# Multi Fiber Arrangement (MFA) and Future of Bangladesh RMG Sector


*PREPARED BY*

A.K.M.MASUD ALI
A.K.M.MUSTAQUE ALI
RATAN SARKAR


*PREPARED FOR*

ACTIONAID BANGLADESH


**INCIDIN Bangladesh**
9/11 Iqbal Road, Mohammed Pur, Dhaka-1207, Bangladesh. Phone-8118044



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## Introduction

The increasing dependence on foreign capital and foreign technology, and the growing dominance of the western consumerist culture and lifestyle have trapped many countries in an economic bind. Adherence to WTO rules, even at the expense of the welfare of the majority of the citizens in the country, has proven to be disastrous.

At global level the 'playing ground' of the trading partners is not equal at any respect. The concept of achieving an equal playing ground has also been identified as impossibility. According to one estimation, if the least developed economies strive to catch up the developed economies they need to achieve a very high annual growth rate of 110.4%. Even if they can achieve this growth rate (the possibility of which is extremely slim), the poor countries will require 127 years to reach the 1986 income level of the rich countries. Moreover, almost half a millennium (i.e. 497 years) will be required by the poor countries to overtake the rich countries.

Thus the time frame assigned for the least developed countries to integrate in WTO can be questioned. This is also true for phasing out of MFA. Countries like Bangladesh should be given more time to prepare themselves for open competition.

## The Basics

The Multi-Fiber Arrangement refers to 'an international agreement entered in to by the governments of over forty countries to provide for special rules governing trade in textiles and garments made of cotton, wool and man-made fiber. The agreements allow importing states to impose quantitative restrictions on imports of particular products from particular sources, while the provisions of GATT prohibit the use of quantitative restrictions on imports or exports except in specific circumstances and under specific conditions.  The MFA is made up of a series of bilaterally negotiated quota restrictions on trade in textiles and clothing between individual developed country importers and developing country exporters. Under the quota, the exporter is allowed to supply a certain volume of textile and clothing products up to a specified ceiling, and it is up to the exporter to allocate the quota allowance among its domestic producers.

**The Agreement on Textiles and Clothing (ATC)** During the Uruguay Round negotiations, it was agreed that the MFA would be phased out through the implementation of the Agreement on Textiles and Clothing (ATC). The ATC is an attempt to put an end to the constant extensions of the MFA by agreeing a phase out plan, after which the textiles and clothing sectors will no longer be subject to quotas

**Textile Monitoring Body (TMB)** In order to supervise the implementation of the ATC to examine all measures taken under the ATC and their conformity and to take necessary actions in these regard a textile monitoring body was established pursuant Article 8. It is quasi-judicial standing body which consist of a Chairman and ten Members discharging their function on *ad personam* basis and taking all decision by consensus. In practice, TMB is represented by both importing and exporting countries as the members are appointed from an agreed grouping of WTO members.

**Quota** The exporter is allowed to supply a certain volume of textile and clothing products up to a specified ceiling.

**Rules of Origin** Rules of origin relating to the granting of tariff preferences, and ensurance that such rules do not themselves create unnecessary obstacles to trade. Upon completion of a harmonization program set up by committee, contracting parties would be expected to ensure that their rules of origin are transparent; that they do not have restricting, distorting or disruptive effects on international trade; that they are administered in a consistent, uniform, impartial and reasonable manner; and that they are based on a positive standard (i.e. that they state what does confer origin rather than what does not).

**Transitional safeguards** The agreement contains rules to ensure that a fair comparison is made between the export price and the normal value of a product so as not to arbitrarily create or inflate margins of dumping. It strengthens the requirement for the importing country to establish a clear causal relationship between dumped imports and injury to the domestic industry.

**Anti-dumping actions** GATT provides for the right of contracting parties to apply anti-dumping measuresmeasures against imports of a product at an export price below its "normal value" (usually the price of the product in the domestic market of the exporting country) if such dumped imports cause injury to a domestic industry in the territory of the importing country. The agreement contains rules to ensure that a fair comparison is made between the export price and the normal value of a product so as not to arbitrarily create or inflate margins of dumping. It strengthens the requirement for the importing country to establish a clear causal relationship between dumped imports and injury to the domestic industry.

