

Vulnerability in Female Garment Workers' Lives: A Qualitative Study from Readymade Garment Industry in Bangladesh

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Abstract Background: The ready-made garment industry in Bangladesh has made employment opportunities of so many vulnerable women to have their own income and take responsibility of their families. But to manage the workloads, they have to pay a lot. This study tries to find out the female workers' living circumstances, food intake security, healthiness well-being and workplace security. **Method:** A qualitative study employed six focus group discussions (FGD) (n=60) with female garment factory workers from six factories in Gazipur city. Data collection was performed from September, 2014 to December, 2014. Purposive sampling was carried out to select the individuals. Interview transcripts were coded in MAXQDA, 2020. The data were analyzed using thematic analysis approach. **Result:** This study has found that for long working hours and too work pressure, the female workers are suffering from health problems like back pain, headache, finger injury, eye problem, chest pain and dehydration. The female workers are harassed by production managers and other male officials inside the factory. Sometimes they have not received exact salary comparing with their working hours. Their insufficient income force them to live from hand to mouth without intake of nutrient-enrich foods. They have not received enough mental support to carry on this work. They are also victim of home violence. Most participants want to have increased salary with better work facilities. **Conclusion:** Garment workers' salary should be increased to attain the basic needs in their lives. The factory authority should take initiatives to maintain workers' health which ultimately results in more production. Working environment should be suitable for female workers without any harassment. To maintain the working hours and working conditions, labor rules should be followed in strict.

Keywords: vulnerability, female, garment, worker, ready-made, garment, Bangladesh

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1. Background of the Study

Being a developing country with very strong agricultural footings, Bangladesh has started its journey of industrial sector with the Ready Made Garment (RMG) industry in 1976 [1]. Now, this sector is the largest export earner of Bangladesh. The quota benefit plus the low wages helped the country to become the world's second largest apparel exporter after China [2]. In Bangladesh female workers are working on an average 11.12 hours/day in the garment factory but they receive very average salary less than Tk. 7000 per month [3]. This industry has provided the largest employment opportunities for female workers in the industrial sector where more than 85 percent of the production workers are female [4]. These female workers maintain a very poor life managing hardly their own and family expenses. They face extreme difficulty in obtaining their basic needs for survival, and this situation makes

them even more vulnerable. Their nutritional status is very poor because of their low payment and their extreme vulnerability. The working conditions of these female workers are not conducive to their work and their lives. It is full of difficulties and trouble. This can be attributed by the hostile attitude of the factory owners and managers towards the female workers [5]. Moreover, the workload has a serious issue that has impact on their family lives too. The motivations for joining garments work include both "push" factors such as poverty, marital breakdown and family conflicts as well as "pull" factors such as the desire to improve one's social and economic status [6]. Almost half of the female workers are either verbally or physically abused by the management inside the factories. RMG workers are compelled to work long hours with no access to sick leave, weekend holiday, annual vacation, pension, bonus or festival allowance. They have to work with constant pressure to increase the productivity [7].

Women's participation in work has significantly contributed to reduce poverty and addressing the issue of

gender equity, mostly in developing countries [8]. With the RMG employment opportunity, women have become more empowered in Bangladesh [9,10]. Moreover, the income of the female garment workers increases their family's economic position and household consumption of food, and helps them invest more in family members' comfort and security [11,12]. Though female workers contribute in family prosperity, participation in paid work also increases women's workload, family conflicts, and their vulnerability to male-marital violence [13,14]. An insightful narrative on migration, living standard, nutrition, work environment and its impact on the health of the female workers is absent from the research because the research approaches have mainly been limited to quantitative methods [15-23]. This study explores through a qualitative lens how female workers see their earnings, food security situation, work environment, health problems and harassment in home and work place in relation with their working experience. The objectives of the study are-i) to generate an over-all idea about female garment factory workers' living condition include accommodation facility, food security, health problems, abuse, work duration concerning their economic standard and work environment, ii) to suggest recommendations to improve the living standard and workplace security for female garment factory workers.

