Sufferings in silence: Violence against female workers in the ready-made garment industry in Bangladesh: A qualitative exploration

Sadika Akhter1,2, Shannon Rutherford3 and Cordia Chu4

Abstract

Introduction: Despite the improved safety of the ready-made garment industry in Bangladesh since 2013, other workplace health and safety issues in the ready-made garment industry continue, especially violence towards female workers. This article examines this violence as well as the social norms and attitudes of key stakeholders underpinning it.

Methods: Data were collected in four ready-made garment factories in Bangladesh through in-depth interviews, focus group discussions with female workers and key-informant interviews with different stakeholders, along with factory observations.

Results: Findings were analysed thematically. Female workers described personal experience of violence in the workplace: physical and verbal abuse, constant pressure, other personal restrictions and withholding of pay. They did not make complaints for fear of losing their jobs. Supervisors characterized the women as 'disobedient,' 'uncooperative' and 'unwilling' to work and viewed their behaviour as acceptable. Other stakeholders ignored these problems.

Conclusion: Finally, this study suggests how the findings encourage action to prevent violence in the workplace in order to address the emerging occupational health problems in Bangladesh.

Keywords
Bangladesh, qualitative research, ready-made garment industry, thematic analysis, workplace violence

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Introduction

Export processing zones encompassing manufacturing industries and predominantly located in developing countries have been identified as places where workers commonly experience physically demanding work, low wages, poor working environments and a lack of human rights.1–4 A growing amount of research indicates that many women, in particular, experience physical and verbal abuse during work in the ready-made garment (RMG) industry in developing countries.5–8 Workplace violence constitutes a violation of human rights because all people have the right to respectful behaviour at work.9,10 The range of rights being violated that female workers faced include physical and verbal abuse, pregnancy-based discrimination that includes refusal of maternity benefits, concerns regarding overtime work to 10–12 h and, in many cases, 7 days in a week which affects the personal life of the workers.11–13

Post-war economic policy helped Bangladesh to establish an export-based ready-made garment industry and the country’s reserves of foreign currency are now highly dependent on this sector.14 The total value of export earnings from the RMG industry has increased over time and the RMG industry now contributes more than 83% of the

1 School of Environment and Science and Centre for Environment and Population Health, Griffith University, Brisbane, QLD, Australia
2 International Centre for Diarrhoeal Disease Research, Bangladesh (icddr,b), Dhaka, Bangladesh
3 School of Medicine, Griffith University, Gold Coast, Australia
4 School of Medicine and Centre for Environment and Population Health, Griffith University, Brisbane, QLD, Australia

Corresponding author:
Sadika Akhter, School of Environment and Science and Centre for Environment and Population Health, Griffith University, 170 Kessels Road, Nathan, Brisbane, QLD 4111, Australia.
Email: sadika.akhter@griffithuni.edu.au
total export earnings of the country, making it a pillar of the national economy.\textsuperscript{15} The Bangladesh garment industry not only contributes to the economic growth of the country, it has also provided opportunities for employment of women. Currently, there are 4 million workers within this sector, and 80\% of them are women.\textsuperscript{16}

Despite the economic growth brought by this industry, its economic success has been marred by a number of workplace incidents that made world headlines. In April 2013, the collapse of the 9-storey building Rana Plaza was the world’s worst industrial accident, causing the death of 1136 workers and injuries to more than 2500 workers.\textsuperscript{17,18} According to a report by the International Labour Organization (ILO), following this industrial accident, the working environment has improved and an accord has been made by the government of Bangladesh to minimize the risk of future fatal factory fires and building collapses.\textsuperscript{16} However, while building safety (structural integrity, fire and electrical safety) has improved, the internal working atmosphere and relations among workers and supervisors remain problematic, especially the issue of violence towards the female workforce who are the backbone of the industry.\textsuperscript{19,20}

