

Gender (In)equality and Discrimination In The Readymade Garments Sector Of Bangladesh:  
*Is The Experience Of The (Female) Office Workers Overshadowed By The Experience Of The  
Factory Workers?*  
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## ABBREVIATIONS

BGMEA- Bangladesh Garment Manufacturers and Exporters Association

BKMEA- Bangladesh Knitwear Manufacturers and Exporters Association

CSR- Corporate Social Responsibilities

GSP- Generalized System of Preferences

HR(D)- Human Resources (Department)

MNC- Multinational Company

NGO- Non-Government Organization

(N)TUF- (National) Trade Union(s) Federation

RMG- Readymade Garments

SEIP- Skills for Employment Investment Programme

TU- Trade Union(s)

UN- the United Nations

WU- Workers' Union

## **ABSTRACT**

The Readymade Garments (RMG) industry in Bangladesh is the world's second-largest export-oriented garments manufacturer. Over 80% of the workforce in this sector is female, including both office and factory level positions. Considering the diverse work settings, the workplace experience of women in this industry often depends on their posting: whether it is at the office level or the factory level. Their experiences also depend on the types of factories they work at; international or local.

This study explores women's experience in terms of the discrimination in the RMG Sector of Bangladesh by paying attention to both office and factory level workers in different types of factories, with a critical focus on the role of the relevant stakeholders in improving the situation through women's empowerment. This study also reviews the gender-responsiveness and efficacy of the policies, legislation, and international conventions that may influence the work situation for women.

This is a qualitative study based on the epistemology of Critical Social Science. The data collection methods included 17 in-depth (semi-structured) individual interviews, 2 focus group discussions with a total of 9 participants, The participants were from 14 different factories in Chittagong and Dhaka, whereas, 3 key informants were respectively from the Trade Unions Federation (TUF), an international NGO, and the Bangladesh Knitwear Manufacturers and Exporters Association. The data collection also involved reviewing policy documents.

Thematic network analysis has been employed to organize and analyse the data through NVivo. The theory of intersectionality, the social construction of gender, and the theory of empowerment have been used to interpret findings.

This study found two prominent forms of discrimination against women in this sector, structural and individual discriminations, that are shaped by the perceived gender roles and other social identities of women including their social class and occupational status. Regardless of the apparent gender-neutral policies, the structural discriminations persist because of the stereotypical image of women perceived by the employers, which is reflected through the policy implementation or the organizational practices regarding recruitment, payment, representation, and maternity protection of female workers. Although more or less all female workers are affected by the discriminatory practices, the office workers' needs are often, overlooked owing to their privileged social background and their detachment from (direct) manufacturing activities.

On the other hand, individual discriminations are linked to the male workers' behaviour (as a single entity) towards their female co-workers based on the objectification and other intersectional identities of women. While the female office workers are highly susceptible to gender microaggressions, the factory workers are subject to both physical and verbal abuses. Interestingly, the verbal abuses the female factory workers go through daily are mostly seen as a means of increasing productivity, hence, these have been normalized by the supervisors at the factory level.

In addition to the substantial gap between the policies, legislation, international guidelines, etc, and their implementation, this study further suggests insufficient initiatives from the stakeholders towards women's empowerment. As the majority of the empowerment initiatives are solely concentrated on the factory workers, the office workers remain left out. Such selective initiatives do not only disempower women by restricting their employment opportunities and career development but also pave the path towards further inequalities.

***Keywords:*** *Readymade Garments Industry, Gender Inequality, Discrimination, Harassment, Social Construction of Gender, Intersectionality, Empowerment, Policy Advocacy, International Buyers, Bangladesh*





# CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

## 1.1. Background and Context of the Study

Equality in terms of gender is widely defined as the condition of having equal access to rights and opportunities in every possible aspect regardless of being men or women. Unfortunately, several elements control women's access to equal rights and opportunities as men, "depending on the economic structure, social organization, and culture of any particular group within that society. Therefore, when it comes to gender inequality, it is usually women who are disadvantaged relative to similarly situated men" (Lorber, 2001, p. 4).

However, the aspect of gender (in)equality in Bangladesh has been paradoxical. The World Economic Forum stated Bangladesh is the only country in the world with women in the head-of-state positions (for 27 years) than men in the past 50 years" (WEF, 2021). One would assume having women in such power positions would accelerate female participation in every sector. Although the female-friendly government policies<sup>1</sup> regarding education and economic activities have contributed to the increase in female employment to a certain extent, women still face discrimination in every sector to variant degrees. To the latest, Bangladesh stands 65<sup>th</sup> in the Global Gender Gap Index, downgrading 15 ranks compared to last year in terms of closing the gender gap (WEF, 2021).

Whereas in the past few years, women's participation in the labour market in Bangladesh has notably increased, the latest downfall in closing the gender gap specifically regarding the "Economic Participation and Opportunity" shows a substantial growth of inequalities causing career dropout for many women (Raihan & Bidisha, 2018; WEF, 2021). In recent times we have seen far-reaching global agendas, national policies, cooperation between development and corporate agencies to achieve gender equality at all stages of our social life. Unfortunately, the success rate in attaining gender equality particularly in the workplaces is particularly low. The inequalities are reflected through different forms of discrimination against women at workplaces that contribute to extensive gender inequality. However, this does not only refer to the internal factors of the workplaces but also to the external factors including social stigma

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<sup>1</sup> For example, the National Women Development Policy, 2011, which I will discuss in Chapter 2.

towards women's employment, and the social construction of gender role particularly regarding family responsibilities<sup>2</sup>, etc (Lorber, 2001, p. 4; Raihan & Bidisha, 2018).

In the context of Bangladesh, alongside the deep-rooted patriarchal ideologies that constitute conventional gender roles, lack of gender-responsive initiatives<sup>3</sup> from the government at organizational level exacerbate the discrimination inequality. Although often, the discriminations are conditioned by socio-economic classes because of the intrinsic intersection of gender and class especially in Bangladeshi society where classism<sup>4</sup> is embedded in every corner of the society.

However, when it comes to the female-friendly government policies as mentioned earlier, as much as such policies are essential for increasing female participation in the labour market, this also contributes to statistical discrimination and occupational segregation by promoting stereotypical expectations of women (Dieckhoff, Gash, & Steiber, 2015). The Readymade Garments (RMG) sector of Bangladesh can be taken as an example in this regard.

The RMG sector of Bangladesh, being the sole industry of the country to ensure the highest economic participation for women, unfortunately, adds up more to the informal employment (lower-level without contract or agreement). In the RMG sector, more than 85 per cent of the workforce is female and only 10 per cent of those female workers occupy mid to top-level positions (Islam & Jantan, 2017; Sili, 2018). This industry has offered tremendous economic opportunity especially, for the poor women which has been accredited to the considerable expansion of such labour-intensive industries as a means of economic reforms like trade liberalization (Islam & Jantan, 2017).

While the women working in the RMG sector may have gained the power to earn an income, they are still susceptible to discrimination resulting from the inefficient policy framework and redressal system of both the RMG sector, government and global bodies (Chowdhury, 2017). Whilst the gender wage gap has noticeably been reduced in some factories, women still earn less than men, face harassment, lack job security, lack career development opportunities and

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<sup>2</sup> The family responsibilities in this regard, involve the caregiver role, childrearing, taking care of the household chores, etc.

<sup>3</sup> Developing a collaborative approach with the respective stakeholders to ensure women's equal access to resources at the workplace can be an example of such initiatives.