2. Methodology

2.1. Study Site, Design and Participant Recruitment

This study is a qualitative part of author's doctoral research. This study made a qualitative approach to achieve a comprehensive scenario of female workers' overall living standard. The doctoral research was a mixed method (both quantitative and qualitative) study. For quantitative objectives, she visited twenty factories in Dhaka and Gazipur city and total sample size were 434. Six factories from these twenties were chosen again for qualitative purpose located in Gazipur city. The rationale was to collect data from factories in Gazipur as this is the most densely areas having garment factories [24]. Field work was performed from September, 2014 to December, 2014. Ten participants were numbered for each Focus Group Discussion. A total of six FGDs (a total of sixty female garment factory workers participated in the FGDs) were administered with married women age limit 19-40 years having children was observed as one inclusion criteria for the participants in this study. Another criteria's were the female workers who were experienced working in the garment factories for at least one year and who resided in the study areas also. All female workers were married except eleven female workers – six were widow and five were divorced. Most of the participants (thirty five) were educated equal to primary level (grade five), ten were found to drop out the school while studying in primary section and the others did not have any formal education. Nobody was found being educated in secondary or higher than this.

The researcher went to the study sites and contacted with the female workers on the day of the interview. She

used purposive sampling to select the individuals. The researcher explained the objectives of this study to the participants and asked them to participate in FGDs. The female workers were interviewed on the yard of their homes or any other convenient places near their homes were addressed by them. Visiting the dwelling places of the factory workers helped the researcher to explore how they live in congested and contaminated areas with limited facilities and how they manage their basic foodstuffs and other belongings with short income. They were very spontaneous to share their sufferings they experienced in their working places.

Purposive sampling was used to select individuals for this qualitative study. Purposive sampling is widely used in qualitative research for the identification and selection of information-rich cases related to the phenomenon of interest [25]. This involves identifying and selecting individuals or group of individuals who are especially knowledgeable about or experienced with a phenomenon of interest [26]. There was also a criterion whether the participants were willing to participate in this study [27]. This method also supports good communication between the researcher and study participants and enables the contributors to express their opinions about the study topic in an articulate, expressive and reflective manner [28].

2.2. The Interview Schedule

The objectives of the study was to achieve an in-depth knowledge on female workers' overall living standard. To measure this, the researcher formed an interview schedule consisted with themes as 1) why they have migrated to Gazipur, 2) how they have been suffered with their inadequate income causing food insecurity, 3) how they do struggle every day in adverse work condition inside the factory facing aggravation both physically and mentally, 4) how the antagonistic work condition make them ill health with suffering from so many health complications, 5) how the factory supports in case of illness, 6) how the owners are responsive to pregnant workers, 7) assistance from their husbands or in laws to carry on this work or they react in opposite, 8) their future plan to pursue this job or take alternative or move out from here. There were also sub themes supportive to these topics such as resident facilities in their dwelling places, problems of abuse and snatching while coming to home from workplace, share of income expend on food consumption, capable to intake nutritious foods, suffering from health problems caused by harsh working conditions, availability of physicians with attention to pregnant workers, work pressure to carry on with overtime duties, harassment inside the factory with male supervisors or male colleagues, get selection for employment with right judgment or pay bribe to high officials, security for the female workers inside the factories etc. Otherwise, the researcher tried to have an overview of workers' family structure which covered with number of children and aged in the family members and ability to take care of their families with minimum salaries.

2.3. Data Collection and Analysis

In total, six FGDs (Focus Group Discussion) were conducted in this study. The researcher started the

discussion with initiating the purpose of the research following an introduction of the issues they would be asked. Far away from the themes of the FGDs, the discussions were advanced to extensive conversations pertinent to the issues in this study.

In the FGDs, the female workers were very spontaneous sharing their life experience. The FGDs were conducted with the researcher and two MS students. The researcher facilitated the discussion while one student took the notes and the other one recorded the interview. Each FGD took approximately 45 minutes. All FGDs were conducted into Bengali language. The FGD participants were provided taka 50 as a token of thanks for their participation. All FGDs were recorded with a digital audio recorder.

Before the analysis, data were transcribed and verified. The transcribed data were entered in MAXQDA 2020 for coding. The data were coded based on different categories and a code memo was used to note the code's meaning, when it intends to apply and possible issues relevant with that code. The researcher coded six transcripts individually by reading and re-reading. She also developed a codebook which helped her to do the coding. Data were analyzed with a qualitative thematic analysis process [29,30]. The researcher explored issues pertinent with the themes of the FGDs.

3. Results

The findings represent a description of the female workers' overall standard of life and work experience inside the factory with problems in their everyday life. Quotes from the study participants represent their statements.

