

## Harassment of women garment workers in Bangladesh

F. Begum, R. N. Ali, M.A. Hossain<sup>1</sup> and Sonia B. Shahid<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Department of Rural Sociology, <sup>1</sup>Department of Establishment, <sup>2</sup>Bangladesh Agricultural University Research System, Bangladesh Agricultural University, Mymensingh-2202, Bangladesh

### Abstract

The study analyzed the different factors that are responsible for the harassment of women garment workers in Bangladesh. Three garment factories from Mirpur area under Dhaka district were selected purposively where garment factories are available. The sample consisted of 90 women workers taking 30 randomly from each of the three garment factories. Female workers are mostly employed at the lower category of jobs like operator, finishing helper, polyer 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. Only 22 female workers earned salary between Tk. 2700 to Tk. 3000 per month. Female workers are sexually harassed by their co-workers in the factory or by police or by mastans in the street. Communication problem is a major problem faced by most of the female garment workers. A long distance travel is not only physical strenuous but also mentally stressful. Their overtime rate is very low. Long working hours result in a number of illnesses and diseases like headache, eye trouble, ear ache, musculoskeletal pain etc. Women are exploited easily due to lack of technical knowledge and training. The employers do not pay any heed to this exploitation.

**Keywords:** Garment industry, Women workers, Harassment

### Introduction

Readymade garment (RMG) industry is the key sector of the Bangladesh's economy in terms of employment, production and foreign exchange earning (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 lions 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.

The health of garment workers is primarily affected by the workplace stress which may be defined as the reaction of workers organisms to threatening situations in the workplace.

Threatening situations in the garment industry may arise from following sources:

- 1) monotonous nature of the job;
- 2) pressure to increase productivity or excessive demand on workers to meet shipping deadlines;
- 3) rush to meet the set production target;
- 4) uncongenial working conditions;
- 5) late-night overtime work;
- 6) insecure commuting to and from the workplace;
- 7) sexual harassment;
- 8) absence of canteen facility;
- 9) absence of weekly holiday and leave facilities;
- 10) non-cooperation from family and society, etc.(Paul-Majumder, 2003).

## Materials and Methods

Mirpur upazila under Dhaka district was selected purposively and from this upazila, three garment factories were selected considering the purpose of the researcher. A sample of 90 respondents, taking 30 from each factory was chosen randomly. Primary data were collected personally from the respondents through a sample survey with the help of a structured and pre-tested interview schedule. In this study, both quantitative and qualitative methods were used in order to get a reasonably true picture of the entire population. The data were collected during the period from February to April, 2008. Tabular method was used for a substantial part of data analysis. Relatively simple statistical techniques such as percentage and arithmetic mean or average were taken into account to analyze the data.

## Results and Discussion

### Monotonous nature of jobs

In the garment industry, women are mostly employed at the lower category of jobs, like operator, finishing helper, polyer etc. and the nature of these jobs is very monotonous since there is no possibility for personal creativity, expression and fulfillment in these jobs. From the survey, about 28 percent of the women workers were polyer, while 24.4 percent, 23.2 percent and 12.2 percent (Table 1) were finishing helpers, operators and sewing helpers respectively. An operator has to sew a small part of garment throughout her long working hours. It is very difficult for a worker to maintain his/her patience for such a long time doing the same work repeatedly. Her monotony reaches the climax when she has to work at a stretch for more than 6 hours without any break (Paul-Majumder, 2003). The case is similar with helpers. Sometimes they are not even allowed to go to the toilets or to drink water. The workers become bored and dissatisfied with repetitive and monotonous work. Sometimes they lose interest in work and become depressed.

**Table 1. Type of work**

Work pattern	No. of respondents	Percent
Quality controller	3	3.3
Supervisor	2	2.2
Operator	21	23.2
Sewing helper	11	12.2
Folding	3	3.3
Finishing helper	22	24.4
Polyer	24	27.8
Embroidery	1	1.1
Line chief	3	3.3
Total	90	100

Source: Field survey, 2008.

### Low and irregular wages payment

Another source of workplace stress for garment workers is their low wages and irregular wage payment. It was observed that a large number of female workers received wages below the minimum wage rate fixed by the Government of Bangladesh. Only 22 female workers earned salary between Tk. 2700 to Tk. 3000 per month (Table 2). From some oral histories it was observed that wage payment is not regular. Sometimes, it was paid after the first week of the month which creates their job dissatisfaction (Table 3).

