GARMENT SECTOR OF BANGLADESH: VULNERABILITIES OF FEMALE WORKERS

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Abstract: The Readymade Garment (RMG) industry, contributing to 83% of Bangladesh's total export earnings, is a critical economic pillar. The sector offers employment opportunities for women who come from low-income backgrounds, making up about 80% of its workforce. Though the RMG industry brings noticeable socioeconomic changes for these women, their plight underscores the high cost of these gains. Female workers in this industry face numerous challenges, such as inadequate wages, unsafe working conditions, and gender-based discrimination, that adversely impact their physical and mental health. Using a qualitative research approach, this paper explores these vulnerabilities. The author visited three garment factories in Ashulia, Dhaka, observed the factories' working environments, and conducted group discussions and one-on-one interactions with 17 female workers. Moreover, a comprehensive review of secondary sources, such as recent literature, blog articles, and news reports, supplemented primary data collection. The author employed a thematic analysis of the gathered data and literature review, which reveals an industry marked by persistent job insecurities, inadequate transportation facilities, health hazards, and societal stigmas that predominantly affect female workers. The findings underline widespread workplace vulnerabilities, including physical and verbal abuse, hazardous working conditions, and gender-specific discrimination, with pregnancy-related discrimination being particularly noteworthy. The paper concludes with recommendations to mitigate these issues, emphasizing the shared responsibility of various stakeholders, including the Bangladesh government, the RMG sector, the International Labor Organization (ILO), and global clothing and fashion brands. The proposed recommendations comprise updating work standards, improving worker privileges such as increasing wages and transport facilities, ensuring building safety, and offering skill development opportunities. Implementing these measures can improve workers' facilities, augment productivity, and ensure sustainability in the success of Bangladesh's garment sector.

Keywords: Bangladesh RMG sector, garment industry, female workers, workplace vulnerabilities, gender-based discrimination, thematic analysis

Introduction

The contribution of women to a nation's prosperity is undeniable, given that almost half of the world's population is women ("Population, female," 2019). Women's sacrifices are often neglected in patriarchal societies despite their contributions to household and professional work. Throughout history, women have played a significant role in the progress of civilization (Gran, 2019). Economic Nobel laureate Amartya Sen recognized the importance of women's economic, political, and social participation in development (Coleman, 2004). While attitudes towards working women have improved

in most developing countries, the number of women in the professional workforce in Bangladesh is still relatively low compared to developed countries.

Since the post-liberation war in 1971, Bangladesh's garment industry has become a crucial source of foreign currency earnings. Statistics have shown that approximately 80% of the country's total earnings from exports come from garments, and the industry has experienced a remarkable revenue increase from $19 billion to $34 billion in recent years (Fathi, 2022). Bangladesh is traditionally a male-dominated society, and women primarily work in low-paid and risky informal labor forces. However, the economic reconstruction of the 1980s created job opportunities for illiterate and poor village women in the Readymade Garment (RMG) industry (Bhattacharya, 1998), where almost 80% of workers are women who work from cutting clothes to inspecting garment products (Shajahan et al., 2021).

Female workers face numerous vulnerabilities despite being the primary workforce behind the Bangladesh RMG sector. They receive the world's lowest wages (Islam et al., 2022) and often lead impoverished lives because they bear their expenses and family members. Furthermore, they lack proper workplace safety and security measures in the garment industry, which are the fundamental requirements for industry workers (Paul-Majumder and Begum, 2000; Yasmin, 2014). The 2012 and 2013 devastating garment factory disasters, in which over 1200 workers died, highlight the serious safety issues (Hasan et al., 2020) and non-compliance with the Bangladesh National Building Code of 1993 (BNBC-93) (Wadud et al., 2014) in Bangladesh's RMG sector. In addition, female workers experience workplace rights violations, including physical and verbal abuse and gender-based discrimination, such as pregnancy discrimination. They often try to cope with the adversarial environment of garment industries since most are uneducated and come from low-income families. Consequently, these workers face many physical and mental health hazards later in life (Mahmud et al., 2018).

