

Understanding Bangladeshi Female Garment Workers' Experience: Empowerment, Patriarchy and Emotional Wellbeing

Habiba Sultana¹

Habiba Rahman²

Sumon Kumer Mazumder³

ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Date of Submission: 28-01-2024

Date of Acceptance: 13-01-2025

Date of Publication: 30-10-2025

Keywords:

Empowerment, Female Garment Workers,
Patriarchy, Emotional wellbeing, Bangladesh

ABSTRACT

This paper explores the experiences of Bangladeshi female garment workers in relation to patriarchy, empowerment, and emotional wellbeing. While some research highlights the positive impact of paid work on women's status, others note the ongoing challenges of balancing employment, domestic responsibilities, and exposure to violence at home and work. This article argues that although garment work has improved workers' economic conditions, it contributes to anxiety and diminished emotional well-being due to separation from children. Additionally, while paid employment in the Ready Made Garment (RMG) sector has enhanced women's consumption capacity, many still adhere to patriarchal norms by relinquishing income to husbands and not owning assets in their names. Understanding economic empowerment within the contexts of patriarchy and emotional well-being is crucial for holistically assessing garment workers' experiences.

1 Professor, Department of Anthropology, Jagannath University. Email: habiba2351@gmail.com

2 Assistant Professor, Department of Television, Film and Photography, University of Dhaka. Email: habiba.rahman@du.ac.bd (Corresponding Author)

3 Assistant Professor, Department of Anthropology, Jagannath University. Email: sumon202ahcu@gmail.com

Introduction

In today's neoliberal world, corporations move globally to find the cheapest labour, resulting in women from the Global South becoming part of the worldwide precariat workforce (Karim, 2022). In Bangladesh, popular discourse, as well as the state and the Bangladesh Garment Manufacturers and Exporters Association (BGMEA), portray the female Ready-Made Garment (RMG) workers as empowerment symbols—as women who have transcended patriarchal restrictions of veil to step into the public sphere, changing their position from backwardness to self-reliant agents (Choudhury et al., 2016; Huq, 2019; Hasan, 2022; Siddiqi, 2009). According to the World Bank, employment at the garment factory has economically uplifted poor and vulnerable women, as a result of which they have found a voice in the social sphere, gained control over income, can defer early marriage, and exercise enhanced decision-making power (World Bank, 2017). While literature focusing on RMG workers' empowerment is abundant, research on garment workers' vulnerabilities also exists (see Akhter, 2018; Karim, 2022; Huq, 2019). For example, Huq (2019) demonstrates that, despite generating income, RMG workers lack control over their earnings and bear the majority of household chores. Similarly, Akhter (2018) reports that female garment workers develop health problems from long working hours, heat, dust, noise, poor lighting, and ventilation; verbal abuse at work, along with anxiety and guilt from separation from children, also causes stress and diminished mental well-being. Karim (2022) shows that RMG workers face mistreatment from employers who withhold wages under the pretext of low productivity, late arrival, and work interruptions. Our article aims to understand the experiences of female garment workers by situating them within the context of economic empowerment, patriarchy, and emotional well-being. Understanding garment workers' experiences is important because it offers valuable insights into how participation in the global production system has influenced the lives of women from the Global South.

The first part of this article provides an overview of Bangladesh's garment sector, followed by a literature review and conceptualization of empowerment and patriarchy. The next section discusses the methodology of this study, followed by the study's main findings, discussion, and conclusion.

Literature Review

Huq (2019) notes that while employment in the garment industry has provided women with some tangible benefits, these have not led to genuine empowerment. While female garment workers' self-confidence has improved, the state's violent responses to RMG workers' strikes have restricted their agency in improving their working conditions. Furthermore, female workers are burdened with household work; they also lack control over their income, indicating that gender norms have not changed.

Offering a gendered lens, Huq shows that the garment workers who have survived factory fires fear that their husbands might abandon them because they have become unfit to bear children. Huq (2019) argues that the government uses the language of empowerment to appeal to Western donors and create an industrial elite class without enhancing workers' rights. While the discourse of empowerment emphasizes the garment industry's role in emancipating women from patriarchy, it obscures the reality that women's wages in this sector remain among the lowest globally.

