Article

Small and Medium Enterprises in the Garment Sector of Afghanistan: Challenges and Prospects

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Abstract

Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs) in the garment sector appear to be neglected by the government of Afghanistan. Although, the improvement in this sector will contribute enormously to the overall economic development. Developing the garments sector has even more importance in the context of least developed economies like Afghanistan. Thus, given the significance, this study aimed to find out the problems of the entrepreneurs of the small and medium enterprises in the garments sector of Afghanistan. This study explores factors affecting small and medium enterprises in the garments sector of Afghanistan. The study employs qualitative methodology by using purposive judgmental sampling method and data was collected from fifteen entrepreneurs of the small and medium enterprises in the garments sector in Kabul province. The study concluded that factors such as; lack of security, lack of government support, tough foreign markets competition, lack of textile production factories, no control over the large volume of garments imports, etc., largely affect the small and medium enterprises in the garment sector of Afghanistan. This study will help the concerned government bodies' policy and decision-makers to understand the problems faced by the entrepreneurs in the garments sector well and take initiatives accordingly to sort out the problems not only but devise policies to assure future growth of the garment sector of Afghanistan.

Keywords: *Small and medium enterprises, garment sector, textile*

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Introduction

Afghanistan not only has a long history of textile industry but in good times, the country has exported its textile products to the region and beyond (Ahmadzai, 2013). In the past, seven largest textile factories were operating within the country located in different provinces of Afghanistan such as Kabul, Parwan, Balkh, Kandahar, and Baghlan province, while accommodating around 30,000 employees (Mohammadi, 2017). However, over the years, these factories were destroyed in different wars. According to the government statistics, Afghanistan harvests almost 60,000 tons of cotton annually but the country lacks textile factories to process all this (Mohammadi, 2017).

Consequently, besides having a vast potential for its textile industry, Afghanistan spends over $500 million a year on the imports of clothing and fabrics from other countries such as Pakistan, Iran, Turkey, India, and other countries (Arman, 2018). In an interview with Khan Jan Alokozai, deputy head of Afghanistan Chamber of Commerce and Industries (ACCI), he said that "currently we do not have garment production in Afghanistan, there are some factories in the country, but material is imported from abroad, this is an important industry which has been concentrated" (Tolo News, 2018).

Afghanistan is a developing country as per the statistics from Central Intelligence Agency report (2019), the nation's GDP stands at about $70 billion with an exchange rate of $20 billion, and the GDP per capita is about $2,000. The report further shows that the country's overall imports are over $6 billion worth of goods while the exports nearly $1 billion only. Also, the unemployment rate in the country is 23.9% (Central Intelligence Agency, 2019). Thus, investing in the garment sector will help the economy of the country grow in many ways. First, the cotton produced within the country will be processed and thus used in the garment sector. Secondly, the local production of garments will help in reducing the reliance on imports of garment not only but the good quality garment locally produced can be exported to other countries as well. Third, besides substantial contribution towards GDP, it will also help in increasing the employment rate as it is one of the major economic issues currently the country is facing.

Given the above arguments, besides investment in the garment sector, there is a dire need to understand the problems being faced by entrepreneurs running small and medium enterprises in this sector. With great potential to contribute enormously towards economic development, the volume of studies to explore potential problems and prospects to grow about garment sector enterprises are still limited. Thus, it is argued that bringing improvements in the existing performance of garment sector enterprises in Afghanistan will not only develop the garment sector of Afghanistan but will also extensively contribute to the growth of country. (Sofizada, 2018). Therefore, considering the significance of the garment sector, the present study centers around one major research question;

Research Question: What problems are there for entrepreneurs running small and medium enterprises in the garment sector?

The present study is organized as follows; the following section discusses the available literature in different countries highlighting the problems in the garment sector including Afghanistan, followed by the research methodology, analysis, conclusion, and recommendation respectively. The last section describes the limitation and implications for future research.

2. Literature Review

To have an in-depth understanding of the phenomenon, the following section presents the literature review about the challenges or problems in the garment sector of the neighborhood countries of Afghanistan such as Bangladesh, Pakistan, and India respectively.

2.1 Bangladesh Garment Sector Problems

Bangladesh is now one of the world's leading clothing exporters, second only to China (The Asia Foundation report, 2019). The report further reveals that the garment industry of Bangladesh employs 3.6 million workers out of a total population of over 150 million. However, a plethora of past studies have highlighted several problems that the garment sector in Bangladesh is facing problems. These problems include lack of skilled workers, lack of proper infrastructures and unplanned built infrastructures, higher interest rates, lack of research and development (R&D) and lack of creativity are the few worth to mention (Berg & Zadeed, 2011; Rahman et al., 2008; Kabir, 2017; Hassan, 1996; Moazzem & Parcka, 2012; Mardha & Gallarm, 2009; Islam, Khan, & Islam, 2013).