<sup>4</sup> "A belief that a person's social or economic station in society determines their value in that society" (Merriam-Webster) source: <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/classism>

multiple forms of discrimination regarding basic rights and facilities (M. A. Hossain & Tisdell, 2005).

## **1.2. Purpose of the Study**

Although gender inequality in the labour market is a universal phenomenon, the extent varies extensively across countries. The work of feminist economists, particularly in the context of the developed countries, also presented significant insight into the processes of labour market discrimination (Kabeer, 2012). However, the latest development in identifying the obstacles for women to access equal rights and opportunities for career development are most relevant only to the perspective of western countries (Islam & Jantan, 2017, p. 2). Therefore, to explore the lived experiences of women in terms of discrimination in the RMG sector of Bangladesh, a context-based study is an essential.

The purpose of this study thus, is to explore the discrimination against women that represents gender inequality in the RMG sector of Bangladesh. This requires the perspective of both (female and male) workers and the people in the key/managerial roles of the industry. Furthermore, it is also crucial to explore the role of the relevant stakeholder, (state) legislation, policy framework, and labour standards to identify the gap in terms of gender-responsiveness. This might bring new insight into such issues in the context of developing/underdeveloped countries, especially in the context of UN's Sustainable Development Goals 5<sup>5</sup> and 8<sup>6</sup> which promote "Gender Equality" and "Decent work and economic growth" respectively.

## **1.3. Research Objective**

As mentioned earlier, the aspect of gender equality in Bangladesh has been paradoxical. It is, therefore, crucial to explore the contemporary scenario from a comprehensive perspective; this requires the involvement of every facet and the perceptions of the relevant stakeholders as well. Within the given time and scope of my study, I intend to explore the below-mentioned concerns-

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<sup>5</sup><https://www1.undp.org/content/oslo-governance-centre/en/home/sustainable-development-goals/goal-5-gender-equality.html>

<sup>6</sup> <https://www1.undp.org/content/oslo-governance-centre/en/home/sustainable-development-goals/goal-8-decent-work-and-economic-growth.html>

*1. Discrimination Against Women that Represents Gender Inequality in the RMG Sector of Bangladesh*

- What are the forms and extent of discrimination against women in terms of rights and opportunities? Why do such discriminations prevail?
- What is the role of the people in managerial/key positions in addressing the discrimination?
- What are the differences between the international and local factories (with both foreign buyers and local buyers) in terms of gender responsiveness<sup>7</sup>?

*2. The Role of the Relevant Organizations and Policy/Acts/International Guidelines in Promoting Women's Empowerment to Reduce Gender Inequality*

- How are the Trade Unions, NGOs, buyers, and the relevant national associations working to reduce the gender gap by empowering female workers/employees?
- To what degree are the company policies and the state's legislation gender-responsive, and effective in connection with the international labour standards?

## **1.4. Structure of this Study**

This study has 8 chapters. The first chapter provides an overview of the background, context, purpose and objective of this study. Chapter 2 consists of a review of the relevant literature regarding gender inequalities in workplaces in general and in the global and Bangladeshi readymade garments sector; this chapter also provides the idea of what my study will add to the existing knowledge in this regard to fill the research gap. Chapter 3 describes the theoretical frameworks that have been used for this study: the theory of intersectionality, social construction of gender, and the theory of empowerment. Chapter 4 presents the methodology of this study including research design, methods of data collection, analysis, ethics and quality assurance involved in the study. Chapters 5-7 present and discuss the findings of the study. Chapter 8 comprises the conclusion of this study including the summary of the key findings, limitations and further implication of this study.

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<sup>7</sup> “Gender responsiveness refers to outcomes that reflect an understanding of gender roles and inequalities and which make an effort to encourage equal participation and equal and fair distribution of benefits”. Source: <https://www.undp.org/content/dam/undp/library/gender/UNDP%20Gender%20Responsive%20National%20Communications%20Toolkit.pdf>

## CHAPTER 2. LITERATURE REVIEW

### 2.1. Introduction

In this chapter I will discuss the relevant studies on gender inequality at the workplace from both global and Bangladesh perspectives. Primarily I have reviewed the literature that is related to discrimination against women regarding recruitment, promotion, job responsibilities, payment, maternity protection, etc besides focusing on the literature on empowering women to achieve equality at work. Additionally, I will be presenting a short overview of the relevant sections of international conventions, national policies, and legislation. I will conclude the chapter by briefly discussing the literature gap and the potential contribution of my study to the current literature.

I have used Google Scholar, Web of Science, and Oria (the University of Bergen Library database) to find the relevant literature. I used keywords like: “Gender (In)equality”, “Workplace (In)equality”, “Inequality in the Readymade Garments Sector in Bangladesh”, “Women’s Empowerment”, “Feminization of Job”, “Discrimination at the workplace” “TUs”, “Violence at the workplace”, “Intersectionality at Workplace” etc. Besides book sections and peer-reviewed articles, I have also looked for newspaper or web articles, interviews and reports using similar keywords. Although I initially customized the searches to literature published in English from 2015 onwards, I also looked for older literature to find the most relevant ones. I have attached the list of reviewed literature as appendix (A.1.1).

### 2.2. Gender Inequality in the Workplace

Despite the overgrowing buzz about gender equality or rights to decent work regardless of gender, women are still subject to occupational discrimination in terms of recruitment, promotion, payment/increment, support/facilities in the workplace (Sobering, 2016). The work of feminist economists, particularly in the context of developed countries, presents significant insight into the processes of labour market discrimination. Studies suggest that women, globally are considered as the “Labour market outsiders” because the employers think women have a lower commitment to work and lower productivity levels compared to men (Dieckhoff et al., 2015). Dieckhoff, Gash, & Steiber (2015) also argued that being the *outsider*, women are an easier target for employers when it comes to cutting off the workforce as a means of cost-minimizing.

However, gender inequality in the labour market is reflected through the structure, processes, and practices of an organization (Stamarski & Son Hing, 2015). The attitudinal difference

towards women plays a major role in this. Men consider themselves as worthier than women to have access and opportunities in the job sector; they barely consider the women eligible to be in the executive positions (Kiser, 2015). Women who exhibit competence and success in “male gender-typed” positions (e.g., managerial, executive) have to confront the disapproval and the negativity that are induced by the socially constructed gender norms. Even after refuting the social stereotype, these women are seen as inappropriately agentic or having less stereotypically female attributes (Heilman, 2012, p. 126). Furthermore, women are also subject to negative judgement like getting promoted to a higher position only in exchange for having a sexual relationship with the boss/employer (Hess, 2016, pp. 458-468).

Gendered hierarchy and women’s positionality at the workplace offer an intriguing paradox that resulted in two distinctive hypotheses. One is the “vulnerable-victim” hypothesis suggesting that vulnerable workers (e.g., women, racial minorities, individuals with the least authority at work) face greater harassment. The other one is the “power-threat model”, which suggests that women in authority/higher positions are more susceptible to harassment because they are seen as a threat to men’s dominance (McLaughlin, Uggen, & Blackstone, 2012, pp. 626-627). Instead of the practical demands of the job, the gendered role of an individual carrying out the job defines “skill” in the workplace. Women are regarded as the “inferior bearers” of labour, thus their work is also stereotypically labelled as inferior (Kabeer, 2012). Reportedly, women’s substantial under-representation in many emerging roles (e.g., cloud computing, engineering) is the main barrier to closing the economic gender gap (WEF, 2020). However, alongside gender, the multiple other social identities (e.g., social class) of a woman play a significant role in determining the extent of inequalities she faces at workplace (Adib & Guerrier, 2003).

