



Prevalent Workplace Sexual Abuse of Ready-Made Garments Female Workers in Bangladesh: Understanding the Pseudo Dynamics of This Offence from Socio-Criminological Perspective

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ABSTRACT

Safe workplace for women is a matter of great concern. Despite extensive empirical research focusing on crime as sexual harassment across various spheres of human existence, even in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, sexual harassment remains a painstaking global thorn in the flesh. Though the sexual harassment is at its peak, a significant proportion of society normalizes this as a custom and manifests it by keeping silent about sexual harassment against RMG female workers. The objective of this study is to understand the major factors contributing the sexual harassment at ready-made garment factories in Bangladesh. This study utilizes qualitative research methodology employing purposive snowball sampling of 20 garments female workers and 5 KII in-depth interviews, aiming to understand the underlying factors of this behavior from a socio-criminological perspectives. The findings of the research highlighted several issues, including gender inequality, the normalization of sexual harassment in the workplace, the significance of sex education in institutional education, power dominance within the organizational structure, and the repercussions for those who report such behavior. The recommendations emphasize how critical it is to boost women's involvement in trade unions, update HR rules, and provide sex education and gender equality training via the RMG industry's Human Resources division. These steps can go a long way towards reducing sexual harassment in the RMG industry.

Keywords: Sexual Harassment, RMG, Female workers, workplace, Bangladesh.

INTRODUCTION

The ready-made garments industry, commonly referred to as RMG, has played a crucial role in the advancement of Bangladesh, contributing significantly to its economic growth and overall societal progress. According to the Bangladesh Garment Manufacturers and Exporters Association, the current number of garment factories exceeds 4000, which contributes approximately 76% of the country's export earnings (M Hasinur Rahman, 2018). Notably, the readymade garment sector of Bangladesh has achieved the recognition of being the 2nd largest contributor to the export hub globally (Alam, 2017). Moreover, approximately 90% of the workforce is women workers (Islam N. , 2018). The flourishing engagement of female workers in the workforce, however, seems to be exposed to a wide range of vulnerabilities, including sexual, physical, mental, and verbal forms of harassment, instead of acknowledging their empowered contribution. It is very unfortunate that readymade garment factories have a high incidence of harassment experienced by women in their workplaces. According to the reported figures (Solotaroff, 2019), the percentages of verbal harassment are around 84.7%, 20% physical, and 12.7% sexual. The Green Bangla Garment Workers Federation reports that 77% of female RMG employees experience harassment from line supervisors, floor supervisors, and senior officials, particularly younger, lower-level employees (ShowT, 2019).

Sexual harassment, according to the International Labor Organization (ILO)¹, encompasses any verbal or physical act that carries a sexual intention behind it. The actions encompassed within this category are those that are considered inappropriate and unwelcome by the individuals who work for the organization, resulting in a sense of discomfort, insult, and violation within their professional setting. It manifests in different forms, ranging from the utterance of inappropriate jokes, comments, general misconduct, unwarranted touching, and display of inappropriate gestures to impose unacceptable favors or requests on employees. Evidently, the contribution of female workers to the generation of foreign income in the readymade garment sector is greatly admirable and inspiring for the country. A recent study on sexual harassment at RMG factories revealed that approximately 91% of respondents expressed that the offenders exerted power-trip to control them as a result of their affiliations with upper-middle and senior-level executives, or with influential local figures and their accomplices (Star, 2023).

¹ To see more:

https://www.ilo.org/dyn/normlex/en/f?p=NORMLEXPUB:13100:0::NO::P13100_COMMENT_ID:4022893

There exist several significant drivers that have contributed to the advancement of this particular industry; among them is the factor of cheap labor, conceivably regarded as the most prominent one. The exploitation of cheap labor by RMG-producing companies is facilitated by the abundance of vulnerable women who are willing to offer their services without any conditions. In Bangladesh, women are often confined to limited occupational choices, particularly in the realm of formal employment, leaving them with little option but to partake in the RMG industry (Islam, 2016). While those engaged in the informal sector, such as day laborers or housemaids, may have some degree of agency in selecting their work, their choices remain significantly restricted in comparison to men. Consequently, many women find themselves employed for wages that fall considerably below the established minimum standard, as they lack alternatives. And the perpetrators use this economic dependency as a tool to keep their voice silent, either in the matter of low wages or sexual harassment cases. Numerous academics have illuminated the particular factors behind sexual harassment (Alam, 2017). An overwhelming majority of the participants, specifically female workers engaged in the ready-made garment industry, acknowledged that they have persistently harbored apprehensions regarding termination from their positions (Alam, 2017).

