

## **Study of Deprivation on Female Garments Workers in Bangladesh: A Case Study of Chittagong City Corporation**

Suman Chowdhury\*

### **Abstract**

The continuing exploitation of women workers in clothing factories across the world is a damning indictment of the global economic system. In Bangladesh, women workers account for 85% of the total workforce in the garment industry. While some have viewed this as a positive step towards female emancipation, the reality is that women are employed in a highly exploitative context. Women workers remain at the bottom of the supply chain, working long hours for poverty wages and denied basic maternity rights. This study seeks to expose the current condition of female workers' rights in the Bangladeshi garment industry especially in the Chittagong City's various garments. The data have been collected from both primary and secondary sources. A questionnaire was used in the survey. The sample consisted of 120 women workers selected randomly from 7 different garment factories in Chittagong Metropolitan area. The data were analyzed using SPSS and XL, different tabular forms used to analyze the data in this study. The results show that the female workers are mostly employed at the lower category of jobs like operator, finishing helper, polder etc. These jobs are very monotonous in nature. Because of the nature of their jobs, female workers sometimes lose interest in work and become depressed. A large number of female workers received low and irregular wages which create their job dissatisfaction. The study concludes with recommendations on what can be done to ensure enhanced respect for female workers' rights in Bangladesh that will have positive impact into our national economy, the study hopes.

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\* Deputy Secretary and Director, (Investment Research and Economic Observatory) Bangladesh Investment Development Authority, Prime Minister Office, Government of Bangladesh.

**Keywords:** Female garments workers, Sexual Harassment, Communication, and Health Hazard.

## **Introduction**

Ready Made Garment (RMG) industry is the key sector of the Bangladesh's economy in terms of employment, production and foreign exchange earnings (World Bank, 1990). According to the Bangladesh Garment Manufacturers and Exporters Association (BGMEA, 2008), there are at present more than 4000 garment factories contributing about 76 percent of the country's export earnings. This tremendous success is greatly attributable to women workers, who account for the lion share of the total labour force employed in the sector. But women were exploited easily due to lack of technical knowledge and training.

Globalization as manifested in the RMG sector, failed to offer opportunities to the female labour force. Garment industries were exploited them as cheap source of labour (Halim and Kabir, 2005). In the garment factory, most of the female workers age is between 15 to 30 years (Begum, 2008). This very young age is also responsible for various kind of harassment such as harassed by colleagues, by police, by mastans etc. Their wage payment is not regular. Sometimes it was paid after the first week of the month. In the garment industry men and women hold different jobs and consequently are exposed to different types of hazards. Majority of the women work in the low-paid and less skilled jobs, where work hazards are comparatively higher (Paul Majumder, 2003). Women are harassed in the factory, in the street, or in the house. Various factors are responsible for this kind of harassment.

The present study will give a clear understanding of the various factors which creates various kind of harassment faced by female workers in Bangladesh. Threatening situations in the garment industry may arise from following sources (Begum et al, 2010):

- a) Monotonous nature of the job;
- b) Pressure to increase productivity or excessive demand on workers to meet shipping deadlines;
- c) rush to meet the set production target;
- d) Uncongenial working conditions;

- e) late-night overtime work;
- f) Insecure commuting to and from the workplace;
- g) Sexual harassment;
- h) Absence of canteen facility;
- i) Absence of weekly holiday and leave facilities; and
- j) Non-cooperation from family and society, etc.

This study covers the following issues of the female garments workers based on the above mentioned threatening situations:

- a) Wage discrimination;
- b) Sexual harassment;
- c) Absence and weekly holiday;
- d) Late-night overtime work;
- e) Commuting to from the work place;

Bangladesh's garment industry has been at the heart of the country's export boom ever since the first factory opened in 1976. The industry has grown dramatically over the past 35 years, and today accounts for 80% of Bangladesh's total exports. There are now 4,825 garment factories in Bangladesh employing over three million people. Fully 85% of these workers are women. The expansion of the garment industry in Bangladesh was fuelled by the structural economic reforms of the 1980s, which opened up the Bangladeshi economy to foreign investment, deregulation of markets and privatization. The Bangladeshi government established tax holidays and the development of export enclaves enabling businessmen to build or rent bonded warehouses in Dhaka and Chittagong cities. This process was accompanied by a massive increase of capital inflows into the country. Foreign direct investment leapt from a mere \$2.4 million in 1986 to more than \$1,000 million in 2008.<sup>1</sup> Today, one third of foreign direct investment comes from European companies, principally from the UK. Young women are the driving force of the Bangladeshi garment sector.