### **2.3. Gender Inequality in the Readymade Garments Sector**

The transnational capital production accelerated the participation of women in the labour force across third world countries during the 1980s. This posed a new challenge to the theorists of gender roles at work (Salzinger, 2004). Women’s perceived nimbleness, natural patience, and compliance were considered for employment and this was another form for reinforcing the patriarchal control over women (Fuentes & Ehrenreich, 1983). A remarkable number of studies have been conducted to date to explore the condition of the female worker in the labour force, especially in the garments/textile sector. The findings say that women in this sector are still the poorer and more vulnerable in most of the countries despite being the largest proportion of the

total workforce. According to the Oxfam briefing paper from 2015, more than 90% of the workforce in the garments industry in Myanmar are women who are barely getting the minimum wage against extended working hours, forced labour, health and safety issues (in and outside of the work), and lack of voice. Even the concept of minimum wages did not exist there before the labour opt-out followed by a collaborative initiative of the brands, TUs and the NGOs like Oxfam (Gardener & Burnley, 2015).

However, the role of the TUs that are supposed to advocate for the rights of all workers, is also questioned for being overly male dominant and influenced by patriarchal norms. A study by Alice Evans (2017) on Industrial Relations in the Asian Garment Industry shows the successful role of the TUs in resolving wage issues in the garment industries of Indonesia, Vietnam, Bangladesh, China, and Cambodia, besides improving the compliance legislation and shifting the labour norms in many factories in England, China, Korea, and Vietnam. Unfortunately, most of these male-dominant TUs are apathetic when it comes to the female workers' needs and priorities. They treat women as an inferior, subordinate category, and marginalize their needs and priorities (Kabeer, 2004). The unions do not show their activism even when the female workers get sexually harassed or any concern in regards to formulating gender-sensitive provisions. In Indonesia and Cambodia, the authority terminated pregnant employees but no TUs raised their voice against this (Evans, 2017).

The fact is, factory owners, regulators, and policymakers are male, the top-mid level employees in the factories are also predominantly male, and the female workers are mostly employed in the bottom level positions. Therefore, the power relation is visible in the way they treat women. The female members of the unions also act following the norms of emphasized femininity (Evans, 2017). In addition to such problems, many countries in the world have legislation that reflects obvious discrimination against women. Labour law (regarding maternal leave) in Tunisia for example, differentiates between the public and private sector, as a result, the working women struggle to balance their work and family life (Moghadam, 2017).

While the European Union's focus on the legislation and policy guidance to promote gender equality in the European labour market (EC, 2017) is praiseworthy, European investor's schemes for cheap labour accelerated unequal pay in the RMGs of underdeveloped countries. After the trade liberalization agreement (2005) of WTO, the Western European investors shifted the labour-intensive parts of their textile business to Eastern and South-Eastern Europe, North Africa, and Asia (Bonfiglioli, 2015). Low wages in the garment industry are not an import of the female workforce rather it is the reason for feminisation of the workforce in the



garments industry. The owners/investors prioritize low labour costs, lack of protective workers' legislation, and also, submissive workers who will not bother about the poor working conditions (Evans, 2017). According to the World Economic Forum, the gender wage gap in the consumer sector (e.g., clothing) is 49% (WEF, 2016). Cross-national comparison in terms of the gender gap in labour market participation and attainment should come under light; especially, studying the social dynamics and scrutinizing the role of national policies and cultures is very significant (Dieckhoff et al., 2015).

## 2.4. Bangladesh Perspective

### *Feminization of Workforce and Persisting Discriminations (Gendered segregation of Labour, Recruitment, Pay Gap, etc)*

The essentialized connection between “lack of income” and “poverty” that leads to the feminization of poverty influenced the participation of (poor) women in the RMG sector of Bangladesh which ultimately resulted in the feminization of employment (Chant, 2006, p. 203). For a country like Bangladesh, where the economic development (in terms of income) has been the foremost priority since its emergences, the largescale investment in the RMG sector created an incredible opportunity for the marginal<sup>8</sup>/vulnerable young and unskilled women with a poor educational background, as they barely had options for employment (Chowdhury, 2017). Besides cashing on the financial vulnerability of these women, the factory owners also prefer women mostly for their (women’s) perceived sincerity, submissiveness, less confrontational, and less inclined nature to anti-management activities (Chowdhury, 2017; Fuentes & Ehrenreich, 1983). Women are mostly employed in the lower grade poor paid positions that do not require higher professional skill or technological ability. Meaning the social construction of gender role is predominant in this sector which determines the position of women in this sector.

Al-Amin & Hoque argue that, even if a woman meets educational and experience requirements for any position, she is paid lower wages for similar/equal positions in comparison to a man (Al-Amin & Hoque, 2015). The authors (2015) also argue that the recording of overtime is systematically forged by the owners to avoid paying for that. Female workers are susceptible to face both forced labour and unpaid overtime. Even if they get paid, the payment is also conditional, depending on the daily target they have to reach in terms of production (Anwary, 2017). The existing studies show similar trends when it comes to promoting women in higher

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<sup>8</sup> In the context of this study, by marginal I refer to the ones who do not have access to resources, be it monetary/tangible or intangible resource including basic needs like education.

positions. Patriarchal cultural pattern, male-dominated management and stereotyping of women as being non-assertive and lacking leadership qualities are a few major factors that hinder women's career in terms of getting hired or promoted to the key positions (Islam & Jantan, 2017; Islam, Jantan, Hashim, Chong, & Abdullah, 2018).

However, lack of support and inspiration from family, balancing family-professional life against excessive work pressure, etc have also been identified to be constraining the women to take up more responsibility at work. Besides, lack of policy implementation and monitoring initiative from the government also leads to gender discrimination during promotion (Islam & Jantan, 2017). Anwary (2017) shares more insight of the situation highlighting at the "hidden" company policies regarding recruiting the women to key positions, the seasonal nature of the job that create insecurity among the workers, hence, they settle for whatever payment they receive for working extensive hours. Besides, the author also highlighted the role of educational attainment in such labour exploitation (p.184). Studies also show an interesting trend of widening wage gap in the first year of work (from the entry level position) and as the men get quick promotions to the higher positions, the gap persists (Menzel & Woodruff, 2019). An ILO publication in this regard has prescribed a multifaceted legal framework to promote gender-responsive public procurement law that would complement the strategy for equal payment besides active collective bargaining for closing gender pay-gap (Rubery & Koukiadaki, 2016).

*Major Impacts on Personal Life (Household/Family Responsibility, Reproductive Role, Childrearing, etc)*

Women's employment has impacted the gender-based exclusion of women by increasing their role in the domestic economy, household decision-making, decisions around childbearing, etc (Khosla, 2009) which led to a shift in their caregiver and reproductive work. But this has not changed the gender division of work and family responsibilities within the household (Khosla, 2009; Mahmud, 2003), resulting in career dropout or compromising family life for many women in the RMG sector. Indicating towards women's hardship in balancing personal and work life in the RMG sector, N. Hossain (2012) summed up various reason including long working hours with unpredictable overtime, inadequate childcare facilities, etc that accelerate the dropout rate among women (p. 17). Another point of view in this regard is, participation in the labour market enabled women to decide between education, work, and marriage/childbearing because of the girl's postponing marriage or having children to retain their work (Heath & Mobarak, 2015). In most cases, women do not get a job if they are married, they lose their job if they report pregnancy or ask for maternity protection and benefits.

Therefore, to save the job female workers sometimes choose abortion which deteriorates their physical and mental health (Ahmed & Islam, 2015).