**Table 2. Monthly income**

Monthly income (Tk.)	Total	Percent
< 1900	20	22.22
1900-2300	22	24.44
2300-2700	26	28.89
2700-3000	22	24.44
Total	90	100

Source: Field survey, 2008.

**Table 3. Payment schedule**

Payment schedule (week)	Total	Percent
1 <sup>st</sup>	65	72.23
2 <sup>nd</sup>	6	6.66
3 <sup>rd</sup>	19	21.11
4 <sup>th</sup>	0	0.0
Total	90	100

Source: Field survey, 2008.

### Job insecurity

Most of the jobs in the garment industry are temporary in nature. Workers are hired when needed and fired when the need is over. Therefore, garment workers suffer greatly from job insecurity. Their jobs are insecure not only because of the temporary nature of their jobs, but also because of the informal nature of recruitment. The garment industry belongs to the formal sector, but workers employed in this industry do not receive appointment letters. Therefore, terms and conditions of their employment are unknown to them. They do not know for how long they will be employed, although a temporary worker has the right to know the tenure of his/her employment. Because of this informal nature of their jobs, about 60 percent of the female workers reported that they feared dismissal from their jobs (Table 4). This condition of their employment causes one kind of mental harassment.

### 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. Moreover, unmarried workers were afraid of disclosing any information on sexual harassment since it decreases their marriage possibility. 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 (Table 4).

### Communication problem

Most female workers travel to and from the workplace on foot. It has been estimated that, on an average, a garment workers travels more than 5 kilometers a day on foot (Paul-Majumder, 2003). This long-distance travels is not only physical strenuous but also mentally stressful, since garment workers worry about attacks by mastans (74.4 percent), by touts (75.6 percent), harassment by police (6.7 percent), harassment by boys in the street, etc. (Table 4).

### Housing problem

It has been found that about 88 percent women workers lived in unhygienic conditions of the slum areas (Table 4). The rooms were very small. The most dangerous aspect of their living condition was the type of toilet they used and the number of user per toilet. Most of the female workers used 'katcha' toilet. In many families only one toilet was used by many women workers. The condition of the toilet was very unhygienic. In most cases, urinary tract infection may result from the use of this unhygienic toilet. However, garment workers have access to safe drinking water. The workers drank water supplied by water and Sewerage Authority (WASA) or from tubewells. Water supplied by WASA is not safe to drink unless boiled. All these unhygienic living condition of the garment workers may adversely affect their health status.

### Bad behaviour of the co-workers

Bad behaviour of the co-workers is another important cause of stress for female workers. In fact, for garment workers the workplace is their second home, since they spend about 12 hours a day in this place. Hence, good relation among the workers is very important. But in many cases, the same does not happen. More than 68 percent of the female workers complained that they were beaten in the factory and their colleagues were beaten too (Table 4). In many cases, the female workers were found to be brusque with each other. It is mainly because of the fact that the workers could not develop a sense of empathy, since the majority of the workers were migrants coming from different villages of the country. Most of them were very young and did not have any job experiences. Hence, they little know about the rules of co-existence. Besides, garment workers feel no attachment towards each other, since they do not stay long time in the same factory.

**Table 4. Problems faced by women workers outside and inside the garment factory**

Type of problems	Number of respondents	Percent
Job insecurity	54	60.0
Sexual harassment	2	2.2
Bad behaviour of the co-workers	62	68.9
Communication problem	89	68.9
Housing problem	79	87.8
Attack by mastans	67	74.4
Attack by touts	68	75.6
Harassed by police	6	6.7

Source: Field survey, 2008.

### Pattern of diseases and illnesses

Work in the garment factory severely affects women's health, as they are confined in a small factory. Moreover, the hot and humid climate of Bangladesh makes the environment of these small factory buildings unhygienic and this condition is largely responsible for widespread prevalence of some illness and diseases among the garment workers. Prolonged standing is also common in the garment factory. In the finishing section of the factory, the ironer category workers have to keep standing up throughout their work period. The case is similar with the folder category workers. The helper category workers in the sewing section also have to work standing up for a long time. According to occupational physicians, low back pain, sore feet, varicose veins, swelling in the legs, general muscular fatigue and other health problems have been associated with prolonged standing (Carson, 1994). Results of the study showed (Table 5) that the most frequent illness reported by 70 percent female workers was headache. Gastritis was more prevalent among the female workers. About 47 percent suffered from gastritis problem. In general, 36.7 percent workers suffered from some kind of weakness. This occurred due to long hours of work and low quality of food that they took for lunch.

