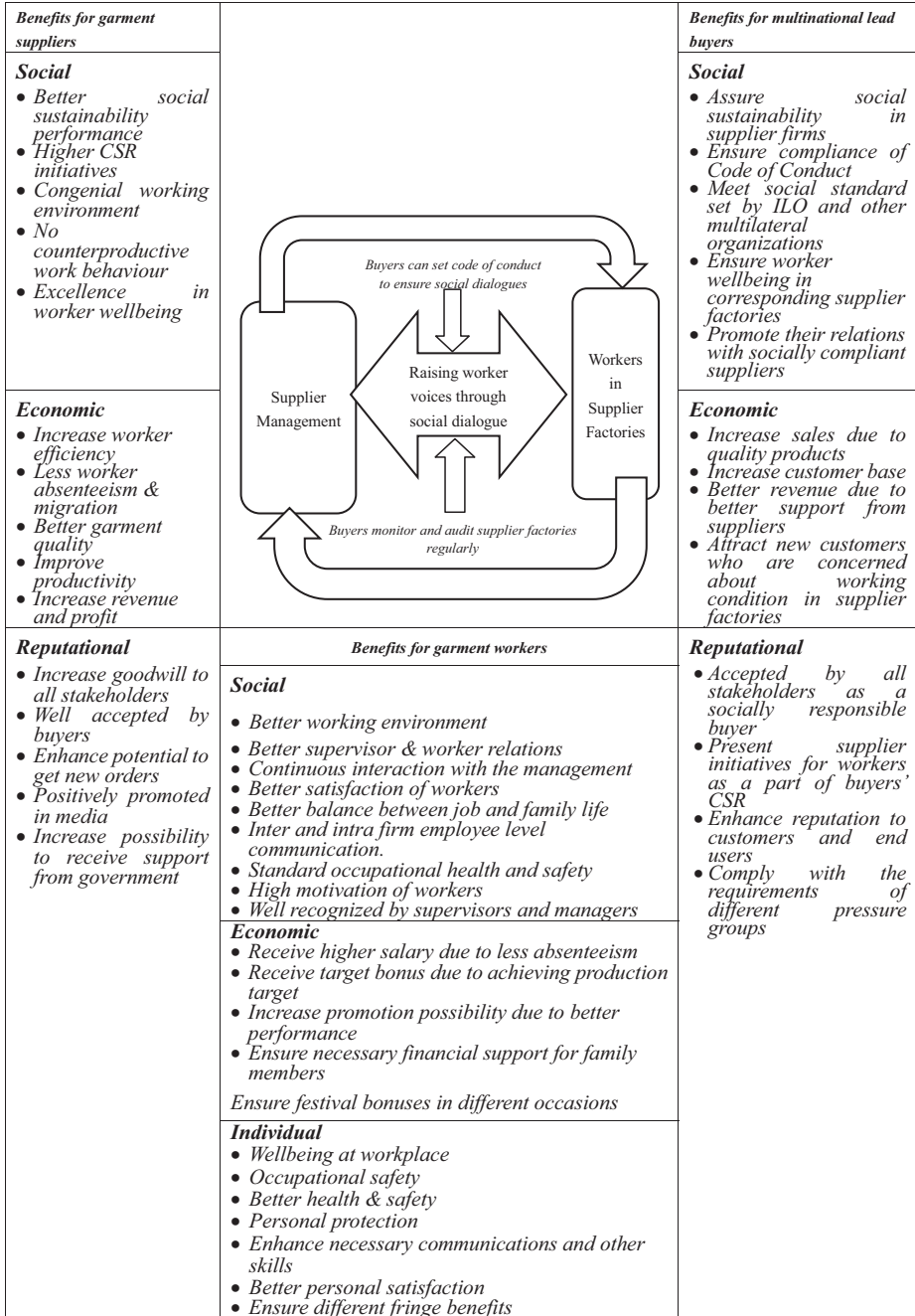
Benefits for garment suppliers		Benefits for multinational lead buyers
Social • Better social sustainability performance • Higher CSR initiatives • Congenial working environment • No counterproductive work behaviour • Excellence in worker wellbeing	Buyers can set code of conduct to ensure social dialogues Supplier Management — Raising worker voices through social dialogue — Workers in Supplier Factories Buyers monitor and audit supplier factories regularly	**Social** • Assure social sustainability in supplier firms • Ensure compliance of Code of Conduct • Meet social standard set by ILO and other multilateral organizations • Ensure worker wellbeing in corresponding supplier factories • Promote their relations with socially compliant suppliers
Economic • Increase worker efficiency • Less worker absenteeism & migration • Better garment quality • Improve productivity • Increase revenue and profit		**Economic** • Increase sales due to quality products • Increase customer base • Better revenue due to better support from suppliers • Attract new customers who are concerned about working condition in supplier factories
Reputational • Increase goodwill to all stakeholders • Well accepted by buyers • Enhance potential to get new orders • Positively promoted in media • Increase possibility to receive support from government	**Benefits for garment workers** **Social** • Better working environment • Better supervisor & worker relations • Continuous interaction with the management • Better satisfaction of workers • Better balance between job and family life • Inter and intra firm employee level communication. • Standard occupational health and safety • High motivation of workers • Well recognized by supervisors and managers **Economic** • Receive higher salary due to less absenteeism • Receive target bonus due to achieving production target • Increase promotion possibility due to better performance • Ensure necessary financial support for family members Ensure festival bonuses in different occasions **Individual** • Wellbeing at workplace • Occupational safety • Better health & safety • Personal protection • Enhance necessary communications and other skills • Better personal satisfaction • Ensure different fringe benefits	**Reputational** • Accepted by all stakeholders as a socially responsible buyer • Present supplier initiatives for workers as a part of buyers' CSR • Enhance reputation to customers and end users • Comply with the requirements of different pressure groups