# Recommendation for RMG and Textile Sector

1. In view of intense competition arising out of the MFA phasing out, the policy of market diversification is of much importance.

2. In promoting and sustaining the export market of garment products in importing countries particularly in those in Europe and America, effective market promotions measures like participating in international fair, organization fair and advertisement in world TV media are needed.

3. Backward integration of RMGs with textiles manufacturing firm and other related industries is needed in order to maintain and increase value added by the garment industries.

4. Considering the need for BMRE and international marketing problem the issue of the possibility of mergers and acquisition of smaller units needs to be examined.

5. The issue of enforcing the provision of eight-hour working day and six working days is deemed to be of paramount importance in enhancing labor productivity, for weekly holiday and eight-hour working day are essential in sustaining energy and promoting commitment, This would also help generate further employment in the RMG sector.

6. There is need to expand under special provision the time frame of MFA phasing out for countries like Bangladesh, which has potentiality of adverse affects on employment and poverty. This needs to be negotiated along with assurance of 'free access' of other least developed and developing countries, which are opting for such market access.

7. Cost of reform should not be borne alone by the poor. Non-economic costs should be taken into consideration in cost-benefit analysis of any reform. And based on that either a reform should be carried through, completely abandon or carried forward with the winners compensating the losers, if we are to link trade positively with development. Before, the phasing out of MFA such a comprehensive cost-benefit analysis and commitment of compensation with appropriate mechanism of implementation is required.

# Issues of Concern to INCIDIN Bangladesh

- The growth rate in overall exports from Bangladesh peaked in 1994-1995 at 40 percent a year. However, export growth has remained strong. Currently, the garment exports alone bring in close to four billion dollars in gross terms. The imports of fabrics and related intermediate goods account for $2.3 billion resulting in net earnings of approximately $1.7 billion. The excessive dependence of the economy on the garment sector for foreign exchange earnings and export growth demands policies that would diversify the export base of the economy.

- There are several avenues by which negative economic shocks from East Asian emerging economies can impact this export industry in Bangladesh. First, several of these nations are also big apparel exporters in same markets to which Bangladesh exports apparel. A steep depreciation in their currency makes their products more competitive in both the open and the quota-protected apparel markets. In the markets protected by quotas, such a development would be a deflationary force pulling down the unit prices and the profit margins for Bangladesh apparel exporters. Second, given the crunch, these economies would try to export themselves out of their severe recession. In the recent crisis, these regional and international forces have greatly increased competition for Bangladesh exports. Third, to help them recover from their downturn, the U.S. government and others have already relaxed quota restrictions on exports from the worst affected economies, making the playing field more difficult for Bangladeshi exporters. Fourth, prior to this crisis, some of these nations were potentially big investors in Bangladesh in the textile and infrastructure projects. Their economic troubles have meant a dramatic scaling back in their direct investments in Bangladesh.

- Other potential hazards include an overvaluation of the taka compared to the currency of its competitors. Despite the repeated devaluation in the recent past, according to the World Bank, the taka remains overvalued in real terms. This could undermine the long-term competitiveness of the industry. Finally, in the year 2004, under the Uruguay Round Agreement on Textiles and Clothing, MFA quotas will be phased out. Bangladesh will lose its preferential access to its most important markets and will have to compete with India, China and other apparel exporters in a truly global competitive environment. Many apparel firms in Bangladesh are not ready for this change, although the more efficient larger firms that have diversified their products and markets are expected to do well in the post MFA world.

- Assessing demand of MFA products on the basis of comparative prices from *competing* countries there is need of policy discussion on the management of the real exchange rate, particularly in countries that, like Bangladesh, depend heavily on textile exports. Such countries need to take into account changes in the exchange rates not only of the destination countries for their exports, but also of their competitors.