According to the female workers' experiences in factories, the management has an easier time exerting dominance over female workers, as they are seen as more vulnerable targets. Conversely, it is more challenging for management to control male workers. This is supported by the fact that many instances of sexual harassment in the Ready-Made Garments (RMG) sector are attributed to male colleagues and/or supervisors. To address this issue, recent labor laws mandate the formation of anti-sexual harassment committees in all RMG facilities.

Sexual harassment based on gender is an extensive predicament that extends throughout the entire world. However, this study will recognize this concern from the perspective of female laborers within the RMG sector in Bangladesh and will try to outline the major drivers behind sexual harassment. It is crucial that actions are taken to confront and eliminate this pervasive issue, guaranteeing the establishment of a secure and comprehensive work environment for all staff members. By doing so, the garment industry in Bangladesh can persist in prospering and making a positive contribution to the nation's economic advancement and progress.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The ready-made garment (RMG) sector in Bangladesh has witnessed remarkable growth; however, it is tainted by reports of widespread sexual harassment encountered by female workers (Islam T. , 2023). Studies indicate a range of harassment, from verbal abuse to physical assault, prevalent within RMG factories (Begum, Ali, Hossain, & Sahid, 2010). Several factors contribute to the prevalence of sexual harassment in this particular context. Primary catalysts include power differentials rooted in gender inequality, inadequate policies, and feeble enforcement mechanisms. Cultural norms and societal structures further exacerbate the vulnerability of female workers to such exploitative behaviors (Naved, 2017).

The following statistics on sexual harassment of female garment workers, which were uncovered by ActionAid's investigation, showed a distressing reality. According to the data analysis of their research, a staggering 80% of garment laborers in Bangladesh have either been directly victimized or aware of sexual harassment at work. Undoubtedly, this statistic indicates threats to the protection of female workers within Bangladesh's readymade garment industry. According to a study conducted by the Manusher Jonno Foundation and Karmojibi Nari, a notable percentage of female garment workers, around 22.4%, experienced sexual harassment both within their workplace premises as well as on their way to work (Tribune, 2019).

A survey conducted by RMG workers' organizations in collaboration with the Solidarity Center on gender-based violence (GBV) in RMG factories found that out of the 140 participants in the survey, 45% reported instances of sexual violence and harassment. Additionally, the following portion of the workers experienced psychological harassment (22%), verbal abuse (17%), economic exploitation (9%), and physical violence (7%). These incidents predominantly took place within the factories and were perpetrated by colleagues and supervisors, with line chiefs and mid-to-senior-level management officials following suit in terms of perpetration (Star, 2023). Moreover, 50% employees who were surveyed disclosed that they encountered salary deductions or were coerced to work additional hours without receiving overtime compensation by their supervisors or the management of the factories if they declined unwanted sexual propositions. An additional 48% indicated that there was an alteration in their production objectives if they lodged complaints with the authorities.

Feminist theory sheds light on systemic gender inequalities and power imbalances within organizational hierarchies (Butler, 1990). Patriarchy, an ingrained societal structure, elucidates how power dynamics perpetuate harassment. The authors used the feminist theory to understand and analyze how this patriarchal and hierarchical setup of the RMG sector in Bangladesh contributes a vulnerable position for female workers. This perspective allowed the study to explore the cultural normalization culture of harassment of female workers by their male supervisors or colleagues and refrain the victims from reporting the incidents. The impact of globalization, as evident in the RMG sector, failed to provide sufficient safe opportunities for female workers, resulting in their exploitation as a cheap source of labor by the garment industries.

Rosabeth Moss Kanter introduced the concept of the "masculinity ethic" in order to delineate specific organizational cultures that prioritize traditional masculine characteristics and behaviors. This ideology frequently highlights traits such as competitiveness, assertiveness, and hierarchical power structures, thereby establishing expectations that align with stereotypical male qualities

(MacKinnon, 1979). Kanter's concept illuminates how such cultures can perpetuate gender inequalities and contribute to environments where harassment or discrimination against women may be more prevalent due to deeply ingrained beliefs about gender roles and power dynamics (Kanter, 2007).