Zaman (2001) describes the implications of paid work in garment factories on empowerment and organisational links. According to Zaman, garment workers are not docile, as they use strategies to avoid harassment. While commuting to the workplace, they walk in groups for mutual protection against harassment. They use kin networks and social acquaintances to find jobs in factories. Employment improved their negotiating capacity with male family members, increasing self-confidence and authority. Furthermore, women workers also make alliances with women's and activist groups. Garment workers develop a double consciousness due to their dual identities as women and workers, leading to multiple forms of resistance against the intersection of the state, multinational corporations, and local entrepreneurs.

Kibria (1995) argues that women's employment in the garment sector has not challenged patriarchal family relations significantly, except in the cases of some young unmarried workers. For young unmarried RMG workers, independent living, along with financial and social autonomy, led to changes in attitudes towards a more egalitarian vision of family life. The traditional family system is an attractive option for working-class and lower-middle-class women. For married women, whether they were able to retain control over their wages depended on their class; therefore, their experiences varied. While lower-middle-class women had control over their income, working-class women had to hand their wages to men. Despite controversy over women's participation in the RMG sector, most women in Kibria's study reported that employment in the garment sector has positively enhanced their self-esteem and worth in the household.

Naved et al. (2018) describe garment workers' experience of interpersonal violence in their homes and workplaces. The authors argue that husbands and mothers-in-law perpetrate emotional, economic and physical violence on garment workers. Violence is used to control RMG workers' mobility and sexuality; violence is also used as a reaction against the contestation of power relations within the household and the transgression of gender norms. Respondents reported handing over their income to their husbands or mothers-in-law. It was reported that garment workers suffer emotional abuse and physical violence from male supervisors. Women also experience

economic violence, such as employers' refusal to issue appointment letters, withholding of pay at the end of contracts, and arbitrary pay deductions. Violence at the workplace often goes unreported because women worry about more violence or losing jobs.

Choudhury, Luthfa, and Gayen (2016) report that garment workers' wages are inadequate and therefore, they can only afford congested and low-quality housing in which they have to share rooms, kitchen, toilets and bathrooms, affecting their health and reducing their capability for emotional dignity. Furthermore, as women age, their earnings decrease even as work hours increase. It has also been reported that women experienced assault in their workplaces and were vulnerable to abuse on their way to the workplace. Despite such negative experiences, garment workers reported that their lives have improved after joining garment factories.

Empowerment

The concept of women's empowerment, which emerged in the 1980s and 1990s, entails transforming power relations to achieve gender equality, and women's rights (Cornwall, 2016). According to Cornwall (2016), when women reflect on themselves and their social worlds to recognize the obstacles that impede their empowerment, they become conscious of the power they possess within themselves. For Cornwall, recognition of this power within and acting together to combat inequality is the key to achieving positive social change.

Batliwala (2013) presents the view that empowerment corresponds to changing power relations between individuals and groups. Power derives from the control over one or more of the following resources: physical (land, water, forest), human (people, their bodies, their skills, and labour), intellectual (knowledge, information, ideas), and financial (money, access to money); an individual gains decision-making power through control over these four resources. While the power structure is initially sustained and justified by force, at a later stage, this justification is achieved by creating an ideology that is accepted by the powerless. Such an ideology that supports inequality is founded on a complex structure comprising beliefs, values, and ways of perceiving reality, and is reinforced by institutions such as the family, the education system, the media, the economy, and even the state. Women's empowerment can be achieved by challenging existing patriarchal ideologies, which can be accomplished by transforming their consciousness. Another way of achieving empowerment is by transforming the structures that perpetuate women's subordination, such as unjust laws and unequal property rights (Batliwala, 2013).