Bangladesh's garment sector largely depends on a female workforce. Although female workers are economically independent to some extent due to their greater involvement with the Bangladesh garment industry, social views toward them have not changed significantly (Kabir et al., 2018). Moreover, these women face numerous challenges ranging from receiving inadequate wages to engaging in risky working conditions (Islam et al., 2022). In a time where global discussions emphasize workers' rights and ethical production, it is paramount to study and understand these vulnerabilities and their effect on the well-being of female workers.

The primary aim of this research is to investigate the challenges female workers face in Bangladesh's RMG industry. The study focuses on issues such as inadequate wages, harsh working conditions, insufficient accommodation and transportation facilities, physical and verbal abuses, and gender-based

discrimination. Additionally, the research seeks to understand the impact of these challenges on the physical and mental health of female workers. This paper utilizes a qualitative research approach to delve into the abovementioned vulnerabilities. Specifically, it employs a thematic analysis to examine the data collected from three garment factories in Ashulia, Dhaka. The goal is to uncover patterns and common themes related to these vulnerabilities to provide a thorough understanding of the challenges faced by female workers in the RMG sector. By shedding light on these challenges, it is hoped that the garment industry will take steps to safeguard and uphold the rights of female workers.

"Made in Bangladesh"- Strugglers Behind the Label

Bangladesh's RMG sector has gained global recognition as the second-largest producer and exporter of garment products worldwide after China (Zaman, 2021). Top fashion brands such as Zara, Gap, Calvin Klein, H&M, Tommy Hilfiger, Hugo Boss, Armani Exchange, Old Navy, and others collect their products from Bangladesh due to their exceptional quality, trendy and ethnic designs, and affordable prices compared to other countries like India ("Easier imports from," 2011), creating a global brand, "Made in Bangladesh." However, the label "Made in Bangladesh" did not come without a price. The primary reason behind the boost of Bangladesh's garment sector is the exploitation of cheap labor, primarily uneducated and underprivileged female workers. According to the World Bank and other research, women from impoverished backgrounds comprise a significant proportion of Bangladesh's garment sector workforce, with approximately 80% (Sili, 2018) and nearly 85% (Sikhdar et al., 2014) of workers being female.

Despite their critical contribution to the industry, Bangladeshi garment workers receive meager wages and few workplace benefits. They work in dusty, low-light, and noisy environments, and are often exposed to chemical materials, and lack proper sanitation facilities. The majority of garment factories do not adhere to healthy workplace rules or labor rights standards that are defined by the International Labour Organization (ILO) Convention 155 (1981) (Sharma, 2015), leaving workers vulnerable to physical and psychological harm. Hence, female garment workers, who primarily work as sewing operators, cutting personnel, sewing operator helpers, and finishing personnel, suffer the most from workplace hazards. Studies have documented the physical and mental health issues experienced by garment workers in Bangladesh (Kabir et al., 2018).

While "Made in Bangladesh" has become a global brand, it also symbolizes the significant sacrifices made by these workers. Their stories are often brutal and heartbreaking. The lack of proper monitoring and law enforcement in the industry leaves these workers in a precarious situation. Although world-renowned fashion brands are happy to get quality products at low prices, they never strongly raise their voices against the workplace rights violations of garment industries. Even if they do, it is only to save

their brand image. Therefore, it is crucial to analyze and address the vulnerabilities of female workers in Bangladesh's RMG sector, including basic needs such as fair wages, healthy work environments, and labor rights standards.

Methods

Study Setting and Data Collection

This study employed qualitative research methods, incorporating individual interviews and group discussions with 17 female garment workers. The participants were intentionally selected to capture a diverse range of ages, marital statuses, and educational backgrounds. All participants were anonymized to protect their identities. Table 1 provides an overview of their socio-demographic profiles.

A significant number were aged between 20 and 30 and worked primarily as helpers or sewing operators. Two participants served as quality inspectors. Many had no formal education or only completed education up to grade 5. Most participants migrated from villages, leaving their children behind to work in the RMG to contribute to family income. A significant number were aged between 20 and 30 and worked primarily as helpers or sewing operators. Two participants served as quality inspectors. Many had no formal education or only completed education up to grade 5. Most participants migrated from villages, leaving their children behind to work in the RMG to contribute to family income.

Table 1: Socio-demographic characteristics of interview participants.

