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Sexual Harassment of Female Workers at Manufacturing Sectors in Bangladesh

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Abstract

Women's participation in the national work force is increasing rapidly in Bangladesh. Most of the women are migrated from village to an industrial area for employment, and they are mostly poor and illiterate. The number of female worker in many manufacturing sectors in Bangladesh are comparatively higher than men, and their contribution to GDP is remarkable. However, violence against women at work is an emerging issue globally. Bangladesh is also having the same scenario since it is mainly a dominating male nation. This paper aims to identify the current status and nature of sexual harassment of female workers in Bangladesh. Six In-depth Interviews (IDIs) and four Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) have been conducted among the female workers work in tannery, RMG, and leather footwear manufacturing sectors in Bangladesh. Both IDIs and FGDs are interaction-based, and participants are allowed to do open discussion free from interruption as recommended by Yin (2003). Findings of the study indicate that working women are always in fear of losing their sexual safety and security. Female workers in Bangladesh are not safeguarded by the management in general.

Keywords: Female Workers, Sexual Harassment, Bangladesh

Introduction

Women in South Asia have not remained as the only housewife anymore. Globalization, female education movement, and social reformation have influenced women economically and socially. Nowadays, women are participating in the workforce in order to contribute to family needs and to reduce the financial problem in the family. Women's participation in manufacturing sectors like RMG, Tannery, Bakery, Footwear, Food Processing Industry, Retail, etc. are comparatively more than Men in Bangladesh (Hossan, et al. 2012; Sarker & Afroze, 2014; Sarker & Akter, 2018). However, in this realm, women are always facing numerous problems at their workplace; sexual harassment being one of them. It is a common phenomenon across the globe and particularly

in the dominating male workplace. Sexual harassment in the workplace has been overlooked till the 1990s, now it is considered a big offense globally, and it is also counted as violence of human rights (Britz, 2007; Parveen, 2010; Rubya, 2015; WHO, 2013). Unfortunately, the issue of women's sexual harassment at the workplace globally, and particularly in Bangladesh has not overcome yet (Rahman & Rahman, 2017; Sarker & Akter, 2018). In many cases, women are not safe at the workplace, especially in the manufacturing sector in Bangladesh since they have been harassed either by their male colleagues or supervisors (Ali & Islam, 2017; Sarker, 2014; Sarker & Akter, 2018). The news headline of women rape, murder, and gender discrimination are very common in the everyday newspaper in Bangladesh. Therefore, it has become as serious issues to deal with immediate remedies. This study investigates the different forms of sexual harassment of women at work in the manufacturing sector in Bangladesh and recommends the ways to maintain gender equity at work.

Literature Review

In the late 1970s, the United States of America started using the term “sexual harassment” (Mallow, 2009). Then, in 1979, Catherine Alice Mackinnon, a legal scholar from the USA, came out with an argument regarding sexual harassment in the workplace which discriminates sex, human personality, and dignity. In addition, Mackinnon further clarified that sexual harassment is prohibited by the civil rights law of the United States of America (Mackinnon, 1979; Mallow, 2009). Since then, many national legislatures and international organizations have come up with the general definition of sexual harassment in the workplace. However, there is no universal definition on sexual harassment in the workplace. Nevertheless, scholars and different organizations have come up with several definitions of sexual harassment in the workplace. According to the United Nations (UN), the definition of sexual harassment at the workplace is “*Any unwelcome sexual advance, request for sexual favour, verbal or physical conduct or gesture of a sexual nature or any other behaviour of a sexual nature that might reasonably be expected or be perceived to cause offence or humiliation to another*” (UNHCR, 2005). Another definition is stated by the United Nations General Recommendation-19 in the Convention of the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination Against Women, 1979. They define the elements of sexual harassment in the workplace as “*Such unwelcome sexually determined behavior as physical contact and advances, sexually colored remarks, showing pornography, and sexual demands, whether by words or actions. Such conduct can be humiliating and may constitute a health and safety problem; it is discriminatory when the woman has reasonable ground to believe that her objection would disadvantage her in connection with her employment, including recruitment or promotion, or when it creates a hostile working environment*” (CEDAW, 1992). Based on the two definitions made by UNHCR and CEDAW-UN, it is very clear that these sensual behaviours strongly but negatively affect women's mind and their nature in the workplace. Thus, it creates a huge negative impact on women empowerment both in the private and public arena. It is also a form of gender discrimination which destroys women's dignity and social status in the family as well as in the society. It is a violation of law on civil rights which is ensured by the constitution of the United Nations. Several studies have identified that women who have experienced sexual harassment in the workplace do not want to continue their jobs with male colleagues (Ali, et al., 2018). In addition, they want to leave the jobs because of sexual harassment, and problems are created for the countries' socio-economic growth in general. Moreover, the country also could not achieve the targeted GDP which they want to achieve by employing both men and women. The researchers feel that, the definition of sexual harassment in the workplace should be:

Unwanted sensual acts which makes a person uncomfortable in the workplace and creates pressure on the victim's mind for which the person cannot focus on job or any kind of behavioral activities, such as verbal, non-verbal, in written form, visual, psychological, or physical contacts, which also generate mental trauma and prevents or influences victim to left the jobs.

Therefore, sexual harassment affects women's performance in their jobs and productivity and creates a threatening working environment. In fact, sometimes, sexual harassment in the workplace may cause death. Consequently, many women do not want to work with male workers, even though they are very efficient in the public and private fields. Most women face or experience sexual harassment and physical assault from their co-

employees in the workplace. Hence, the situation and surrounding become dangerous and not safe for women in the workplace.

Forms of Sexual Harassment in the Workplace

There are several forms of sexual harassment in the workplace. Most of them are very annoying and irritating, while other forms lead to sexual assault. Though sexual harassment takes different forms, all the prevalence is unwelcome, unwanted, and not accepted by female employees in the workplace. Some of the forms of sexual harassments are discussed next. **Verbal harassment** is actually sexual insinuation, suggestive comments, jokes of sexual nature, sexual propositions, or sexual threats (Britz, 2007); these types of remarks or hints are directed to women in order to disturb and get their attention to the harasser are considered as verbal harassment. Sexual harassment also includes various ways to get women's responses by calling them in different names, for instance, calling a person "honey," "sweetheart," "darling," "babe," "dear," etc. In addition, under this type of harassment, men also spread gossip and make open comments on an employee's personal or sexual life (Mallow, 2009). Moreover, verbal harassment also includes passing comments about a female employee's face, appearance, body, dress, makeup, etc. (ILO, 2004). Besides the above-mentioned forms of harassment, some people harass their female colleagues by making phone calls at night and through other forms of electronic communications. **Non-verbal harassment** refers showing the victims suggestive sexual gestures, objects, pictures, graphic commentaries, suggestive or insulting sounds, leering eye contact, licking lips, holding eating foods, whistling, or obscene gestures (Mallow, 2009). These actions also humiliate women's dignity at work. **Written form of harassment** includes hand written and printed materials. It is also a form of sending text or note to the claimant which contains sexual tomes through mobile phone, electronic devices, and other forms of social networks, for instance, hand written sex-oriented short notes, faxes, Short Messages Service (SMS), Multimedia Message Service (MMS), and Electronic mail (E-mail) (Mallow, 2009). **Visual (Environmental) harassment** is something which creates a hostile environment for female workers in the workplace, and it is an indirect hint to the claimants. In this situation, the harasser is trying to paste nude picture in a place where women are passing by as well as sending nude pictures to the claimants. This also includes drawing a sexual object which contains or gives indirect hints of sex (Britz, 2007; Mallow, 2009). **Physical harassment** is a conduct in a sexual nature where people get involved in the form of unnecessary touching, pinching on the cheeks, putting hands at the back, touching private parts of a woman's body during problem-solving and supervision (Mallow, 2009). Another example of physical conduct is brushing employees' body, blocking pathways, neck rubbing, and coercive sexual intercourse. Finally, this kind of unlawful physical conduct forces illegal sexual intercourse between male and female colleagues. **Psychological harassment** includes many forms of harassment, for example, people utilize verbal abusiveness to humiliate someone in front of other co-workers. Another example of psychological harassment is an unwanted invitation, proposing for a date, and proposing for physical intimacy. This type of harassment in the workplace is very dangerous because it affects the victim's mind, and it also destroys the desire to work. Under this category, most of the victims feel nervous, anxious, and depressed when they see or meet any male in the family as well as in society. Sometimes it leads victims to commit suicide (Mallow, 2009).