However, several studies also highlighted the impact of “respectable femininity<sup>9</sup>” that determine women’s conduct in a particular society has also been a major influence for the working women to choose between “professional life” and “family/caregiver role”, especially in the South Asian context (Ansari, 2016; Fernando & Cohen, 2014; Hussein, 2017).

In respect to maternity protection (leave, benefits, facilities for the lactating mother, and childcare facilities) in the RMG sector, the Bangladesh labour act provides a mandate which has been overlooked in the respective policies of many factories. Such policy inconsistency does not only contribute to the health risk of the women but also results in career dropout due to the irregular maternity leave or firing the pregnant worker/employee, limited breastfeeding and childcare facilities, or even adequate mental support from the authority (Akhter, Rutherford, & Chu, 2017; A. R. Hasan et al., 2020). However, as much as the lack of implementation of existing legislation affects the maternity protection rights of the workers, the scope of exclusion through the legal framework itself has also been identified by the scholars (Addati, 2015). For example, the eligibility criteria defined by the Bangladesh labour act in terms of tenure of working in the respective company and even the number of children, etc contribute to exclusion of many women from maternity protection (mentioned in section 2.5).

#### *Gender Microaggression, Abuse, and Physical Assault*

Gender microaggression<sup>10</sup>, abuse, and assaults are exceptionally common in this sector. The female workers face the risk of sexual harassment that ranges from both verbal and physical abuse like suggestive comments/language directed at a person’s gender, demeaning/derogatory remarks, inappropriate touching to grabbing, and physical assaults (Akhter, Rutherford, & Chu, 2019; M. Hasan & Mahmud, 2017). Economic violence (e.g., not issuing appointment letters, withholding pay, and arbitrary pay deductions) has also been reported by many women, especially from the factory level. The reasons behind different types of violence in factories include the structured gender hierarchy, considering violence as a means of increasing

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<sup>9</sup> “Gendered ideological construct, which prescribes the rules of conduct for women in a particular socio-cultural setting” (Ansari, N., 2016, p.529).

<sup>10</sup> Gender microaggressions is intentional and unintentional insults, invalidations, and assaults based on gender and are most frequently perpetrated against women and girls (Gartner & Sterzing, 2016, p. 492)

production, and contravening gender norms by female workers as they participate in the labour market (Naved et., al 2018).

Unfortunately, the experience of the workers says the abusive supervisors are not held accountable, instead, they are rewarded with promotion which proves the absence of organizational liability. The latest data from World Bank on Workplace indicator for Women, Business and the Law shows there are no criminal penalties or civil remedies for sexual harassment in employment. While a score of less than 100 indicates the lack of sexual harassment legislation, criminal penalties/civil remedies to protect women at the workplace, Bangladesh scored 50, which is alarming (WB, 2020).

#### *Trade Unions, Policy, Legal Framework and Other Support System*

The role of TUs is expected to improve the situation by negotiating for women's access to the rights and opportunities at work to create an inclusive atmosphere for both male and female workers (Dieckhoff et al., 2015). However, the participation of women in these unions is extremely less and likewise in many other Asian countries, the employers' internalised gender stereotypes influence hiring and factory management in Bangladesh too (Evans, 2017). Although there has been a recent development in participation and initiatives of women in the leadership position of the TUs to some extent (Alamgir & Alakavuklar, 2018), the power politics involving the unions and other stakeholders like the owners and politicians are limiting the scope for collective bargaining especially affecting grievance redressal for women (Chowdhury, 2017). Being excluded from the male-dominated leadership of unions and management, most of the female workers are unaware of their rights hence, they are deprived of existing welfare initiatives as well.

Despite having several compliance guidelines from the International Labour Organization, World Trade Organization, global brands/buyers, and national rules and regulations protecting various rights of workers, most of the factories are accused of violating or manipulating the rules, lack of transparency and accountability in this regard (Haque & Azmat, 2015). Especially, unjustified hiring (without legal contract or documentation) and firing practices, delayed or no payment at all, inadequate provision for maternity protection and against harassment or abuses, etc are some major examples. Haque and Azmat (2015) also highlighted the attribution of lack of legislation, policy intervention, and CSR of the companies in coping with discrimination. Most specifically, the foreign buyers' roles in working towards compliance with their corporate social responsibilities are quite inadequate, primarily because the low-grade factories do not have direct contact with respective buyers. They work through the

subcontractors which limits the space for the company's liability about labour rights, work environment, and fair-trade issues. For example, factories in Bangladesh produced sportswear for 2012 London Olympic sponsors: Adidas, Nike, and Puma. Reportedly, female workers were abused (both physically and verbally), underpaid, and were compelled to overwork during the manufacturing period but none of the buyers effectively monitored for compliance with CSR standards (Haque & Azmat, 2015). Moreover, the historical directive (2008) from the High Court Division of Bangladesh addressing Harassment at the workplace has not been followed by many factories/companies yet (Naved et al., 2018).

## **2.5. Relevant Policies and International Conventions**

### *2.5.1. ILO Conventions*

The ILO Conventions cover various issues on gender equality at the workplace. For instance, the first two Conventions on women: Maternity Protection (C3, which has been revised in 2000 and reintroduced as C183) and Night Work for Women (C4)<sup>11</sup>. Bangladesh has ratified most of the ILO conventions in this regard except for the convention on Workers with family responsibilities 1981 (C156) whereas the convention on Violence and Harassment, 2019 (C190) is still under consideration (Star, 2021). However, considering the discretionary power of the different stakeholders to adopt international labour standards regardless of ratification status by the state, I have reviewed the relevant conventions for this study.

*C183/Maternity Protection-* ILO introduced the convention on maternity protection back in 1919 followed by two revised versions in 1952 and 2000. The latest one does not only ensure health protection (article 3, 5), maternity leave and benefit (article 4,6), also ensures the job security of the pregnant worker (article 8). This convention also declares women's right to return to the same or an equivalent position with the same payment as before should be secured. Besides, in article 10, this convention states the right of a worker to have a nursing or breastfeeding break. These rights should be determined by the national law and policies, the convention urges.

*C100/Equal Remuneration-* This convention is to provide the guiding principles of equal remuneration for equal work regardless of sex. Article 2 (section 1,2) of this convention depicts the responsibility of the member states to establish, the methods for determining rates of

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<sup>11</sup> [https://www.ilo.org/moscow/areas-of-work/gender-equality/WCMS\\_249143/lang--en/index.htm](https://www.ilo.org/moscow/areas-of-work/gender-equality/WCMS_249143/lang--en/index.htm)

remuneration. The states should promote the method and ensure the application of this to all workers.

*C111/Discrimination convention-* In 1958, Convention No. 111 and Recommendation No. 111 were adopted to establish the principle of non-discrimination to ensure equality of opportunity and treatment in respect of employment and occupation. This includes equal access to vocational training, access to employment, and terms and conditions of employment regardless of sex, race, colour, religion, political opinion, national extraction or social origin.

*C156/ Workers with family responsibilities-* The goal of this convention is to facilitate employment without discrimination owing to one's existing private duties. This convention was published (1965) primarily to support female workers to be able to continue their employment regardless of private duties. The revised version (1981) has extended the support also to the males with responsibilities for dependent children or immediate family members. Article 3 (1) of this convention states the responsibility of the member states to formulate national policy that facilitates anyone with family responsibilities who are employed or intend to be employed to exercise their right to do so without discrimination or, without conflict between their job and family responsibilities.