According to Acker's theory (1990), it is common for women to hold lower positions in hierarchical structures—a tendency that is glaringly apparent in Bangladesh's apparel sector. In this context, women are frequently restricted to lower positions within the organizational structure and face obstacles that prevent them from moving up the ladder. This phenomenon is a reflection of larger structural injustices, as women are assigned to subservient roles in gender-based hierarchies, perpetuating differences in opportunity, authority, and decision-making in these settings (Acker, 1990). To explore how the organizational structures, gender-based hierarchies and practices contribute to the sexual harassment of female workers, the authors employed this theory.

The impact of harassment on female RMG workers is profound, affecting their mental health, job satisfaction, and productivity. In order to mitigate these repercussions, effective interventions and support systems are crucial (Naved, 2017). Efforts to address harassment encompass policy reforms, awareness campaigns, and organizational interventions (Islam,

2016). Evaluating the effectiveness of these measures is essential to ensure safer working environments for female workers. The topic underscores the prevalence, contributing factors, theoretical foundations, and consequences of sexual harassment encountered by female RMG workers in Bangladesh.

Existing literature on sexual harassment in Bangladesh's RMG industry emphasizes quantitative assessments that highlight the scope and economic consequences of this type of harassment. Nevertheless, qualitative research delving into the complex experiences and viewpoints of the victims is noticeably lacking. Thorough qualitative research is necessary to comprehend the complex dynamics and variables that lead to the sexual harassment of female employees. By offering a thorough examination of the main causes of sexual harassment of female employees in Bangladesh's RMG sectors, this study aims at filling this important gap.

There are significant gaps in the present body of research on sexual harassment experienced by female RMG employees in Bangladesh, mainly because there are no readily available secondary data. The victims' fear of employment insecurity and the delicate nature of the subject make data gathering even more difficult, which has an effect on the breadth and depth of previous study. In order to address these issues, our research investigates community-based sex education, sex education in educational institutions, HR policies addressing sex education and training, and the representation of women in labor unions. These fields are still largely unexplored, especially in the particular demographics context of Mirpur. By examining these aspects, our research adds insightful analysis and useful suggestions to the body of knowledge, enhancing the field and providing a foundation for future literature, more successful initiatives to reduce sexual harassment in Bangladesh's RMG industry.

METHODOLOGY

This study adopted an exploratory qualitative research design, aiming to understand the experience of sexual harassment from the victim's perspective faced by female ready-made garment workers within their workplace in Bangladesh. Qualitative method was deemed appropriate as it allowed an in-depth exploration of individuals' experiences, capturing the participant's in-depth insights and perceptions related to systemic vulnerabilities (Rutledge, 2020).

Purposive snowball sampling was deemed appropriate to understand and act accordingly to understand the female workers' experience within their workplace and the factors behind the

sexual harassment within the RMG factories (Coyne, 1997). To conduct the study, both primary data and secondary data were collected. For the primary source of data, a total of 20 in-depth interviews (IDI) have been conducted with the female workers from Mirpur under Dhaka district, where three garment factories were selected considering the purpose of the research. Also, key informant interviews (KII) have been conducted with three gender experts and two academics to clearly understand the perspectives of the factors contributing to the crime. In-depth semi-structured interviews were conducted. All the interviews duration were around 2 hours minimum. Manual coding was adopted, where themes were coded by hand. To accurately represent the raw data, the qualitative analysis involved constructing textual data from both recorded and unrecorded in-depth interviews. Among the participants, 3 participants objected to interview if recorded. The authors chose to conduct unrecorded in-depth interviews as the participants stated that due to the sensitive nature of the study. They would feel uncomfortable to express their experiences without hesitation. To code the unrecorded interviews, the authors relied on detailed note-taking during the interviews. After each unrecorded interview, detailed notes and summaries were written to preserve accuracy.

To identify keyword phrases, the interview transcripts underwent multiple examinations (Merriam, 1998). The manual transcription of each interview into text helped in gaining familiarity with the data and identifying themes after the process of coding. In addition to primary data collection methods, this study also incorporated secondary data sources such as existing literatures, journals, news articles, and research papers.