Kabeer (1999) sees empowerment as a process in which people who are otherwise denied the ability to make strategic life choices gain that ability. For Kabeer, empowerment is closely connected to the conditions of disempowerment; to be empowered, one needs first to be disempowered. Another dimension of Kabeer's

analysis of empowerment is the notion of choice. Empowerment entails the expansion of one's strategic life choices—choices that Kabeer refers to as first-order choices. These choices are defined as those that are critical for people to live the life they want, such as the choice of livelihood, who to marry, or whether to marry at all, or whether to have children. These strategic life choices, in turn, set the parameters for second-order choices. Kabeer defines these latter choices as less consequential—choices which 'may be important for the quality of one's life but do not constitute its defining parameters'. Kabeer (1999) links the ability to exercise choice to three interrelated components: resources, agency, and achievements. Resources, which can be material, human, or social, are distributed and accessed according to established rules and norms. Agency encompasses the motivation and purpose behind an activity; defined as the 'power within', it refers to the ability to set goals and act upon them. Agency entails bargaining, negotiation, manipulation, subversion, and resistance. Finally, achievement refers to the outcome of empowerment.

Rowlands (1997) presents empowerment as a tri-dimensional concept: personal, relational, and collective. Personal empowerment is defined as an individual's sense of self-confidence and self-esteem, as well as the recognition of their right to autonomy and dignity. Relational empowerment refers to the ability to negotiate and influence relationships, as well as the decisions made within those relationships. Collective empowerment is the process by which individuals work together to exert a political impact and take action through trade unions. Individuals are considered empowered when they can make and influence decisions that help them overcome constraints and fully realize the potential of their abilities and opportunities.

Some authors have defined the empowerment of Bangladeshi female garment workers as the ability to leave abusive marriages, renegotiate dowries, postpone early marriages, and gain control over their income (see Kabeer, 2005; Mamun & Hoque, 2022). Mamun and Hoque (2022) conceptualize empowerment as encompassing economic capability, autonomy, freedom of mobility, decision-making power, enhanced self-esteem, and consciousness about the right to choose. Similarly, Karim (2014) translates empowerment as not paying dowries during marriage, autonomy in terms of financial support to the family, freedom to visit cinemas, and the ability to make small purchases. Our article poses specific questions to further examine empowerment: Do women have access to and control over financial resources? Do women control the income they generate? What role do family relations play in influencing women's access to resources? Does participating in income-generating activities translate into emotional wellbeing? To answer these questions, this article situates the experiences of garment workers within the context of family, domesticity, and patriarchy.

Patriarchy

Eisenstein (1999) argues that patriarchy is maintained and sustained by women's domestic roles in the family as mothers and homemakers. Specifically, within the family structure, women care for men and children, and reproduce new workers. In addition to these domestic responsibilities, women's work is unpaid, and when they enter the labour force, they are paid lower wages compared to men. Nevertheless, it is essential to recognize that women also play a significant role as consumers, one that extends beyond spending to shaping the economy. This role stabilizes the economy and should be recognized and valued.

Walby (1989) defines patriarchy as a system of social structures and practices in which women are exploited, oppressed, and dominated by men. Walby conceptualizes patriarchy at different levels of abstraction. At the most abstract level, patriarchy is rooted in social relations. The next level includes six structures: the patriarchal mode of production, patriarchal relations in paid work, patriarchal relations in the state, male violence, patriarchal relations in sexuality, and patriarchal relations in cultural institutions such as media, education, and religion. These patriarchal relations allow husbands, fathers, and cohabitees to appropriate women's labour. Walby also argues that a conflict exists between the interests of patriarchy and capitalism. This conflict, shaped by tension and power dynamics, is evident in the different ways employers and husbands view women's labour. While employers are interested in women's cheap labour, husbands believe that women's participation in the labour force deprives them of women's labour in the household, challenging their authority. Discourses on femininity and masculinity, institutionalized in all sites of social life, relate masculine identity to the notion of work. Walby (1989) asserts that women do not necessarily consider marriage and the domestic division of labour as disadvantageous compared to other available options.

In Bangladesh, patriarchal ideologies control women, making them dependent on their fathers, husbands, and sons at different stages of their lives (Kabeer, 2011). Religious personal laws grant men unilateral rights to divorce, polygamy, and guardianship over wives and children. Women inherit half as much as each brother, which is often nominal since most women relinquish their inheritance to visit their parents' house after marriage (Jahan, 1995; Kabeer, 2011). Parents feel compelled to give dowries to the groom; as a result, daughters are seen as liabilities in their families (Chowdhury, 2010; 2009). Khundker (2006) notes that employment opportunities for women have not eliminated the dowry system. Chowdhury (2009) argues that the practice of handing over married women's income to their husbands and in-laws can be defined as a new form of dowry.