The garment industry is the most important source of foreign currency .Bangladesh has about 4825 garment factories and 10 million people are dependent directly or indirectly and 80% garments workers are women. The garments sector has become an important institution for reduction of poverty. The workers face many problems

during the working time and outside of the factory. The main problems faced by garments worker are:

- a) Lower wage
- b) No leisure time
- c) Torture (Physically and Mentally)
- d) Sexual harassment
- e) Negative outlook to them of the society

The main objective of the study is to critically evaluate the rights of female garments workers in Chittagong region. The study based on the main objective spells out the following specific objectives:

- a) To clarify the concept of rights of female Garments workers;
- b) To examine the current status of female garment workers regarding their rights; and
- c) To suggest some policy recommendations for the betterment of the current position of the female workers of garments workers in Bangladesh.

## **Materials and Methods**

The Chittagong metropolitan City was selected purposively as study area and seven garments factories were selected for study considering the purpose of the researcher. In this study, both quantitative and qualitative methods were used in order to get a reasonably true picture of the entire population. A number of 120 respondents chosen randomly from 7 selected garments factories of Chittagong area. The respondents were chosen randomly based on the location and access to those garments.

Data were collected from both primary and secondary sources. A semi-structured questionnaire was administrated to collect primary data considering the objectives of the study. The questionnaire consists of maximum close-ended and a little bit open ended questions, which was distributed among the female garment workers. The respondents were personally questioned and the questionnaires were filled in by the interviewer based on the response of the respondents. The data were collected during the period from November to December, 2017. The secondary sources are books,

journals, articles, newspapers, and internet and so on. This study also reviewed some printed materials and web sources of the sample garments factories.

Tabular method was used for a substantial part of data analysis. Relatively simple statistical techniques such as SPSS, XL data analysis tools and percentage and arithmetic mean or average were taken into account to analyze the data.

## **Results and Discussion**

The Constitution of Bangladesh has recognized fundamental rights of women workers at work places including necessary social protection (Articles, 28, 29, 34, 38, 14, 15 and 20(1), (The Constitution of Bangladesh). Bangladesh Constitution provides that the state shall not discriminate against any citizen on the grounds of religion, race, caste or place of birth and women shall have equal rights with men in all spheres of the state or public life (Article 28).

Bangladesh as a state is responsible for its citizens to ensure the right to work that is the right to guaranteed employment at a reasonable wage having regard to the quantity and quality of works, and reasonable rest, recreation and leisure (Article 15). Bangladesh Constitution recognizes that everyone shall be paid for work on the basis of the principle from each according to his abilities (Article 20). In addition, the fundamental rights guaranteed in Chapter III of Bangladesh Constitution, especially relevant to workers' rights, prohibits all forms of forced labour and makes it a punishable offence (Article 34) and guarantees the right to freedom of association and to form trade unions (Article 38).

Bangladesh Labour Act, 2006 has included a large number of labour rights for protection of women workers. BLA has various positive points relating to labour rights, but due to its various limitations, absence of adequate penalty in statutory law for employers and lack of proper code of conduct by the garment authorities, there is scope of violation of labor rights in some areas. Right to Occupational Safety and Health BLA, 2006 prescribes provisions relating to occupational hygiene, occupational diseases, safety measures, industrial accidents, protection of women and young persons in

dangerous occupations and also covers conditions of work, working hours, welfare facilities, holidays, leave etc. (Sections 11, 51, 52, 53, 56, 57, 58, 61, 62, 91, 92, 93,94 and, 109, BLA, 2006). Most of the provisions lack in standard values and are not specific rather general in nature. In terms of occupational safety and health issues, the status of Bangladesh is very poor and women workers are extremely vulnerable in this regard.

Bangladesh has ratified International Labor Organization (ILO) conventions 87 and 98 on freedom of association and collective bargaining, and is required to protect the rights contained in them. At the international level, Bangladesh has also ratified the UN Convention on the Elimination of all forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), as well as different ILO Convention. According to the UN Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights, factory owners and the companies which buy their products also have responsibilities to prevent human rights violations occurring in the garment factories, and should take remedial action should abuses occur. All businesses, regardless of their size or where they are based, should "avoid causing or contributing to adverse human rights impacts through their own activities, and address such impacts when they occur." They should also "seek to prevent or mitigate adverse human rights impacts that are directly linked to their operations, products or services by their business relationships, even if they have not contributed to those impacts." Many national and international companies with business activities in Bangladesh are failing to meet these responsibilities.