The term ‘violence’ at work has no universally accepted definition as the concept of violence has evolved over the past 20 years due to differences across cultures and disciplines.\textsuperscript{21,22} In 2003, due to increasing reports of violence at work, the ILO developed a Code of Practice to address the issue of Occupational Safety and Health. The broader definition adopted by the ILO in 2003 was the following:

Violence includes both physical and non-physical or psychological violence, in the form of verbal abuse, physical assault up to and including homicide, bullying, mobbing, harassment and mental stress. Workplace violence can be internal (within the enterprise, among managers, supervisors and workers); but there is also external violence (between workers and intruders, as well as between staff, clients, patients, students, suppliers, and the general public).\textsuperscript{23}

This initial definition was subsequently changed due to pressure by employers.\textsuperscript{24} The newer definition of violence at work is ‘... any action, incident or behaviour that departs from reasonable conduct in which a person is assaulted, threatened, harmed, or injured in the course of, or as a direct result of, his or her work’.\textsuperscript{25} In a more recent document, ILO also defined psychological violence, which also covers ‘emotional violence’, as verbal and non-verbal abuse, bullying, isolating the person and giving impossible goals and deadlines.\textsuperscript{26} These two definitions relating to both the act and threat of physical harm and psychological harm underpin the analysis of workplace violence used in this article.

A multi-country research explores how involvement in paid work exposes women to new forms of violence such as workplace violence\textsuperscript{27} and this is an obstacle for the development of women and a threat for their health and mental well-being.\textsuperscript{26,28–30} The last national survey on the prevalence of violence against women in Balderdash reported that ‘husband’s house’ is the most common place for women to experience physical violence (76.8\%), followed by ‘working place’ (21.9\%).\textsuperscript{31} Violence occurs both at home and outside of the home but this is less explored in Bangladesh. Violence at work against female workers in the workplace is a multi-dimensional issue, and prevention requires an understanding of the root causes, including gender norms, professional ethics, the nature of work and working environments.\textsuperscript{19} This study attempts to better understand the nature of the violence and how and why such behaviour occurs in the RMG industry in Bangladesh. It also explores attitudes and the power dynamics between female workers and their male supervisors.

**Methods**

**Study setting**

The study was conducted in Mirpur and Savar cities of Dhaka district. Most of the RMG factories are situated in these areas mainly because the infrastructure of the district is favourable to foreign investors.\textsuperscript{32} The populations of Savar and Mirpur are 1,387,426 and 266,046.\textsuperscript{33} Twenty-five percent of the total city population are garment workers living in slums with very limited infrastructure.\textsuperscript{34,35} Four factories (two from each city) were chosen as the setting for this research. We had no prior knowledge about workplace conditions at the chosen factories. They were chosen on the basis of their export orientation and hence have compliance conditions imposed by the Ministry of Labour and Employment according to Bangladesh labour law and the willingness of factory management to participate in this study.\textsuperscript{36}

**Study participants and recruitment**

Twenty in-depth interviews (IDIs) and four focus group discussions (FGDs) were conducted with married female garment workers who had at least 1-year working experience in the RMG industry and who were currently working in an RMG factory in the study area. Female participants were identified and contacted to be interviewed with the help of NGO community workers living in the areas where the study participants live. IDIs and FGDs were conducted across four factories; five IDIs and one FGD were conducted with female workers from each factory (a total of 36 female garment workers participated in the FGDs, eight participants were in two FGDs and 10 participants were in another two FGDs).

A total of 14 key-informant interviews (KIIIs) were conducted with supervisors of the female workers (each of the four factories, n = 4), government officials from the Ministry of Labour and Employment (n = 3), representatives from
the Bangladesh Garment Manufacturers and Exporters Association (BGMEA) (n = 3) and garment factory doctors (each of the four factories, n = 4). Four factories were visited to observe working conditions and to conduct interviews with the supervisors. Initially, access to observe the factories was denied but finally with the help of personal networks and by convincing management that the researcher was a PhD student with ethics approval from the University, permission was granted. The government officials welcomed an interview after knowing the identity of the researcher.