The authors chose a convenient location to conduct the interviews by minimizing distractions and for the comfort of the participants providing the context of the research topic. Additionally, the researcher continued interviews until new interviews no longer provided additional themes which suggested that enough data was gathered and reached the "theory saturation point." Participants in this study were selected based on their pertinent expertise, recommendations, availability, and voluntary participation, contributing to the study's ethical conduct (Mason, 2002). Throughout the data collection process, the researchers remained vigilant against potential biases and questioned any earlier stages that could impact the research's reliability. The American Sociological Association (ASA) provides guidelines and ethical standards for conducting research. The authors ensured ethical principles by obtaining both written and verbal consent from the participants, researchers conducted this study that emphasized the protection of participants' rights, the maintenance of confidentiality, anonymity, and the promotion of transparency and openness in research practices.

Throughout our study, we faced a number of difficulties. Among the RMG female employees, approached, eleven of them did not agree to take part in interviews. Some of the participants refused to allow us to record their interviews. Furthermore, this study excludes the viewpoints of supervisors and employers in favor of concentrating only on the experiences of female employees as the victims' voices has been given priority. The research is predicated on a small sample size of 25 interviews, which might not adequately represent the range of experiences found throughout Bangladesh's RMG sector. Due to a qualitative study, our objective is to offer detailed insights rather than generalized findings. In addition, Few participants were unwilling to share their experiences in detail out of concern for social stigma or retaliation.

FINDINGS

This section presents the primary data's key findings collected through qualitative, in-depth interviews. In order to guarantee confidentiality and anonymity, participants' actual identities have been replaced with either fake or pseudonymous ones. Through a meticulous process of coding and data analysis, the findings have been categorized according to distinctive thematic areas, with a specific emphasis on the statement of female garment workers in Bangladesh.

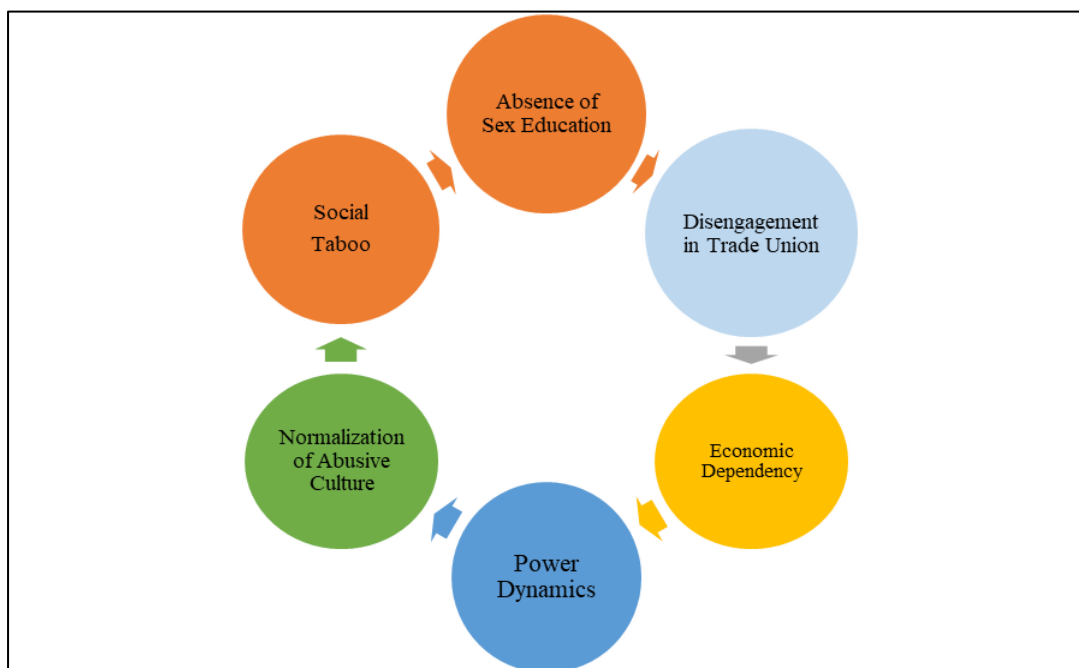


Figure 1: Factors Contributing to Sexual Harassment in the RMG Sector in Bangladesh

(Figure generated from respondents' interviews taken for this study).

