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Research Article – Sociology

Safety Issues of Female Workers of Garment Industry in Gazipur District, Bangladesh

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Abstract

We study the prevalence of safety hazards of female worker of the garment industry in Gazipur district, Bangladesh. This study focused on two sub-districts, Sreepur and Kaliakoir, of Gazipur district. Data for this study were collected from 100 female garment workers of the district. This study observes female workers in the industry consistently suffer from a wide range of safety hazards, such simple cut injury and fire incidences at the workplace. This study also analyses the causes and measures to solve the health issues of female garment workers of Gazipur district.

Key words: Bangladesh garment industry, Female garment workers, Safety hazards, Physical injury, Safety measures, Solution

Introduction

Ready-made garment industry in Bangladesh has experienced dramatic growth in the past couple of decades. After achieving its independence in 1971, the industry that has been making vital contributions in rebuilding the country and its economy, is now the largest export earner of the country (Adnan *et al.*, 2015; Ahmed *et al.*, 2013; Bangladesh Garment Manufacturers and Exporters Association, 2017; Curran and Nadvi, 2015; Farhana *et al.*, 2015; Hasan *et al.*, 2013; Karmaker and Saha, 2016; Mahmud *et al.*, 2017; Sikdar *et al.*, 2014; Wadud *et al.*, 2014). In 2014-2015 the industry in Bangladesh was worth USD 25.49 billion that has experienced sharp increases from around USD 10 billion in 2007-2008 to USD 17.91 billion in 2010-2011 to USD 19.1 billion in 2011-2012 (Bangladesh All Party Parliamentary Group, 2013; Bangladesh Garment Manufacturers and Exporters Association, 2017; Mottaleb and Sonobe, 2011; Wadud *et al.*, 2014). Currently, the industry accounts for approximately

80-81 percent of export earnings of the country (Ahmed *et al.*, 2013; Akterujjaman and Ahmad, 2016; Bangladesh Garment Manufacturers and Exporters Association, 2017; Curran and Nadvi, 2015; Islam and Ahmed, 2014; Islam and Liang, 2012; Stotz and Kane, 2015; Theuws *et al.*, 2013). The main reason for this explosive growth of the garment industry in Bangladesh is easily available cheap labor (Stotz and Kane, 2015).

As the garment industry is a very competitive industry worldwide, availability of cheap and intensive labour is highly valued (Wadud *et al.*, 2014). In addition, cost saving is another widely adopted practice in the industry. In Bangladesh, easily available cheap labour, since the inception, is the main formula of being so successful in the industry. But the cost saving practice in the industry often affects the health and safety of the workers. The Bangladesh garment industry is vulnerable to a wide range of safety issues, such poor electrical wiring and insufficient fire safety arrangements affecting its young, vibrant and urbanising workers from diverse ranges of safety hazards ranges from simple cut injury to premature death (Mahmud *et al.*, 2017).

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Currently around 4.5 million people are working in the garment industry in Bangladesh, 80 percent of whom are female (Ahmed and Nathan, 2014; Begum et al., 2010; Farhana et al., 2015; Heath and Mobarak, 2015; Mahmud et al., 2017; Sultana et al., 2012). Female workers are predominantly employed in the stitching section of the industry and majorly work without proper protective measures such as hand gloves and masks, due to lack of availability of them and also due to self-indifference.

Keeping this in mind, the present study attempts to explore the safety hazards of the female workers of garment industry in Gazipur district of Bangladesh.

Methodology of the Study

The data of the study come from Sreepur and Kaliakoir sub-districts of Gazipur district, Bangladesh. These two sub-districts are in a peri-urban area and outside of Dhaka city, the capital of the country. From each sub-district, five garment factories were selected and from each garment factory, 10 female garment workers were chosen (a total of 100). To collect data from the workers a questionnaire was carried out among them.

Objectives of the Study

To explore the prevalence of the safety hazards of female workers in the garment industry, the objectives of the study were set to:

- identify the major safety hazards of the female garment workers.
- explore the causes of the safety hazards of female garment workers.
- find out the measures to ensure safety hazards of female garment workers.

Major Findings of the Study

Safety hazards of the female garment workers

This study finds female workers of the garment industry in Bangladesh are exposed to a wide range of safety issues at the workplace. The safety risks female garment workers in the industry suffer range from physical injuries, for example, simple cut injury to slippery ground related issues such as falling.

The respondents cited physical (71%) injuries as the predominant safety issue associated with their work in the garment factories. As women workers are majorly appointed in the stitching

section in the industry. Therefore, they are common victims of physical injuries, most significantly needle inserting their fingers while working and blunt injury. One of the reasons for this type of injury is operating the old and outdated machinery in the work. Followed by physical injuries, 64 percent respondent's enunciated sticking by objects in the factory as a safety hazard. It has been identified that not all the factories have sufficient space to move around and the machines are too close to one another, besides, many people work on the same floor result in stuck by objects such as machinery and other staffs in the factory.

Table 1. Safety hazards of female garment workers

Safety Hazards	Response (%)
Physical injuries	71
Stuck by objects	64
Electrical related	37
Slippery ground	11

Subsequently, the issue participant's cited is related to electrical wiring (37%). Poor and substandard electrical wiring in addition to the lack of proper and regular maintenance poses some serious threats to the worker's safety. As a result, fire incidents were found to be a typical problem in garment factories. Finally, one tenth of the study population articulated problems related to floor of the factory (11%). Some pointed floors are not cleaned regularly and sufficiently in their factories. This problem includes dirty and wet floors that cause false step, falling, etc.

Causes of safety hazards of the female garment workers

The safety hazards of the female garment works are a collective outcome of several causes coupled with the factory safety arrangements. The responses regarding the reasons of the safety troubles in the factories range from insufficient safety measures such as inadequate fire safety arrangements to unorganised workers causing workplace violence (Table 2).