The reality is that, despite such legal framework, women workers perform poorly paid jobs, face severe labor rights violations and often do not enjoy their legal entitlements. Maternity leave is rarely provided; overtime is compulsory and excessively long working days in addition to the burden of domestic responsibilities. Over the years, hazardous working conditions have resulted in the deaths of many workers through factory fires and building collapses. Right to receive fair minimum wage is one of the human rights for all working men and women at workplaces. In reality, majority of women workers are deprived from this right for various reasons.

Labour Laws, which supposed to protect the fundamental rights of women workers, including the right to maternity leave and Bangladesh has ratified the UN Convention on the limitation of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), as well as ILO Convention 111 on Discrimination in Employment and Occupation, but the reality is that, despite such legislation, women workers' rights are ignored. Women workers perform poorly paid jobs, face severe labour rights violations and do not enjoy their legal entitlements. Statutory maternity rights are rarely provided, overtime is compulsory and excessively long working days add to the burden of domestic responsibilities, denying women any rest periods or time with their children.

### **Wage Discrimination**

Wage is not sufficient for female workers to meet their daily basic need. Factory owner does not follow the government prescription regarding the salary. Human Rights watch report has sketched that most of the worker like operator, folder sewing technician, Helper, most of categorized workers basic salary is 5000 tk to 6000 tk. After doing the overtime work they get 8500tk-9000tk per months. Mentionable that some interviewer said they get overtime 32 to 42 taka per hour based on the skill of the worker. Just have a look for the salary structure of the government.

This study had 120 interviews with the female workers (operator, folder, and helper) of the sample garments, among them 84 wome which is 70 percent of the total interviewee said that the salary given by the different companies is not sufficient for their family maintenance. The factory does not maintain standard salary structured by the government. (Table-1). The wage discrimination among the different categories like supervisor, Human resource officer and Quality controller 10 gets high salary in comparison with the lower level workers. Supervisor gets 18000 tk, HR officer 16000tk, and Quality controller 15000tk. But they said, they are not satisfied by the existing salary of the company, if they get higher salary, they will switch over another company.

Different company provides different types of salary structure as they need but that is lower than the government structured salary (Shown in Table-1). The main problem is that the salary is given in the middle of the month that is very hamper for the worker to paid house

rent and food, education expenses for their children. some factories give salary in the third week of the month (66.66%) worker said wage related discrimination in relation to giving salary to the worker. Workers in almost all of the factories complained that managers did not pay wages or benefits in full or on time. This included pay for overtime, maternity benefits, the Eid holiday bonus, and compensation for working during vacations.

**Table 1: Satisfaction on the wage provided by the different garments factories.**

Satisfied on the wage provided by company	Frequency	Percentage
Agree	38	31.70
Partial Agree	54	45
Disagree	23	19.20
Strongly Disagree	5	4.20
Total	120	100

**Sexual Harassment**

Sexual harassment is an important source of mental stress for female workers. The incidence of sexual harassment ranges from insults directed at a person's gender, suggestive comments, or language, and demeaning remarks to unwelcome touching and grabbing and other physical assaults. These types of sexual harassment were under reported since female workers were very shy to disclose any information on this subject. The survey showed that only 2 percent of female workers encountered with sexual harassment in the factory. But case studies disclose the fact that sexual harassment is largely prevalent among the young garment workers. However, sexual harassment is not limited in the workplace. It extends to home too. The police, who could have protected them from this harassment, were themselves involved in harassing the women garment workers (Begum *et al.*, 2010).