**Data collection and management**

This study used a qualitative approach for data collection. Data were collected through direct observation, FGDs, IDIs and KIIIs. Multiple data collection methods were used to reduce biases that may appear for using single method and it also enable to avoid the limitations of using any single method.

FGDs were first conducted to identify issues in a group setting where women who were comfortable with each other could share their experiences and views on workplace conditions. Following FGDs, the IDIs were conducted with separate female workers where they were able to express more in depth their workplace experiences. Both IDIs and FGDs were conducted to understand the individual and group perspectives of their experiences of violence during work while KIIIs were conducted to better understand workplace relations and power dynamics related to the issue of violence at work from the perspective of factory supervisors, government officials and the industry.

Through direct observation, the study investigated the working environment, types of work done by the female workers, breaks at work, and behaviour and attitude of the supervisors in the working environment. A total of eight non-participation observations (two in each factory) were conducted and lasted 10–12 h. The researcher entered the factory at 8:00 a.m. in the morning and stayed till 7:00–8:00 p.m. when the workers left the factory. Detailed notes were taken by the researcher while observing at the factory and photos were also taken. After completing the observation, the notes were annotated using behaviour coding. The researcher used predetermined codes such as ‘N’ for a negative comment by the supervisor at the factory. A significant proportion of the codes were adapted from the GEM (gender equitable men) scale to observe attitudes and behaviour of the supervisors.

The importance of the observations is that it helped to collect actual behaviour and practice in a natural setting. Data were collected from December 2015 to July 2016. The long data collection period was largely due to difficulties in accessing the women due to their very long working hours and accessing KII due to competing priorities for their time.

Open-ended interview guides were designed to elicit conversation with study participants. The interview guides for IDIs and FGDs were similar but a separate interview guide was developed for KIIIs. The topics covered were (1) the nature of the work in the garment factory, (2) experiences of work in the garment factory, (3) factors influencing supervisor behaviour towards women at work and (4) employers’ perceptions of violence at work. All interviewing guides were pre-tested with five people who have similar demographic profiles to ensure their suitability to improve the guidelines and interview techniques for the local context. These people were not included as study participants. All discussions were conducted in Bengali, the local language.

IDIs and FGDs with women were conducted in their homes or at another location convenient to the study participants. The IDIs and FGDs were conducted at the home of the female workers according to their expressed wishes. The study participants wanted to avoid their work environment to have free discussions about their experience of work, life and health. The researcher also wanted to avoid the formality of the factory environment. The researcher conducted the FGDs in a room that was voluntarily provided by the community where the study participants live.

KIIIs were conducted in a private office in their workplace. Appointments were made over the phone for each participant. The FGDs were conducted by two researchers: one facilitated the discussions while the other assisted with the logistics of gathering the women and taking notes as needed. All interviews were audio recorded with consent from participants. Each interview and FGD lasted approximately 45–60 min. FGD participants were provided a snack and drink to show appreciation for their time. IDI participants received a small gift as it was the month of Ramadan and participants were fasting during the daytime. FGDs were conducted in the evening and snacks were provided during this activity as fasting was completed at this time.

**Ethical considerations**

Ethical approval for this study was obtained from the Griffith University Human Research Ethics Committee (GU Ref No: 2015/668). The World Health Organization ethical and safety recommendations for conducting research on sensitive issues were followed. Informed written consent was taken from each study participant. Written consent was taken to record the conversation. To maintain the privacy, anonymity and confidentiality of data, it was explained to each of the respondents that his or her identity and the information he or she would provide would be confidential. It was further explained to the study participants that only the researchers who are directly involved with this study would have access to the data which helped to create an environment where women felt
safe discussing personal experiences of their work. Confidentiality was maintained after data were collected by de-identifying the field notes, transcripts, audio recordings and any subsequent publications. In this article, the researcher used the generic terms such as ‘study participants’ and ‘female workers’ instead of their names.