**Table 5. Type of diseases and illnesses**

Types	No. of respondents	Percentage
Headache	63	70.0
Musculoskeletal pain	34	37.8
Ear ache	30	33.3
Physical weakness	33	36.7
Eye pain	19	21.1
Less appetite	15	16.7
Chest pain	29	32.2
Fainting	24	26.7
Diarrhoea	25	27.8
Jaundice	14	15.6
Skin disease	29	32.2
Gastritis	42	46.7
Typhoid	14	15.6
Others	26	28.9

Source: Field survey, 2008.

### Overtime work

The normal working hours in the garment factory is 9 hours a day, usually from 8 a.m. to 5 p.m. There is a seasonality in its production, hence work hours vary accordingly. The peak season is from October to January, while the slack season is from March to June. As the labour requirement increases during the peak season, the workers are required to work overtime (Table 6). The extent of stress can be measured from the workers unwillingness to do overtime work and also from the workers job dissatisfaction due to the extended work hours. Besides, overtime work is also stressful for married workers, since they often have to face severe censure for reaching home late at night after finishing the overtime work. Female workers also encountered various mishaps while returning home late at night after finishing overtime work.

**Table 6. Overtime work**

Hours	Age group (years)			Total
	15-20	20-25	25-30	
1-26	5	2	1	8
27-52	7	11	2	20
53-78	3	3	4	10
79-104	9	5	13	27
105 and above	7	6	12	25
Total	31	27	32	90

Source: Field survey, 2008.

### Overtime rate

According to the Factory Act 1965, no person can be employed for more than 8 hours a day in a factory. Work in excess of these hours should be paid for at the overtime rates, which is twice the basic salary. Usually, the basic salary is considered to be 60 percent of the monthly pay. Thus a worker should get 1.2 times his/her hourly pay for one hour of overtime. The basic salary of the garment workers is expected to be 45-47 percent of the total salary. But none of the female workers knew about their basic salary. Most of the respondents are ignorant about how the rate is calculated. Table 7 shows that 74.44 percent respondents got Tk. 6-10/hour overtime. About 19 percent respondents got Tk. 11-15/hour overtime.

Table 7. Overtime rate

Wage (Tk./hour)	Number	Percent
6-10	67	74.44
11-15	17	18.89
16-20	6	6.67
Total	90	100

Source: Field survey, 2008.

## Conclusion

Lastly, it can be said that various factors are responsible for the harassment of women garment workers in Bangladesh. It is true that the government of Bangladesh had very limited resources to invest in the health sector, but it could encourage the employers to invest in garment workers health by providing tax rebate or tax holiday as incentives. The government must be diligent in implementing the labour laws. The employers must use all the facilities provided by the government for the good of the women workers. However, the employers can implement some measures themselves without any cooperation from the government. They can provide filtered water on each work floor without much cost. Similarly, they would not incur much cost if they provide quality food like a banana, a boiled egg, a cup of milk, etc. during tiffin hour. To provide breaks during work would also not involve much cost. In the same way, employers can undertake a number of measures like ensuring cleanliness and cross ventilation in the workplace, installing adequate number of exhaust fans and powerful blowers in the workroom, withdrawing restriction on workers visits to toilet etc. without incurring much cost. Appointment of a regular doctor would also not involve much cost. NGOs can very successfully provide hygienic housing facilities to the garment workers. They can also provide transport facilities. These two facilities would quite reduce the various harassment of the female garment workers related to housing, communication etc. Adequate proper training should also be provided to the female workers. The workers must be aware about labour rights and occupational safety. They must demand and acquire their rightful position in the labour market.

## References

- Begum, F. 2008. Rural Women in Urban Garments: a Study on Livelihood Pattern of Women Garment Workers at Dhaka City. Unpublished M.S. Thesis submitted to the Department of Rural Sociology, Bangladesh Agricultural University, Mymensingh, Bangladesh.
- BGMEA (Bangladesh Garment Manufacturers and Exporters Association) Member's Directory. 2008. Annual Report. Dhaka, Bangladesh.
- Carson, R. 1994. "Stand by Your Job," *Occupational Health and Safety*, April 1994. p. 38.
- Halim, S. and Kabir, A.H. 2005. Globalization, Gender and Labour Market: Some Evidence from RMG sector: *A Journal of Social Science*. 22(1): 29-42.
- Paul-Majumder, P. 2003. Health Status of the Garment Workers in Bangladesh. Arambagh, Motijheel, Dhaka: Bangladesh at Associates Printing Press.
- World Bank. 1990. Garments: Global Subsector Study.