Figure 1.
Integrative framework

Source: Authors' own work

Respondent	Code	Representative verbatim quote
FGD participant	FP11	"As an important value chain partner, garment suppliers work on a temporary contractual basis with buyers. Therefore, buyers have limited involvement in any supplier development initiatives"
Merchandising General Manager	GS13	"Multinational lead buyers want to ensure a better environment, not for the interest of suppliers; instead, they want to fulfil their interests, i.e. uphold their reputation in the market"
Country responsible	MLB11	"We do not want to see any Rana Plaza incidents again in Bangladesh. Thus, we advised our factories to increase their safety, security and sustainability initiatives"
Quality Assurance Coordinator	MLB14	"Each worker is fairly treated in our sourcing factories, and they are getting opportunities to raise their voices"
Operation Manager	GS31	"A team of buyers frequently visits our factory and directly talks to workers to understand many issues"
Admin, HR and Compliance Manager	GS43	"Buyers are always welcome to visit our factory to audit any social and other compliance-related issues"
Business Development Manager	MLB23	"We have regular audits in our sourcing factories to check workers are getting sufficient opportunities to share their problems with factory management"

Source: Authors' own work

Table 13.
Respondents' quotes

Respondent	Code	Representative verbatim quote
Merchandising Manager	MLB22	"We do not compromise the social sustainability and worker welfare initiatives in any of our sourcing factories. We always try to protect the interests of workers, and our assigned team regularly monitor situations in factories"
FGD participant	FP21	"Multinational lead buyers are more focused on worker wages, working hours, occupational health and safety of workers than worker voices through social dialogues"
Strategic Sourcing Manager	MLB12	"Although we developed a code of conduct and auditing system for our suppliers, we cannot control everything strictly and transparently due to our limited human resources"
Public Affairs Manager	MLB21	"Although we have a local office in Dhaka, our head office is in Europe. Therefore, it is difficult to handle all worker well-being-related issues at the factory level. We force suppliers to comply with our code of conduct"

Source: Authors' own work

Table 14.
Respondents' quotes

4.4 Lead buyers' future possible roles for increasing worker voice through social dialogue
As reflected in interviews, buyers positively intend to see workers' freedom of speech in supplier factories. However, the buyers' role is not optimal to ensure freedom of speech. Thus, buyers need to be more active and instrumental in creating social dialogue opportunities in garment supplier factories in the upstream global garment value chain (see Table 16).