- Ready-made garments and knitwear are the major export items destined for the major export markets. This indicates the link between commodity concentration and market concentration of Bangladesh's exports. Diversification of the export basket is therefore needed to achieve a sustainable high rate of export growth. The need for export diversification assumes critical importance when note is taken of the fact that the MFA-quota system, which has been a major factor behind the rapid growth of garments export from Bangladesh, will be completely phased out by 2005 and thereafter the country's export of garments will face stiff competition from hitherto quota-restrained apparel exporting countries. While commodity diversification is likely to lead to some degree of market diversification for Bangladesh's exports, more direct measures would have to be taken to achieve greater market diversification, and this would include obtaining up to date market information, aggressive marketing policy, etc.

- If global trade is considered as the means of economic progress, the prospect of the least developing economies is not also so bright; the LDCs with 10% world population, have only 0.3% of work trade – and this is half the proportion of two decades ago. Nevertheless, the least developed and developing economies are rapidly liberalizing their trade under WTO. This also has poverty implication at national level. The process of liberalization, which has become more or less the key word of the trade policy of the poorer economies, should be dealt with caution.

- The question of competitiveness of the weaving sector has generated a lot of discussions. The objective of developing the weaving sector is often justified for a wrong reason. For instance, the study by the Ministry of Textiles(1996) argues that after 2005,when the MFA is completely eliminated, there may be shortages of fabrics, because countries which currently export fabrics will instead use their fabrics to produce and export clothing to North-America and Europe. The findings from the applied general equilibrium analysis suggest that output and exports of textiles will increase in South Korea, Taiwan, Hong Kong and also in Asean, China, South Asia, and Japan. Accordingly, the "fabric shortage" in the world market after 2005 does not constitute a strong argument for developing an integrated textiles and clothing industry. Instead, other arguments such as long-term benefits from establishing clusters of industries (“**Changing World Economy”**,1999) and exploitation of dynamic external economies, as mentioned already, deserve attention.

- Textiles and garments manufacturers and exporters associations often call for massive government support in the form of investment, low interest rates, and cash incentives to facilitate establishment of industrial linkages. However, any government support must be performance based and must be tuned to appropriate phases of the "textile cycle." Representatives of clothing industries have also called for substantial devaluations of the currency or a separate exchange rate for garments exporters. However, devaluations by making imported intermediate inputs more expensive may not improve the competitive position of garments exporters. Accordingly, any substantial devaluation of the Taka is unwarranted.

- Industrial and trade policy instruments, no matter how well designed, will not be credible or effective under a chaotic and corrupt regime. Accordingly, organizations and think-tanks outside the government must play an active role in monitoring formulation and implementation of government trade and industrial policy instruments so that the government does not remain part of the problem.

## The Facts

1. Review of the structure of the economy indicate that the industry sector contributes about 17.1 percent of he GDP and employs 16 percent of the labor force. Out of various industries, the textile sector still occupies dominant place in the industrial structure. The textile sector contributes 34.12 percent of the total gross value added due to the manufacturing sector with 18.47 percent of the investment in fixed assets.

2. Bangladesh exported RMG products to as many as 85 countries. The main destinations of the RMG products of Bangladesh were U.S.A, Canada EEC Countries and EFTA countries. The average annual compound growth rate of exports from Bangladesh to the EEC countries was 37.9 percent, while the same from were 18.4 percent to the USA and 30.4 percent to Canada.

3. The textile sector in the leading sector providing employment to more than 56 percent of the industrial labor force. The major sub sectors of the textile sector are the jute industry, the cotton textile industry, and the ready-made garments manufacturing industry, and silk and synthetics.

4. In the absence of the quota system the least developed countries like Bangladesh would face tough competition from countries like South Korea, Taiwan, Thailand, Vietnam, Pakistan and India. Factory owners were of the view that it was possible to be more efficient and remain competitive in the world market without the protection of the quota system, but the numbers of factors were needed to be taken care of. In promoting local industry, policy support from the government was needed to keep pace with the changes in the world-trading environment.