Several crucial factors that facilitate sexual harassment in the workplace were identified through the analysis of interviews with female employees in the RMG sector (Fig. 1). These factors included the normalization of abusive cultures, social taboos, absence of sex education, disengagement from trade unions, economic dependency, and power dominance etc.

Forms of sexual harassment

The findings of the study underscore the shocking level of workplace harassment encountered by female participants from RMG factories in the interviews. The age range of the female respondents is between the ages of 15 and 30. All 25 respondents described verbal harassment as a prevalent incident, and 19 respondents reported both physical and sexual harassment, indicating a highly common occurrence. Additionally, mental harassment at work was reported by 16 respondents. These findings collectively depict a disconcerting depiction of a workplace rife with various forms of mistreatment.

The respondents admitted that, in an industrial context, harassment comes mostly from several sources. The majority of harassment cases are caused by managers, supervisors, or other persons in positions of authority abusing their influence over the employees. As per one of the respondents stated,

I was forced to keep in contact with the line manager. He touched me inappropriately while I was working and many times scolded me in front of everyone for not doing my job properly when I attempted to talk against him.

Furthermore, harassment by coworkers may also occur, resulting in a hostile and frightening work environment. Furthermore, there weren't many documented instances of harassment coming from outside parties, including clients or supply chain associates.

Normalization Culture within workplace setting

It is evident in patriarchal societies that verbal sexual harassment is deeply ingrained in everyday life. The statement from a 30-year-old female worker pictured the current scenario more perfectly.

I was working, and my boss was passing by me. He was murmuring verbal sexual slang words, and this is every day's situation. At first, I felt so scared as well as frustrated, but now, days later, it doesn't bother me anymore. I have already gotten used to this.

The statement effectively emphasizes the normalization of sexual harassment in garment factories, which is consistent with the focus of cultural criminology that maintains that cultural norms shape criminal behavior and responses (Williams, 1973). The concept of "shadharon bepar," which dismisses these occurrences as inherent or normal, illustrates how cultural beliefs perpetuate the acceptance of mistreatment as customary rather than confronting and rectifying it. The initial fear and frustration experienced by the worker eventually transforms into acceptance, putting the onus on the individuals to become desensitized to ongoing harassment.

Furthermore, the observation regarding educational vulnerability aligns with the examination of power dynamics in cultural criminology (Williams, 1973). The lack of awareness about rights creates a vulnerability that perpetrators exploit, making it easier for them to manipulate individuals. This lack of knowledge amplifies the perpetrators' ability to take advantage of workers, underscoring the role of cultural influences in perpetuating such injustices within workplace settings.

Gender inequality, institutional conventional education and sex education

Evidently, the garment industries make use of illiterate production workers or less skilled female workers. and if they fail to achieve the given target, then that is the only time the supervisors make use of verbal harassment so that next time they finish their tasks properly, and in time. Rahima (alias) explained this matter:

Sister, most of us have not passed class 10 and are not skilled like our boss. However, some possess a certain degree of education, but it still falls short in comparison to the level of education attained by my superiors. We enter here as unskilled workers, so to teach us, they sometimes get angrier with us. I see nothing wrong with maintaining the order because they know better than us.

Based on the interview of the respondents, it has been found that the average level of education of female garment workers is not more than the 10th grade. There is a lack of education in a variety of important areas, including gender equality, awareness of their rights, and comprehension of concepts such as verbal harassment, good touch, and bad touch.

Being an Islam dominated country, the implementation of sex education within the framework of the formal school system presents a number of important obstacles in Bangladesh. A KII, on the other hand, stated that the incorporation of such instruction into the inclusion of sex education in formal education system from the very beginning of schooling, professional training programs including the rights of female, gender equality, harassment within the workplace that are supervised by the Human Resource Division has the potential to dramatically reduce the number of instances of sexual harassment that occur in preparation-made garment factories.

Power dominance within the organizational structure

The organizational framework in these industrial establishments provides an environment conducive to the misuse of authority, where female employees frequently find themselves vulnerable to the whims of their superiors, administrators, or coworkers. The exploitation of authority manifests itself in subtle ways, with the occurrence of sexual harassment being distressingly prevalent. Fatima (alias), a 21-year-old ready-made garment worker in Ashulia, stated:

On the first day of my job, I was flustered by the approach my manager made. A hostile environment was created for me by my supervisor's frequent offensive comments and inappropriate physical contact. I felt imprisoned, unable to speak up for fear of losing my job or suffering worse.