Although it is difficult for multinational lead buyers to monitor and control social dialogue standards and opportunities in garment supplier factories, they must enhance their focus with new strategies to increase worker voices (see Figure 1). Moreover, they can

Respondent	Code	Representative verbatim quote
HR, Admin and Compliance	GS43	"Although we have a Worker Participation Committee (WPC) in our factory, buyers are inspiring us to think about forming a labour union in our factory"
HR, Admin and Compliance	GS12	"We are serious about complying with buyers' freedom of speech requirements to continue our business relationships. However, buyers only suggest complying with their requirements without taking any responsibility"
Business Development Manager	MLB23	"We regularly check and monitor workers' freedom of speech in our sourcing factories and suggest supplier management to correct and improve if any non-standard situation is found"
Line Supervisor	GS44	"We tend to be more vigilant about adhering to buyers' requirements and demonstrating compliance through documentation rather than encouraging freedom of speech within our factory"
FGD participant	FGD15	"Due to locating in a cross-border setting, buyers cannot ensure all indicators of social dialogues in supplier factories, and suppliers in some cases are only the window dresser"
Operation Manager	GS31	"Buyers use regular audits and certifications to assure social compliance for worker rights such as working environment, OHS and worker welfare. But, these certifications and audits are not enough to create space for worker's voice through social dialogues"

Table 15.
Respondents' quotes   **Source:** Authors' own work

Respondent	Code	Representative verbatim quote
Sustainability Manager	MLB15	"We have been continuously monitoring worker voice raising opportunities in our supplier factories and trying to enhance the degree of social dialogue opportunities"
Quality Assurance Manager	MLB13	"We think it is a responsibility of all stakeholders to increase worker voice at the factory level, and suppliers have to work together with buyers and other stakeholders"
FGD participant	FP11	"In future, suppliers need to be more proactive to ensure social dialogues in their factories beyond only complying with buyers' requirements, and buyers also need to make a target-based long-term plan to work together with suppliers"

Table 16.
Respondents' quotes   **Source:** Authors' own work

increase the priority of worker voices in addition to other social compliance measures (see Table 17).

Multinational lead buyers can discern the reasons why workers are hesitant to voice their concerns. They also have the potential to collaborate with supplier management at the factory level to eliminate or alleviate barriers to worker communication. These buyers can be pivotal in involving all stakeholders in their due functions, ensuring workers are heard through social dialogues within supplier factories (see Figure 1) (Table 18).

However, the following table presents some of the possible short- and long-term roles that multinational lead buyers, retailers and brands could play to increase worker voice through social dialogue in sourcing factories (see Table 19).

Respondent	Code	Representative verbatim quote
Operation Manager	GS31	"We think that buyers need to take factory-based initiatives based on the barriers of social dialogues in each factory"
Quality Assurance Manager	GS32	"As the garment industry is buyer-driven and suppliers are bound to follow their instructions, they have to set timely strategies and plan for social dialogues in supplier factories"
Production Manager	GS11	"Both lead buyers and host government can work together to ascertain worker voices in garment supplier factories"
Merchandising Manager	MLB22	"We know very well what our role in the global garment value chain is. We are incrementally increasing our roles and hope to play more active and effective roles in the future"