3.1. Migration from Village, Poor Living Standard with Inadequate Resident Facilities in Gazipur

The female garment factory workers' economic condition is very miserable. To improve their economic situation, they have migrated to Gazipur and entered into the job. After working in the garment factories, now they can send money to their families living in villages. *"I have migrated here for my poverty. For my poverty situation I have come Gazipur in search of work. Joining in the garment factory, now my poverty condition is fairly good than past"*. The situation is worse for the workers who break up the marital relation and get separation from husbands or who are widow from the death of their husbands. In most cases, husbands and in laws undercut the economic supports for their first family. The absence of a male breadwinner and lack of tangible assets leads to a situation of increased vulnerability for the destitute women to maintain the necessities for her and their children- *"I got divorce from my husband while the ages of my two kids were two years and one year respectively. I did not get any allowance from my ex-husband. My father was poor and he was unable to meet the demands of my children. To continue our survival, now I am working here. My kids live with my parents in village and they are studying in school. My husband has got married with another lady."*

The rent of the living room depends on its width, distance from the factory, number of family members and the available facilities. If the room is large and near to the factory, the rent will be higher- *"The room where I live with my husband rents TK.2400. Inside the room, there is no window. As I live near the factory, so, the rent is high. The rent of the room varies from TK.1800-TK.2500 with its width"*. Another female worker said, *"I live in a tin shaded building house in rent. In that house I live in one room with my family and have to share the kitchen and bathroom-toilet with other rented members. I give the owner Tk. 1800 monthly as a rent."*

For using single toilets with electricity and water supply, the female workers have to pay separately-*"Other than the room rent, I have to pay the electricity and water charges individually. I feel problem in using the common toilet in my period time. It is very unhygienic using a common toilet. There are one or two separate toilets. For using separate toilets, I have to pay extra charge"*. The sewerage systems of the houses are not also good. Garbage overflow in drains frequently happen in rainy season- *"As we 20-25 people live in a congested place, so to maintain hygienist is very difficult here. We live and cook in the same room. There is no separate dustbin here. Many residents throw food wastes from kitchen and garbage from room. For not cleaning, there is overflow of debris in drains with foul odor"*.

Load shedding is a common problem in rented houses in Gazipur. Female workers have complained that they do not get sufficient water to use if there is load shedding- *"Water crisis and electricity crisis frequently occurs here. In the whole day, electricity does not exist for at least 10 minutes and we do not get water for our daily use. For not having electricity, I cannot even sleep in the night"*. Another worker complained- *"The owner of our home has direct water supply line with municipality. We collect water from there for our daily use. We get water in the morning at 6 am for half an hour, then again at 12 pm for another half an hour. Quarrel among the residents while taking water is a common scenario here. The supply of water from motor depends on the availability of electricity. If load shedding is high, then we do not have water. Sometimes the owner locks the motor key intentionally not to provide water. He wants to save water for his own use. Then we have to collect water from tube well which is far away from our dwelling places"*. They also suffer from insufficient gas supply- *"Before going to work, I cook breakfast and lunch for my family. But in the morning, it rarely happens that I can cook perfectly. The supply of gas is very less. Then I have to cook in electric stoves which costs to me."*

Female workers frequently face the snatchers outside the factory while they come back to home in the night. Low paid workers normally live distanced from the factory and they are at risk of losing their cash through hijacking. In this study it has been found that all the workers do overtime after their usual working hours (8am -5pm) and in so many factories, the authority pay the monthly salary after 5pm. So, there is high chances of being attacked by robbers. In the time of hijacking, there are incidents of being physically and sexually assaulted, too-*"I face the problem of money snatching frequently as I live far from my workplace and I am doing overtime till 10*

pm. In the last month, the robbers suddenly attacked me on the road and showing the knife they snatched my money and mobile phone. It was around 11pm and there were few people on the road. I screamed but nobody came to help me", she added, "the owners should give the salary before lunch and overtime hours should not be after 8pm." In addition, the workers who lost their money through snatching, fell in intense shortage of finances-"I was attacked by snatchers few months ago. They snatched my salary and also kicked me a lot. I felt totally helpless and cried a lot. I was in tremendous pressure for the whole month and did overtime even in the night to reimburse my damages".