*C190/Violence and Harassment Convention-* this convention is to protect the workers from any occurrence that induces physical, psychological, sexual or economic harm and includes gender-based violence and harassment. In article 2 and 3, the convention distinctly elaborates the scope of harassment in terms of the potential victim, workplaces, accommodation/ movement/ trips/ communication or anything related to work. Besides, this convention emphasises the necessary legal framework, policies and implementation of those to eliminate harassments. It also emphasises the guidance, training and awareness among all the stakeholders including the employers and employees.

*C154/Collective Bargaining Convention-* this convention (1981) supports the workers' right to negotiate with the employer, a group of employers or one or more employers' organisations, on the one hand, and one or more workers' organisations for determining terms and conditions of work; also, to regulate their relationships with the relevant stakeholders including the employers/ employers' organization, workers' organization. To mention, this applies to both public and private sector workers.

*2.5.2. Bangladesh Labour Act 2006, 2018 (amendment) and EPZ Law 2019*

The Labour Act 2006 is the common legislation regardless of sectors whereas the EPZ Labour Act 2019 is specifically for regulating labour relations in the EPZs in the lights of the labour act. I have reviewed the sections related to Maternity Protection, Collective Bargaining, Harassment at workplaces, Equal Participation following the research objectives.

*Maternity Protection-* This has been the most prominent part of both these laws. Chapter 4 (section 45-50) of LA 2006 and chapter 3 (section 29-34) of EPZ law 2019 instruct regarding rights of a worker to get maternity leave, benefit (amount, payment procedure and payment in case of death of the entitled worker during pregnancy or during giving birth), the period for an employer to engage a pregnant woman and a new mother at work etc. The latest amendment of this law (2018) confirms paid maternity leave for the workers which was not assured by the law before. However, the benefits are restrained only to workers who have worked not less than 6 months under the employer before the notice of the delivery (Bangladesh, 2019; BEF, 2009).

*Misconduct-* Section 332 (Chapter 21-miscellaneous) of LA and Section 189 (Chapter-16) of the EPZ law instruct the conduct towards female workers. This prohibits any indecent behaviour toward a woman regardless of her position and status. This elaborates as obscene or rude behaviour that seems indecent, repugnant to the modesty or honour of the female worker. Again, no mention of the measures if otherwise happens.

*Equal Remuneration-* Section 345 of chapter 21 of LA and Section 197 of chapter 16 of EPZ law simply stated equal pay for equal work, regardless of sex. Discrimination in this regard is a punishable offence as per BD law.

*Collective Bargaining-* Both the National Labour Act 2006 (chapter 13, section 176) and the EPZ law (Chapter 9) describe the rights and limitation of both the employers and workers regarding collective bargaining. A minimum of 30 per cent female (permanent workers) in the executive body (EPZ law 2019, section 94.5). The amendment to the labour act 2006 has made it easier for the workers to practice their rights to collective bargaining by reducing the required percentage of the workers to form TUs; now, 20% of workers of a factory can form legitimate TUs whereas it was 30% before. However, according to the ILO Convention, even if only 10 workers want to form trade unions, they have to be granted permission (Bhuiyan, 2018; Cotula & Mouan, 2021; Firm, 2019).

In addition to these, section 46 (Chapter 5) of the EPZ law restricts the authority to employ the females at any duty between 8 pm to 6 am without prior permission from the additional

inspector general of the respective (industrial) zone. Lastly, section 348 of LA instructs the authority to conduct training on this act. The EPZ law too states about displaying this law for everyone at the workplace in section 193 (Bangladesh, 2019).

### *2.5.3. The National Women Development Policy, Bangladesh 2011*

The Convention of the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Woman (CEDAW) 1979 was at the core of the National Women Development Policy 2011 following the similar objective to eliminate all kinds of discrimination against women in family and social life. This is a framework adopted to empower women by establishing their socio-economic and political rights. The Ministry of women and Children Affairs is responsible for policymaking and implementation in collaboration with other concerned ministries, organizations and NGOs (MWCA, 2011). The aim of adding this policy to this study is to examine the effect of this in the current labour law and at the workplaces. However, the relevant features are:

#### *Elimination of All forms of Abuse against Women*

The framework aims at the elimination of all forms of violence against women, including physical and mental abuse and sexual harassment, rape, dowry, family abuse and acid throwing in family, society and in the workplace (section 19). Therefore, this suggests for amendment of the existing laws or to formulate new if necessary. This also calls for extending legal support to women victim of abuse.

#### *Employment and Workplace*

The framework emphasises equal remuneration and equal opportunity for women in the workplace, besides increasing participation of women in the labour market by ensuring security and removing disparities in employment (23.7). The need to support women with services like childcare facilities, the day-care centre for the children (section 28) for effective participation of women in all economic activities has also been discussed. In section 34, it calls for policies to increase the mother's capacity to work at her workplace (34.10). Therefore, to form and implement maternity laws that allow mothers to enjoy a leave for 6 months after the delivery of the child (34.11).

The framework also suggests forming a 50-member National Women and Children Development Council with the Prime Minister in the Chair as a part of the implementation of this policy. This also urges to take necessary decisions to implement the steps undertaken for preserving the interest of the women in their workplaces, their participation and improvement of their lot. Besides, the cooperation between the GO, NGOs or other private bodies at all level



has been highlighted for the implementation of this policy framework (section 48). International, regional and sub-regional cooperation through bilateral and multilateral financial/technical cooperation have been emphasised for women's empowerment (section 49).

#### *2.5.4. The High Court Directive of 2009*

The High Court (HC) Division of Bangladesh Supreme Court laid down a set of guidelines to prevent harassment of women (and children) at workplaces, educational institutions and on the streets on May 13, 2009 (HCD, 2008). The HC also directed the government to make a law based on the guidelines and ordered that this guideline will be treated as law until the law is made. According to the directives, disturbing women and children by any means like letters, e-mails, SMS, posters, writings on walls, benches, chairs, tables, notice boards and threatening or pressing them to make sexual relations are sexual harassment and torture, the lawyers said quoting the judgement. They also said rape, sexual provocation, envious or intentional propaganda against women and children, and showing such films, digital images, paintings, cartoons, leaflets, posters and still photographs are also considered as indirect sexual harassment and torture. Nobody can touch or hurt with any bad intention any part of the body of a girl or woman. Any indecent word or comment cannot be used about them, and any unknown adult girl or any woman cannot be addressed as a beautiful one with any bad intention. Teasing women and children through e-mail or telephone will also be considered an offence, and ordered that any kind of provocation or character assassination will have to be stopped.

The HC ordered the respective authorities to form a (minimum of) five-member Sexual Harassment Prevention Committee headed by a woman (and with the majority of women) at every workplace and institution to investigate allegations of harassment of women. The Complaint Committee should have at least two members from outside the organization concerned, preferably from organizations working on gender issues and sexual abuse. The committee shall receive complaints, and conduct an investigation and make recommendations regarding any mental, physical or sexual harassment. But the concerned authorities are restricted from disclosing any traceable information of the complainants and accused persons until the allegations are proved. The Complaint Committees will submit annual reports to the Government on compliance with these guidelines. The HC asked all the relevant bodies including Bangladesh Garment Manufacturers and Exporters Association (BGMEA), Bangladesh Knitwear Manufacturers and Exporters Association (BKMEA), Bangladesh police and Bangladesh Bar Council to comply with the guidelines (Chronicles, 2009).