Source: Authors' own work

Table 17.
Respondents' quotes

Respondent	Code	Representative verbatim quote
Operation Manager	GS31	"Lead buyers can take awareness programs in their sourcing factories to share the positive impact of worker voices and justify the reasons for taking social dialogue initiatives"
Quality Assurance Manager	MLB13	"As our end users are concerned about freedom of speech and worker voices in supplier factories, we want to ensure worker voices in supplier factories by all means"
Business Development Manager	MLB23	"We are motivating our suppliers to think positively to form labour unions in their factories and hope they would agree in the future to do the same"
Public Affairs Manager	MLB21	"We have regular communications with the Bangladesh Garment Manufacturers and Exporters Association (BGMEA) to create a space to form labour unions in their member factories"

Source: Authors' own work

Table 18.
Respondents' quotes

5. Discussions

This study is partially in line with the studies of Latif and Vang (2021), Reinecke and Donaghey (2021), Sultana *et al.* (2020), Gallo and Thinyane (2021) and Granath (2016). While previous research has explored social dialogues in garment supplier factories, most of these studies have treated social dialogue as a proxy. Our study considers social dialogue as a key construct in understanding worker voice behaviour using cross-border buyer–supplier dyadic roles in the GVC. The common perspectives that earlier studies considered are voice behaviour for lean implementation, social dialogues for partnership and gender equality, social dialogue as a part of political CSR and digital technologies for social dialogues; previous studies have not investigated why unskilled and semi-skilled, low-literate workers struggle to voice their concerns, as well as the reasons and methods by which multinational lead buyers must take an active role in ensuring worker voices are heard through social dialogues within garment supplier factories. The current study focuses on bipartite social dialogues to understand their impact on worker voices and multinational lead buyers' role in ensuring social dialogues in their supplier factories.

MNCs, often acting as lead buyers, bear responsibility for modern slavery within GVCs and factory operations, particularly in supplier facilities (Rašković, 2023). Stringer and

| | Possible future roles of multinational lead buyer | |
Short-term		Long-term
• Identify the short-term benefits of social dialogue		• Set a long-term vision for all stakeholders to achieve together through social dialogues
• Address the importance of workers' voices		• Identify the long-term benefits of worker voices through social dialogues such as increasing worker efficiency, unrest between workers and management and worker well-being
• Sketch the mode of workers' voice-raising process		
• Identify KPIs for evaluating worker voices		• Make a plan for continuous social dialogues between management and workers
• Motivate workers to raise their voices		• Need to determine the role and responsibilities that buyers need to play in the long run
• Provide reassurance that workers' professional progression will not be adversely impacted as a result of voicing concerns.		• Find out a way/mechanism to involve all stakeholders in the social dialogue initiatives
		• Ensure that workers are empowered and tension-free to share their opinions and ideas
• Demonstrate how social dialogues can mitigate problems in factories such as reducing tensions, absenteeism and migration		• Involve top management and get their commitment to ensuring sustainable social dialogues in factories
		• Nominate staff in supplier factories who will be responsible for ensuring worker voices through social dialogues
• Develop standard operating procedure (SOP) to monitor worker voices through social dialogues		• Formulate a corrective action plan in cases where social dialogues within the factories are not functioning effectively
		• Prepare necessary policies in collaboration with suppliers so that social dialogues can be established in factories
		• Play a leading role in involving all stakeholders in any social dialogue initiatives

Table 19.
Role of buyers in raising voices through social dialogues in supplier factories

Source: Authors' propositions

Michailova (2018) identified three key factors contributing to modern slavery: the complexity of GVCs and their governance, business models that facilitate exploitation and conducive conditions for slavery. This issue predominantly occurs in garment supplier factories where subcontracted production is common, impeding MNCs' oversight of labour practices, including worker representation through social dialogues (Dunning and Lundan, 2008; Stringer and Michailova, 2018). Consequently, the governance mechanisms used by lead buyers with their suppliers, alongside the organizational capabilities of suppliers and the institutional frameworks within supplier countries, influence the implementation of worker representation in garment supplier factories (Rašković, 2023).