3.2. Insufficient Income and Food Insecurity

According to Bangladesh Ministry of Labor and Employment (2018), the current salary grades for garment workers in Bangladesh range between Tk. 8000 (94.21 US dollar) and Tk. 18257 (193.79 US dollar) on a monthly basis include house rent, medical allowance, transport and food allowance (1 US dollar = 84.91 Taka). Female garment factory workers are the key workers in garment factories but their low payments make their life vulnerable. With this low payments, to carry out the basic demands in life are really very tough for them. The workers have said that overtime period rate has not increased with the rate of salary increase. They work hard but they are not getting sufficient salary as overtime payment is computed based on earlier calculation rate. They also have made out when the government was planning to increase their salaries, then automatically the prices of all food items have also increased. It has happened before the implementation of the government order and now they cannot manage their expenditures correspondence with their low income - "When the government increases our salaries, prices of all food items like rice, vegetables, fish, meat etc. have increased. I get Tk. 7000 as a helper. After paying the house rent and my daughter's study expenses, it is very tough for me to buy foods regularly", she extended-"though I expend most of my income to buy foods but the amount of foods we consumed are not sufficient for us".

The female workers are in lack to consume protein, calcium and vitamin enrich food items. Meat, fish, milk, egg and other protein supplement foods are very expensive for them since they are low paid workers-"I know the usefulness of meat, milk, egg and vegetable. I or even my children cannot consume these nutritious foods regularly. When I get salary at the first week of the month, then we only can consume eggs, milk and other nutritious foods. It is not possible to buy these foods on regular basis with this small amount of salary". Another female worker comments- "I cannot afford milk, fish, egg and meat all the days in a month. If I will try to feed these items in every week to my children, I will go on a serious financial crisis at the end of the month. One kilo meats (beef) costs Tk. 500 and with this amount of money, I can bear my one week food expenditure. I can consume milk and eggs twice in a month, but only for my kids, not for me". Instead of intake these costly food items, they try to cover it with consuming compared low cost food items as vegetables "one kilo fish prices tk 250-Tk 300 and four eggs priced

Tk. 35-Tk. 40. So we eat two types of vegetables instead of consume fish and eggs".

Various seasonal fruits like mango, guava, orange, jackfruit, banana (they are enriched with vitamin A, E, C, zinc, iron, calorie) are necessary for the nutrition of working women as well as for the nourishment of their children. But the workers have reported that it is very hard for them to buy these fruits and they are incapable to provide their children on their regular diet. One worker has said, "I can hardly consume fruits like mango, banana, guava etc. After getting salary on the first week of the month, I can buy some fruits. I have to take care of my daughter who is studying in class four. I buy fruits only for her consumption." The female workers have to sacrifice their own meals to provide balanced diet for her family members and she is always in lack of nutrition-"We are always in a pressure to adjust with our income. I spend more than half of my income on food purchase and I always try to feed my kids with the nutritious foods like milk, eggs etc. Then it is quite impossible for me and my husband to eat those foods also. Then I must have to give up my food portion for the betterment of my husband. Then I have nothing to eat rice only with vegetables. But to work in the factories, good dietetics is necessary to have strength and I consistently shortage of receiving this".

3.3. Unfavorable Work Environment with too Work Load and Harassment

In the garment factories, there is always high workloads and the pressure is same throughout the year. There is no option for the workers to come back home before finishing their targets-"After increasing the new pay scale, I have to work more under the high work pressure. I have to make target pieces of cloth 100 or 110 in one hour at past but now I have to make 140 or 150 pieces of cloth in the same time". The work pressure is so high that even the workers could not do their basic necessities- "The work load is so high that there is no scope for taking five minutes rest to go to toilet. Not for the urination, we suffer from abdominal pain. The condition is worse when we have our periods. Some of us get sick for excessive discharge of bloods. For not changing the clothes, sometimes marks of blood excretion focused on our clothes and it is very ashamed for us getting this situation in front of our male colleagues."

The workers are deprived of getting overtime salaries for the malpractice of supervisors- "The supervisors make the slips of our overtime at 7pm. Sometimes they submit it empty. They never show the slips to us." They added, "The supervisors make right slips for their favorite persons. They are the leaders. They have special relation with the supervisors. The supervisors also make them happy with the arrangements to get high salaries."

Forceful released from the work with salary deduction is commonly practiced in factories. One female worker said- "My factory deducts my salary if I do not attend without taking any leave. Even I do late for one minute, I do not get the attendance bonus Tk. 500. As a rule, we get fourteen days sick leave and money is also sanctioned for this. But when we want leave, we never get it easily and

we never get the money also and we have to compensate it by working more.” Another female worker inspected “At present target level, 2500 pieces clothes per day cannot be completed by all workers. The workers who cannot fulfil the demand make them force released from their work. Now I am working as an operator instead of the released operators.”