## **2.6. Literature Gap and Potential Contribution of this Study**

Whilst several existing studies focused on labour rights and standards, fair labour practices, and working conditions, etc, only a few scrutinized the policy gap in this regard. The comprehensive (and collaborative) role of the buyers, NGOs and other advocacy organizations in securing labour rights is also less explored. Furthermore, woman's participation and underrepresentation in the key positions in the RMG sector, difference between treatment towards the office and factory workers, etc are two less explored phenomenon. However, considering the time constraints and scope of my study, I cannot explore all the issues at the same time. But I hope, this study will contribute to the existing literature on the contemporary gendered aspects in the RMG sector of Bangladesh from both the (female) office and factory workers' perspective besides the other stakeholders. Additionally, this study might contribute to understanding the perception of women's empowerment from both organizational and individual contexts.

## CHAPTER 3. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

### 3.1 Introduction

In this chapter, I will present the theoretical frameworks I used to explore and interpret gender inequalities in the workplace. I have used two different theories following the research problem and objectives of my study. As my research objectives entail the need for exploring the scope of inequalities and the support system in place to overcome them, I have used the theories of Intersectionality and Empowerment.

### 3.2. The Social Construction of Gender

Gender is no more a synonymous word for “sex”; while sex is more of a biological categorization of an individual, gender is the socially constructed behavioural category that comes with a set of rules suggesting what men and women should do following their (socio-culturally) assigned roles. As we perform those assigned roles as the members of that respective society, we “do gender” and keep reinforcing gender roles (West & Zimmerman, 1987). Zimmerman and West (1987) precisely emphasised gender to be the “socially guided perceptual, interactional and micropolitical activities” in defining masculine and feminine nature (p.126). Thus, gender cannot be static but a process that is variable and subject to change depending on our interactions and social locations (Acker, 1992; Berkowitz, Manohar, & Tinkler, 2010).

Another very significant aspect of this social construction is hierarchy and power, which allow men to dominate women due to their (men’s) relatively privileged social locations (Berkowitz et al., 2010, p. 113). This domination and power practices produce greater inequality which becomes institutionalised owing to the authoritative positions of the social structures, including the labour market (Maharaj, 1995, pp. 60-62). However, with a focus shift from individual to the organizational status of doing gender, Joan Acker’s (1990) concept of gendered organizations (based on feminist organizational studies), suggests gender is constructed into the organizational structures as well, and the actors within them reproduce it. At the structural level, organizational policies and practices regulate the “divisions of labour, power relations, and resources between men and women” (Acker, 1990; Sobering, 2016, p. 130).

#### In Context of My Study

I have used the concept of the social construction of gender to explore and describe the way this essentialization of gender roles is affecting the organizational structure and practices to

produce discrimination against women, in terms of participation and representation in the RMG sector of Bangladesh.

### **3.3. Intersectionality**

“Intersectionality” denotes the shared interaction of different (social) identities and other differences within individual lives, socio-cultural practices, institutional settings, etc and, how the interactions produce and transform the power relation (Davis, 2008). The intersectional framework helps to discover the multi-layered structures of power by adopting a grounded praxis approach engrossing the circumstances that shape the construction and diffusion of knowledge (Cho, Crenshaw, & McCall, 2013). However, the term “Intersectionality was coined by Kimberlé Crenshaw (1989) to address the marginalization of women of colour within institutionalized discourses (e.g., feminist theory and antiracist theory) that legitimized the power relations. She elaborated on the concept highlighting the vulnerabilities of (disadvantaged) women that were neglected both by social movement organizations and advocacy programmes for violence against women (Carbado, Crenshaw, Mays, & Tomlinson, 2013). Crenshaw articulated the interaction between racism and patriarchy using the framework of intersectionality. She mentioned about three different construction of intersectionality: Structural intersectionality, Political intersectionality, and Representational intersectionality<sup>12</sup> (Crenshaw, 1990; Durfee, 2021).

Crenshaw’s approach has been appreciated for its applicability in studying social practice, individual or group experience in the different structural and sociocultural configuration (Davis, 2008). Although the theory of intersectionality has been criticised by some especially for not being inclusive/universal enough, antisystemic and providing limited space for sexuality in it (Cho, 2013), many scholars and activists have successfully extended intersectionality to engage social identities, power dynamics, legal and political systems, discursive structures and various other issues in and beyond the United States (Carbado et al., 2013). Describing the immense potential of intersectionality to explore social problems, in the introduction of her book Patricia Hill Collins (2019) wrote “Intersectionality emerged as the new way of looking at the social inequalities caused by colonialism, racism, sexism and nationalism” and “intersectionality is far broader than what most people including many of its practitioners imagine it to be” (Collins, 2019, p. 2). The initial development of intersectionality

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<sup>12</sup> “Structural intersectionality involves institutional practices and policies that replicate inequality; Representational intersectionality focuses on the controlling images of women, and political intersectionality refers to the lack of political representation of women” (Durfee, 2021. Pp. 648-649).

pursued to illustrate the intersection of race and gender in marginalising the women in the society whereas the further development offers the means for exploring the construction of race, gender, class and other disparities through interrelated social processes and practices that position groups differently in society as well as in organizations (Carrim & Nkomo, 2016). Because of this expansion of intersectional theory, it has been widely used to identify the causes and extent of gender inequality at workplace/labour market for many years now (e.g., Shaw, Chan, & McMahon, 2012; Tariq & Syed, 2017).

#### In Context of My Study

Considering the diverse workforce of the RMG sector, I have used intersectionality to explore the interactions between different social identities including gender, social class, occupational status, etc in determining the treatment women receive at work. However, the intersectional framework in this study has also been used to identify the factors that restrict women's access to the policies and legal framework.

### **3.4. Theory of Empowerment**

Empowerment is a multifaceted concept involving both individual and collective awareness, beliefs, and behaviour embedded in the context-based social structure (Huis et al., 2017). This refers to one's ability to challenge the ideologies of discrimination and subordination; also, changing the structures that enable and sustain unequal access and control over resources (Batliwala, 2015). Perkins and Zimmerman (1995) described empowerment as a process and outcome that results in situation-specific perceived control and resource mobilization skills of an individual (p. 570). However, Kabeer (2005) explained empowerment as the ability to make choices. She emphasized "disempowerment" meaning being denied the opportunity of making choices, referring to an individual's ability to make both strategic life choices (choices regarding livelihood, marital status, reproductive roles, freedom of movement and association, and so on) and second-order life choices (e.g., the quality of life) that follow the previous one (Kabeer, 1999; Kabeer, 2005). She explained the concept of empowerment through three interrelated dimensions: Agency, Resources, and Achievements; where Resources are the pre-condition to the process (Agency) of outcome (Achievement). Therefore, the interactions between Agency and Resources determines the achievement.

According to Kabeer, the sense of Agency entails people's sense of self-worth that influences their power of decision making and shapes their actions. Resources (can be both materials, social and human resources), that are distributed through different social institutions and

relationships, are the means of exercising the agency. Achievements are shaped by the exercised agency and its consequences. Resources and Agency enable people to explore their potential for living the lives they want (Kabeer, 2005). Kabeer (2005, pp. 15-16) further added two distinctive features of agency: “Effectiveness” of agency, meaning women’s competence to carry out roles/responsibilities, and “Transformative” agency, meaning women’s competence to challenge the restrictive aspect of those roles/responsibilities.