Social dialogues have more potential to contribute to any crisis or disasters such as tsunamis, earthquakes, floods, labour strikes and counterproductive worker behaviour pandemics (Hoque and Shahinuzzaman, 2021; Katsaliaki *et al.*, 2021; Sultana *et al.*, 2020). COVID-19 represents a type of crisis that we have recently endured and continue to navigate. This pandemic compels garment suppliers to acknowledge the importance of fostering social dialogues between management and workers to create effective response plans incorporating necessary health guidelines like social distancing, mask-wearing, hand

hygiene, etc. Suppliers would struggle to tackle any crisis with isolated initiatives without creating space for raising worker voice opportunities through social dialogues. As garment suppliers depend on lead buyers, they need to seek support to develop a sustainable crisis management capability. Multinational lead buyers also need to realize that they need to design their COC in a way so that factory floor workers can get an opportunity to be involved in any sudden resilience initiative as key beneficiaries. Social dialogues are also necessary to mitigate any regular problems and challenges garment suppliers face to deal with their daily operations. For instance, lead buyers need to direct their suppliers to create space for workers' voices to improve social sustainability performance in supplier factories to meet their expectations. Although the situation has significantly improved due to pressure from multinational lead buyers and suppliers' initiatives, there are scopes and opportunities to improve.

Multinational lead buyers in global garment value chains create pressures to reduce production cost which force garment suppliers to minimize workers' wage expenditures (Kano *et al.*, 2020). As a result, working conditions deteriorate and opportunities for workers to voice their concerns diminish in garment supplier factories (Hoque and Rana, 2020). Usually, lead buyers control their suppliers using different mechanisms such as direct monitoring, external certifications, incentives, direct involvement and so on (Modi and Mabert, 2007; Humphrey and Schmitz, 2002). However, lead buyers need to coordinate suppliers to improve social dialogues in supplier factories in addition to controlling them (Zeng *et al.*, 2023). Buyers can also consider incentivizing social dialogue performance to motivate suppliers to create opportunities for social dialogue. In addition, suppliers need to take proactive steps in implementing social dialogue initiatives to attract buyers and differentiate themselves from other competitors in both domestic and global markets.

As garment suppliers have limited capabilities to meet lead buyers' expectations (Rana *et al.*, 2019), they need to check all possible opportunities to improve their performance to be competitive in the global apparel market. As a key actor in upstream of the global garment value chain, Bangladeshi garment suppliers compete with their counterparts such as China, Vietnam, India, Pakistan and Myanmar to secure orders from multinational buyers showing superior performance. Worker voices through social dialogues can be an important option to enhance suppliers' performance in some key areas in garment supplier factories, such as labour efficiency, productivity, product quality, production flexibility, counterproductive work behaviour, social and environmental sustainability, supervisor–employee relations and other development areas. Earlier studies such as Latif and Vang (2021) and Bryson *et al.* (2006) found a positive relationship between worker voices and efficiency, productivity, quality and flexibility. Therefore, buyer–suppliers need to create an opportunity and scope for workers to share their opinions, views and suggestions with the management in supplier factories. Buyers must also confirm social dialogues in supplier factories to receive their expected quality products at a reasonable price within a short lead time. Furthermore, multilateral organizations and NGOs should support buyers and suppliers to keep a decent work environment with workers' freedom of speech.

Workers must also be concerned about their basic rights to share voices and the reasons behind their ineffective voice behaviour. If workers do not become self-motivated to raise their voices, or if they do not learn how to raise voices, their management will not willingly create the space for them to raise their voices. The management in supplier factories also needs to realize that worker voices not only satisfy workers' interests but also meet the expectations of suppliers. If suppliers do not encourage workers to share voices using a formal or informal channel, it will affect actors in the upstream and downstream parts of the global garment value chain. For instance, downstream consumers in developed countries are

becoming increasingly concerned about workers' interest in developing countries where garment suppliers are located. They want to know in which environment workers are working, for how many hours, with what occupational health and safety measures and what facilities they have for freedom of speech. Thus, worker voices need to be ensured in garment supplier factories through a well-planned strategic decision to meet the collective interest of all actors in the global garment value chain. The discussion mentioned above has drawn three-sided benefits of the social dialogue. It shows that social dialogue is a way of raising voices that can bring advantages to garment suppliers, garment workers and lead buyers. Thus, the study would like to propose an integrative framework in this regard (see Figure 1).