Table2. Causes of safety hazards

Causes	Response (%)
Lack of safety measures	69
Lack of knowledge of risks	56
Congested workplace	30
Unorganised workers	29

The leading reason for the impoverished safety management in the garment industry identified as the paucity of safety measures available in the factory (69%) including insufficient fire safety equipment, inadequate and narrow fire exits, inadequate and locked gates. The following cause mentioned is workers lack of knowledge about the risks associated with their given job (56%). This lack of knowledge of risk is a combined consequence of inexperience in work, lack of training and information on the given job, and unawareness of the workers. Some respondents articulated that they did not receive any or sufficient training on their given jobs resulting in a safety concern of the workers. Additionally, they also pointed out that some workers, to a limited extent though, are also responsible for this knowledge gap, as there is insouciance among them to learn about the risks and their responsibilities during any emergency.

The congested nature of workplace (30%) also dangers the safety of the employees in the industry. In Gazipur district, it has been found that a typical garment factory is characterised by lack of free space for its huge number of employees work on the same floor. Besides, on each floor many machines are also installed on the same floor, making the factory stuffy. Because of the overcrowded workplace and narrow space to move around eventually threatens the safety of the workers. Lastly, 29 percent respondent informed that the lack of amity among the workers also causes safety hazards, for example, worker act in a disorganised way whenever any emergency appears as they are not well trained and lack knowledge about their responsibilities.

Solution of the safety hazards of female garment workers

To ensure safe and sound workplaces for the workers, safety arrangements of the industry should be improved to a great extent. In order to solve the safety issues, employee, garment authority and government should work from their respective places accordingly.

To reduce the safety issues in the factory, employees working in the industry have certain duties to ensure their own safety and also to help the garment authority to make sure workplace safety (Table 3).

Table 3. Employees’ responsibilities to ensure safety at the workplace

Employees’ responsibilities	Response (%)
Reporting all hazard situations to authority	85
Learning about the risks	74
Using safety equipment properly	47
Others	20

Reporting all the hazard situations (85%) to the factory authority, if noticed, immediately is the most important responsibility of the workers to ensure a safe workplace in the factory. Problems, such as, related to electrical should be reported to the authority at the earliest so that they can take necessary initiatives to solve the issue. Following hazards reporting, 74 percent respondents underlined worker’s obligation to learn about the risks associated with their jobs. This includes learning their jobs and associated risks well at the training stage of their jobs. In this regard, some emphasis on helping others working in the factory to realise the concerns related to the job. Around half of the respondents (47%), articulated the importance of using available safety equipment properly such as using provided gloves duly. Finally, always following the factory rules, stepping outside of the building peacefully during any emergency mentioned by 20 percent of the female workers in the study.

The garment authorities are the most important stakeholder who can play the ultimate crucial role to ensure safer workplaces for its employees. The factory authority can protect the safety of their employees in the factory, by ensuring adequate safety measures to prevent any safety hazards or to face any incidences if occurred.

Table 4. Garment authorities’ responsibilities to ensure safety at the workplace

Garment authorities’ responsibilities	Response (%)
Arranging sufficient safety measures	76
Ensuring sufficient fire safety measures	73
Ensuring enough space to move around	50
Security	25

Highest number of respondents (76%) quoted arranging sufficient safety measures in the factory as the most crucial issue to ensure workplace safety. The safety arrangements include regular safety inspection of the factory, rapid solution of any safety hazards reported or identified and increasing number of stairs in the factory. Sufficient fire

safety arrangement (73%) is also another major responsibility of the factory authority to ensure in the factory. Regular fire incidences are found to be a common phenomenon in the garment factories in Gazipur district. To ensure fire safety, enough fire extinguisher and fire exits are mandatory. In addition, giving training to the employees regularly on their responsibilities during any fire incidence in the factory. Furthermore, half of the respondents mentioned the importance of enough room to move around within the factory. So, they can move out safely during any emergency period or can comfortably walk in the factory. A quarter of the respondents mentioned special arrangements should be taken for the female worker's safety at the workplace, including not forcing to work late at night and not harassing verbally, mentally or physically.

The government is one of the most important stakeholders of the garment industry in Bangladesh. The government in any country can play a significant role in ensuring the workplace safety from a managerial and governing level. Although, this study found that women employees of the garment industry are not well aware of the government's role in ensuring their safety at the workplace.

Table 5. Government's responsibilities to ensure safety at the workplace

Government's responsibilities	Response (%)
Regular inspection of factories	54
Implementation safety law	39
Others	24

The current study found little more than half of the workers (54%) cited about the regular inspection of the government as an important factor to protect worker safety at the workplace. They emphasised on periodical checking of factory safety management, including fire safety, building safety and worker safety. Participants of the study believe if government authorities regularly visit the garment factories, the factory authority will be compelled to assure necessary safety arrangements. Regular factory visits will also aid to identify areas to implement new laws or to monitor current one. Around quarter participants of the study (24%) voiced the necessities of on payment special transportation facilitates for female workers, establishing hospitals where garment factories are abundant and implementing laws to ensure workplace safety and

punishment the factory owners if standard safety arrangements are not assured or followed.

Conclusion

Poor workplace safety is one of the issues Bangladesh garment industry is facing for a long period of time. The current paper studied the contemporary safety problems of female workers of the garment industry at their workplace. This study found safety hazards in the garment industry ranges from physical injuries, like, needle injury to slippery ground results in false step and failing. The causes range from lack of safety measures, for example, fire safety and personal safety to disorganised workers. To solve the issues, all the parties related to the industry, employee, employer and government have to work together from their respective.

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