Despite measures taken to ensure that participants felt safe and comfortable sharing information with researchers, still some participants were reluctant to disclose their experience. It was explained that there were no ‘right’ or ‘wrong’ answers and the study participants have right to end the interview/withdraw her from the study at any time. These issues of privacy and confidentiality were ensured in each interview and FGD. Furthermore, by conducting FGDs and IDIs away from the factory, participants were reassured they could freely discuss the issues without fear of such conversations being monitored by their supervisors.

Data analysis

All recorded interviews and FGDs were subsequently transcribed into a written text; the texts were checked with audio files for accuracy and consistency before coding. The transcripts were prepared by a research assistant who is a university graduate with experience in conducting qualitative research and trained for data collection. The first author (SA) read a sub-sample of transcripts to check consistency of the transcripts. Data were analysed by following a thematic analysis approach. In order to conduct thematic analysis, descriptive data were read and re-read to become familiar with the data to develop codes for thematic analysis. The analysis approach integrated priori codes based on the research question with data-driven codes. Data-driven codes were done through open coding approach, which included categorizing small codes, and subsequently, the small codes were grouped together to produce key themes where emerging issues become the categories for analysis. The analysis approach was led by de-identifying the field notes, transcripts, audio recordings and any subsequent publications. In this article, the researcher used the generic terms such as ‘study participants’ and ‘female workers’ instead of their names.

Results

Socio-demographic profile and nature of the job

Table 1 presents the socio-demographic characteristics of the female workers. Most of them were less than 30 years old, and all of them were married, most with two to three children. Most of them were illiterate or had only completed education up to grade 5. Most of them work as helpers and machine operators, and some as quality inspectors. All had migrated from villages outside of the city leaving their children behind in order to work in the RMG to contribute to family income.

The following findings are presented according to the nature of violence they reported during work in the workplace. The most commonly reported types of violence in this study included verbal abuse, restriction on various rights and work constraints that affected how women are treated in the workplace. This analysis of experience of violence focuses on two key aspects of the phenomenon: first, to identify the different types of violence that occur in the RMG industry in Bangladesh, and the impact of the violence upon women’s health and safety. Second, it describes views of the different stakeholders on the factors influencing the violent acts.

Verbal and physical abuse

All the female workers of this study reported that their supervisors frequently shout, insult, criticize and speak to them harshly in their workplace. Shouting was the most common type of abuse and women felt that the supervisors lacked empathy. They also mentioned that supervisors ‘shame’ them in front of others. Many of the women said that the supervisors ‘insult us like we are not a human being’ and ‘maltreat us like a maid’.

One female worker said, ‘If we make very small mistake during work, the line supervisors scream at us. We do not say anything because we may lose our job. We cannot even talk with each other during work’.

Some female workers reported experiences of physical abuse in their workplace, though this was less common than verbal abuse. The most common types of physical abuse reported were slapping, pinching, pushing and throwing the clothing pieces into their face. One woman reported,

Today I was thirty minutes late to arrive at the factory and my supervisor got angry with me. He (supervisor) pushed me, yelling and raised his hand to slap. Then another supervisor came to us and took him away from me.

The reasons for the physical abuse were articulated by another worker,

If we cannot meet a target or if we make a mistake in our work they will hit us. One of my supervisors once threw clothing on my body as I made mistake during sewing the shirt. If we raise our voice then they will get crazy and slap us.

The women shared that they feel powerless and panicked as the supervisors are physically stronger than them and they have the power to make them jobless. The women
cannot protect themselves; rather, they keep silent because if they cry or make a noise, they are worried that the supervisors would hit them more.

**Behaviour restrictions**

*Insufficient breaks and opportunity to communicate outside the factory*

Factory observation revealed that women work under hot lights and with very limited artificial cooling – usually electric fans. The production floor runs hundreds of machines continuously and the floor is noisy. The women sweat due to the temperature and lack of ventilation but are not provided enough small breaks to take a drink as the supervisors consider it a waste of time. They are allowed one hour lunch break in a 10–12 hours day. Women reported that their supervisors believe that if they were to frequently drink water, they would need to go to the toilets too often and would not meet their production target. One female worker said,

> We don’t drink water much because then we need to go to toilet. If we drink water more we need to go to the toilet three-four times a day but we do not have time to go to toilets because we need to meet our daily production quota.