However, as much as we need to focus on the achievement earned through the interactions between resources and agencies, we cannot overlook the need to sustain this achievement. The perspective described by Andrea Cornwall & Althea-Maria Rivas (2015) is significant: “Accountability, Inclusiveness and Non-discriminatory” features of empowerment that allows the burden to be shared by all the relevant actors instead of burdening women by feminizing the responsibilities. Especially the concept of accountability is highly relatable in the social context of countries like Bangladesh:

*“The first is accountability, and within these two further concepts – obligation and answerability, both of which place the onus on the powerful. This has much to offer gender discourse. To talk, for example, in terms of holding to account rather than ‘involving’ or ‘engaging’ men offers a frame that goes beyond gentle invitations to join in to harder talk about patriarchy, privilege and power”* (Cornwall & Rivas, 2015, p. 409).

In Context of my study

As gender equality and women’s empowerment are two interrelated terms, incorporating the framework of empowerment in exploring inequality in this study led towards identifying the gaps in interactions between the elements of empowerment. I have used this framework to address the distribution of both tangible and intangible resources (interventions, supportive organizational practices, policies and legislation, etc), women’s access to these, and the extent of agency they have achieved through the resources concerning their occupational sphere.

## **CHAPTER 4. DATA AND METHODS**

### **4.1. Introduction**

In this chapter, I will present the research design I employed for this study. I will explain my ontological and epistemological views for this study, describe the data collection and analysis processes, and the measures to ensure credibility and ethics throughout the study. I will also discuss the challenges that I encountered during the data collection process.

### **4.2. Research Design**

This is a qualitative study based on the perspective of Critical Social Science (CSS). With the ontological claim of multi-layered reality, the critical process of inquiry goes beyond the surface to reveal the underlying reality (Neuman, 2014). CSS, thus, helped me to discover the reality by persuading a deeper conception of the innate connections between the societal elements (e.g. norms & values, knowledge, socio-economic stratification, politics) (Dent, Wong, & Bin, 2013). I have used qualitative methodology to discover the contextual reality by exploring the pattern of human behaviour, norms & values, and experiences. This methodology helped me to develop an inclusive perspective of the social context by allowing me to collect data from multiple sources (Creswell & Poth, 2016). I have used phenomenology to describe the lived experiences of several individuals illuminating the commonalities and convert those into a depiction of universal meaning. By using a phenomenological approach, I tried to find the answers to "what" and "how" questions concerning the participants' experiences and meaning of a mutual phenomenon, discarding any assumption (Creswell & Poth, 2016).

### **4.3. Data Collection**

#### *4.3.1. Study Site*

I have recruited participants from 14 factories in Chittagong (the commercial capital of Bangladesh) and Dhaka (the capital). This includes both international and local factories. By “international factory” I refer to the foreign owned companies that manufacture for international buyers, whereas, “local factories” are the Bangladeshi owned companies that manufacture for both international and local buyers.

According to the unofficial sources<sup>13</sup>, there are over 3000 factories in different belts of Dhaka and around 1000 in Chittagong, including the BGMEA/BKMEA registered and non-registered factories. I selected Chittagong as the study site as it is my hometown, hence, the target settings of data collection were better accessible for me. However, as I was unable to travel to Bangladesh with the deteriorated COVID-19 situation, it was hard to get the participants online from Chittagong only. Therefore, I included Dhaka to recruit a sufficient number of participants.

#### *4.3.2. Participants and Recruitment*

I have recruited 26 participants, including both males and females. The inclusion of men was done because I believe their experiences, observations, and perceptions regarding the topic are very crucial to explore gender roles and discrimination.

17 of the participants participated in in-depth individual interviews and 9 in the FGDs. The number of factories in Bangladesh and the range of departments in these factories has contributed to the recruitment of a relatively high number of participants. Although it was not possible to cover every department, I tried to cover the most common departments to avoid oversimplification or generalization of the research problem.

In addition to the participants who are from different positions in the office and factory settings (including the managers), I have recruited some participants from TU, national-level authoritative bodies, and NGOs as key informants. I have divided the participants into three different categories depending on their roles, positions, and the type of data I was looking for:

*The Office and the Factory Workers-* Female office workers are most often left out as research subjects, but were included in this study. The participants have been divided into two separate groups: Male and Female workers (office and factory) and Female Factory Workers.

*Participants from Managerial Positions-* This group was included in order to explore the decisions and policies that are in the place. The interviews with this group were also used as part of triangulation to verify/compare the information I got from the office workers and factory workers.

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<sup>13</sup> There was no latest data available about the number, hence, a few of my participants confirmed this from their own sources.



*Key Informants*- This group was included to explore their roles and action plans to deal with the issues that the females encounter at the workplace, and to what degree they work to empower the workers in terms of achieving gender equalities.

**Table 1: Male and Female Workers (office and factory)**

Individual Interviews	Factory Type/ Study Site	Position	Sex	Age	Name
	Dhaka/International Factory	Merchandiser	Male	32	Arzu
	Chittagong/International Factory	(Former) HR Executive	Female	32	Jinia
	Chittagong/International Factory	Procurement Officer	Female	27	Adrita
	Chittagong/International Factory	HR Executive	Male	34	Joy
	Chittagong/ Local Factory	Former Merchandiser	Female	29	Ishika
	Dhaka/Local Factory	Former J. Executive	Female	29	Kim
	Dhaka/Local Factory	Procurement Engineer	Female	32	Nazla
	Dhaka/Local Factory	Senior sewing operator	Female	25	Meena
	Dhaka/Local Factory	Senior sewing operator	Female	23	Julie

**Table 2: Female Factory Workers**

	Study Site/ Factory Type	Position	Age	Name
FGD 1	Chittagong/ Local Factory	Quality Control Helper	33	Shefa
	Chittagong/ Local Factory	Senior Operator	27	Kohinoor
	Chittagong/ Local Factory	Senior Operator	29	Bipasha
	Chittagong/ Local Factory	Sewing Operator	33	Tanni
FGD 2	Chittagong/ Local Factory	Helper	32	Shawon
	Chittagong/ Local Factory	Finishing Operator	24	Maisha
	Chittagong/ Local Factory	Helper	19	Fahmida
	Chittagong/ Local Factory	Overlock operator	31	Tahira
	Chittagong/International Factory	Overlock Operator	45	Asma

**Table 3: Participants from Managerial Position**

	Study Site/ Factory Type	Position	Sex	Age	Name
Individual	Chittagong/ International Factory	Deputy Production Manager	Male	28	Farhad
	Chittagong/ International Factory	Production Manager	Male	28	Amit
	Chittagong/ Local Factory	A. General Manager	Female	45	Reeta
	Chittagong/ Local Factory	HR manager	Male	35	Misbah
	Dhaka/Local Factory	Production Manager	Male	32	Ronnie

**Table 4: Key Informant- Representatives from Authoritative Organization/TU/NGO**

Individual Interviews	Affiliation	Position	Sex	Age	Name
	INGO	Project Coordinator	Female	33	Rebeka
	BKMEA	Deputy Secretary	Male	41	Himadri
	TUs Federation	Leader	Male	36	Maruf

#### 4.3.2.1. Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

*Department and Position-* There is a range of different departments in both offices and the factories as well, and inequalities vary from department to department. So, it seemed crucial to me to include more than one participant from the most common departments to avoid oversimplification and generalization of the issues.

*Knowledge about “gender equality”-* Several potential participants did not have a clear idea about (gender) inequality, hence, it was not easy for them to be a part of a conversation. Many of them were aware of the discriminations but owing to the lack of education they do not see the role of their gender in this. The lack of knowledge (or the tendency to overlook) regarding gendered aspects applied to the potential participants from managerial positions as well. Moreover, some of them believe that since the readymade garments sector is highly female-oriented, there can never be discrimination against women. This was disregarding the fact that they had been provided with the information letter and I had further explained the topic during the conversation. Therefore, the lack of a minimum idea about gender equality was an exclusion criterion for this study. Although it felt nice to educate people on this topic, I needed to consider the time constraint I had.