Sexual Harassment of Working Women in Bangladesh

Women's presence in every manufacturing sector in Bangladesh is comparatively high. The number of working women in Bangladesh are increasing. Their percentage in the national labor force are significant, especially in the manufacturing sectors. There are nearly 5000 RMG factories in Bangladesh that produce fashion wear sold locally and internationally (Rahman & Rahman, 2017; Rubya, 2015). In this RMG sector, approximately 4.2 million workers are working, where more than 90% of the employees are women (Ali & Islam, 2017; Rahman & Rahman, 2017). Women have a great contribution to earn this huge amount of foreign revenue in every financial year, and it increases the GDP of Bangladesh. But, they also face sexual harassment everywhere by their male counter partner, which is truly unfortunate and unacceptable. Female workers in the RMG sector in Bangladesh experience vulnerable situation in terms of sexual harassment from their male colleagues and supervisors (Rahman & Rahman, 2017). Though Bangladesh Labor Act 2006 protects women at work with safety and security, they are raped, murdered and assaulted in many cases by men at the workplace, and unfortunately, there are no rules and regulations to prevent these derogatory activities (Rahman & Rahman, 2017; Rubya, 2015). The

scenario remains the same till today. Female workers in the RMG sector face sexual harassment from their male co-workers, and the percentage is approximately 69% (Rahman & Rahman, 2017). Therefore, the issue of women's equality, safety, and security is still a question, and the solution is overlooked.

Methodology

This study has followed qualitative approach where primary data has been collected to investigate the current status and nature of sexual harassment of women at work in Bangladesh. Since, women feel discomfort to discuss on this highly sensitive issue, data has been collected from working women known in personal network of the researchers. Six In-depth Interviews (IDIs) held in June, 2019 on women working in different manufacturing sectors in Bangladesh. Based on the findings of IDIs, four Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) were held in June and July, 2019 in order to validate and support the findings from IDIs. First FGD was conducted with participation of female workers from RMG sectors in Bangladesh. Second FGD was taken with the discussion of female workers from leather and footwear industry, and the third FGD was with female workers of tannery sector in Bangladesh. The last FGD was conducted with the female supervisors of these three sectors. Both IDIs and FGDs are interaction-based, and participants are allowed to do open discussion free from interruption as recommended by Yin (2003). Identity of the respondents are kept anonymous for confidentiality, and their consents have been taken before using their opinions and comments in findings part. Collected data have been analyzed thematically through a systematic and rigorous process.

Findings and Discussions

Participants of In-depth Interviews (IDIs) have mentioned their personal experiences in regards to sexual harassment. According to the participants of IDIs, sexual violence against women in Bangladesh is not disclosed and widely discussed. The untold stories of women at work in Bangladesh are heart breaking and mysterious. Women are assaulted and victimized at work as like as they are challenged in the family either verbally or physically or sexually (P3, P4 & P6). Participant P5 says, *"The job I do is very tedious, I feel so tired after working three or four hours. One day, I asked my supervisor to give me a few minutes for rest, and he offered me to go for sexual intercourse with him. He said, make my body feel relaxed, your job will be more relaxed then & you will get extra pay and benefit"*. Sexual harassment by male supervisors in many manufacturing sectors in Bangladesh is very common, but not well reported into the media. Participant P1 is an office assistant works in a RMG. She mentioned, *"I work hard to live a standard life. I work with men, and I often feel a lack of privacy and safety. My male colleagues often use embarrassing words while doing conversation. They try to touch my body during work. I am good looking young women, so-called beautiful. In my previous workplace, I entered the room of MD sir one day to clean the room. I did not know about his presence inside the room. As soon as I entered, he locked the room, and started coming closer to me. I tried to go out of the room to save myself, but I couldn't. I screamed and asked for helped, but no one listened. He raped me, and I couldn't protest since no one would believe me. I also had the fear of losing job, and I am a single mother with two kids. I kept quit and left the previous job for this company. I also experience same kind of male colleagues and bosses at this place"*. Participants of the Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) also mentioned that sexual assault for women is very common in manufacturing sectors of Bangladesh. All the participants both in IDs and FGDs are female worker with no formal academic degrees. Some of them can read and write, but many of them are illiterate. They work for food and survival. They are from poor section of the society. Many of them are abounded by their husbands. Most of them are migrated to urban area for work and left their extended family back in the villages. They mostly do the job of manufacturing workers in different sectors like RMG, Tannery, Bakery, Leather & Footwear factories, etc. Many women workers in Bangladesh get job with the support of men who often demand sex in return (F.1.5; F.2.6; F.3.7; F.1.4). Participant P2 mentioned, *"I came to Dhaka with my friend's elder brother who gave me a job in garments factory. He often phones me and meets me after office. One day, he hold my hand and offered love. We were in a relation for one year. We also have sex many times, when I asked for marriage he denied and left me for another girl"*. Women workers in Bangladesh are betrayed, abused, and harassed by their male counter parts in different ways. All the participants of FGDs have raised the issue of bullying at work by their male colleagues. Women listened at least one sexually abusive words in a day spoken either by their male colleagues or supervisors (F.1.2; F.2.4; F.3.5; F.4.8). It is said that women workers are not