The female worker could not want to say regarding sexual related question due to their personal problem, such as threat of quit from

the job. Social problem also cause of another problem not to raise voice against the sexual harassment in the garments factory. If we want to analysis the data of the table we find that 25 female workers out of 120 workers of different garments factory of the Chittagong metropolitan city. They have said their personal anonymity they are being tortured in the factory that is 20.83 percent of total population. Among them 16.66 percent women worker get sexually intimate proposal from the higher management and sexual harassment form fellow male worker is 11.66 percent. They do not dare to do such incident for the causing of losing their job. Huge number of the female worker couldn't relax to say in this regard that is 50.83 percent of the total population ( Table 2). They shy to say something in this regard. Though sexual harassment is very prevalent in the garments factory, they are used to tolerate this situation for their safety. They are keeping silent in this matter due to another mental harassment in and out of the factory. Most of female worker unmarried in the factory within the age limit 20 -30 years. So they keep mum in this matter due create less possibility to marriage in future. In the case of BNWLA vs Bangladesh, High Court Division (HCD) declared, 'sexual harassment' is a crime which includes verbal abuse, sexual overtures, showing obscene pictures and other unwelcome physical, verbal conduct of sexual nature, insinuating comments, making love.

**Table 2. Sexual harassment in the factory by senior management and fellow male worker.**

<b>Type of Sexual Harassment</b>	<b>Number of respondents</b>	<b>Percentage</b>
Sexual harassment in the factory	25	20.83
Sexual intimate proposal from the higher Management	20	16.66
Sexual harassment form the fellow male workers	14	11.66
No comment	61	50.83
Total	120	100

The sexual harassment is a punishable offence if any willful acts like words, gestures, assault etc. outrage or insult the 'modesty of any women (Huda et al., 2003). 'Insulting the modesty' of any women is clearly vague as the meaning of the word 'modesty' can be interpreted in multifarious ways. Does the modesty of a female worker get insulted if repeated sexual jokes are made in her presence by her male colleagues or does it require actual physical assault? It is not made clear under which circumstances her modesty is insulted and she is able to get legal recourse. When it comes to physical assault or force what kind of physical assault is to outrage a woman is not clear?

The Government of Bangladesh attempted to bring it under the purview of law through the enactment of the Prevention of Women and Children Repression Act (PWCRA), 2000 and also amended it in 2003. Section 10 of this Act states that, 'If any person in order to satisfy his sexual urges illegally touches any part of a woman's or child's body with any part of his body or object or outrage the modesty of any woman would be accused of sexual oppression and the act would be punishable with rigorous imprisonment extending for ten but not less than three years, with additional fine.' (Mia *et al.* 1990)

### **Absence and Weekly Holiday**

In this survey it is revealed that almost 100 percent female works enjoy their weekly holiday the frequency of which is 119 out of 120. It is only Friday of the week. But Bangladesh government has declared the two days holiday (Friday & Saturday). Most of the female worker said if the shipment is high then they pressure to do the extra work in the factory for daily overtime basis but the overtime per hour. Most of the worker said they enter into the factory 7.00 am to 5.00 pm is regular working hour. Now BGMEA promulgate the rules no worker should not be stay at work in the factory over 6.30 pm. So any worker can do overtime 2 hours only. I find in the survey there is no unique allowance for the overtime among the garments factories. They are giving to the worker 20tk to 30 tk per day basis overtime. The interviewee said they couldn't accustom to fit the market price of house rent, food and other daily basic need.

It is found in the survey that 12.50 percent worker sale their holiday into daily basis allowance (15 respondent out of 120). According to the Bangladesh Labour Law- 2006, worker will enjoy weekly holiday. But 74 respondents said they get the leave according to the labour Low that is 61.7 percent of the total population. But the survey also revealed that earned leave is one day add to leave bank of the worker one day out of eleven day. Most of the female worker don't have any idea regarding earn leave. Most of garment factory declared that if any worker works at a stress one year they gift a necklace of gold. So they are working with taking any leave for the incremental activates of the factories. In the Human Resource department can't add their leave properly not for giving them extra money to the worker. Another finding is that if they do any bargaining in this regard they would have possibility to quit the job. It is interesting to see that even they don't get any appointment letter for this consequence they out form the factory by taking only putting signature in blank paper by the authority. They said us not mentioning their name to the authority.

**Table 3. Enjoyment of different pattern of holiday and late night work in the factories**

Types of leave enjoyment	Frequency	Percentage
Enjoy holiday	71	59.16
Work in holiday	17	14.16
Sale holiday in busy shipment	15	12.50
Work in late night work	17	14.16
<b>Total</b>	<b>120</b>	<b>100</b>

The Table shows that most of the female workers 59.16 percent try to stay at home due to getting low salary in the factory form maintaining their family life. Only 14.16 percent are wanted to work in the holiday. When busy shipment in the factory, research revealed 12.50 percent of the female worker do working overtime basis for money. The major problem seen in the late night working, the respondents said if they work at late night family life has been hampered suppose said quit the job, such job no need, most of the case husband beaten their wife for late night work in the garments factory.