2.2 Pakistan Garments Sector Problems

Pakistan was once ranked as the 4th largest garment and textile manufacturer in the region (Sarwar, 2012). In the past, this sector was making the export of 8.5% of the total country exports annually which makes about $12.36 Billion US Dollars (APTMA report, 2009-2012).

Several studies in Pakistan revealed that the garment sector of Pakistan has been facing many challenges and problems resulting in low productivity. This sector has not only lost its charm but also its competitive advantage in the world market. Lack of energy, increasing yarn prices, lack of gas and electricity, problems of law and orders, devaluation of Pakistan Rupee (PKR), lack of research and development centers, increasing fuel prices, lack of machineries and equipment's, and lack of investment were highlighted as the major reasons for the lower performance in the garment sector of Pakistan (Sohrab & Zahan, 2018; Sattar, 2017; Iqbal, Mahmood, Iqbal, & Akhtar, 2017; Mumtaz, Gul, & Khan, 2018; Shah, Essrani, Shah, & Rahat, 2013).

2.3 India Garment Sector Problems

In India, the textile industry, being one of the oldest manufacturing industries, contributes considerably to India's Gross Domestic Product (GDP), export earnings, and industrial production (Goyal, Kaur, & Aggarwal, 2017). The overall contribution of the textile industry to the overall Index of Industrial Production (IIP), GDP, and total exports is 14%, 5%, and 13% respectively (IBEF report, 2016). Although, the textile industry is

contributing a lot towards the Indian economic growth, nevertheless, a large volume of studies also highlighted problems in the garment and textile industry. Among many; lack of investments, lack of modernized machinery for production, lack of raw materials, electricity shortages, lack of water which is still somehow existing, lack of safety standards, are underlined as some of the major problems (Singh & Kathuria,2006; Marya,2018; Mezzadri& Srivastava, 2015; Kasi & Chitra, 2016;).

2.4 Afghanistan Garment Sector Problems

As mentioned earlier, the garment sector of Afghanistan has a long history. However, the decades of war have badly damaged this sector. A few studies pertaining to this sector have underscored some of the major problems in the past. These problems include, lack of technology, lack of government support, lack of raw materials for the textile and garments factories are all leading to the lower performance of the garment sector in Afghanistan as indicated in different studies in Afghanistan (Rahimi, 2017; Sofizada, 2018; Rassol, 2013; to Pain et al.,2014; Ahmadzai, 2013).

In the net shell, the above literature shows a consensus on the problems highlighted by authors in different countries in the garment sector. Besides problems, extant literature indicates that the garment sector also plays a vital role in overall economic development. Therefore, much attention needs to be paid to this sector in terms of its effectiveness for developing countries like Afghanistan, where economic development is one of the major issues for the government and the policymakers.
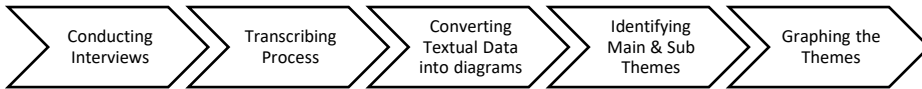
3. Research Methodology

Bearing in mind interpretivism philosophy, an inductive approach was designed according to the nature of the present study. The nature of this research was phenomenology. According to Creswell (2009), "Phenomenological research is a qualitative strategy in which the researcher identifies the essence of human experiences about a phenomenon as described by participants in a study" (p.245). Qualitative studies that focus on phenomenological dimensions often propose interviews. Therefore, face-to-face interviews were conducted on an average time of 25 minutes with fifteen participants selected from the owners of the small and medium enterprises in Kabul, Afghanistan.

The sampling technique used for this study was purposive and judgmental that involved identifying and choosing respondents who had expertise and experience with the phenomenon of the study and could speak openly about the subject matter. Semi-Structured interviews were conducted to gather responses from the study participants. The interviews were held at the respective respondents' offices, and the questions asked during interviews were carefully recorded, typed, and transcribed for the analysis purpose. Though, the interviews were recorded in Pashto and Dari languages. However, utmost care was taken to translate those responses into the English language.

4. Analysis Method

The data was analyzed through cumulative thematic analysis. The information obtained from the respondents was fully typed, and then the central and common texts among all the respondents' answers were highlighted and analyzed. Finally, recommendations were made based on data interpretation and conclusion. So the overall analysis process followed in this study is depicted in the following figure 1.

