

Violence against Women Workers in the Ready-made Garments Industry in Bangladesh

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Abstract

Garments sector has indeed added great impetus to the poor economy of Bangladesh. Although majority of the employees are women they are most often prone to various types of violations especially the sexual one. The study is descriptive in nature. Both primary and secondary data are used in the study. This article contains some analysis of the real situation in light of which several recommendations were made to ensure the protection of the women workers.

Keywords: *garments industry, merchandising, women workers, harassment etc.*

Introduction

Bangladesh is on the way of becoming a leading global star in the twenty first century because of garments industry that helps to bring it into this position. The garments industry in Bangladesh totally depends on women workers because of their numbers and low wages, delicate working hands. But women in Bangladesh have traditionally been excluded from outside activities by means of religious institutions such as the veil and different Islamic rules. Their presence in any kind of social, political or economic activities is very limited because the majority of population is Muslim and they follow lots of fatwa's (Islamic rules by their religious leaders) against women working. In Bangladesh half of the population are woman and mostly illiterate. However, the rise of the ready-made garments industry in Bangladesh has provided women with opportunities to work outside for wages. This opportunity brings innumerable change in woman's life such as a decrease in the importance of rural sector, giving importance on girls' education and campaigns to improve women's

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health and reduce fertility rate, but still the harassment and exploitation against women persists in a full swing in many ways which impedes women's participation in outside works. Bangladesh is a developing country, hence the readymade garments sector is the main source of foreign exchange revenue in many ways and it is only feasible through the work of low wage women workers. Traditionally agriculture sector is the largest employment sector in Bangladesh through the foreign revenue gained from exporting textiles and it is the single greatest source of economic growth in Bangladesh. An export of textiles, clothing, and ready-made garments reckons for 80% of Bangladesh's total merchandise exports in 2014. Traditionally Bangladeshi women have low economic autonomy in terms of their income. The women's ability to control their income was varied, and in fact, a very few number of the women workers exercised full control over their wages.

Low socioeconomic background always impedes the women to enjoy their wages with their husbands always takes authoritative power in the distribution of income. Many new jobs mostly for women have been created by the country's dynamic private ready-made garment industry, which grew at double-digit rates since 1980s. From that time the export-oriented ready-made garment sector overtook the dominant jute sector, the garment sector has continued to consolidate its predominant position in Bangladesh. The ready-made garments contribution to export earnings has increased each year with all other sectors being comparatively static.

In financial year 2011-2012, earnings in the export-oriented garment sector was \$26.37 billion which constituted 80 percent of total export earnings (Statistical Year Book of Bangladesh 2012: 161-162).

The Objectives of Studies

The objectives of my study are to explore in detail of the violence against women workers in the readymade garments in Bangladesh. To explore women workers role in the development of readymade garments sector. I wish to describe their real position in the garments industry. And examine their participation in nation building. I tried to explore their wages, work conditions, skill development, organizational links, and empowerment process.

Literature Review

In my literature review we analyzed some of papers related to the study of Bangladesh ready-made garments area. Several studies have done outstanding work on women workers in the ready-made garments area. Their studies vigorously assert that the overall impact of the ready-made garments industry on women's lives is mixed. If we see the positive impacts that the industry offers women workers advantages not offered by the other limited and tedious areas of employment available to women such as stone crushing, agricultural labour and paid domestic work. On the negative perspectives, there is huge gender inequality and sexual exploitation in this industry that is an impediment in every single moment in women's life to reach upward mobility. It is therefore important to develop a proper understanding of Bangladeshi society, economy and the role of women in Bangladeshi society in order to

appreciate the benefits the ready-made garments industry offers to women, despite its exploitative conditions largely. Overall the analysis also suggests that policies should be directed towards addressing the specific problems that women workers face, in order to make the ready-made garments industry a more humane, sustainable and income option for women.

Literatures on the ready-made garments industry have described the problem faced by women workers and the impact of employment in this industry on health, fertility and marriage of garment workers even sexual exploitation of workers and the impact of the industry on women's position in society and in their families (Paul-Majumder & Begum, 2000; Siddiqi, 2003).

Present Conditions of Ready-made Garments in Bangladesh

The ready-made garments industry in Bangladesh is made of many types of garment factories like small, medium and large. Among these some of the factories are registered and many more are unregistered, that produce garments and trying to fulfill the demand of foreign buying houses. In 2014, Bangladesh has more than 4700 factories which employ more than 4 million are women. Some factories offer formal appointments and benefits though the wages is very low, while many others have arbitrary hiring and employment practices. The rapid growth of the ready-made garments industry in Bangladesh has increased for many reasons like cheap labour, lack of employment options for women because of huge poverty, simple technology, small amount of capital required and policies that encouraged the growth of this particular industry. These factors are inter-related. The relatively cheap cost of labour in Bangladesh is the main reason for its comparative advantage internationally since goods can be produced at a very lower cost in Bangladesh than in many other countries. Women's lack of education and dearth of proper skill makes garment work highly attractive to them.