Kibria (1995) contends that women relinquish their income because they worry men would withdraw from familial economic responsibilities, leaving women vulnerable in without a father or husband. As Kibria (1995, p. 300) notes:

Used to meet basic household subsistence costs, the women's pay symbolized the inadequacy of men's breadwinning capacities. Women worked, however, to mute the potential challenge of this situation to men's authority in the family. The handing over of wages to men was a gesture that diverted attention from men's economic inadequacies. Women also affirmed the economic primacy and, thus, the authority of men by the ways in which they spoke of their pay. For example, they spoke of their pay as a supplement rather than a replacement for male wages.

While powerful patriarchal norms influence women's control over income, Hossain (2012) argues that garment workers also negotiate within those structures. In what follows, we present firsthand data on garment workers' experiences within the context of patriarchal relations, empowerment, and emotional wellbeing.

Methodology

This research was carried out among female workers of two garment factories in Gazipur, a district adjacent to the capital, Dhaka. Gazipur is an industrial area where many garment factories are located. The fieldwork for this research was carried out between March 2021 and October 2021. The third author, along with research assistants, carried out the task of data collection. Formal semi-structured interviews were conducted with 36 female garment workers at their residences and public places. Respondents were selected through purposive sampling. Furthermore, two Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) were carried out with the garment workers. The interviews and FGDs were conducted in Bengali. All the data was recorded, which was later transcribed and translated into English. The data was analysed through thematic analysis. Informed consent was obtained from the respondents prior to the interviews. Pseudonyms have been used to protect the identity of the respondents. Apart from these data, informal unstructured interviews were conducted with the supervisors of the factories, husbands, fathers, and mothers-in-law of some workers to gain an overall picture of how the factory setting and the home environment interact.

Garment Workers' Experiences

Enhanced Self-Esteem

According to Rowlands (1997), personal empowerment involves gaining self-esteem, self-confidence, and a sense of self-worth; an individual is empowered when he or she is able to make decisions to overcome constraints and achieve the full potential of their abilities. Our findings show that garment workers have gained a sense of self-identity and pride as salaried workers with a fixed income. They believe that, unlike work in

the informal sector, work in the formal garment sector has given them the identity of a '*chakurijibi*' or service holder. They value the fixed income that they earn from their job. Sumi explained: "I feel good about identifying myself as a service holder. Unlike the work of a housemaid, which confers a different type of identity, I have a job with a fixed salary."

Like any other office work, employment at the garment factories has a fixed operating time. For unskilled workers, jobs in the informal sector include the work as maids or laborers, which are not formally regulated, and do not guarantee a secure income. Kaberi shared:

I am proud to be a garment worker. Why wouldn't I be proud? It is an occupation. It is not a bad type of work. It's a job... I go to [factory] at eight in the morning and return at eight in the evening like any other service holder. I am associated with a famous fashion manufacturer. I do not wait in the street from dawn, hoping to be hired as a day laborer.

Most informants echoed Sumi and Kaberi's thoughts. Common quotes that emerged from the interviews are: "I am not asking for help from anyone. I am supporting myself from my work, and this gives me confidence" and "I feel proud that I am a woman, yet I am earning ten to twelve thousand taka per month. I live in society, keeping my head high."

However, some informants reported the negative image of garment workers and the stigma they experience. Despite the stigma, garment workers migrate to urban areas to work in the garment sector. Sukhi, an unmarried garment worker, shares:

People back in my village do not consider working in the garment sector as a good thing. Nevertheless, those of us who work in the garment sector know whether it is good or bad. Villagers tell me to resign from my job and get back home.

Similarly, Juthi, another young unmarried woman, says, "People do not think that garment work is good... The environment in villages is different from here. I can buy expensive clothes. I can move independently [because I have moved away from the village]." Like Juthi, Simi shares: "I can make my own decisions. If I have my own income, I can do things according to my willingness... I don't have to ask my husband for money... Empowerment is—I can do what I wish to do; I can make my decisions". These quotes reveal that moving away from the villages and working in the garment factories has allowed women relative freedom.