Socio-demographic Information	Number of Participants
Age	
18 to 24	5
25 to 30	8
30 to 40	3
40+	1
Marital Status	
Married	10
Single	3
Separated/Divorce	4
No of Children	
0	3
1 to 2	8
3 to 4	6
Religion	

Muslim	12
Hindu	3
Others	2
Education level	
Illiterate/ None	4
1 to 5 years	8
6 to 10 years	3
10+ years	2
Position in Garment	
Helper	9
Swing Operator	6
Quality Inspector	2

The research was conducted in three different factories located in Ashulia, a suburb of Savar city in the Dhaka division, chosen due to its high concentration of garment factories. Data collection included one-to-one interviews with all participants and three group discussions comprising five participants each, except for one group, which had seven participants. The data collection continued until thematic saturation was achieved.

In addition to interviews and observations, a comprehensive review of existing literature was conducted to explore the challenges faced by female workers in Bangladesh's RMG sector. Google Scholar was used to search for relevant articles, focusing on publications from the past ten years. The scope of the search included reputable conferences, journals, book chapters, as well as articles from newspapers and blogs. For the literature search, keywords were used either individually or in combination, including: (1) "female workers" OR "workers," (2) "vulnerabilities" OR "difficulties," (3) by the name of the county, "Bangladesh," OR other South Asian countries, and (4) "garment" OR "readymade garment" OR "RMG sector" OR "clothing factory/industry" OR "fashion industry."

Data Analysis

The study utilized a qualitative thematic analysis approach for interpreting the collected data. After each interview, transcripts were prepared in Bengali language based on the audio recordings. These transcripts were then meticulously reviewed multiple times to ensure a thorough understanding. The data were then sorted thematically to identify recurring patterns in the participants' responses.

In addition to the interviews, a comprehensive review of secondary data, including existing literature, was conducted. This review guided the formulation of key research questions to gain a holistic understanding of the subject. The research questions included:

- Why do workers migrate to areas like Ashulia, Savar, and Gazipur, home to most of Bangladesh's garment factories?

- What motivates women to work in this sector?

- What significant challenges do they encounter?

- What are the potential solutions to mitigate these vulnerabilities?

The findings were synthesized after the successful collection and analysis of the data. The findings are discussed in the subsequent section of the paper.

Results and Discussion

This section presents key findings on the myriad challenges female garment workers in Bangladesh face, including gender discrimination, violence, and health and workplace concerns.

Gender-based Discrimination and Violence in the RMG Sector of Bangladesh

Gender equality is strongly related to the income status of a country. Gender inequality is a prevalent issue in developing and low-income countries like Bangladesh. Despite having a female prime minister and female parliament speaker, Bangladesh remains one of the most challenging countries for women in South Asia. In Bangladesh, gender-based discrimination and violence are pervasive not only in domestic areas but also in the workplace, particularly in the RMG sector, which has a significant number of female employees. Discrimination against women can manifest in various ways, such as undervaluing their work, paying them less than their male colleagues, and assigning male team leaders despite female workers' equal capability. For example, in Bangladesh, the gender pay gap, which measures the difference between the hourly wages of male and female workers as a percentage of male workers, is 22% (Munni, 2022). Additionally, female workers are often overlooked for important assignments, with their capabilities doubted in favor of their male counterparts. Moreover, female workers face the threat of losing their jobs due to physical sickness, menstruation, and other issues. Despite many stories of female abuse and discrimination, most remain unreported. One interviewee encapsulated this sentiment by stating,

"Can you believe it? I have the same qualifications as my current supervisor, but they still made him the boss while I am stuck being a quality inspector. They do not even see my capability just because I am a woman."

Workplace violence based on gender is another common issue in the garment industry of Bangladesh. Violence happens in various forms, including physical, emotional, psychological, or sexual. Typical

forms of physical violence in RMG and housekeeping sectors include kicks, slaps, intentional hits, beatings, and burning (Oosterom et al., 2022). Female RMG workers often remain silent in the case of such incidents due to the potential long-term consequences of speaking out.

Gender-based discrimination and violence in Bangladesh's garment industry have severe consequences for women's economic empowerment and the overall development of the garment sector. Addressing these issues through policy reform, awareness-raising, and training programs is crucial for employers and employees. This requires collaboration between stakeholders, including the government, employers, and workers.