The female workers are sexually harassed both inside and outside the factory. They lack power and self-confidence, they are more vulnerable and insecure position compared male workers and they are socialized being suffered in silence- *“The production managers, floor in charge and line supervisors all are male. They force us to work faster. They use offensive words for doing mistakes. Supervisors’ eve tease us and their behaviors remark to unwelcome touch with physical assault. They force us to build up illogical relationship with them for job promotion. If we do not respond, they harass us while coming to home on the road. Not only the supervisors, while doing overtime in night, our male colleagues try to harass us.”*

The workers have to pay to the middle man or so called 'dalals' to get job in the factories. Nepotism is also practiced there as the workers are familiar to supervisors or belong to the owner's district get job without any interview-*“In my factory, workers are mainly recruited according to their home districts. If the worker comes from Sirajgonj district than she/he will be recruited without knowing any garment work. Because the owner of the factory belongs to that district and he is the member of the parliament. And the workers from Sirajgonj also get salary Tk. 800-1000 higher than the pay scales.”* She added-*“There are priorities of educated workers to work in the factories, but now-a-days factory authority gives jobs to those girls who are looking beautiful. Even workers finished higher secondary, they do not get job without lobbing.”*

Fire exit doors or emergency exit routes are available in the factories are mentioned by the workers and they also have training how to get depart in case of fire. In reality, they cannot move leaving their work and they must have to continue their works in any type of accident-*“In my factory, there is fire exit way. Today a generator was burst in the factory at ground floor and I was working on the fourth floor. When smoke surrounded us we got scared and tried to get out from the factory. But the supervisor scolded us and ordered us to keep working. Even we have to work all day long being scared of fire.”*

3.4. Health Problems, Treatment Facility and Security

The RMG workers work from morning to night in a confined environment with no air refreshing facilities. Overcrowding, noise pollution, inadequate light and poor ventilation facilities, constantly sitting or standing in one position without back rest and continuous noise from hundreds of machines make them to feel permanently tired- *“I suffer from headache, suffocation and vomiting. Because the inner environment of the factory is congested, less air to breath and too hot. The sound of the running machine is so loud which causes bad headache for all the workers. By the sound and heat of the machine, I also suffer from ear problem. At least five to ten workers*

fainted everyday working in this brutal environment. Drinking water inside the industry is strictly prohibited as it affects the production.” Another worker's inspection-*“I feel suffocation working in the factory. Because I cannot breathe inside the factory free. There exists no ventilation, no window and lot of workers working in a small area. Some workers leave the work for this problem.”* The work is monotonous and repetitive and it puts constant pressure on fingers and wrists (for sewing machine operators who operate with hands), on legs (who operate with pedals) and on eyes (eye strain for quality checking on sewn products) - *“I am working as a helper. I work from 8 am until 8 pm, sometimes it exceeds up to 10 pm and the whole time I have to stand. Naturally I suffer from leg pain regularly.”* *“I badly suffer from headache. This headache causes for working in the hot environment with loud sound. I am taking medicine regularly for headache and also go to the doctor in Dhaka. But this problem does not relieve.”* *“I work as an operator. Working with needle and to see the different stiches in the whole time make my eyes to be painful. While working, the dusts come to my eyes and I also feel itching in my eyes.”*

There are also women workers in the ironing, heating and quality inspection section and they suffer from eye problems, chest pain and dehydration- *“Factory provides face masks to protect workers inhaling fabric dust. Although a mask is fitted with my face, but sometimes torn parts of the clothes go inside my nose while shaking and I suffer from chest pain. For constantly to see clothes, I suffer from headache and eye pain also.”* *“In the finishing section, I do ironing and check the quality of the clothes. For ironing, the temperature of the room is too hot and it makes me to feel bad headache. In the rooms where we work, there is no fan near us. Cause with blow of the fan, the shirts and the other outfits cannot be arranged properly. There are only exhaust fans for removing dusts.”* *“I work in the heating section and inside it there is no fan. When the machines are heated, I feel that the water of my whole body is going out. I always feel weak. One cannot stand beside this machine while it is turn on.”*

Finger injury due to needle puncture is one of the most common occurring accidents has been found in this study. Finger guard is provided to the workers but to work faster, they avoid wearing any guard on fingers- *“While sewing t-shirts or trousers, I get injured with needle punctures. To save my fingers, I need to wear finger guard. But the proper speed in work cannot be maintained if I wear guards. So, overlooking all the injuries, I just concentrate on my works.”*

In this study a good remark has been noticed by the female workers that they receive free treatment facility from their factory in case of minor illness and the authority consider them to do liberal work during their pregnancy period- *“The factory doctor prescribes us for minor illness such as fever, headache, and waist pain. But for major illness he prescribes the name of the medicine which I have to buy from outside. Sometimes if the illness is so serious he gives bed rest to the worker in the factory. If the worker feels good later then she starts work or in a major case she gets release from the work and asks to take rest in home.”* *“We have doctors in our factory who prescribe us medicine and we get the medicine free from our factory. The doctor prescribes us to intake Napa or*

Paracetamol. If the illness is severe then the worker is suggested to take leave for some days. But to enjoy the sick leave, wages for those days are deducted from our salaries."