As the narratives above show, working in the garment factories involves a sense of pride because it is a formal job with a fixed salary; it allows RMG workers a sense of dignity because they are earning a living without having to seek help from anyone else. Zaman (2001) argues that shifting the social location of work from the domestic to the garment arena has given rise to a new class of women—the industrial women class

and their collective consciousness. Our findings suggest that a change has occurred in the consciousness of garment workers: their self-image is no longer that of a dependent woman, but rather a woman who can earn her living independently. Following Rowland's (1997) notion of empowerment, it can be argued that work in the garment sector has enhanced RMG workers' self-confidence. Cornwall (2016) argues that empowerment for women is about recognizing the obstacles that hinder their empowerment and developing a consciousness of their power within themselves. The findings of our study show that despite the stigma attached to garment work, women who have chosen to work in garment factories have gained relative freedom, are able to fulfill their wishes without relying on anyone for financial support; they feel empowered because they can make their own decisions.

Agency

According to Rowlands (1997), empowerment entails undoing negative social constraints and having the capacity to influence decisions. In Kabeer's (1999) analysis, agency and resources are two integral components of empowerment. Agency encompasses the motivation for an activity—the ability to set goals and act upon them (Kabeer, 1999). The findings of this study indicate that female garment workers' careers are relatively short. They plan to use their earnings to invest in the future. Sumi shared:

When we were in the village, we spent whatever we earned by the end of the day; we had nothing left for savings. Now we can save from our salary. At the end of the month, I get 10,000-12,000 taka. I combine this income with my husband's income. We help our families in the village. After meeting our expenses, we can save some money, even if it is a small amount. We buy cows and goats from our savings. We are young now, so we can work hard. As we age, we will no longer be able to work hard, and nobody will look after us.

In a similar vein, Sima elaborated during an interview:

People come to Dhaka to earn a substantial amount of money. I will earn for another two to three years, and then return to my village... If I work in the garment factory for two years and save some money, I will be able to return to my village and do something—such as raising livestock, buying land to rent out, or opening a shop. When I turn 40 or 45, I will no longer be able to work in the garment factory. I should save now for a secure future.

The informants reported that women can only work in garment factories until their mid-thirties or early forties, after which the factory officials prefer to replace them with younger women. Similar findings were also reported by Kabeer and Mahmud (2004), who showed that garment workers do not consider work in the garment factories as a sustainable livelihood option in the long run; those who had savings started their businesses. Our research findings also show that garment workers plan

to make savings for future investments. Their ability to motivate themselves for future goals and act upon these goals indicates that garment workers can act as agents.

Enhanced Economic Capability: Education for children

Work in the garment factories allowed women to contribute to family expenditures and invest in their children's as well as siblings' education. Razia, an unmarried RMG worker and student, shared:

I am [financially] better off working here. I can bear the cost of my education. I am also paying for my younger brother's education. If I were sitting idle at my village home, I would not have been able to pay for anything.

Like Razia, Simla also shared how she was able to overcome her financial hardship, and secure the future of her son because of her job:

I had financial hardship [before starting work in the garment sector]. A job in the garment sector provided me with financial independence. I have a son, and he has a future [which I can help build by working in the garment factory].

Reshmi, a married RMG worker, echoed similar thoughts:

I am working here to supplement my husband's income to pay for household expenses. I have two children who go to school. I want their lives to be better than our lives. Thinking about their future, [I started working in the garment sector].

Another informant, Sabina, shared how she is able to pay for her household expenses with her income: "Those who work [like us] can easily afford their household expenses."

The narratives discussed above suggest that garment workers' economic conditions have improved as they have evaded poverty, gained financial independence, and are able to spend on their children's and siblings' education. When they talk about their financial wellbeing, they refer to the improved economic condition of their family, rather than their individual status. Therefore, they relate their own wellbeing to that of their family.

Married RMG workers' dilemma over providing for parents

In our research, those informants who are unmarried or divorced reported providing financial support to their parents. Ayesha, a divorced RMG worker, said she sends money to her mother:

Yes, I send money to my mother. I send money through a mobile transfer and give her money when I visit her. I send money so that she can buy food, medicine, and other necessities. I want to make my mother happy.

