



## Female garment workers' experiences of violence in their homes and workplaces in Bangladesh: A qualitative study

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### ABSTRACT

The ways in which women's engagement in paid work shapes their experiences of violence in the home and workplace is widely debated, particularly in Bangladesh, but rarely considered together. We undertook 23 in-depth interviews with female garment workers living in slums in Bangladesh, and nine interviews with key informants (factory managers and supervisors, male workers, and employees from non-governmental organisations). Data came from two studies conducted in Dhaka, Bangladesh - the first between August and September 2011 and the second between June and August 2015 - and were analysed using thematic analysis. In both settings, women experienced similar forms of violence, including emotional, physical, sexual, and economic, although from different perpetrators. Despite violence in the home and violence in the workplace typically being considered separately, we identify four overlaps between them. First, violence in both settings is shaped by how patriarchal norms and structures of institutions intersect with institutions economic structures. Second, dominant representations of female garment workers as sex workers or sexually promiscuous enables violence against them. Third, economic violence is used as a way to control and limit women's autonomy. Fourth, women develop strategies to continue working and maximize the benefits of work for themselves. Finally, we suggest how interventions could work to prevent violence in the home and workplace.

### 1. Background

The impact of women's participation in waged labour on their health, gender equality, household relationships, intimate partner violence (IPV), and other experiences of violence, has been widely debated (Heise and Kotsadam, 2015; Vyas and Watts, 2009). While waged work empowers women economically, how this has translated into changes in women's health, household decision-making, in particular women's experiences of violence, is rather more complicated. Some research suggests women's participation in waged labour protects women from IPV (Vyas and Watts, 2009). However, in some contexts, particularly highly patriarchal ones, where there are low levels of women's participation in the labour force, or where IPV is common, waged labour may increase women's experiences of IPV (Heise and Kotsadam, 2015). Additionally, engagement in waged labour potentially exposes women to workplace violence (Tijdens et al., 2015).

The Bangladeshi garment industry has since the late 1970s been a central focus for debates about women's participation in paid work (Elson and Pearson, 1981; Kabeer, 1997). Currently there are an

estimated 3.6 million garment workers, of which about 80% are women (Berg et al., 2011; Fair Wear Foundation, 2013). Women are preferred over men for most non-supervisory jobs because of traditional expectations of female propriety; women are perceived as more compliant, controllable, loyal, and law-abiding compared to men (Afsar, 2002; World Bank, 2013); it is also felt they are less likely to join trade unions (World Bank, 2013). Managers are almost exclusively men (Siddiqi, 2003) creating a gender hierarchy reflecting wider social relationships in Bangladesh.

The expansion of women's waged labour in Bangladesh contrasts to the dominant social order of *purdah*, which relegates women to the domestic sphere and men to the outside world, limiting women's ability to work outside the home (Kandiyoti, 1988). Additionally, men are considered breadwinners and required to make important household decisions (Kabeer, 1995; Kibria, 1995). *Purdah* also assumes women have a male 'protector', either family member or husband, who police women's mobility, upholds patriarchal notions of honour, and sanction transgressions of the gender order. Violence is widely accepted and practiced as a tool for disciplining and controlling women (Kibria,

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1995; Ruchira Tabassum Naved and Persson, 2010; Salway et al., 2005). There is a complex association between *purdah* and class, whereby it has been relatively less important for poorer women, and more important for those with wealth where it is possible to enforce. However, more recently *purdah* is becoming more common across all socio-economic spectrums, but the associations between class and *purdah* are not fully articulated.

Research on the impact of factory work on women's lives in Bangladesh has mixed findings. Some studies have emphasized how working has increased women's autonomy, household decision making (Khosla, 2009), provided greater control over economic resources (Kabeer, 1995; Kibria, 1995), delayed marriages (Ruchira T Naved et al., 2001) and reduced fertility rates (Heath and Mobarak, 2015). Indeed, Karim (2014) suggests that the public and structural nature of factory work has enabled women to become more independent as they become 'workers'. Others suggest more marginal changes, but combined with wider liberalization within the country argue work has become a route for women's empowerment (Schuler et al., 2017).

In contrast, others suggest women's work may not be as 'empowering', and may increase women's experiences of IPV. In Bangladesh, studies from rural areas (Ruchira Tabassum Naved & Persson, 2010), and formal urban areas – as opposed to slums – showed work increased women's experiences of IPV (Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics (BBS), 2016). Similarly, Kagy (2014) found that while work increased women's decision-making in the home, it also increased their experiences of IPV. Qualifying this Heath (2014) found that women who worked in peri-urban Dhaka had an increased risk of experiencing IPV only if they had less education or had married at a younger age. Additionally, working women often handed over wages to husbands as a way of 'placating' husbands who may feel challenged by women's independence, thus not changing women's economic or gender position (Kabeer, 1997).