Physical Health Vulnerabilities

Garment workers are exposed to various physical health vulnerabilities due to unhygienic working conditions and the nature of their tasks. These vulnerabilities include but are not limited to respiratory issues (Parimalam et al., 2007, Ahmed and Raihan, 2014, Hasnain et al., 2014, Makurat et al., 2016, Fitch et al., 2017), hearing loss due to constant loud noise from machinery (Parimalam et al., 2007, Khan et al., 2015), eye problems and loss of sight due to constant visual concentration (Ahmed and Raihan, 2014, Khan et al., 2015, Fitch et al., 2017), skin diseases caused by exposure to industrial chemicals (Ahmed and Raihan, 2014, Khan et al., 2015), cardiovascular diseases (Fatema et al., 2014), and musculoskeletal problems (Parimalam et al., 2007, Ahmed and Raihan, 2014). Other common physical disorders are back and joint pain due to prolonged standing (Ahmed and Raihan, 2014, Khan et al., 2015, Fitch et al., 2017), high blood pressure, fever (Ahmed and Raihan, 2014, Hasnain et al., 2014, Makurat et al., 2016), diarrhea (Hasnain et al., 2014, Makurat et al., 2016), and gastric pain (Ahmed and Raihan, 2014). One elder female worker articulated the grim reality succinctly, stating,

"I have heard many garment workers end up with health problems later on, like hearing loss, eye issues, and body pain. We are all aware of the risks but have no other options. I come from a low-income family, have little to no formal education, and am a mother of three. My husband drives a rickshaw, and his earnings alone cannot cover our family expenses. If I do not work here, we might not have enough food. So, I have accepted this as my reality."

In addition to the common physical problems mentioned above, the unsanitary working environment of the garment industry causes particular health problems for female workers. For instance, female RMG workers suffer from irregular menstruation due to constant work pressure. Additionally, they face difficulties during pregnancy and childbirth due to the lack of medical attention and maternity leave in the workplace. They are sometimes advised to quit the job temporarily without salary or permanently. Moreover, female workers suffer from different transmitted diseases due to the lack of hygienic and clean sanitation available in workplaces (Ahmed and Raihan, 2014). Since female workers are the lowest salary holders, they get fewer opportunities to consume nutritious foods and face physical issues such as being underweight, anemic, and having iron deficiency (Hasnain et al., 2014, Makurat et al., 2016).

Research indicates that the primary factors contributing to these vulnerabilities are unsanitary workplaces, long working hours, improper chemical handling, nutritional deficiencies, and environmental hazards such as noisy workplaces, poor lighting, inadequate ventilation, and dust-laden atmospheres (Padmini and Venmathi, 2012, Khan et al., 2015). Given the adverse consequences of these issues, policymakers must take immediate action to improve the workplace environment and overall well-being of RMG workers.

Behavior Restrictions and Oral and Physical Abuse

Female garment workers suffer from widespread verbal abuse from their male coworkers and supervisors. Such forms of abuse include frequent criticism, insults, yelling, and even threats of termination for trivial mistakes. It is a common belief in the garment industry that female workers are treated more like maids than coworkers. This behavior negatively impacts workers' mental well-being (Akhter et al., 2019). Although physical abuse is less common, it does occur in many forms, such as pinching, pushing, and throwing clothes in workers' faces (Oosterom et al., 2022). The most recurrent form of physical abuse is slapping or the gesture thereof. Physical abuse not only prompts immediate physical discomfort but also contributes to long-term emotional and psychological stigmas and undermines the workers' self-esteem. As described by one interviewee,

"One day, I came to the factory half an hour late. My supervisor was mad and shoved me. He even lifted his hand to hit me. But another supervisor stepped in and pulled him away. We cannot speak up in moments like that. If we do, they get angrier."

