

Program Profile

Program	Program name	Social Sustainability Assessment of Fashion Supply Chain: Insights into Upstream Fashion Manufacturing
	Category	A6

Summary of Program

Program Name	Social Sustainability Assessment of Fashion Supply Chain: Insights into Upstream Fashion Manufacturing
Category	A6
Abstract of Program	To achieve the sustainable development goals (SDGs), it is necessary to reduce inequalities in fashion supply chain to create a decent workplace and economic growth. While the number of published research works on measuring the eco-indices of fashion (materials, products) is plentiful, limited research has been conducted on the sustainability of social and labor performance. This study fills the gap by investigating social and labor sustainability performance of fashion factories in developing countries using the Higg Index Facility Social and Labor Module (FSLM) by the Sustainable Apparel Coalition (SAC). Informed by qualitative short-questionnaire-based data, results show varied performance scores across the manufacturing facilities covering a diverse social aspect. The overall score achieved for case factories A (knit), and B (Denim) were 359 and 426, respectively, out of 594, with significant variations in social practices. The key novelty lies in unveiling these practices from an upstream supplier perspective as the scenarios are often hidden and inaccessible to wider stakeholders. The study reveals technical, managerial, and contextual limitations on social and labor performance in fashion manufacturing. The findings have important theoretical and practical implications and could be extended to other fashion production facilities across the supplier countries. It helps fashion stakeholders, especially practitioners, brands, retailers, academics, and researchers, to reformulate their strategies and current practices to improve social and labor performance.

Details of Program

Planning

Objectives	Long-term Goals	✓ Contribute to systemic improvement in social and labour practices across the fashion supply chain ✓ Influence policy, regulations, and industry standards in developing countries ✓ Strengthen global understanding of upstream sustainability challenges ✓ Encourage multi-stakeholder accountability (factories, buyers, NGOs, government) ✓ Support the development of sustainable, ethical fashion as a competitive advantage
	Short-term Targets	➤ Assess social and labour sustainability performance in selected factories ➤ Identify risks, poor practices, and improvement areas using FSLM ➤ Provide immediate insights for factory managers and stakeholders ➤ Generate empirical evidence from a developing country context

	Rationale	• The fashion industry is criticized for social injustices and labour exploitation • Limited research focuses on upstream suppliers' role in social sustainability • Current assessment tools (like Higg Index FSLM) are underutilized in factory-level analysis • Bangladesh, as a global garment hub, provides a critical context for study • Findings can bridge gaps between theory (CSR, TBL, Stakeholder Theory) and practice in real supply chains
Subject (Leader)	Initiator(s)	SHAMSUZZAMAN, Md.
	Champion(s)	SHAMSUZZAMAN, Md.
	Major team member(s)	RAHMAN, Md Mostafizur; FAISAL, Md. Ariful Hossain; HASAN Tamanna, and SHAHRIN Tahsina
Environment	Nature/Society	The study advocates for holistic sustainability practices, thereby fostering environmental accountability while emphasizing social and labor aspects. Factories that prioritize social responsibility can more effectively enforce environmental standards due to enhanced awareness and accountability fostered by ethical governance. The Higg Index also advocates for evaluations of energy, water, and chemical management, alongside social metrics. Research advocates for more sustainable production practices that mitigate ecological degradation. Social performance frequently enhances environmental compliance, thereby fostering holistic sustainability in the fashion and textile sectors. This research enhances employee well-being, equitable compensation, secure working environments, and accountability in fashion manufacturing, thereby benefiting society. Concentrating on upstream suppliers in developing nations empowers marginalized labor demographics. Observations of quality in factories by employees and union representatives inform policy reforms and advocacy efforts. The study aims to achieve social justice, empowerment, and dignity for millions of workers, particularly women, while mitigating exploitation and fostering inclusive development in garment-producing countries.
	Industry/Market	The Higg FSLM tool evaluates social sustainability within the fashion and textiles sectors. It assists compliance officers, factory managers, and brand partners in identifying significant social risks, deficiencies, and enhancements. Comparing knitting and denim processes fosters discussions on sustainable governance across the industry. The research highlights the incorporation of social practices into fundamental business models to guide supply chain audits, enhance capacity building, and inform CSR initiatives for sustained reputational and operational benefits. This study addresses consumer demand for ethical fashion. Transparency and accountability in production enable brands to substantiate their ethical assertions, thereby enhancing consumer trust and loyalty. International purchasers necessitate that suppliers adhere to stringent social standards. This study is beneficial. It promotes value-oriented purchasing and certification to transform markets. Validated insights inform the ethical sourcing practices of retailers and brands.