Separate research has focused on violence women experience in the workplace. Globally, workplaces are sites of sexual and physical violence, although there is variation by country and workplace (Fair Wear Foundation, 2013; Tjijdens et al., 2015). Studies in Bangladesh highlight high levels of violence; a study conducted by Fair Labour Foundation on garment factories, suggested Bangladesh had the highest rates of violence compared to China, and other Asian countries (Fair Labour Foundation, 2005). And there is some evidence, from a small scale mixed methods study of 81 female workers, that factories outside of export processing zones (EPZ) in Bangladesh may have higher levels of violence than those in EPZs, which are better regulated and monitored (Siddiqi, 2003).

Studies describe female garment workers experiencing verbal, physical and sexual violence in the workplace. Verbal abuse by managers is exceedingly common, as is physical violence (Fair Wear Foundation, 2013; Siddiqi, 2003). Studies have sought to measure the prevalence of physical violence in garment factories in Bangladesh, with widely varying estimates (from 9 to 67%) (Chowdhury and Ullah, 2010; Sohani et al., 2011), due to different methodologies and definitions of physical violence. Despite variations in prevalence estimates, physical violence in work settings was consistently reported to be perpetrated by male managers and supervisors against female workers.

Research suggests physical violence and emotional abuse are driven by garment workers failure to meet production targets, arrive on time, or request leave (Siddiqi, 2003). Moreover, most management believe workers are innately lazy and undisciplined and superiors need to 'get work out of them' using violence and abuse to maintain production levels (Siddiqi, 2003). Managers who refuse to employ such methods are often labelled as weak or ineffective (Siddiqi, 2003).

Sexual violence in factories includes sexualized verbal abuse, as well as touching, patting, pinching, slapping, coerced sex, and rape (Alam et al., 2011; Fair Wear Foundation, 2013; Siddiqi, 2003). In small factories, which are typically outside of EPZs, where payments are irregular and other benefits are sparse, sexual harassment can attain a

transactional nature (Siddiqi, 2003, emphasizing the structural nature of these forms of violence, as they intersect with EPZ and non-EPZ factories and regulations. This form of sexual violence can involve the owner, owners' close male relatives, production managers, supervisory staff, and buyers, with attractive young workers most vulnerable (Siddiqi, 2003). Estimates of sexual violence range from 7 to 60% (Fair Wear Foundation, 2013; Sohani et al., 2011), again shaped by definitions and methodology.

In Bangladesh IPV is criminalized through the 2010 Domestic Violence Act. However, there remain significant challenges in implementation, including the ongoing perception that domestic violence is a private concern. A range of non-governmental organisations (NGOs) are also working to provide support services for women who experience IPV, as well as push for improved implementation of the Domestic Violence Act.

Factory work in Bangladesh has become increasingly regulated, driven primarily by workers and trade unions. In response to the culmination of reports of sexual harassment against women in workplaces and educational institutions, the High Court issued a directive in 2008 for responding to and preventing this. Unfortunately, most of the garment factories have not taken measures for effectively addressing sexual harassment following the directive (e.g., raising awareness, disciplinary rules and action, and appropriate complaint mechanism) (Special Original Jurisdiction, 2008). In addition, the Rana Plaza factory disaster in which over 1100 garment workers were killed, led to two agreements, one legally binding, and one non-legally binding regulating workplaces, however many buyers have signed the non-legally binding one (Karim, 2014).

This paper draws on interviews with women garment factory workers and managers to describe women's experiences of violence within the home and workplace, and specifically understand, how being a female garment worker and the dynamics of paid work, shapes these experiences of violence.

## 2. Methods

Data for this paper comes from 41 interviews conducted in two studies, both undertaken in Dhaka, Bangladesh. The studies focused on different topics, the first on women's experiences of workplace violence, the second on violence against women and sexual and reproductive health and rights, but both included female garment workers, living in urban slums.

Data on workplace relationships and violence in the workplace (referred to as the workplace study) were collected between June and August 2015 amongst female garment workers ( $n = 14$ ), and key informants ( $n = 9$ ). Key informants interviewed were 1 male worker, 3 managers, 2 workers and 3 NGO staff members involved in implementing an intervention focused on workers' rights, including violence. Participants were purposively sampled from the Dhaka metropolitan area, a non EPZ, where levels of violence are higher than EPZ factories (Siddiqi, 2003). Access was via the NGO who worked with garment workers. Interviews were conducted outside of factories.

In-depth interviews covered types of workplace violence, situations in which such violence occurs; coping strategies of the workers; consequences of workplace violence; role of factory management in addressing workplace violence; and, suggestions regarding ways of addressing workplace violence.

Data on IPV and household relationships came from secondary analysis of data collected the Growing up Safe and Healthy: Addressing Sexual and Reproductive Rights and Violence against Adolescents and Young Women in Urban Bangladesh (SAFE) project. The SAFE qualitative study included 15 in-depth interviews (IDIs) with married women living in study slums in Dhaka, of which nine were garment workers (comprising the sample used for analysis). These nine interviews were conducted between August and September 2011. Married women aged 15–29 were recruited into the SAFE study through

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