The female workers reported that they are isolated from the outside during working hours. They are not allowed to bring their cell phones to work. When they enter the factory, their bags are searched by the gatekeeper to seize the phones. This restriction becomes problematic for the women, especially when their family members are sick at home. When this happens, they may smuggle the phones into work and have a talk with their family secretly when they go to the toilet. However, they are verbally and physically abused if the supervisors find out about the presence of their phone. In this regard, one woman explained,

> We feel like we are out of the world when we enter in the factory, we cannot talk with our family members by phone during working hours and our phone is seized if we bring it secretly.

**Constant pressure**

*The daily production targets*

The women need to process 100 shirts per hour, and they work 10–12 h a day. The women can generally process 80 shirts in 1 h meaning that they regularly fall 20 shirts behind per hour to meet their daily production target. The women regularly need to work an extra 2 h without payment to meet the production quota. If they complete their target, then any extra production earns overtime payment. The female workers mentioned that the pressure of production quota was ‘inhumane’ and ‘unattainable’. The women explained that if they cannot complete their hourly targets, and on most days they cannot, they are verbally abused, shamed in front of all and their pay is docked.

**Threat of job loss**

All women indicated that they regularly experience the threat of losing their job. If they lost the job, they would be extremely economically vulnerable, so they always try to compromise with their supervisors. The women reported that there is a complaint box to complain if they are physically or verbally abused. However, they do not dare lodge complaints because they indicated that the supervisors get more dangerous and want to take revenge. Women reported that they always try to be silent and do not argue with their supervisors when their supervisors get angry with them.

One female worker said,

> We work in an open space. When our supervisors physically or verbally hit us everyone can see it. If we put a complaint in the complaint box it does not remain secret. Eventually the supervisors come to know it and then they take revenge. They will make you lose your job. Some of our co-workers put complaints against our supervisors and they had to leave the job.
**Lack of access to needed medicine**

The women mentioned that they suffer from gastric problems, headache, body ache, eye pain and fatigue. The most common injuries are finger punctures from sewing and burns from ironing. Women reported that medicines in the first aid box, supposedly available on each production floor, are often not available.

**Female workers are falsely accused of stealing at work**

The respondent further reported that medicines are kept in the first aid box under lock as the workers are falsely accused of stealing items from it. The women suggest that the factory manager locked the first aid box because there was no medicine in the box.

One female worker reported,

We do not get medicines when we get injured from a machine or for ironing. Most of the time there are no medicines in the box. They always blame us that we steal medicine but we never do this. Why will we steal medicine? Is it a food that we will eat when we are hungry? We feel so sad, insulted and helpless when we are blamed for stealing of medicines.

**Impacts of workplace violence on the female workers health**

All the women reported that after returning home from work, they felt sad and cried because of being physically and verbally abused by their supervisors. They also reported that they could not sleep or eat well. They kept silent even when they felt ‘agitated’, ‘angry’ and ‘upset’ but they felt that they could not express their feelings; rather, they are expected to be silent while they are abused.

The women reported that the supervisors never apologize to the woman. The women said that if the supervisors apologized, it would help to ease their pain.

In this regard, one female worker explained her health problems were exacerbated by a sense of powerlessness,

The only reason I work in the garment factory is money. This is the third factory I am working. I changed two other factories because the supervisors of the factories do not behave with the workers nicely. I heard that this factory is good; they do not do bad behaviour with the workers. So I joined to work with this factory. But the supervisors always shout at us. We all work hard and we deserve good behaviour but we receive bad behaviour. They know we cannot do anything against them so they always misbehave with us. We always feel upset.