For an example, very early in the morning, a female worker's husband beating her under the factory for late night overtime working. (Table 3) shown only 14.16 percent women work late night over time by pressure by authority. So it is revealed in the research, Most of the female worker those who are unmarried reluctant to work at late night in the factory.

### ***Discussion***

The garment workers socio- economic conditions are very low and rights in the factory are not ensured. They are working for 7.00 am to 5.00 pm at a stretch but there are monotonous job with very poor salary. This study very closely interviewed 120 women of the different garments factory of Chittagong city at their home and factory. At the home they live in dirty and dingy environment because those low income worker can't afford basic need of their life and capable to give their children a healthy and secure life.

It is very interesting that they don't bother about their rights in the readymade garments sector. Even then they always feel insecurity in the job, because job threat is very prevalent there, no appointment letter given at the time of appointment. Some female worker said to me that while interview. Some of the worker threat to put signature in the blank page to leave the job forms the factory. Only it is possible their education level is very low, most of the female worker hard to complete primary level education. It is good sign to watch that some of the women working in the garment factories in senior management by secondary level education.

The survey found and learned from the research that different types of harassment exist in the garments factory. Sexual harassment is very common and mental harassment also occurred in the garments factory. They shared in the interview verbal abuse is very common but in it interesting that they don't mind in these types of insulting incidents. The study also found that physical abuse including sexually intimate relation, but they can't disclose it to the public or any researcher due to social insecurity and possibility to quit from the job. Most of unmarried female garment workers to feel shy to disclose the sexually intimate experience due to less possibility to marriage with good groom in future.

They are not bother other things of the life, they fetch up their life with the boundary of 5500 tk to 7000tk wage rang. This study revealed that it is the vicious cycle, the garment workers children will be garments workers- it seems disgraceful.

### **Key Recommendations**

- a) The Bangladesh government should carry out effective and impartial investigations into all workers' allegations of mistreatment, including beatings, threats, and other abuses, and prosecutes those responsible.
- b) The Bangladesh government should revise the labor law to ensure it is in line with international labor standards. Amendments made to date fall short of International Labour Organization's conventions ratified by Bangladesh, including Convention No.87 on freedom of association and Convention No. 98 on the right to organize and bargain collectively.
- c) Companies sourcing from Bangladesh factories should institute regular factory inspections to ensure that factories comply with companies' codes of conduct and the Bangladesh Labor Law.
- f) Ensure that workers' rights to form unions and collectively bargain are protected.
- i) Encourage members to drop pending unwarranted criminal charges against labor activists and workers who have sought to organize unions.
- j) Collaborate with the International Labor Organization to educate factory owners in the benefits of having independent trade unions and improved labor relations.

### **Conclusion**

Bangladesh is very densely populated country. They work in the factory very early in the morning to 8 pm at night with numerable low salary for month long working. After that they can't treated as human being. The scenario is not fruitful for the company owner and the workers. The major concerning issue is to give them late salary. No company maintains the rule of labour law and BGMEA regulation. It is clearly mention the section of labour law salary will be given to the every worker with in first week or 8 days of the

month. So they get their salary in middle week or last week. It create great havoc of their daily life such as paying house rent and payment of debt in the grocery shop to fulfill their need. In this sector government should intervene to create congenial environment in the readymade garment sector.

The employers must be followed the particular wage related section of Bangladesh Labour Law. Government should intervene in this sector and penalize the respective company. The employers must use all of the facilities provided by the government for the betterment of the workers. However; the employers can implement some measures themselves without any co-operation from the government. The majority of women workers have no option but to send their children to stay with their parents in rural areas, depriving them of the right to breastfeed and of the enjoyment of bringing up their own children. Women workers entitled to give maternity leave with payment in the Bangladesh Labour Law-2006, but most of the female workers don't have idea of legal rights regarding maternity provision of the existing law. Most of the cases employers and Doctor's certificates needed in order to claim those rights. The majority end up being fired by their employers when they become pregnant, or sent on leave without payment. As a result, many women are forced to work during the final stages of pregnancy in order to make ends meet, jeopardizing the health of both mother and child. In this sector Ministry of Labour and Employment oversee the matter as if the female worker gets friendly environment to enhance their production. Women workers face various crises in the RMG sector.

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