Violence against Women in Ready-made Garment Sectors

If we see the ready-made garments sector in Bangladesh it creates disproportionately gender inequality, poor working conditions in factories and sexual harassment. The huge employment of women in the ready-made garments industry which provides hope for poor, unemployed women is ironically also a reflection of the unequal treatment given to women both within and outside this industry. Garment factories always prefer women workers because women are obliging more than men. Even Women are placed in normal jobs that not require higher technological ability as compared to men. As a result, as jobs become more technologically intensive, men's earnings rise faster than women's who get concentrated in low skill, low-pay jobs. Even after controlling for education and experience, women are paid lower wages for the same job as compared to men. Moreover, wages are often paid in such way that overtime is not recorded properly. Women workers work with few breaks, doing repetitive work and in poor working conditions, such as poor lighting and ventilation, unhygienic surroundings and inadequate toilet facilities. Weight loss, fatigue, head and ear complaints and eye problems among women garment workers have been reported because of

their tedious jobs. Many factory structures are dangerous to the workers. Bangladesh has experienced a lot of building collapses and fires reported weekly.

Sexual harassment of women workers is even more telling, both at the workplace and while commuting. Women's employment and visibility in public may be perceived as a threat to male dominance in society, and various forms of harassment of working women may be an expression of retaliation by males. As a result of sexual harassment, many women report shame, embarrassment, and inability to concentrate on work, a decline in productivity, fear, anxiety and depression. Many women left the garments industry mutely because of constant sexual harassment. The actual incidence of sexual harassment is not always known since women are unwilling to express their personal experiences of harassment. At the same time it must be noted that, there is a competing perception as well that garments work entails lower sexual harassment than other forms of employment such as stone crushing, agricultural labour and paid domestic work.

Women's sexual harassment gets increased because of the informal recruitment practices increase more than any period of time. Because of the lack of verifiable evidence, it is very difficult to the trade unions to pursue cases successfully or restraint it vigorously. Now in the present situation Bangladesh government has ruled to carry an identity card to all workers that has become mandatory under the Bangladesh Labour Law 2006. According to the law, no employer shall employ any worker without giving such worker a letter of appointment and every such employed worker shall be provided with an identity card with photograph. The employer of every establishment shall maintain a register of workers, to be available to the Inspector at all times during working hours. This may contribute to strengthening workers' position.

Government Initiatives for Reducing Violence

Bangladesh is not a very developed country so the government is inattentive to social protection strategies to women workers in the garments industry. A lot of laws are violated by garments owner like workers will work not more than 8 hours, and in case it happens then the owner should pay overtime. But owners rarely maintain these rules. Different law use language that is vulnerable to misinterpretation. Even the new Bangladesh Labour Law 2006 does not have any mention of sexual harassment in a proper way though it prohibits discrimination on the basis of sex, colour and creed. Day by day the violence against women as garment workers is increasing. In the present time the total population of women workers in the garments industries account for a disproportionately high of rape cases. But still government has not taken any suitable initiatives for the protection of women workers. The reluctance of government to make proper law is unpardonable negligence.

Recommendation of policy

There is an immediate urgency for action to improve the condition of women workers in the ready-made garments industry in Bangladesh. Future policy initiatives should be directed not only at the root causes of violence against women, but also towards addressing the specific

problems that women workers face in their daily life. This would make the ready-made garments industry a more humane and sustainable employment option for women. First of all women need to organize themselves and become aware about their rights in a proper way. Latter they can protect the violence more vigorously against hecklers and owners of the garments industry. Again the sexual harassment laws need to be made more specific by correcting the dated language and the law should protect against all forms of harassment. The ready-made garments industry should represent a better avenue for women as a work place. The state should apprise to women workers that they are safe in here and that governments will take care of their problems. Negative attitudes associated with women's work need to be changed further in the mainly the patriarchal society. This could be implemented by opinion makers such as the media and religious and social leaders.

Limitations

This study has the following limitations. First, the analysis is based on secondary sources, and does not present fresh statistical data. Second, some of the data sources are backdated since latest data is not available. Third, most studies cited are cross-sectional studies. Fourth, none of these studies conducted a thorough direct comparison of living conditions and attitudes among non-working women and those employed in the garments industry. However, the thrust of the paper is not so much statistical, and hence, these limitations should not prove to be major.

Conclusion

In Bangladesh, relatively low rates of women's participation in wage employment have traditionally been understood as a reflection of cultural factors unfavourable to such participation. This paper set out to analyse the violence against women in the ready-made garment industry in Bangladesh in various angle. The paper sought to identify the various sources of violence against women in the industry. The ready-made garments industry is almost like a natural experiment that illustrates the change in the economic environment such as the growth of the ready-made garments industry and women's employment therein. The policy implication is to create more paths for women's employment.

So that such changes can be more widespread in the whole nation and Bangladesh can reach more prosperous conditions. After all any third world country need the proper implementation of law and human rights to involve woman in the work arena. Bangladesh government always needs to remember that the garments industry is crucial to the national economy as a source of employment and foreign currency at various labels.

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