Married garment workers' ability to send money to their parents depends on their husband's approval. Some women reported that their children live with their maternal grandparents, which is why they send money to their parents. Rupsha, a married garment worker, shared:

I send money to my parents. My younger sister is a student. My daughter stays with my mother. I have a responsibility towards her. It's a pleasure for my mother that her daughter and son-in-law provide her with money. I help her financially.

However, not all married garment workers can remit money to their parents due to their husband's disapproval. Nevertheless, some workers send money to their parents in secret. Zeba says, "I send money to my mother secretly without informing my husband." Sumi echoed a similar thought:

I don't tell my husband that I help my parents financially. If he finds out, he will put pressure on me. He will say, "Give me that money! Why do you send it to them? ... I feel that they gave birth to me, so why shouldn't I help them?" He creates chaos over this issue.

The cases of Zeba and Shumi, as well as many other women in our study, show that married garment workers need their husbands' approval to send money to their parents. These findings are similar to Chowdhury's (2010) argument that it is common for husbands to control their wives' income; they do not expect their wives to help their parental families financially. Our findings show that the mere fact of earning wages does not automatically dissolve gender hierarchy or patriarchal control, which validates the fact that husbands have a say in deciding whether married women can provide financial support to their parents.

Consumerism, control over income, ownership of assets

Our interviews suggest that garment workers have emerged as a consumer group. Income from the garment work has allowed women to purchase products they previously could not afford. Nazma shares:

I buy cosmetics, clothes, and lipsticks. I have a mobile phone and a television. Now I can buy clothes, but I could not do that when I was living in the village and not working.

In a similar vein, Sumi shared:

I have a touch-screen mobile and a button phone...I buy Fair and Lovely cream, face wash, eyeliner...everything that a girl needs. I bought my shoes from Bata. I use body spray...I have a Wi-Fi connection. I watch drama on the internet.

The ability to purchase consumer goods provides garment workers with a sense of autonomy, as illustrated by Rekha: "It is different. I can earn and spend as I wish." Karim (2022) argues that a consumer culture is a significant aspect of working-class women's lives, particularly in relation to clothing and appliances.

While the availability of disposable income allows young workers to participate in consumer culture and fulfill their desires, RMG workers, especially those who are married, do not have any assets in their names. Rajia said, “I invest my savings in my village. My father-in-law bought a cow with my earnings. My husband will sell this cow later on to buy some land.”

Most married informants reported giving their income to their husbands or fathers-in-law, who buy assets in their names. In all the cases, when land was purchased, it was purchased in their husbands’ names. Sonia, a married garment worker, said:

I give my salary to my husband. He gives me money whenever I ask for it. I do this to avoid conflict over who controls my income. I do not mind if he controls my income; I can still use it. I give him my earnings, and he buys our assets. All the assets are in his name. It does not bother me whose name our assets are registered in.

The above quotations demonstrate that women hand over their earnings to their husbands to maintain peace within the household. The most common strategies that husbands use to control their wives’ income include buying assets in their own names while compelling their wives pay back loans or cover family expenses, withholding financial support, and directly taking wives’ income (Chowdhury 2010). While Batliwala (2013) and Kabeer (1999) relate empowerment to control over assets, our data indicate that married RMG workers do not own assets in their own names, indicating that they have not gained control over resources.

Diminished emotional wellbeing: Anxiety over separation from children

Most informants reported that, due to their work, they are unable to keep their children with them in urban areas. As a result, they send their children to live with their grandparents in the village. Mostari says, “I have one child who lives with my mother. I feel bad that my child cannot stay with me, but I am doing this for his future”. Sumi shared similar emotions:

I have one daughter and one son. They live in the village with my mother. They study in the local *madrasah* (religious school). I provide for their expenses. I send money to my mother. Sometimes I send 2000 taka, other times 3000 taka.

Emotional distress among garment workers due to separation from their children also emerged in the FGDs. As one respondent said:

I feel so bad. I am his mother, yet I am not able to keep him with me. If he were with me, I could feed him, and help him in his studies, even if I had little time with him. However, I am unable to do so.