	Citizen/Government	Regulators of labor rights, factory compliance, and sustainable industrial development utilize our findings. Advocate for social sustainability concerns and exemplary practices to enhance labor policies, oversight, and enforcement. The results can guide training, incentives, and enhanced auditing procedures. This study enables Bangladesh and other garment exporters to align their development strategies with international labor standards and socioeconomic objectives. The research endorses the social justice awareness, advocacy, and intervention efforts of NGOs within the fashion industry. Development agencies can enhance donor-funded programs and public-private partnerships to ameliorate working conditions based on these findings. It addresses deficiencies in social sustainability literature regarding upstream supplier performance, particularly in developing nations. It facilitates longitudinal and comparative studies. The study facilitates stakeholders in co-creating solutions, fostering dialogue, and producing fashion in an ethical and sustainable manner.
Resources	Human resources	2 students were involved in the program work
	Financial resources	Tk 150,000 was required to accomplish this research.
	Technological resources	Nvivo software, Higg Index software, data recorder, and ethical approval.
Mechanism	Strategy (Weight/Sequence)	Case Study Expansion Strategy: Include additional factories from other sectors (e.g., woven, leather) or countries (e.g., Vietnam, India). Mixed-Methods Integration: Integrate quantitative data (e.g., injury records, turnover rates) with qualitative insights. Longitudinal Study Strategy: Conduct follow-ups with the same factories over time. Stakeholder Engagement Strategy: Involve diverse stakeholder buyers, auditors, trade unions, NGOs, regulators in feedback loops or workshops. Digital Platform Utilization: Use digital tools or dashboards to collect, visualize, and disseminate results. Policy Advocacy Strategy: Translate findings into actionable policy briefs or recommendations for government and industry bodies. Cross-Theoretical Application: Extend analysis through multiple lenses such as institutional theory, stakeholder theory, and capabilities approach.
	Organization	• This is a collaborative research; and the Department of Textile Engineering World University of Bangladesh leads the program with faculty expertise and student research involvement. • Collaborative structure ensures academic rigor, applied research focus, and industry relevance. • Institutional priorities emphasize social responsibility and sustainable textile innovation.

	Culture	• Collaborative practices within the university foster teamwork, knowledge sharing, and problem-solving, which strengthen the program's execution. • Institutional values emphasize environmental responsibility and social impact, aligning well with the objectives of natural dye research. • The culture of academic rigor and industry collaboration creates an enabling environment for the successful adoption of sustainable dyeing practices.
Doing		
Launch date	July 2024	
Responsible organization	World University of Bangladesh	
Program content and process	The Higg Facility Social & Labor Module (FSLM) evaluates and contrasts social sustainability in Bangladeshi knit and denim textile manufacturing facilities. The qualitative multiple-case study employs document analysis, stakeholder interviews, and factory-level assessments. This method allows for a detailed examination of factory risks, substandard practices, and enhancements in social and labor performance. FSLM assesses employee engagement, equitable compensation, complaint resolution processes, and management frameworks in a systematic yet adaptable approach. Triangulation of annual reports, wage records, audit documents, and worker and trade union testimonies improve reliability. Cross-case thematic analysis reveals inter-factory and systemic disparities. The research employs stakeholder theory, corporate social responsibility (CSR), and the triple bottom line (TBL) to analyze the data both theoretically and contextually.	
Key highlights of the content/process	Evaluation of Social and Labor Practices: Assesses social sustainability in two categories of textile factories (knit and denim) utilizing the Higg Facility Social & Labor Module (FSLM). Qualitative Multi-Case Methodology: Utilizes a case study framework incorporating interviews, document analysis, and factory-level data from various stakeholders. Comparative and Thematic Analysis: Performs cross-case comparisons to discern risks, substandard practices, and opportunities for enhancement in upstream fashion supply chains. Theoretical Integration: Correlates findings with Corporate Social Responsibility, stakeholder theory, and the triple bottom line to contextualize social sustainability issues in developing nations.	
Differences from traditional approaches	Factory-Level Focus vs. Macro-Level Analysis: Traditional studies often emphasize buyer-driven compliance or global standards; this research examines social sustainability directly at the factory level. Upstream Perspective vs. First-Tier Supplier Focus: Unlike many studies limited to first-tier suppliers, this research investigates upstream factories, offering insights from deeper supply chain tiers. Use of Higg FSLM vs. General Social Audits: It applies the Higg Facility	

	Social & Labor Module (FSLM), a standardized, globally recognized tool, rather than generic or company-specific audit tools. Multi-Stakeholder Input vs. Management-Only View: Includes voices from workers, trade union reps, and factory managers, instead of solely relying on managerial perspectives. Contextual Analysis vs. Universal Benchmarking: Anchors findings in the socio-economic and regulatory realities of a developing country, rather than applying one-size-fits-all benchmarks.
Progress as of today	Project done, waiting for publication.
Problems in implementation	Factories' unwillingness to share sensitive data, subjectivity in qualitative data, logistical and financial support
Approaches to solve the problems	Build trust via industry networking and ensure research value clearly; use data triangulation, and apply coding. Seek grants/funding
Completion date, if completed	Completed, submitted for publication.
Seeing	
Impacts on students	✓ Augments experiential education in sustainability and ethical fashion ✓ Offers practical case study experience ✓ Promotes analytical reasoning and investigative abilities ✓ Facilitates opportunities for internships and industry collaboration ✓ Promotes socially responsible innovation in fashion and textile studies
Impacts on professors	• Enhances academic research and publication prospects • Facilitates interdisciplinary collaboration (e.g., sustainability, management, textiles) • Provides revised curriculum material • Enhances the connection between research and teaching • Establishes connections with industry and non-governmental organizations for prospective research initiatives
Impacts on university administration	➤ Enhances the institutional research profile in sustainability ➤ Augments international standing in ethical fashion and social impact scholarship ➤ Secures research funding and fosters international collaborations ➤ Facilitates the attainment of national development objectives (SDGs) ➤ Establishes robust connections with industry stakeholders and policymakers
Responses from industry/market	N/A
Responses from citizen/government	N/A
Measurable output (revenues)	N/A
Measurable input (expenses)	N/A

Cost-benefit analysis for effectiveness	N/A
Future Planning	
Where does the project go from here?	In industry-based pilot projects
Addendum	
Exhibits, pictures, diagrams, etc.	N/A
Reports, mimeos, monographs, books, etc.	Expecting to publish two papers from this project.
Others which may help explain the program (including website links)	N/A