Threats of losing their jobs or facing other consequences push many workers into an agonising silence where they do not dare to speak up.

Many suffer from low pay, unpaid overtime, and threats of retaliation if they dare to stand up for what they believe to be their rights. Shaila (alias), stated about the pressure they had to tolerate to keep their job.

They tell us that we need to finish a batch of 220 pants by today, but the real target is actually 200 pants. Therefore, at the end of the day, workers can accomplish making 210 pants, but for this enormous pressure, there is no extra pay or paid overtime. Sometimes, if you get the boss's bad side, you won't get paid if you get your hand or leg cut while working.

Being refused necessary medical assistance even after suffering work-related injuries is a severe consequence of speaking out against such injustices. These women are stuck in a cycle of vulnerability and systemic abuse, with little way out of this atmosphere of exploitation, manipulation, and terror.

Consequences of the Complaints

Complaints within the garment industry among female workers entail notable hazards and outcomes. The predominantly transitory nature of their occupations engenders an atmosphere of profound job instability. Though the Anti-Sexual Harassment Committees are supposed to ensure the safety and justice of female workers in the Ready-Made Garments (RMG) sector. However, there is an imperative requirement for combined endeavors to augment the effectiveness of these committees in dealing with and forestalling instances of harassment. Rita (alias) stated:

My supervisor sexually harassed me, and I complained to the authority. It's been two years without any progress on my justice. I have to face him every day at work, and I am still the one with the fear of losing my job.

The Anti-Sexual Harassment Committees do not help female workers in the ready-made Garments (RMG) industry. Even though some cases are dealt with, it takes a lifetime to get justice. This is frequently attributed to the limited independence, resources, and awareness among the workers, ultimately undermining their capacity to adequately handle grievances.

These workers encounter uncertainty not solely due to the temporary nature of their positions but also due to the prevalent implementation of informal recruitment procedures within the industry. Deprived of formal letters of appointment, they function in obscurity with regard to the terms and conditions of their employment, ignorant of the duration of their tenures.

Consequently, approximately 60 percent of female workers expressed a persistent apprehension of dismissal, augmenting their psychological stress to their already demanding work milieu. Furthermore, owing to the informal character of their employment, voicing grievances or complaints regarding harassment or mistreatment can yield severe repercussions. Many dread retaliation, including immediate termination or exclusion from future job prospects, further suppressing their voices and perpetuating a culture of reticence and vulnerability. This climate of fear and uncertainty intensifies the psychological and emotional strain experienced by these workers, significantly affecting their well-being.

DISCUSSION

In a developing country like Bangladesh, where a patriarchal culture predominates, women face gender based violence both at home and workplaces. As indicated by the World Health Organization (WHO), sexual harassment is “ any unwelcome sexual behavior, including requests for favors, verbal or physical conduct, or gestures perceived as offensive or intimidating” where is the page number (WHO, 2016). The ILO defines sexual harassment as "quid pro quo" (demands for favors) or a "hostile work environment." (ILO, 2018). One needs to add the systemic disparities based on gender and the unequal distribution of power within hierarchical organizational structures (Butler, 1990). The prevalence of harassment within the garment industry is a manifestation of the broader societal concerns stemming from patriarchal frameworks that sustain the exploitation and mistreatment of women in the labor force. This concurs with the perspectives of feminism, which underscore the imperative of challenging power imbalances and advocating for comprehensive transformation to combat harassment and foster fair work environments.

Karl Max's theory of the base and superstructure posits that the economic structure exerts influence and shapes the social and ideological facets of society (Jean, 1995). Similarly, within the organizational context, the dominance of power in the economic base impacts the superstructure, encompassing policies, ideologies, and norms that prevail within the workplace. The decisions made by those in positions of power have repercussions on the working conditions, rules, and hierarchies, thereby impacting the beliefs and behaviors of the individuals existing within that particular structure. Essentially, the dominance of power within an organizational structure serves as a reflection of Marx's theory of the base and superstructure by illustrating how economic power wields influence and shapes the broader social and ideological dimensions within the workplace. Marx however did not explain

gender exploitation – that is why you need to add a gendered lens to this theory, which explains exploitation on the basis of gender.