In this study it has been found that the pregnant workers are not allowed to do overtime and they are permitted to do flexible or less strenuous job- *"I have got proper care from my factory in my pregnancy period. I have not been able to do heavy work in that time. The doctor of the factory gave me proper treatment and the medicines were also free. I also got the pregnancy leave and salary in due time."* But there are also unfavorable attitudes from garment owners to reward legal payments in their maternity leave- *"I was pregnant and my maternity leave was sanctioned for 112 days (8 weeks prior expected date and 8 weeks after delivery) and all wages have to paid as per as the legal provision. But after coming back from my leave, the owner denied to pay the second installment and asked me to work like before."* She added, *"Female workers work silently and they can be forced to work for long hours in harsh situation. So, the owners have imposed an embargo to be pregnant to female workers as it affects the production."*

There is a post in every factory named 'social welfare officer' and in this study it has been found that 2-3 persons are employed in this position and there are both male and female officers. Their responsibilities are to look after the workers, help them while getting injured or abused by supervisors, assist the pregnant workers to get the maternity benefits, deliver health education include hygiene, reproductive health and family planning - *"There is a female welfare officer in my factory to hear our health problems and others. Her duty is to call a workers' meeting in every week where we can tell our health problems to her, but she rarely does it. She is involved in different office works other than her assigned duties."*

3.5. Mental Support from Family

To execute the work in the garment factories, husbands' kind and concerned manners have been observed by some female workers. In the view of some workers, they have received full support from their husbands and in laws to get into this job- *"My family supports me to work in the factory and they encourage me running my work. Because it is tough to run my family without working in the garments. I am lucky that my in laws also support me and they take care of my children in my absence."* But the story of other workers is not so encouraging. There are also scenarios of abusing wives to carry out this job and they are not sympathetic to their wives at all - *"My husband and mother in law take my earned money forcefully. He spends the money to take drugs and heroine. If I protest, he beats me a lot and breaks the furniture of the home. He threatens me saying that he will get marry another."* To work in the factory for long time and after returning home, take care of the family members is a double load for the workers. They have to prepare foods, feed their children, clean home, wash clothes and they do not get time for their own- *"I am in too working pressure. I do the night duty from 10 pm to 6 am. My husband does not like to stay outside in the night, scrolls me after coming home and makes bad comments of my personality."*

I do not get enough time to sleep and rest in the day time as I have to prepare foods, take care of my husband and children."

There are facilities of keeping babies in day care adjacent to the factories which make them tension free instead of leaving their babies in home, but this is not available in all factories- *"In my factory, there is a baby day care center. The babies are taken care there from the age of 1 to 5 years. Their foods and other expenditures are given free by the factory. But there is a limitation at the number of keeping babies there. The number of the babies in the day care varies from 6 to 7. The worker's working quality is also favored of keeping baby in the daycare."*

3.6. Maintain the Work or Leave the Job

The garment workers are very poor. To live from hand to mouth, they work hard from the dawn to dusk in an uncomfortable setting. The work conditions cost their physic with loss of their mental health. The individuals around them are also pitiless and they are deprived of getting least sympathy from anyone. They battle in every step of their duties and the remuneration they receive is not sufficient compared their persistent diligence. They want to change their work with another having better environment with high salary but they are compelled to their misfortune. To face the harsh reality of their lives, they have no alternative only to continue this work- *"I want to leave this job but for poverty I cannot do this. After increasing the salary, the work pressure seems too heavy for me. Now I am too disturbed of doing this work and think to work not more than 5 years."* *"I do not want to change the factory. The salary that now I am getting from this factory, I will get this salary 3 years later if I change my factory. In a new factory, I have to join as a helper even I have the experience of working as an operator."* They are also worried about getting promotion. They are not upgraded systematically according to the duration of employment - *"After joining the factory, the authority assures me that I will go to next upper grade within one year. But it is almost around three years that I am working in the same grade. Now I am getting salary in the new pay scale but I do not know exact about my promotion. The promotion is not based only our work length in the factory. It also depends on working quality and reaching towards the target."* *"Last five years I am working as an overlook operator. I see so many workers who are supervisor's favorite one, are getting more facilities than me. I want better work than overlooking. But the supervisors let me do the same thing year around as it costs them less. They get a good overlooking operator like me with low salaries."*