Likhi shared:

It is hard for me to be away from my child. I don't get holidays except for Eid and Kurban. Even then, I beg my boss for one or two days off so I can go home and see her. When I eat, I wish she were with me so I could feed her... I cry by myself. I call her. My daughter answers and asks, "Have you been crying?" I don't tell her that I have been crying for her.

In a similar vein, Reshmi said,

I am a woman, yet I cannot look after my child. I tried to keep her with me, but my in-laws didn't allow me... I call her... I feel so hurt... I am always anxious about her. Do they take care of her? How is she? I am always in a state of anxiety.

The narratives above suggest that separation from their children leads to increased anxiety and reduced emotional wellbeing among garment workers. Although employment in the garment sector offers financial security, it also deprived them of the emotional comfort associated with keeping their children close to them. It is always in the back of the minds of the mothers that they are depriving their children of maternal affection and care, and not fulfilling their motherly duties.

Discussion and Conclusion

According to Amartya Sen (1999), women's earning power has contributed positively to their independence and empowerment, thereby enhancing their voice and agency. Our findings show that women's economic independence through paid work in garment factories has enhanced their pride and given them relative freedom. Following Rowlands's (1997) argument that personal empowerment entails self-esteem, it can be argued that garment workers exhibit self-confidence and pride at the psychological level.

Garment workers reported that they have a negative image in the rural areas—an image in which garment workers are portrayed as "bad" women. Despite such negative social attitudes, they have come out of the patriarchal gaze of rural society to migrate to work in the urban centres to earn a living. Cornwall (2016) argues that empowerment entails awareness of obstacles, recognizing the power within, and acting together to eradicate inequality. According to Rowlands (1997), empowerment involves recognizing one's capacity and the right to influence decisions to undo negative social constructions. Garment workers exhibit empowerment in identifying social stigma as a negative social construction and deciding to migrate to work.

Most women exhibit agency by contributing financially to their families and paying for their children's education. They have a fixed income, allowing them to plan for the future without worrying about the insecurities of living hand-to-mouth. Furthermore, their income has enabled them to purchase cosmetics, dresses, and other

goods, thereby transforming them into another group of consumers and contributing to the economy (see Eisenstein, 1999). At the individual level, they feel they are not dependent on anyone for their necessities, which enhances their dignity.

The narratives of the informants show that married garment workers adhere to patriarchal norms by handing over income to their husbands, and/or in-laws. None of the respondents reported that assets such as land were bought in their names. Fearing disapproval and disputes from husbands, married garment workers adopt the strategy of secretly helping their parents. Contrary to Batliwala's (2013) argument that empowerment entails control over resources and poses a challenge to patriarchal ideologies, our data show that garment workers adhere to patriarchal ideology by relinquishing their income to their husbands.

According to Eisenstein (1999), patriarchal relations assign women the role of taking care of family members and reproducing new workers. Participation in the labour force reduces women's time and labour for care work in the household. Our findings indicate that without childcare facilities, women rely on their kin network for childcare. However, separation from their children often results in feelings of guilt among garment workers due to perceived inadequacy in fulfilling maternal responsibility. While employment in the garment sector has enhanced women's economic wellbeing and agency, it needs to be comprehended holistically within the context of patriarchy to understand how the interplay between patriarchy and capitalist relations shapes the experiences and emotional wellbeing of female garment workers in the Global South.

References

- Akhter, Sadika. (2018). *Health and Safety Issues for Women Working in the Ready Made Garment Industry in Bangladesh*. (Ph.D. thesis), Griffith University, Australia.
- Batliwala, S. (2013). *Engaging with empowerment: an intellectual and experiential journey*. New Delhi: Women Unlimited.
- Choudhury, Z. U. A., Luthfa, S., & Gayen, K. (2016). *Vulnerable Empowerment: Capabilities and Vulnerabilities of Female Garment Workers in Bangladesh*. Dhaka: Bangladesh Mahila Parishad.
- Chowdhury, F. D. (2009). Theorising Patriarchy: The Bangladesh Context. *Asian Journal of Social Science*, 37(4), 599-622. doi:10.1163/156853109X460200
- Chowdhury, F. D. (2010). Dowry, Women, and Law in Bangladesh. *International Journal of Law Policy and the Family*, 24(2), 198-221. doi:10.1093/lawfam/ebq003