Most women who work in the ready-made garments sector in Bangladesh come from very poor and remote areas, where they even lack the basic necessities. Most of the females in this category have already endured domestic violence and sexual harassment at the hands of their employers. A 2019 poll revealed that 80% of Bangladeshi garment industry women have experienced sexual harassment, molestation, assault, severe verbal abuse, or witnessed factory managers or supervisors harassing other women (Solidarity Center, 2023).

Traditional gender roles create an imbalance within factories, where male supervisors hold significant power over female workers. It is vital to acknowledge which types of working women are most vulnerable to workplace. Violence, abuse, assault and harassment are worth discussing. base and superstructure theory postulates that women frequently occupy inferior positions in the hierarchical framework, a phenomenon that is evidently observable in the garment industries of Bangladesh (Acker, 1990). These industries predominantly employ female laborers who mainly undertake sewing, cutting, and knitting tasks, thus occupying positions at the lower levels of the organizational hierarchy. The findings of the study support the theoretical ground also.

A recent study found alarming rates of harassment in Bangladesh's garment industry, with over 84% experiencing verbal abuse and over 70% facing mental harassment. While physical and sexual harassment were lower (20% and 12.7% respectively), a significant portion (52%) reported physical abuse from supervisor (Dhaka Tribune, 2018). It (sexual harassment) is widespread but rarely reported (Rahman, 2016). Women face unwanted advances, groping, and even assault from supervisors and colleagues. Fear of losing their jobs, often their sole source of income, and a lack of trust in the system make the victims silent (Haque, 2019). This correspond with Moss Kanter's notion of masculinity ethic, in which less educated and unskilled women are assigned to the production line, while their male counterparts, who possess higher levels of education, assume supervisor and production manager roles (Hofstede, 1980). As a result, these male supervisors subject the female laborers to immense pressure, disregarding their emotions in order to meet strict production deadlines.

Fear of losing their (garments workers) jobs emerged as a another theme. Financial vulnerability kept them silent, even when supervisors threatened them or lodged complaints. The existing complaint system offered no recourse, as supervisors retaliated against those

who reported abuse. This highlights a cycle of fear and powerlessness that silences victims and allows the abuse to persist. The abuse caused emotional distress, with women reporting sadness, sleep problems, and suppressed anger. Feeling powerless and unable to express themselves due to fear of retaliation further exacerbated their mental health, the study also revealed a range of physical abuse, from pushing and slapping to more aggressive behavior (Sadika Akhte & Chu, 2019).

Thus, by the time they enter garments industry, they're already accustomed to the normalization of sexual harassment (Monika FM, 2023). There are many reasons behind it. Women are vulnerable due to their underprivileged, rural backgrounds, lack of agency, lower pay, and exposure to sexual harassment, aggressive behavior, and informal recruitment procedures. Traditional patriarchal society in Bangladesh makes women more receptive to exploitative labor structures, where they are assigned lower positions and often handle hazardous products or chemicals (Kabir H & S.R, 2018). Nagorik Uddyog and Bangladesh Labour Rights Forum highlight that 68% of victims do nothing about harassment, despite trade unions representing workers. Women often face offensive remarks and questioning from managers (ShowT, 2019). Consequently, the workforce's gender ratio has decreased from 90% in 1980 to 59% in 2020, leading to sexual harassment, assault, and abuse, and potential dismissal (Rishi Agarwal & Gupta, 2022).

Above all, Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) promises a safe and respectful work environment though Bangladesh affirms through international agreements like the ICCPR, ICESCR, and CEDAW. These pacts guarantee women freedom from discrimination and violence, including in the workplace. Yet, the reality in Bangladesh's garment sector paints a different picture. The documented abuse highlights a critical gap between legal protections and their implementation. This disconnect leaves women workers vulnerable and undermines the very purpose of these human rights instruments.

Bangladesh has enacted laws that target sexual harassment in the workplace, particularly in the ready-to-make garment (RMG) industry. Sections 26-32 of the "Bangladesh Labour Act 2006" contain rules of sexual harassment, which delineate strategies for mitigating and preventing incidences of this nature in workplaces, including RMG companies. Furthermore, the "Bangladesh National Women Development Policy 2011" highlights the necessity of establishing an atmosphere free from harassment for women, especially those employed in

the RMG sector. This is a basic human need to feel safe where they can earn their livelihood, and it is high time to ensure that for the female workers at RMG factories in Bangladesh.