As Bangladeshi garment workers are mostly illiterate or unskilled, they need a different approach to being involved in social dialogues than workers in garment industries in other countries. Thus, customized context-oriented policies and practices are required to make social dialogues successful. Therefore, lead buyers need to offer a customized COC for each sourcing destination. Relevant stakeholders also need to act to create an opportunity for workers so that they can share their voices freely. As a significant stakeholder, the government of the country can play an active facilitating role by formulating industry-specific and need-based policies for worker voice-raising through social dialogues. Government assistance is necessary to ensure the implementation of the policies through strict enforcement of requisite rules and regulations (Faroque *et al.*, 2021b). In this regard, the government can dedicate different agencies to look after the policies for the sustainability of social dialogues and worker voices in garment supplier factories (Faroque *et al.*, 2021a). Furthermore, other relevant actors in the global garment value chain need to pay attention to increasing social dialogues between workers and the management of supplier factories. For instance, ILO needs to be more active and instrumental so that all actors/stakeholders must comply with the set rules of freedom of speech for workers. Moreover, suppliers must be rewarded for better social dialogue practices and punished for hindering social dialogues in their factories.

Multinational lead buyers have the opportunity to adapt successful platforms from various industries and countries to the garment industry context. For instance, models like Toyota's supplier support centre, Nissan's equity position and e-learning platforms used in the auto industry could be implemented to foster interaction between lead buyers and suppliers, as well as facilitate social dialogues between suppliers' management and workers in garment supplier factories (Modi and Mabert, 2007; Liker and Choi, 2004). Labour unions are one of the platforms that can be used as an effective way to raise worker voices in garment supplier factories. Although it is an acceptable association of workers in different countries, garment supplier firms have a negative perception of labour unions in the garment industry of Bangladesh. As the "Worker Participation Committee" is not a highly effective platform for raising worker voices through social dialogue and labour unions are perceived negatively, buyers need to consider a suitable alternative to these two. Previous research also indicated that various technologies can enhance the efficacy of social dialogues. For instance, "technology-based multilingual mobile apps" have the potential to improve voice-raising opportunities for workers through social dialogues (Gallo and Thinyane, 2021). This type of app may make social dialogues convenient for unskilled and illiterate workers who feel too shy to share their expectations and are unable to explain problems in front of top management of a garment supplier firm. Therefore, garment suppliers can bring the necessary technologies, and buyers can provide the required support to develop suppliers' technological capabilities.

Multinational buyers have different types of relationships with their suppliers, such as short-term transaction-oriented and long-term collaboration-oriented relationships (Rana *et al.*, 2019). These varied relations may affect buyers' initiatives differently for supplier development. More established buyers are long-term oriented and take different initiatives for social dialogues and worker voices. However, it is worth noting that not all MNCs necessarily support labour unions or are willing to engage in social dialogue. Buyers alone cannot guarantee social dialogues in supplier factories, highlighting the need for tripartite involvement to enhance worker voices and foster dialogues from various perspectives. Suppliers should explore engaging additional stakeholders, including government bodies such as the Department of Inspection for Factories and Establishments (DIFE) in Bangladesh, to facilitate social dialogues. By leveraging government support, buyers can fulfill their responsibility of assisting suppliers in this regard. Private initiatives such as the ETI can broaden and intensify their impact in supplier factories by expanding their reach to more garment suppliers and implementing diverse training initiatives aimed at enhancing worker engagement and promoting voices through social dialogue.