In the RMG sector, female workers not only face verbal and physical abuse from male supervisors but are also subjected to restrictive behaviors that limit their basic human needs. Work conditions are often harsh, characterized by extended working hours in poorly ventilated spaces with intense lighting, leading to physical stress such as excessive sweating (Akhter et al., 2019). Despite these grueling conditions, workers are not allowed to take short breaks for rest or hydration, as these are considered intentional time-wasting by garment authorities. Supervisors often discourage frequent water consumption to minimize restroom breaks, aiming to maximize daily production outputs (Sharmin and Manan, 2022). One interviewee noted,

"You know, we work really long days here under these bright, hot lights. The room hardly has any fresh air, so we sweat a lot. And guess what? We are not even allowed to take short breaks. They think we are wasting time if we sit down for a minute or grab a quick drink. And do not even think about drinking too much water. The supervisors do not like that because you will need to go to the bathroom more. They say it messes with how much work we can get done in a day."

Moreover, regulations like the restriction on carrying mobile phones during duty hours worsen the difficulties for female workers (Akhter et al., 2017). This creates problems, particularly for single mothers who must leave their children unattended at home. This detachment prompts severe mental anxiety and takes a toll on their psychological health. Since female workers comprise a significant part of the garment workforce, urgent attention is required in response to these extensive events of abuse and behavioral restrictions. Tackling these issues is not a matter of labor rights but a fundamental necessity for establishing a safe and healthy workplace.

Unattainable Production Quotas and the Fear of Losing Employment

Bangladesh's RMG sector is characterized by a challenging workplace where female workers are disproportionately affected by unrealistic production quotas, systemic abuse, and the constant threat of job termination. Factories routinely impose virtually unattainable production targets, requiring workers to produce between 120 and 150 shirts per hour (Kamat, 2016, Sharmin and Manan, 2022). Even though the actual capacity of a female worker averages around 80 shirts per hour, the expectation remains unchanged. Research indicates that these female workers frequently work two extra unpaid hours daily to meet such ambitious goals (Akhter et al., 2019). Failure to achieve the set targets results in public humiliation and wage deductions. This untenable situation is reflected in the words of an interview participant who stated,

"Our target is to make about 100 to 110 shirts every hour. I can only manage around 90, so I have to work extra hours every day to meet the quota, and I do not even get paid extra for that. After work, I go home and do household chores, only to return the next day and do it again. I am always tired, and it makes me feel hopeless."

Furthermore, the fear of losing employment is a significant concern for female workers. Supervisors frequently wield the threat of dismissal as a tool of coercion, creating a toxic work environment marked by rudeness and lack of empathy from senior colleagues. Although garment factories have complaint boxes to report instances of abuse, workers are afraid to use them, fearing reprisals from management (Akhter et al., 2019). For many workers, switching to another job is not viable, as they lack higher education and come from low-income families. Even if they manage to change their jobs, their previous work experience is not recognized, and they are offered the same starting salaries as new employees. One participant lamented,

"Once, I made a small error. The supervisor yelled at me and used harsh words in front of everyone. He even threatened to fire me. I felt so humiliated, but I did not have anything to do. This work indeed gives me some money, but nothing more. I keep doing it because I must take care of my kids."

To alleviate these conditions, the responsible authorities of the RMG sector must take suitable action against unattainable production quotas, systemic abuse, and job insecurity affecting female workers.

Psychological Health Vulnerabilities. Workers in Bangladesh's RMG sector migrate from rural areas to Ashulia, Savar, and Gazipur city areas, where most garment factories are located. This migration imposes various psychological strains on female workers, especially those who leave their families in their native villages due to the extremely high costs of city living, along with meager wages. This precludes many from relocating their children, thereby forcing them into involuntary separations. Such detachment provokes deep feelings of guilt, depression, and decreased appetite, especially among mothers. The absence of paid leave and infrequent communication opportunities with their families further elaborate their emotional strains (Akhter et al., 2019). An interview with a female worker, a mother of two, illuminates this grief:

"My husband and I moved here for work, leaving our kids in our village with their grandparents. We promised to bring them here soon, but we have not been able to do that yet. We cannot afford them here with our low-paying jobs. They keep asking when they can come, and I do not know what to say. I feel guilty and cry a lot at night. I cannot sleep properly."