Another woman said experiencing abuse was ‘destabilizing’ for female workers who are often vulnerable at work,

The attitudes of our supervisor make us sick. If they talk and behave with us well, encourage us and appreciate our work we become happy after working hard. When they are rude and harsh, we become upset and feel threatened. All of our supervisors are male. They always show their physical strength to us as they know we are physically weaker than they are. It makes us feel so helpless.

**Employer’s perspectives**

At the factories visited, all the supervisors are male. All the supervisors (four out of four) explained that the female workers can be ‘disobedient’, ‘non-cooperative’ and ‘unwilling to work’. They believed that female workers gossip, spend time at the toilet talking with family members and waste time talking with and being distracted by male co-workers. They further stated that without verbally shouting, it is impossible to control these women. A production manager said,

These women are uneducated and lower class. You cannot control them if you always talk with them nicely. We need to shout at them. If you talk with them nicely, they will be more disobedient.

Another supervisor explained,

Garment workers always work under pressure. We need to control the women. If we do not shout at them they will talk and we will always lag behind to meet our production target. We need to rule them by shouting and yelling.

The supervisors did not acknowledge that there was physical violence against female workers. They acknowledged verbal abuse but not physical violence. In this regard, one supervisor said, ‘Women were physically abused 10 years back but now it is rare that women are physically abused. The working environment has improved; we do not physically hit any women’.

According to the supervisors, the women are not of good character, suggesting that they lie and steal medicines and toilet accessories. One manager of a factory said, ‘They always ask for sick leave but they are not sick. They lie to us. We do not trust them’.

**Views of government officials and BGMEA**

Three interviews with government officials were conducted to provide additional information on working conditions in the garment factories. Discussions with them revealed that the issue of safety upgrades in terms of the building structure was given more emphasis than personal safety from violence and threats. According to the government officials, the working environment has improved since the fatal Rana Plaza incident. They reported that the factories now have fire-proof doors; they have fire alarms, fire extinguishers and good electrical wiring to prevent fire incidents and building collapse in the future. The researcher observed
a sign of ‘Safety First’ in the main stairway of the factories and in every floor there. One respondent explained,

We are investing huge money to make the building safe for the workers and also to meet the needs of the buyers. If still the women do not feel that they are safe in the factory what more can we do for them?

However, neither the government officials nor the BGMEA representatives made any comments about violence towards female workers, although they acknowledged that women sometimes were verbally abused. They also explained that a large number of women work on a production floor and the managers and supervisors verbally shout at them in order to maintain discipline on the floor. One government official said,

We sometimes hear about some verbal abuse during work at the work place. Our factory inspectors report it to the factory authority but we do not receive any official complaint of violence against female workers. It may happen as they work always under pressure to maintain discipline in the factory.

Discussion

This study has explored women’s experience of violence in the workplace and other stakeholders’ views of violence at the workplace in the RMG industry in Bangladesh. Violence against women in the workplace in our study setting appears common. Women in this study shared their experiences of physical abuse such as slapping, pinching and pushing and verbal abuse such as yelling, and other forms of bullying included withholding of payment and constant threats of losing their job. Furthermore, the female workers felt unable to express their complaints due to fear of losing their job and becoming victims of revenge by their supervisors. They expressed feelings of being powerless to improve their working environment and culture.

Bangladesh is a patriarchal society, and from this research, it appears that this patriarchal attitude still dominates in the world of work, where women are treated as subordinates. Employers justified abusive behaviour, describing the women as uncooperative; for example, it was acceptable to the factory managers that their supervisors can shout and yell to control the women. However, violence in the workplace can be further attributed to disempowerment of women because of their class as they are perceived by the supervisors as ‘uneducated’ and ‘poor’ women.

The literature indicates that violence against women in the community and workplace has significant impacts on their health, particularly their mental well-being. Violence against female workers, while not acceptable to the women, was not considered a health and safety issue by the stakeholders (i.e. supervisors, government officials and BGMEA). However, another important aspect this study revealed was that when various stakeholders were considering workplace health and safety, they put more emphasis on improving building safety issues such as good electric wiring, setting fire alarms and establishing fire protection doors. Furthermore, pressure of production targets contributes to an abusive working environment and the government officials accepted that when the supervisors cannot cope with this stress, they may transfer their aggression onto the female workers. Thus, for the male stakeholders, violence at work appears to be an acceptable and appropriate measure to ensure that unrealistic daily production quotas are met.