5. With the implementation of the provisions of the UR, there would be further liberalization of trade. This would enhance the intensity of the competition. The fact that the system of analyzing the changes taking place due to the UR is yet to develop in Bangladesh. Albeit the majority of the RMG entrepreneurs were not aware of the provisions of the UR or of the restrictions imposed by the MFA, they were concerned about the quota system.

6. The future of the RMG sector largely depends on the strategy that the enterprises would take to enhance competitiveness of the sector. The major strategies as mentioned by the RMG enterprises were minimizing labor cost, developing efficiency of workers, improving quality of products introducing automation, products diversification and demanding government subsidy.

7. The poor women in whatever part of Asia are the ones who suffer the most from globalization. The further liberalization of trade and investments

(particularly financial investments), which has led to the present crisis, has exacerbated unemployment, underemployment, dislocation from traditional sources of livelihood, increased out-migration to urban areas and overseas, and worsening food insecurity. While jobs have been created for women because of the influx of labor-intensive industries like Ready Made Garments Manufacturing to take advantage of cheap labor, these jobs are also highly insecure. The recent financial crisis has shown how fragile these jobs are.

8. In Bangladesh the crisis of the East Asian economies has not negatively affected women's employment status. However, phasing out of MFA is posing threat of closing down of many RMG factories in which almost 65 percent of total workers employed are women. The average family size of the women worker was found to be between 4.1 and 5. Another study estimated that around 30 percent of women are the primary earners of their families while the others are secondary earners. Form this it is found that the impact of trade liberalization in Textile and RMG sector will increase women's unemployment and have a negative impact on income level on workers families.

**Consequences of MFA Phasing out in Bangladesh**

■ The real challenges for the export-oriented RMG industry of Bangladesh lies in the long run. It can be safely stated that the phenomenal growth of the RMG industry in Bangladesh is almost absolutely driven by the preferential market access in the USA, Canada and EU countries. With phasing out of the MFA, Bangladeshi RMG will lose restricted but some what guaranteed access to the US and Canadian Markets and unrestricted and preferential access to the markets of the EU where more than 99% of the RMG exports now end up. That means, almost entire RMG exports business of Bangladesh will be at stake with the elimination of the MFA and GSP trade regimes under the Uruguay Round on the morning of January 2, 2005, when no quotas will be left and the ATC itself will be terminated. The challenge for Bangladesh is elephantine in size, formidable in magnitude and simply overwhelming in comprehension

■ At present the total member of labour force engaged directly in this sector is about 4.4 million. At the ration of 1:3, as many as 15million people depend indirectly on these industries. If the expected numbers of additional garment and textile industries would be established by the year 2000, more than 2.5 million new work force would possible be deployed.

■ Majority of the workforce of this sector is female. The consequence of MFA phasing out may lead to unemployment of these workers. This is because Bangladesh exports ready made garments in the world market primarily based on cheap labor and quota protection. After MFA phasing out the later will not be in place, while cheap labor alone may not be enough to acquire a competitive position. As a result, the source of cheap labor, the female workforce will have to bear the cost of global liberalization. This will lead to a negative impact on poverty situation and livelihood situation of the poor, especially that of the poor women.

■ At present, Bangladesh has access to the EU market under the Generalised System of Preferences (GSP) as least developed countries. There are no quota for Bangladesh and it does not have to pay customs duties on products covered by the scheme, which include textile and clothing products, under the strictly monitored condition that a certificate of origin accompanies the imported goods. After 2005, when quota systems on textiles and clothing will be abolished, it is expected that the textile sector of Bangladesh will have a very hard time competing with its competitors India, Pakistan, China and Southeast Asia if backward linkages are not established. The phase out of quota for countries such as India and Pakistan will increase competition for Bangladesh.

# The Technical Issues

During the Uruguay Round negotiations, it was agreed that the MFA would be phased out through the implementation of the Agreement on Textiles and Clothing (ATC).