The most identified psychological issues among these workers are trauma, stress, and depression. Consequent health hazards include insomnia, hypertension, cardiovascular issues, somatic illnesses, anxiety disorders, and social dysfunction (Steinisch et al., 2013, Ahmed and Raihan, 2014, Fitch et al., 2015, Kabir et al., 2018). The leading causes of such vulnerabilities are daily production targets, long working hours, restrictive factory rules, low pay, poor working conditions, inhumane abuse, concerns about making mistakes, a lack of job promotion prospects, and continuous fear of job loss (Steinisch et al., 2013, Fitch et al., 2015). Additionally, monotonous types of work, unsafe work environments, lack of recognition, and workplace injuries are also recognized as common reasons for mental health vulnerabilities among garment workers (Padmini and Venmathi, 2012).

Sexual harassment compounds these vulnerabilities. Instances of unsolicited sexual advances, explicit verbal impositions, and forced pregnancies are unfortunately not uncommon among female RMG workers (Sharmin and Manan, 2022). The sector also witnesses a distressingly high miscarriage rate, a phenomenon exacerbated by grueling working conditions, fear of post-maternity job termination, and rudimentary healthcare amenities in factories (Majumder, 1998). Female workers' low levels of education and lack of skills to work in other sectors limit their options, forcing them to comply with the system. In some extreme cases, stress, restlessness, anxiety, extreme work pressure, and detachment from family members lead to suicide. The somber testimony of a worker highlights the gravity of the situation:

"A friend of mine, who works in another garment factory, recently had a miscarriage. The doctor said it was due to the long hours and stress. She is still working there because she does not know how to do anything else."

Low Income and Insufficient Nutritious Food

Bangladesh's RMG industry, while significantly benefiting from the labor of female garment workers, paradoxically relegates them to a vulnerable economic status due to meager compensation. Such limited income severely curtails their ability to cater to fundamental needs: adequate housing, a balanced diet, children's educational expenditures, and routine health assessments. Consequently, they tend to work overtime for low payments to make ends meet, but their salaries do not add significantly even with overtime pay.

According to the Bangladesh Ministry of Labour and Employment, the 2018 salary grades for Bangladesh's garment workers were between Tk. 8000 (94.21 US dollars) and Tk. 18257 (193.79 US dollars) monthly, including housing rent, transport allowance, food allowance, and medical allowance (Sharmin and Manan, 2022). However, this nominal wage presents a grim disparity with escalating living costs. According to a recent survey, female workers, even with overtime and bonuses, earned an average monthly wage of just USD 99.17, noticeably less than their male counterparts, who made USD 120.29 (Anner, 2020).

Their low income impedes them from accessing a balanced diet, which is essential for their demanding work schedule. For example, foods and seasonal fruits rich in proteins and calcium, crucial for optimal health, are often beyond their reach. The pressing obligation to pay rent at the beginning of every month further restricts their budget for nutritious foods. Consequently, they often depend on a monotonous diet of inexpensive foods like rice and potatoes, which severely lack vital nutrients. Even female workers sometimes spend days subsisting on meager or no food, inevitably compromising their health and energy levels (Ahmed and Raihan, 2014, Makurat et al., 2016). A female worker underscores the severity during an interview:

"My monthly salary as a sewing operator worker is very low. Nowadays the grocery is very high. After paying my rent each month, there is not much left to buy decent food. Often, I have to search for leftovers in the market to feed my family."

This financial hardship is not just limited to dietary compromises. The cascading effects of inadequate income extend to housing, utilities, and their children's education. These intertwined challenges of insufficient income and compromised nutrition collectively deteriorate these female garment workers' physical health and overall well-being. For an industry that heavily depends on them, the RMG sector must ensure a wage structure that genuinely reflects the workers' contributions and addresses their basic human needs.

Accommodation Problem and Unprivileged Facilities

The garment factories in Bangladesh are mainly located in urban areas and do not have accommodation facilities (Osmani and Hossen, 2018). This inadequacy in proximate accommodations presents manifold issues, specifically for female employees.

Although residing near their workplaces would be the most convenient option, the heightened housing costs in such areas deter workers. Consequently, many of them, constrained by their limited earnings, have little choice but to reside in distant slums (WHO., 2007). Despite being more affordable, these settlements frequently lack fundamental amenities, including continuous electricity, reliable gas supplies, sanitation, clean environments, potable water, and adequate cooking facilities (Sharmin and Manan, 2022).