According to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, every worker has a right to work in a violence and discrimination-free environment. Bangladesh has signed several relevant international covenants and conventions: the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR) and the International Convention on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW). It is the duty of the country to ensure a violence-free working environment for these women.

While this study makes a significant contribution to the international academic literature on violence in the workplace, some limitations should be recognized. This study was conducted in four factories in Dhaka district and may not reflect the experiences of violence in the ready-made garment industry across Bangladesh. Violence is a sensitive topic to discuss with different stakeholders (owners, supervisor, government officials and BGMEA), and therefore, they may have underreported such experiences (social desirability bias). However, the research team is made of both sociologists and medical professionals, who are trained to explore and understand this multifaceted topic.

Research implications and recommendations

Following the Rana Plaza incident, several steps have been taken to improve the working environment of the RMG sector: the National Tripartite Plan of Action (NTPA) on fire safety, the European Union Sustainability Compact to improve labour rights and factory safety and the United States Trade Representative (UTSR) plan of action. While all these efforts have helped to improve the working environment, their focus is mostly on the structural safety of buildings with less emphasis on ensuring other health and safety issues of the working environment.

In 2016, the ILO at its 325th session declared that violence in the workplace is a threat to the dignity, security, health and mental well-being for workers and approved an agenda which included understanding the forms of violence and the gender dimensions of violence at work.
ILO further highlighted the urgent need to identify how violence affects workers’ well-being and those groups of workers and occupations who are at greater risk of being subjected to violence. However, limited research has been conducted in Bangladesh on women’s experiences of violence at work in line with this declaration of the ILO.

The results from this study point to some necessary steps in addressing this problem in Bangladesh. First, there needs to be acknowledgement of this problem by the government officials, factory owners and representatives of the BGMEA. Ignoring the existence of the problem will not solve it.

Second, this research identifies the complex problem of a buyer-driven production system in setting daily production quotas. This system leads to downwards pressure on the supervisors and subsequent stress on workers to meet unrealistic production demands. Multinational Corporations (MNCs), the factory owners and government need to work together to create a flexible and reasonable production system to reduce the pressure of these unrealistic daily quotas. Globally, the working conditions and violations of human rights of workers in this industry, the drivers for such violations and subsequent pricing of ready-made garments need to be more widely communicated to markets at a wholesale, retail and consumer level. While there are numerous campaigns increasing awareness of the issue, more needs to be done by governments when developing trade agreements with buyers to protect the rights of workers.

Third, in Bangladesh, the government, international rights-based organizations, the BGMEA and employers should use these findings to create a dialogue to develop strategies to stop violence against women at work in order to improve this important element of the working environment.

Fourth, addressing the issue of violence against female workers needs to be considered a priority by the government, business owners, international organizations and buyers in order to change attitudes and behaviour of the supervisors. Designing and implementing behaviour change interventions targeting the relevant stakeholders, particularly the supervisors, are required to improve the situation.

Conclusion

This article has examined violent acts in the workplace of the RMG industry in Bangladesh and found that violence towards female workers exists in multiple forms causing physical and mental harm to women. Indeed, this research suggests that the economic gain of the nation through the contribution of the ready-made garment industry has come at a cost of humiliation and sufferings due to the violence inflicted upon female workers. This study has (1) provided evidence of such unacceptable violent acts against female workers in the ready-made garment industry and the associated health impacts, (2) explained views of various stakeholders underpinning such workplace culture, and (3) recommended necessary measures to improve the situation. The findings of this study should be useful to develop strategies to address the issue of violence against female workers in the ready-made garment industry in Bangladesh.

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ORCiD

Sadika Akhter https://orcid.org/0000-0003-1807-4406

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