6. Conclusions

Despite Bangladesh's garment industry having a substantial role in the global garment value chain, workers in garment supplier factories often face limited opportunities to voice their concerns due to the lack of social dialogue platforms. Many stakeholders can be held responsible for these suppressed worker voices, such as multinational lead buyers, suppliers' management, workers and labour unions within supplier factories, among other parties. The findings of this study demonstrate that space for workers' voice raising through social dialogue in garment supplier factories is limited for various reasons, and the multinational lead buyers' role is not optimal in this regard. This study also shows that buyers can take short-term and long-term initiatives to ensure social dialogues. Moreover, this study presents how social dialogues can meet the expectations of multinational buyers and their garment suppliers. However, this study highlights the current situation of worker voices in the garment industry of Bangladesh, the reasons for poor worker voices, the role of multinational lead buyers in ensuring worker voices and the potential benefits from better worker voices. Though all lead buyers have their COC to control the behaviour of garment suppliers, they pay less attention to active social dialogues between workers and supplier management in garment supplier factories. As many industries accept social dialogues as an effective approach to maintaining decent work in factories in developing countries, it is expected that social dialogues would be an opportunity to raise worker voices in garment supplier factories in the upstream value chain. However, previous research has not delved into why garment workers cannot raise their voices, the obstacles that prevent them from expressing their ideas and views and how multinational lead buyers can ensure social dialogues in garment supplier factories to promote worker voices. Using a qualitative research approach, this current study explores that garment workers cannot share their voices due to certain implicit beliefs; supplier management does not welcome worker voices; and multinational lead buyers do not play an active role. This study also shows that lead buyers can significantly ensure worker voices in garment supplier factories through bipartite social dialogues between workers and the management. Furthermore, this study presents that buyers can take short-term initiatives to increase worker voices and long-term initiatives to ensure sustainable worker voices through active participation in social dialogues.

6.1 Theoretical contribution and managerial implications

This study contributes to the social dialogue and worker rights literature integrating worker voice and international business literature demonstrating buyers' role in ensuring social dialogues in supplier factories in the global garment value chain and the potential of workers' voices to contribute to supplier development in the upstream value chain. Considering a cross-border buyer–supplier business setting, this study contributes theoretically by presenting multinational lead buyers' initiatives to create scopes and opportunities for worker voices in the export-oriented garment industry in a developing country such as Bangladesh, where suppliers are mostly reacting to lead buyers' instructions and bound to create social dialogue opportunities for workers if buyers want. Moreover, it contributes to the dynamics of critical relations between management and workers in the garment industry, showing how social dialogues can improve relations for mutual benefits, where workers are mostly unskilled or semi-skilled, and workers' contributions are crucial for the development and survival of the industry. This study enhances our understanding by outlining how worker voice behaviour in a labour-intensive industry can meet the mutual expectations of workers, export-oriented suppliers and multinational lead buyers. The study findings provide insights into how lead buyers from developed countries can effectively engage in a developing country context. This includes initiatives such as increasing formal audits, conducting regular visits to supplier factories, sharing expertise, enriching COC, holding formal and informal meetings with workers and enhancing compliance transparency. If lead buyers play an active role and workers cooperate with supplier management, the working environment in garment supplier factories will change dramatically and a congenial environment will prevail in the industry where formal institutions are weak. Furthermore, the findings of this study would give a better insight into the management of cross-border buyers and suppliers to realize their roles in mitigating management–worker tensions in suppliers' factories and buyer–supplier tensions in the global garment/apparel industry. The findings will enhance the knowledge of how participatory management and cooperative attitudes between stakeholders can contribute to the continuous progress of the garment industry. The study's findings also contribute to practice showing how co-actions between different value chain partners, i.e. buyers and suppliers, suppliers' management and workers, can be increased for the betterment of the garment industry. Moreover, this study shows the significance of social dialogues in discovering workers' potential, increasing their efficiency and well-being; mitigate worker unrest and counterproductive behaviour in supplier factories. The findings of this study may act as an eye-opener for the participants in the global garment value chain and the relevant stakeholders in the garment industry to realize their roles in facilitating social dialogues in garment supplier factories in developing countries.