Co-living arrangements, wherein multiple workers share accommodations, have become a pervasive solution to housing costs. However, this presents an entirely new set of challenges for female workers. They are often confronted with overcrowded living conditions, sharing unclean kitchens, living spaces, and bathrooms. Such unsanitary conditions elevate the risk of contracting infections and diseases, especially during menstruation (Ahmed and Raihan, 2014). The subpar living conditions also predispose workers to illnesses like diarrhea, coughs, and fevers. As one worker poignantly articulated,

"I am single and get no housing from the factory. I live in a nearby slum without proper sanitation, water, or electricity. I share the place with three others. Life here is tough, but I cannot go back home."

Another significant concern for these women is their safety. The commute from distant living areas to factories is often fraught with threats of muggings and thefts, further compounding their vulnerabilities (Sharmin and Manan, 2022). Paradoxically, even as these workers relocate to distant areas to economize on housing, a staggering 60% of their earnings are still consumed by rent, constricting their budget for other essentials like food, education, and healthcare (Finnegan, 2017).

The glaring gap between the prosperity of the garment sector and the dismal living conditions of its predominantly female workforce calls for immediate and concerted action from all stakeholders involved. Addressing the urgent need for affordable, decent housing for these workers is not just a logistical necessity but a moral imperative.

Lack of Transportation Service Opportunities

For garment workers in Bangladesh, one of the most pervasive challenges stems from the scarcity of reliable transportation options (Osmani and Hossen, 2018). To economize on housing expenses, many reside considerable distances from their workplaces. This decision, however, implicates them in a daily struggle to navigate the notoriously inefficient public transport system. These workers often pay extra fares during peak periods, with some having no choice but to undertake arduous walks exceeding half an hour to reach their factories (Sikdar et al., 2014).

During the prime commuting hours, traffic congestion is a well-documented problem in Bangladesh (Rosen, 2016). Female garment workers suffer the most because of this gridlock. They rely on public transportation for their commute to their workplace. The public transportation system, already stretched beyond its capacity, serves as an unfortunate reason for physical and sexual harassment during their commute. Often, passengers take advantage of crowded buses to touch female passengers intentionally. Moreover, many people standing at the bus gate during peak hours make it challenging for women to board the buses. Often, public transport does not maintain any strict schedule and departure time. Therefore, garment workers' jobs usually hang in the balance if they are late due to transportation delays. As a participant shared during the data collection,

"I live far from the factory to save money. Since the factory does not provide transportation, I struggle to take the public bus daily. This long commute sometimes makes me late for my job. On top of that, some people in the crowded buses take the chance to touch me inappropriately. It is extremely upsetting, but I do not have any alternatives."

Good transportation service is vital for garment factories. Very few factories have that facility. Poor transportation affects female garment workers' productivity and jeopardizes their safety and well-being. Measures must be implemented to ensure these workers access safe, efficient, and affordable transportation to obtain sustainable development in the Bangladesh RMG sector.

Conclusion

The RMG sector in Bangladesh has brought significant socioeconomic changes for women who can now contribute to their families. However, these changes have come at a cost. The thematic analysis of data collected from three garment factories reveals how female workers face numerous vulnerabilities, including poor working conditions, low wages, insufficient nutritious food, accommodation problems, lack of transportation services, and unsafe working conditions. These vulnerabilities further expose them to various physical and physiological disorders, threatening their well-being.

Although there is no straightforward solution to address female workers' vulnerabilities, this paper suggests several recommendations. Firstly, the Bangladesh government, the RMG sector, and the ILO must work together to update workplace standards and increase workers' privileges. Secondly, government authorities should ensure that factory buildings meet the rules and regulations of the BNBC-93 and regularly conduct maintenance to prevent fatal tragedies. Thirdly, the transportation problem can be addressed by providing free transportation for workers and increasing public transportation facilities. Finally, world-renowned brands that are regular buyers of Bangladeshi garment products must push the Bangladesh government and the RMG authority to provide better workplace facilities for workers, increase minimum wages, and provide opportunities for worker skill development. By ensuring these basic needs are met and improving workers' skills, the productivity of garment workers can be boosted, contributing to the continued success of Bangladesh's garment sector.

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Declaration of Interest Statement

The author declares that they have no conflict of interest.

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