given honor and dignity as like as their male colleagues (F.1.6; F.2.2; F.3.6; F.4.7). Women workers are considered to be easily available for sex by the men since they are poor, helpless, and less aware of their rights (F.1.1; F.2.1; F.4.2; F.4.3). The agony and frustration of working women are unseen, and they are still seen as commodity for entertainment both at work and home. Working-class women are always in the fear of losing their sexual safety, and they are not safe-guarded by the management. Therefore, women rights are violated, which is against the humanity.

Conclusion

Women are supposed to be free from any kind of mistreatment, sexual violence, and other forms of assault across the globe. It is the demand of modern teachings and values in this civilized society. Sexual assault creates negative impression on women's mind that, they are subordinates to men, and they have born only for men's satisfaction. All of these mistreatments practised by men onto women is because of ill practices of social norms and cultural traditions. These misjudgments and assumptions have been shown on women's issues in the family and in the society due to ignorance, rigidity, and muscle power of masculinity. Oppression on women in every aspect of life should be demolished since it affects women's personal development in the aspect of financial identity in the family, society, and countries' economic growth in general. As it is to be said behind every successful man there is women, it can also be said differently that someone wants something to be done, it could be the women to be asked. The power of womanhood can never be ignored in any society at all.

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Appendix-I: List of Participant in Focus Group Discussions (FGDs)

SL/ Code	Designation	SL/ Code	Designation	SL/ Code	Designation	SL/ Code	Designation
	FGD on Female Workers in RMG 29/06/2019		FGD on Female Workers in Leather Goods & Footwear Industry 30/06/2019		FGD on Female workers in Tannery 01/07/2019		FGD on Female Supervisors in RMG, Tannery, Leather Goods & Footwear Industries 02/07/2019
F.1.1	Finishing Worker	F.2.1	Packaging Worker	F.3.1	Sewing & Machine Operator	F.4.1	Supervisor in Leather Goods & Footwear (Sewing)
F.1.2	Sewing Worker	F.2.2	Cutting Operator	F.3.2	Buffing & Finishing Worker	F.4.2	Supervisor in Tannery (Quality Control)
F.1.3	Cutting Operator	F.2.3	Production Worker	F.3.3	Hydrolic Machine Operator	F.4.3	Supervisor in Leather Goods & Footwear (Cutting)
F.1.4	Quality Control Assistant	F.2.4	Sewing Worker	F.3.4	Quality Control Assistant	F.4.4	Supervisor in Tannery (Finishing)
F.1.5	Machine Operator	F.2.5	Lasting Worker	F.3.5	Raw Leather Cleaning Worker	F.4.5	Supervisor in RMG (Sewing)
				F.3.6	Leather Preserving Worker	F.4.6	Supervisor in Leather Goods & Footwear (Production)
F.1.6	Office Assistant	F.2.6	Quality Controller	F.3.7	Cutting Operator	F.4.7	Supervisor in RMG (Packaging)
				F.3.8	Leather Ironing Worker	F.4.8	Floor in charge in RMG

Appendix-II: List of Participants (Female Workers) in In-depth Interviews

SL/Code	Participants' details	Date
P1	Office Assistant in a RMG	23/06/2019
P2	Machine Operator in a RMG	24/06/2019
P3	Cutting Worker in a Leather Goods & Footwear Company	25/06/2019
P4	Sewing & Machine Operator in a Leather Goods & Footwear Company	26/06/2019
P5	Leather Preserving Worker in a Tannery	27/06/2019
P6	Buffing & Finishing Worker in Tannery	28/06/2019