6.2 Limitations of the study and future research avenues

Whereas the garment industry of Bangladesh has more than 4,000 registered garment suppliers, and exports to many countries across different continents, this study considered only two buyers from Europe and only four Bangladeshi garment suppliers. Thus, the generalizability of the findings may be questioned. This study considered only four garment suppliers from Bangladesh's two garment clusters (Dhaka and Narayanganj). Thus, this study may not depict the whole scenario of the entire industry. Future studies could consider buyers from different continents and suppliers from all garment clusters in Bangladesh for a holistic understanding. In addition, this study only conducted interviews with a limited subset of workers from each supplier factory, and these interviews took place in a controlled factory environment. Thus, the findings of this study may be biased. There may be some

psychological dimensions involved in managerial resistance or marginalization of workers' voices, emanating from culturally acquired norms in Eastern societies, compared to the Western counterparts, which we could not investigate and verify in this research. Future studies could interview workers in their residences outside of the factory premises. As this study concentrated only on the lead buyers' role to ensure social dialogue in supplier factories, it was difficult to isolate the role of other stakeholders for the same purpose. Thus, future studies could explore the role of different stakeholders such as government, multilateral organizations, NGOs, civil society, etc. Future studies could investigate how worker voices can influence and contribute to garment suppliers' economic, social and environmental sustainability.

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Appendix: Interview guide

Part A: Preliminary/Qualifying Questions for Buyers and Suppliers

Q1. What is your name and position in your company?

Q2. What is your experience in your current company and your total experience in the garment industry?

Q3. What are your roles and responsibilities in your company?

Q4. What type of products does your company produce/sell?

Q5. What is the size of your company?

Q6. Where do you export/import? Who are your key buyers/suppliers?

Q7. How many employees and workers do you have?

Q8. What is the ratio of male and female employees/workers?

Part B: Questions for Supplier Management

Q1. Do you think that workers' voice is necessary and significant for garment suppliers? If yes, explain how and why.

Q2. Do you think that workers' voices can be raised through social dialogues? If yes, explain how and why.

Q3. What is the status of social dialogues in your factory?

Q4. Who is involved in the social dialogues?

Q5. What issues do social dialogues cover?

Q6. Do you think that social dialogues have a significant impact on the working environment of your firm? If yes, how?

Q7. What opportunities do you provide your workers to engage in social dialogues?

Q8. Do you think workers can contribute significantly to your development through social dialogues?

Q9. What role are multinational lead buyers playing in ensuring social dialogues in your factory?

Q10. Do you think that the buyers' current role is sufficient? If not, how can buyers increase their role and in which areas?

Part C: Questions for Workers

Q1. Do you know anything about social dialogue and workers' voices? If yes, share what you know.

Q2. Do you think that workers have the potential to contribute to suppliers' development?

Q3. Do you raise your voice when necessary? If yes, share when and how.

Q4. Can you share your thoughts with your supervisor and managers freely? If no, share why not.

Q5. How do youraiseyourvoice?

Q6. What are the consequences of raising your voice?

Q7. Do you think that your management considers your opinions and suggestions?

Q8. If you cannot raise your voice, please share why not and who restricts you from sharing.

Q9. Do you think that the labour union/WPC is not playing their role? If yes, share why and how.

Q10. What are your suggestions to raise your voice through social dialogue in garment supplier factories?

Part D: Questions for Buyers/Brands/retailers

Q1. Do you have any idea about social dialogue and workers' voices? If yes, explain in brief what you know.

Q2. Do you have any social dialogue practices in your company?

Q3. Do you want to ensure social dialogue in your supplier factories?

Q4. Do you care about worker voices rising in supplier factories?

Q5. Do you have any initiative in supplier factories to ensure social dialogues? If yes, share the initiatives in detail.

Source: By authors

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