Figure 1: Step by Step Analysis Process

Conducting Interviews → Transcribing Process → Converting Textual Data into diagrams → Identifying Main & Sub Themes → Graphing the Themes

4.1 Analysis

Table 1: Respondents' Profile

S. No	Designation	Gender	Year of Experience	Number of Participants
1	Poshak Istanbul Garments Factory Representative	Male	15	2
2	Master Garments Factory President	Male	5	2
3	Idea Garments Factory Owner	Female	5	1
4	Mahram Ali Garments Factory Owners	Female	20	2
5	Ministry of Interior Affairs Sewing Factory Representatives	Male	30	2
6	Nangarhar Garments Machineries Supplier Owner	Male	10	1
7	Dubai Garments Factory Owner	Female	7	1
8	Edress Tailoring Factory Owner and a Garments Tailor	Male	12	2
9	Abdullah Garments Logo Factory Owner	Male	14	1
10	Daikondi Whole seller of Garments	Female	8	1

Source: Author's compilation

The above table portrays that 66% of the respondents were males while 44% were females. The table also indicates that these participants had a minimum experience of five years in the garment sector.

To find out the answer to the main research question, a set of questions (research protocol questions) were further developed and asked. For analysis, one example as a common view is in place for each interview question. For instance, in response to the first research question, which was; What problems are there for the entrepreneurs running small and medium enterprises in the garment sector? The responses from the interviewees were collected as follows:

Interviewee 1: *Lack of security in the country, Instability of the market for garments, Lack of proper infrastructure, corruption in customs department for letting any kind of textile and garments get into the markets made our*

business operations poor, poor quality of raw materials, high level of rivalry in Afghanistan, and no control by the government.

Interviewee 2: *No domestic textile factories, no standardized packaging factories, and tough competition.*

Interviewee 3: *Electricity costs are high which is 16 Afs per Unit, Tax employees ask for a bribe, lack of skilled workers and high competition in the market, lack of skilled workers, lack of government support, raw materials.*

Based on the responses, themes were developed and thus, findings were generated as follows;

Main Findings from the Interview Questions

The following figure 2 depicts some of the major problems identified as themes in response to the first research question, which was, what problems are there for the entrepreneurs running small and medium enterprises in the garment sector?

Figure 2: Output of TVET
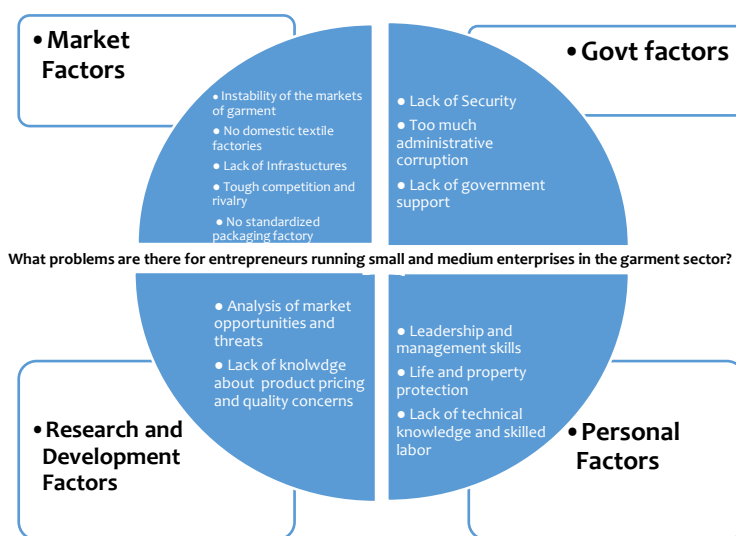
Source: Compiled by the authors.

Justifications of Figure 2 Theme Factors

The major problems identified through a set of sub-questions have been categorized into following four global themes: 1)   Government factors, 2) Market factors, 3) Research and development (R&D) factors, and 4) personal factors. To grasp the understanding of these global themes, the following section describes the sub-themes obtained through the interview process.

1. Government Factors

Lack of security in the country: In response to a question on the security in the country, all respondents anonymously said that it is, indeed, one of

the major concerns of the entrepreneurs' not only in the garment sector but in the other sectors of the economy as well. The overall insecurity in the country has created uncertainty about the future of garment sector entrepreneurs. Due to uncertainty, some of the entrepreneurs' have sold out their business assets and settled abroad permanently.

Too much administrative corruption: The majority of the respondents had a consensus on the issue of corruption in the government administration. The presence of corruption has created a huge frustration among entrepreneurs not only in the garment sector but in the other sectors of the economy as well. Self-interest and lower commitment among government officials have been reported by the majority of the respondents.