The ATC is an attempt to put an end to the constant extensions of the MFA by agreeing a phase out plan, after which the textiles and clothing sectors will no longer be subject to quotas. The phase-out plan is as follows:

On January 1st 1995, WTO Members were to integrate into the World Trade Agreement (WTA) products accounting for no less than 16% of the volume of their 1990 imports of textiles and clothing. These products were to include yarns, fabrics, textile products and clothes (although proportions were not specified).

- On January 1st 1998, WTO Members were to integrate into the WTA at least 17% of the volume of their 1990 imports in the 4 categories mentioned above.
- On January 1st 2002, WTO Members are to integrate into the WTA at least 18% of the volume of their 1990 imports in the 4 categories mentioned above.
- On January 1st 2005 the MFA will be fully phased out and the textiles and clothing sector is to be fully integrated into the WTA whereupon the ATC ceases to apply.

Phasing out of the MFA protection system over a 10 year transition period would be as follows: -

i) At the beginning of phase-1, on 01 January, 1995, each country would integrate into the products from the specific list in the Agreement which accounted for not less than 16% of its total volume of imports in 1990.

ii) At the beginning of phase-II, on 01 January, 1998, products which accounted for not less than 17% of 1990 import volume would be integrated.

iii) In the third phase starting from 01 January, 2002, products which accounted for not less than 18% of 1990 import volume would be integrated.

iv) The remaining 49% of 1990 imports would be integrated at the end of the transition period of 01 January, 2005. Integration in all these phases means trade in these products would be governed by the general rules of GATT.

- The comparative advantage of a country in clothing can be computed as "revealed comparative advantage (RCA)". If the RCA is greater than 1, the relevant country is considered to have a comparative advantage in the product concerned, while an RCA of less than 1 implies a comparative disadvantage in the product. The RCA for clothing at the 4- digit level during 1980,1985,1990, and 1996 for selected countries: Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, India, Pakistan, China, Indonesia, and South Korea reflect that, countries such as Bangladesh and Sri Lanka which did not have comparative advantages in most of the categories of clothing in 1980.

- According the laissez-faire approach any government intervention is unnecessary counterproductive. This laissez-faire approach however, ignores the presence of externalities in industrial linkages and in knowledge capital and imperfections in financial markets. In the presence of market failures, trade liberalization could induce a technologically less advanced country to specialize in product groups in which the potential for learning is limited. This can help us to understand even though by 1996 Bangladesh and Sri Lanka managed to achieve the comparative advantages for most categories of clothing, why the comparative advantages of these countries are still concentrated on low-value added categories.

- Like any other reforms, MFA phasing out will create some losers (some even in the long run) and could exacerbate poverty, even if temporarily. However, under the present context may be it is realistic to presume that most of the government in these circumstances will frame policy aiming at alleviating the hardships caused rather than abandon reform altogether. But the question is ***whether the reform depends upon or affects the ability of poor people to take risks or will reform lead to discontinuous switches in activities?*** When it comes to MFA phasing out, for a country like Bangladesh the answer is affirmative for both. If, trade reform leads to more or less complete changes in activities, there is a possibility that risk increases, as the new activity is riskier than the old one. Similarly, if a reform makes it more difficult for the poor to continue their traditional risk-coping strategies, it may increase their vulnerability to poverty even if it increases mean incomes.

- The greater market access for the developing countries arising as a result of MFA phasing out should not be taken for granted. The efficient economies with comparative advantage in clothing and textile may find out that there are certain risk factors with ATC restricting an over ambitious claim of expansion of market in the northern economies.

**The Main Risks Regarding ATC**

i) With the bulk of liberalization (and removal of quota restrictions) left to the very end of the transitional period, protectionist forces will make use of this time to attempt to build up sufficient political pressure to achieve a postponement of the final stage.

ii) With the selection of products for integration left solely to the importing countries, it could be expected that products that have never been subject to restriction would be integrated first, while the integration of more sensitive products in each category would be postponed as long as possible, thus offering no new market access opportunities for developing countries.

iii) During the transitional period new restrictions can be negotiated or imposed under a 'transitional safeguard mechanism' (Article 6), on a discriminatory basis, when importing countries determine that imports of textile and clothing products are causing 'serious damage' to their domestic industries.