4. Discussion

The researcher selected 19-40 years age range suited for the most productive age variety for the female workers. Usually the workers get married at an early age and after 40 years, very few are able to continue their jobs [30,31]. Otherwise, the minimum age limit is 18 years for any type of hazardous works referred by International Labor

Organization Convention 138 [32]. The twenty factories which were selected for the quantitative study purpose (six from these factories were selected for qualitative study) also follow the rule of not recruiting labors below 18 years old. Moreover, most female participants aged 18 years old started working as a trainee lasted for three months was found in this study. They were not so familiar with the working environment and other vulnerabilities faced by the workers. So, the researcher fixed the age criteria for the participants from 19 years old.

In this study, it has been noticed that most female garment factory workers migrated to city in search of work for their survival. Rural poverty is a major problem and rural women are in lack of education, power, independence and access to property. Most of the women in rural areas are housewives and become a widow or being divorced or separated, the vulnerabilities are more severe for these deserted women. This findings is consistent with other studies who found that exposed to poverty-stricken situation, the female workers typically migrated to urban areas and search works in the factories to meet their financial needs [33,34].

The most tedious condition of work in the factories is the long working hours and after increasing the salaries, the work pressure is twice than before has been noticed in this study. The female workers have to fulfill more orders of sewing clothes in the same working hours than before. In corresponded with International Labor Organization (ILO) convention 1919, No(1), a maximum standard of working time is eight hours a day and forty eight hours per week in industries, with the exception of limited and well-circumscribed cases [35]. But this rule is totally crumbled in the factories of Bangladesh. Dedication to work, less demanding characteristics and not to raise voice against any adverse situation are considered for the inclusion of female workers in the factories [36]. The owners and supervisors treat them just as machines and they force them to work in a dictatorial and merciless environment. The RMG workers have to work for long hours either sitting or standing for the whole day without any few or short breaks. The continuous handling of loads, prolonged standing, repetitive movement of both hands and wrists and awkward postures feels this work to be monotonous and increase the workers' fatigue [37]. Risk of losing jobs and no option for income generate pressure to work more to have some extra money for survival.

Sewing operators and helpers are mostly female and they work with male workers in the same production floor. They cannot move from their works when they are thirsty or need to go toilets. Female workers feel very uncomfortable to go to toilets and they cannot share their problems with supervisors or others as they are male [30]. Nobody is aware of their needs in the production room and they suffer from different health vulnerabilities.

In this study, it has been found that most problems are originated from a restricted working place where no labor rules are practiced. The factory act 1965 (22) ensures workers' safety to have facilities of escape in case of fire in every factory [38]. But in reality, no factories in Bangladesh properly follow the rules mentioned in the factory act. The workers' observation is in any hazardous situation, they must have to continue their works. Studies found that to work in the dark room [39], limited space

with so many workers and lack of safeguard mechanism [36,40] make the workers' unsafe and hinders them to move in case of fire accidents. For poor ventilation, the problem is more severe and they could not breathe in fire disasters. Evidences have found that the majority of workplace accidents are related with the employers' lack of administration, negligence and avoidance of occupational health and safety provisions [41].

Sexual harassment is very frequent for female workers work in the factories. The workload are always high in the factories and both female and male workers work inside the factories. The production managers, floor supervisors and other high officials are male and they always monitor the female workers' activities. As the female workers are illiterate, submissive and they are not so courageous to raise voice against the malpractice and offensive behavior of male supervisors, so they are the easiest targets to fulfil their unfair desire. Researchers studied that female workers have to work overnight to meet up excessive workload and they are sexually harassed by supervisors on that time. They also suffer from sexual diseases [42].

The RMG workers have to work for long hours without any few or short breaks. They sit on a small wooden tool and work for around 10-12 hours each day. Awkward position for works, overcrowding, noise pollution, inadequate light and poor ventilation facilities are common contributing factors to some remarkable health issues for factory workers. Some frequent and common diseases of the workers are back/joint pain [42,43,44], cough and common cold [45,46], headache [36,47], eye problem and loss of sight [36,39,44]. Absence of separate washroom facilities for female workers with safe drinking water are causing factors for gynecological problems and jaundice [42,43].