Lack of government support: The majority of the respondents had a consensus on the ineffective role of government in the growth of the garment sector. Lack of government support in terms of taxation, the provision of other facilities such as water and power, cost of raw materials, cost of electricity, custom duties on the imported garments machineries, were commonly reported.

2. Market Factors

Instability of the markets of garments: In response to an interview question, the respondent commonly agreed to the fact that there exist a rivalry and tough competition in Afghan markets for the garments. Further, there is no control on imports of garment by the government, which in turn has made the domestic small and medium garments sector enterprises to suffer the most and keep them stagnant.

No domestic textile factories: In response to the research question, the study respondents replied that since there is no domestic textile factory, therefore, the garment sector owners have to rely on the imported raw material which is expensive. As a result, the price of the locally produced garments goes up leading to a decline in overall demand for the garment. Eventually, customers either switch over or prefer to buy foreign products.

Lack of infrastructures: Most of the respondents were of the opinion that the decades of war have affected the infrastructure of the garment sector badly. Besides building, machines and other equipment's have either been destroyed or damaged.

Tough competition and rivalry: Most of the respondents agreed on the presence of tough competition between locally produced and imported garments in the market. Customers usually prefer foreign products (garment) for the reason that these products are well promoted by the media and the distributors of those products in the local market.

No standardized packaging factory: In response to a question asked, respondents, shared their concerns about no availability of standardized packaging materials in the local market, and if available, it is either very expensive or of inferior quality. In any case, due to poor packaging, the local

products (garments) seem less appealing relative to foreign well-packaged products.

3. Research and Development Factors (R&D)

Analysis of market opportunities and threats: Lack of research and development (R&D) has been reported as one of the serious problems by the majority of respondents. Due to no proper research, entrepreneurs in the garment sector could not understand the market dynamism in terms of identifying opportunities and threats to effectively compete with the competitors by employing well-informed business decisions and strategies accordingly.

Lack of knowledge about product pricing and quality concerns: In response to a question, respondents admitted that, since there is no R&D, therefore the entrepreneurs lack the awareness about the target market's income level and their demands which consequently lead to poor pricing and the quality.

4. Personal Factors

Leadership and management skills: Respondents admitted that the leadership and management skills are lacking among entrepreneurs in the garment sector. They somehow manage people and their business operations by using traditional leadership and management practices, which sometimes do not work effectively in managing the workforce and business operations in the garment sector.

Life and property protection: Respondents shared their apprehension about the security of their lives and properties. They shared their concern that incidents like kidnapping, stealing, and even target killings make them worried a lot and as a result, they cannot focus on the development of their skills and business expansion ideas.

Lack of technical knowledge and skilled labor: Lack of technical knowledge and skilled labor has been reported as another obstacle in the growth of the garment sector. Respondents agreed to the fact that entrepreneurs in the garment sector are not technically sound. They are running their businesses based on their experiences and past practices which are not as effective as modern practices are. Lack of technical knowledge and skilled labor results in overall lower productivity which subsequently lead to the issues of quality.

5. Conclusion and Discussion

Despite having a huge potential to grow, the stagnancy is present in the garment sector of Afghanistan. Consequently, there is much demand for imported garment related products. Considering the significance of the garment sector, the present study was designed to identify problems that create hurdles in the growth of small and medium enterprises operating in this sector. There are several problems that the small and medium enterprises in the garment sector are facing. These problems include; lack of security in the country, too much administrative corruption, lack of government support, instability of the markets of garments, no domestic

textile factories, lack of infrastructures, tough competition and rivalry, no standardized packaging factory, analysis of market opportunities and threats, and lack of knowledge about product pricing and quality concerns, leadership and management skills, life and property protection, lack of technical knowledge and skilled labor. These problems have been broadly categorized into four groups such as; government factors, market factors, research and development (R&D) factors, and personal factors.

Interestingly, some problems have been identified in the previous studies conducted in Afghanistan or found as a common problem between Afghanistan and other countries mentioned in the literature. For instance, lack of government support and lack of textile factories have been identified frequently in the previous studies on the garment sector in Afghanistan (e.g., Ahmadzai, 2013; Pain & Painman, 2014; Rassol, 2013). This is an indication of the fact that the sector has not yet received proper attention from the government side. In addition to lack of government support, lack of infrastructure seems to be a common problem not only in Afghanistan but in Bangladesh and Pakistan also. Many studies in Bangladesh (e.g., Mardha & Gallaram, 2009; Hassan, 1996; Islam et al., 2013; Berg & Zadeed, 2013) and in Pakistan (Sohrab & Zahan, 2018) stressed on the availability of proper infrastructure.