RECOMMENDATIONS

After thorough primary and secondary data analysis, the study emphasizes the critical necessity of establishing a robust interconnected framework that seeks to safeguard female employees against the network of sexual misconduct in the ready-made garment (RMG) industry. The absence of committees that address instances of sexual harassment within factories, as well as the insufficient presence of women in trade unions, are in alignment with the principles of routine activity theory. As posited by this theory?, the convergence of three elements is necessary for a crime to take place: a motivated offender, a suitable target, and the absence of capable guardianship (Cohen & Felson, 1979). Within this particular context, the absence of committees and the lack of adequate representation of women in trade unions create an atmosphere where the circumstances for which? harassment can flourish. The absence of committees that specifically address harassment eliminates a form of capable guardianship, which acts as a deterrent against such transgressions. Similarly, the underrepresentation of women in trade unions may diminish their collective capacity to advocate for their rights and protection within these workplaces, thereby rendering them more susceptible targets for harassment. These deficiencies within organizational structures and support systems correspond with routine activity theory, as they contribute to an environment that is conducive to the prevalence of sexual harassment within factory settings.

The association between sex education in educational institutions and the Human Resources (HR) department of Ready-Made Garment (RMG) industries in relation to the sexual harassment of female workers necessitates a proactive approach to address and prevent such occurrences (Naved, 2017). The introduction of comprehensive sex education in educational institutions fosters an understanding, appreciation, and recognition of gender dynamics, consent, and boundaries. These students subsequently carry this knowledge into their professional lives when they enter the workforce. Simultaneously, the integration of HR training programs within RMG sectors, which emphasize behaviors that promote a respectful workplace and a zero-tolerance policy for harassment, reinforces these fundamental principles (Mostafiz, 2016). Through the alignment of the principles of sex education with HR initiatives, the objective is to establish a culture wherein workers, particularly women in RMG industries, possess the knowledge regarding their rights, boundaries, and avenues to

report instances of harassment. The educational foundation nurtures a mindset of respect and understanding, while the HR policies within the RMG sector provide the practical framework to enforce and sustain a secure work environment (Islam, 2016). Ultimately, this integration endeavors to prevent sexual harassment by empowering individuals with education, awareness, and a supportive system within their workplace. It establishes a continuous process of learning and implementation, commencing in educational institutions and extending into professional settings, in order to combat and mitigate incidents of sexual harassment.

Additionally, a pervasive lack of awareness among all stakeholders perpetuates this issue. The augmentation of awareness plays a pivotal role in the battle against sexual violence in educational institutions and workplaces. By enhancing communication and rapport within these spheres, particularly between staff and management, it is feasible to substantially reduce the incidence of harassment. Moreover, it is crucial to prioritize the education of female workers to elevate their awareness and comprehension of their rights.

The establishment and active endorsement of committees devoted to combating sexual harassment in the workplace are indispensable in rendering comprehensive assistance to those affected and fostering collaboration between employees and management. The promotion of social dialogue and collaboration among all stakeholders is of paramount importance in effectively addressing and eradicating sexual harassment. Extensive research underscores the dire consequences of workplace harassment on both individuals and organizations, emphasizing the urgent and collective endeavors required to create safer and more respectful work environments for all individuals involved.

CONCLUSION

The purpose of this research was to investigate how female workers in Bangladesh's ready-made industry recognize sexual harassment and the underlying major factors behind the heinous acts. The results of the study showed that female workers acknowledged sexual harassment that occurs in their workplaces but accepted it as the norm of the place. Employers, in particular, had a tendency to ignore verbal harassment since they saw it as commonplace among female production line workers. Worryingly, the study revealed that highly hierarchical managers frequently used verbal abuse as a means of pressuring female employees to improve their performance, creating an unsettling work environment. The goal

of the study was to document these encounters in order to identify the underlying causes. The power dominance is patriarchal, and cultural dynamics foster gender inequality and insecurity about jobs for female workers. The reign of the exploitation must be stopped. The Anti-Sexual Harassment Committee should have come forward and act to guarantee the female workers safety, job and justice for their claim.

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