In this study, it has been found that female garment factory workers' work hard but their salaries do not guarantee them to have a better life. Most respondents have said that they spend eighty percent of their income on food expenses and house rent. Their meagre income let them to live in a despondent living condition without having water or electricity supply or sewerage facilities. There are some studies which support this findings that low income communities are struggling to find affordable urban housing in Bangladesh's cities [48]. It also has been found from their study that eighty nine percent of poor households in Dhaka live in one-roomed houses made of straw and bamboo. Usually the low income people such as rickshaw pullers, transport workers, day laborers, hawkers, tea-sellers, RMG workers are tenants of these houses. With very limited facilities, they live in these settlements.

The female garment factory workers are food insecure has been found in this study. Increased wages have not transformed garment workers' food intake pattern into improved food security for price increase. To balance with the price hike, they intake less amount of meat, fish, milk, eggs for high costs in the market and consume more amount of vegetables and other cheap foods which do not ensure exact nutrition for them. They starve while food shortages or better foods are available given to husbands and children. Studies found that food price hike results decline in household nutrition for low income households [49]. They try to earn more correspondence with the price hike [50]. But they cannot afford nutritious foods and always live from hands to mouth.

All the study participants have shared their future plans to become a worker for more years or not. Most of them are exhausted for ruthless work environment of garment factories. But they also agree that with their poor economic and educational background, they won't get better job opportunities than this. They have to survive and to meet up the basic demands of the family members, they must continue their work in the factories. Their expectations are the salaries should be increased compared with their hard works.

5. Conclusions and Recommendations

The growth and development of the garment sector largely depends on the female workers because female workers are the main contributors to this sector. The income level of the female workers is very low to survive. They cannot fulfil their basic requirements with their income. It minimizes their capacity in intake of nutrient rich foods and maintain minimum health care as well as access to other amenities. Therefore, the government should raise the workers' basic salary in such amount which will be enough to achieve the necessities for their living. The garment factory authority should start to provide lunches with protein and vitamin enriched foods. A policy can be initiated to create a wholesale market in the factory's premises. Basic foods at lower prices can be made available there, hence saving the workers' time and transportation costs.

Proper working environment is very essential to maintain workers' health which ultimately increases workers' skills for more production. The authority should provide cross ventilation in the workplace, installing adequate number of exhaust fans and powerful blowers in the workrooms to have a congenial working atmosphere. The presence of pure drinking water in all floors and separate rest rooms for the female workers should be ensured in the factory.

Long working hours in the factories with prolonged sitting or standing and excessive workloads increase the workers' fatigue and mental pressure. The working hours should be minimized for the physical and mental fitness of the workers. The female workers should give some breaks to get relax during their working time. Overtime hours should be reduced only for two hours and doing overtime in night should be eliminated, especially for the female workers. Labour codes for working hours, overtime and payment should be followed strictly. Annoying attitudes to the female workers and all harassments should be controlled strictly. Instead of gaining more profit, the authority should focus on workers' working environment and on their physical and mental health. Periodic consultation with workers' on health problems and injuries with providing singular services to pregnant workers can be started within the factory. Healthy people are productive people and healthy workers are also needed for year round production. The large number of workers will be active and productive if they will avail of the opportunity to be in sound health.

With the earning capacity of the female workers, their contribution to the economy will be justified and women empowerment will also be established. To breakdown the cycle of poverty from the family and also from the society, their roles as contributors should be appraised.

Ethical Approval and Consent for Publication

Prior to the data gathering, the tools were endorsed by the University Human Ethics Committee from University Science Malaysia. The workers' consent forms were translated into Bengali for acceptability as native language in Bangladesh. The consent form consists of the topic of the research with a brief introduction, the purpose of the study, potential risks, all possible benefits, right to withdraw from the study, publication of the materials and voluntary nature of the participation. In the signature pages, the workers expressed their concerns about the risks and confidentiality of the study. To ensure confidentiality and anonymity, individual identification was removed.

Availability of Data and Materials

The dataset generated and analyzed during the current study is not publicly available due to data protection rules but can be made available from the corresponding author on reasonable request.

Abbreviations

RMG- Ready made garment
FGD- Focus Group Discussion

Competing Interests

The authors declare that they have no competing interests.

Authors Contributions

Sadika Sharmin collected the data, analysed it and developed the manuscript. All the authors read and approved the final manuscript.

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