- Cornwall, A. (2016). Women's Empowerment: What Works? *Journal of International Development*, 28, 342–359.
- Eisenstein, Z. (1999). Constructing a Theory of Capitalist Patriarchy and Socialist Feminism. *Critical Sociology*, 25(2), 196–217. doi:10.1177/08969205990250020901
- Hasan, M. T. (2022). *Everyday Life of Ready-made Garment Kormi in Bangladesh: An Ethnography of Neoliberalism*. Cham: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Hossain, N. (2012). Exports, equity, and empowerment: The effects of ready-made garments manufacturing employment on gender equality in Bangladesh, World Bank. Retrieved from <https://openknowledge.worldbank.org/handle/10986/9100>
- Huq, C. (2019). Women's "Empowerment" in the Bangladesh Garment Industry through Labor Organizing. *Wagadu: A Journal of Transnational Women's and Gender Studies*, 20, 130-154.
- Jahan, Roushan. 1995. "Men in Seclusion, Women in Public: Rokeya's Dream and Women's Struggles in Bangladesh" In *The Challenge of Local Feminisms: Women's Movements in Global Perspective*, edited by Amrita Basu and Elizabeth McGrory, 87–109. Boulder: Westview Press
- Kabeer, N. (1999) "Resources, agency, achievements: Reflections on the measurement of women's empowerment." *Development and change* 30 (3): 435–464.
- Kabeer, N., & Mahmud, S. (2004). Rags, riches and women workers: export-oriented garment manufacturing in Bangladesh. In M. Carr (Ed.), *Chains of Fortune: Linking Women Producers and Workers with Global Markets* (pp. 133-164). London: Commonwealth Secretariat.
- Kabeer, Naila. (2005). Gender equality and women's empowerment: A critical analysis of the third millennium development goal 1. *Gender & Development*, 13(1), 13-24. doi:10.1080/13552070512331332273.
- Kabeer, N. (2011). Between Affiliation and Autonomy: Navigating Pathways of Women's Empowerment and Gender Justice in Rural Bangladesh. *Development and Change*, 42(2), 499–528.
- Karim, L. (2014). Analyzing Women's Empowerment: Microfinance and Garment Labor in Bangladesh. *The Fletcher Forum of World Affairs*, 38(2), 153-166.
- Karim, L. (2022). *Castoffs of Capital: Work and Love among Garment Workers in Bangladesh*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Khundker, N. (2006) *Perpetuation of Dowry as a Social Practice in Bangladesh*, Dhaka, Bangladesh: Research Initiatives.
- Kibria, N. (1995). Culture, Social Class and Income Control in the Lives of Women Garment Workers in Bangladesh. *Gender and Society*, 9(3), 289– 309.
- Mamun, M. A. A., & Hoque, M. M. (2022). The impact of paid employment on women's empowerment: A case study of female garment workers in Bangladesh. *World Development Sustainability*, 1, 1-11. doi:<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.wds.2022.100026>
- Naved, R., Rahman, T., Willan, S., Jewkes, R., & Gibbs, A. (2018). Female garment workers' experiences of violence in their homes and workplaces in Bangladesh: A qualitative study. *Social Science & Medicine*, 196, 150-157. doi:<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.socscimed.2017.11.040>
- Rowlands, J. (1997). *Questioning Empowerment: Working with Women in Honduras*. Oxford: Oxfam Publishing.
- Sen, A. (1999). *Development as Freedom*. New York: Anchor Books.
- Siddiqi, D. M. (2009). do Bangladeshi factory workers need saving? Sisterhood in the post-sweatshop era. *Feminist Review*, 154-174.

- Walby, S. (1989). Theorising Patriarchy. *Sociology*, 23(2), 213-234. doi:<https://doi.org/10.1177/003803858902300200>
- World Bank. (2017). In Bangladesh, Empowering and Employing Women in the Garments Sector. Retrieved from <https://www.worldbank.org/en/news/feature/2017/02/07/in-bangladesh-empowering-and-employing-women-in-the-garments-sector>
- Zaman, H. (2001). Paid work and socio-political consciousness of garment workers in Bangladesh. *Journal of Contemporary Asia*, 31(2), 145-160. doi:10.1080/00472330180000101