## Case Study :

# Bangladesh RMG Sector and MFA Phasing out.

The textile and clothing sector is a very potential and fast growing sector of the developing countries. For example , in clothing and textile, developing countries met about 26 percent of apparent consumption of the EC, Japan and North America in 1988 while the share was nearly 3 percent in the 1960s ( World Bank, 1992). Consequently, the impact of the phasing out of MFA is quite an important issue for the developing countries.

In Bangladesh, we also see that Ready Made Garment (RMG) sector has a rising trend of contribution to the GDP of the country. In 1991/92 the contribution of the RMG sector to GDP was estimated at 1.20 percent, which increased to 1.50 percent during 1993/94.

In addition, the RMG sector contributed 60.1 percent of the total export earnings of the country during 1993/94. The growth rate of gross value added at factor cost in the RMG sector was estimated at 80.79 percent during 1980-81 to 1988-89. These statistics clearly demonstrate that the RMG sector is certainly a potential industrial sector of Bangladesh. Therefore, the consequence of the MFA phasing out is an issue of vital importance for the country.

One study reveals that if the developed countries remove the restriction on clothing and textile, exports of China, Korea, Hong Kong would rise by 322, 210 and 35 percent respectively, while those from Bangladesh would increase by 70 percent (Trolley and Whale, 1990). From this it is clear that on average all the countries will be benefited by the phasing out of MFA, but the benefit will not be the same among the developing countries.

Contrary to this optimistic view, some economists argue that the immediate effect of the elimination of MFA will result in market contraction of the textile and RMG products of Bangladesh; as because quota has played a vital role in the growth of this sector in the country. At the same time, there is a possibility that after the phasing out of the MFA, Bangladesh would lose market share to her more efficient and advanced competitors. This may result because, open competition amongst developing countries might drive out inefficient countries like Bangladesh; a country with poor technology and very low labour productivity. This may as well have a negative impact upon employment and further worsen the economic misfortune of the country.

## Case Study :

# Development of Clothing Export under MFA

Bangladesh relies heavily on the United States and European Union for exporting clothing. The two regions/countries account for over 95% of exports in 1996. Under MFA, the major competitors of Bangladesh face quantitative restrictions both in the United States and the European Union.

Whether the European Union is a more competitive market than the United States (i.e. the volatility of ranks of leading clothing exporters in the two markets) can be measured with the help of the Kendall coefficient of Concordance (KCC). The concordance coefficient lies between zero and unity. If the ranks of leading exporters change little over time, the coefficient will be close to unity. On the other hand, if ranks of leading exporters change substantially, the coefficient will be close to zero, suggesting the existence of volatile comparative advantage or what Bhagwati and Dehejia(1994) called, "kaleidoscope comparative advantage" in clothing.

A recent study has computed KCC for 17 years, covering the 1980-96 periods. The number of leading clothing exporting countries in the US, European Union, and the world market considered is twenty-five. It is striking to note that for the three SITC categories :outer garments (8429), men's shirts (8441), and knitted undergarments (8461), which are dominant in clothing exports from Bangladesh, the European Union has lower KCC. This suggests that for categories of clothing in which Bangladesh now specialize; the European market is more competitive and volatile, compared to the US market. Greater competition in the European market can be attributed to the facts that;

- this market is relatively less restricted by MFA quantitative measures, compared to the US market and
- the presence of several clothing exporting member countries, for instance, Spain, Portugal, and Italy, which are competitors of developing countries.

The study also examines the composition of clothing exports from Bangladesh at a disaggregate level. It is apparent that three categories (8441, 8429, and 8461) of clothing account for about 70% of total clothing exports. The shares of categories 8441 and 8429 in total world trade, however, have declined in recent years. Accordingly, Bangladesh needs to shift toward high-value-added categories whose demand is increasing. The concentration of clothing exports among different categories can be examined with help of the Herfindahl-Hirschman Index(HHI). The data show that the concentration index declined for Bangladesh during 1980-96. However, the index for Bangladesh is higher, compared to that for India and China.

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