In the case of Bangladesh, the issue of infrastructure seems to be resolved. It is evident from the progress of its textile industry over the years as mentioned in the literature. This study has found that there is a lack of research and development (R&D) initiatives in the garment sector of Afghanistan. These results are similar to the findings of studies conducted in Bangladesh (e.g., Hassan, 1996; Islam et al., 2013; Kabir, 2017) as well as in Pakistan (see, Mumtaz, Gul, & Khan, 2018) has been found another common problem.

In conclusion, among many problems as identified in the current study, some problems were identified in the previous studies on the garment sector in Afghanistan. The existence of those problems indicates that the improvement in the garment sector has not been taken seriously yet. Furthermore, the current study highlights some problems which are commonly faced by Afghanistan and the neighboring countries such as Bangladesh and Pakistan.

The garment sector in Bangladesh, India, and Pakistan has been progressing in comparison with the garment sector in Afghanistan. Hence, the understanding and implementing the reforms being brought by the governments of the neighboring countries could also help the Afghan government tackle the problems in the garment sector. This study, however, suggests the following recommendations not only to overcome the present problems but for the future growth of small and medium enterprises in the garments sector.

Furthermore, past studies have shown that Afghanistan was once not only self-reliant in the production of textile products (garments) but it was able to export those products to other countries in the region. Although,

the decades of war have destroyed the infrastructure, machineries, and equipment of the textile industry, however, there exists a potential to revive this sector again. The revival of this sector will contribute enormously in creating employment opportunities, income generation, and growth in the GDP.

6. Recommendations

The study provides the following recommendations to improve the performance of small and medium enterprises in the garments sector of Afghanistan. Some of the recommendations

1. **Improve security in the country**: Security is the biggest challenge for the present government. It creates hindrances for any kind of economic development in the country. Since the garment sector comprises of males and females either as entrepreneurs or employees. Security is one of the main concerns for them especially for the females in rural and provincial areas which might distract them to be a part of this sector in any capacity.

2. **Decreasing the level of corruption:** Intensive efforts should be made by the government to lower down the corruption in the concerned departments such as customs. This will help in making sure that there are a proper check and control on the trafficking of the textile-related product by the mafia group within the country.

3. **Improving and investing in infrastructures:** There is a need for a large amount of investment in the war-affected infrastructure. The government can encourage private investment in the garment sector by providing facilities to private entrepreneurs such as proper buildings with a wider space, low-cost electricity, connecting roads to ports and provincial cities, low duties on the imports of machineries and other equipment.

4. **Reviving domestic textile factories in Afghanistan:** The efforts should be made to revive the domestic textile industry. It will help in getting the raw materials at a lower cost on one hand, and on the other hand, the dependency on the imports will be reduced to a greater extent.

5. **Improving and investing in packaging factories for garments:** Afghanistan is importing its raw material and textile from neighboring countries specially Pakistan, Iran, Turkey, and other countries. The raw materials are then processed domestically for garments. However, the final product needs to be packaged in a standardized way. Usually, the packaging material is also imported from foreign countries with the highest price, thereby increasing the overall price of garments. Thus, the need for the packaging industry arises here. Further investment is needed to improve the current packaging factories and establish new ones.

6. **Improving government support for the females:** There is a large number of Afghan women who are either already trained or being trained by international organizations especially with the financial

support of USAID-Afghanistan. Thesewomenstay at home because of a lack of support and resources. To apply and expanding their skills, they need some machinery, space for selling their products, free tax lotteries, and encouragement and some financial support from the government.

7. **Improving entrepreneurs' leadership and management skills**: As it is said that, the more an entrepreneur has good leadership and management skills in planning and directing their staff towards the achievement of assigned and planned goals, the better the entrepreneurs will be succeeding in their business operations. Therefore, it is recommended that these entrepreneurs should be provided with on and off training to understand the philosophies and application of contemporary leadership and management practices.

7. Scope, Limitation, and Implication for Future Research

Just like any other research, this study has its limitations. First, most of the data were collected from the entrepreneurs (as participants) of the small and medium enterprises in the garment sector in Kabul province only. So, there is a need to conduct similar studies in the other provinces of Afghanistan to understand well the problems of the small and medium enterprises in the garment sector. Further research can also be conducted on the importance of textile and cotton factories in connection with the garments sector which is not discussed in detail in this study. In addition to that, future research should address the standard textile factories' revival, cotton cultivation, and processing as these are the inputs providing sources for the garment sector. Lastly, some empirical studies are also suggested to be conducted in the garment sector.

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