#### 4.3.2.2. Recruitment Strategy

Considering the context and sensitivity of the research topic, I have used snowball sampling to recruit participants. This was a tough process as I had to recruit the participants online due to the travel restrictions in the COVID-19 situation. The target group and the possible gatekeepers were already so stressed in their personal and professional lives that it took them a while to respond resulting in a more time-consuming recruitment process than expected. I used social media platforms (e.g., Facebook and Facebook messenger) to reach out to as many people as possible through posting in different groups and messaging to relevant Facebook pages. Following the response, I started to spread my network. I had to take assistance from my friends and family besides the gatekeepers especially, to recruit the factory workers who do not have internet access.

#### 4.3.4. Data Collection Methods

I have used Individual Interviews and Focus Group Discussions for collecting primary data. Besides, I have reviewed documents (e.g., national policies, legislation, court rulings and international labour conventions) as a source of secondary data.

### *Interviews*

I adopted qualitative (online) interviews as these are a means to explore the participants' lived experiences from their perspective (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2009). I have been able to choose from various forms of interviews that are flexible, easy to start with and fit my study purpose. Considering the research problem, the purpose of the interview, and the epistemology of my study (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2009), I opted for open-ended and semi-structured interviews. The interviews were conducted in Bengali to receive the most authentic expression and to avoid any misunderstanding caused by the language barrier. Also, I believe speaking in the native language is empowering when it comes to voice our opinion. The media for the interviews was (video and audio calling) Zoom (encrypted by the university itself), WhatsApp, Skype, Facebook messenger and IMO.

### *In-depth Individual Interviews*

My priority was to unveil the context-specific attributes related to the research problem other than generalizing the whole scenario. Therefore, besides gender discrimination in terms of recruitment, payment, promotion, and other benefits, the individual interviews in this study covered issues like harassment at work, female participation/voice in the TUs and workers associations, stories of overcoming gender issues, empowerment etc. In-depth interviews not only worked as an efficient tool for this study to explore the phenomenon from the participant's view (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2009) but also provided the participants with a comfortable ground for sharing personal/sensitive experiences as well. I could even observe their body language and gestures while talking to them which I would say, worked as an alternative to direct observation to some extent. I have conducted 17 individual interviews. The interviews lasted between 45 minutes to slightly over 2 hours. The average duration of the interviews was around an hour.

### *Focus Group Discussions (FGD)*

The two FGDs covered issues including the participants' perception of gender equality, their expectations, factory policies regarding gender issues, programs/initiatives by NGOs and respective TUs, comparisons between the factories (as the participants were from different factories/companies), etc. I chose FGDs because this is considered an economic, cumulative, and stimulating tool for qualitative data collection (Punch, 2013). FGDs are an effective tool for exploring explore the deep-rooted societal norms, behaviour in the research setting and thus helped to unveil multiple dimensions of the context in a short spell. FGDs have been useful in

this study for far-reaching knowledge construction through the open interaction of many participants simultaneously. It allowed a few participants, including the marginalised or minor ones to express their opinion freely (Neuman, 2014, pp. 471-472). Participants in FGDs were more vocal about sensitive issues like harassment in comparison to the participants of individual interviews. I would argue the FGDs created a better sense of unity and belongingness among the participants; this was fostered through the commonality they share in terms of occupation and experiences, as Jakobsen (2012) also emphasised. Moreover, FGDs provided a ground for further debate and open discussions in this study. For example, comparing the status in different factories was not a part of my study but when one of the participants started to talk about this, the rest of them also took part in the discussion spontaneously! Also, a few participants helped others to talk about incidents like assault. This, indubitably, helped me to find a newer insight, as I had expected when choosing this tool. The first FGD lasted for only about 42 minutes with 4 participants, and the second one lasted for over 1 hour 35 minutes with 5 participants. It should be noted that during the first FGD the participants were more comfortable answering the questions individually or through someone else as representative rather than having a discussion, which is a relatively common weakness of FGD as a method (Jakobsen, 2012, pp. 117-120).

#### *Reviewing Documents*

My intention of reviewing documents was to explore the structural and policy gaps related to the research problem, and also to have a better understanding of the future course of action in terms of achieving equality at the workplace. Initially, I planned to review documents like government policies/legislation, bilateral trade agreements, action plans & reports from the advocacy organizations, factory policies, agenda of TUs, etc. However, considering the confidentiality of most of the mentioned documents, I managed to have access to very few of them including the National Women Development Policy (2011, inspired by CEDAW 1979), High Court's ruling on harassment at the workplace (2009), Bangladesh Labour Law, and relevant ILO conventions. The list of analysed documents has been attached as an appendix (A.1.2).

#### *4.3.5. Data Accumulation and Management*

As I have conducted the interviews on online platforms, I mostly used the default recording options of the particular platform instead of using a separate device for audio recording to record the conversations. For instance, Zoom and Skype offer recording features whilst the other media (Facebook messenger, WhatsApp, and IMO) do not. So, I had to use my cell phone

and laptop for recording. Two of the participants did not permit me to record the conversations, and I, therefore, used rapid note taking.

Recording helped me to focus on the conversation, but considering potential technical difficulties, I also used a notebook for jotting down some specific points for further clarification and asking more probing questions. In some cases, I jotted down the type of interaction I had with the participants, besides their notable expressions while talking.

I have saved the recordings on a password-protected computer and after I was done with transcribing, I have deleted all the recordings. I stored the transcriptions and other relevant documents on the same password-protected device for analysis. Since the conversations and written texts are different in terms of language (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2009), I transcribed them carefully to avoid the minimum possible deviation of the narrative. I have moved the data to SAFE (Secure Access to Research Data and E-infrastructure) provided by the University of Bergen, as this study generated a few sensitive data regarding harassment, reporting inconveniences, and membership of unions. I stored the files in my google drive (which is again, password protected and has a two-factor authentication process) too as a backup considering the unpredictability of electronic devices. I have managed the data following all the required ethical procedures.

## **4.4. Ethical Considerations**

### *4.4.1. Overall Ethical Issues*

In qualitative studies, the worthiness of the study, informed consent, benefits/harm, privacy, confidentiality, anonymity, etc are the core of ethical consideration (Punch, 2013). Being the most common and effective method of data collection, interviews are subject to high moral and ethical criteria as participants' private information is collected for public accounts (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2009). For my study, informed consent was the obligatory part before conducting interviews. This refers to a written statement containing information about the study seeking voluntary consent from the participants (Neuman, 2014). I gave out the information letter and explained it to the ones who wanted further clarification before acquiring informed consent. The information letter that I provided to the participants contained an overview of my study, confirmed anonymity of their identity, confidentiality of their personal data, storage of data, involved risks/benefits for them, their rights, and further contact information.0020 Besides considering the personal (and cultural) context of the participants, the privacy concerns were

determined as per the General Data Protection Regulation in Norway, especially section 2 of the Personal Data Act. The letter was provided in both English and Bengali.

Although the participants were well informed (reading the information letter) about the interviews being recorded, I would brief them again during the interviews. For example, a few of the participants were not comfortable enough to share their experiences regarding the physical or verbal harassment they go through at work. I tried to make them feel safe to share their experiences but at the same time, I had to respect their privacy concern as well. The participants have every right to control the release of their private information and I respected this by adopting the required precaution to maintain confidentiality (Punch, 2013). All the traceable information has been anonymized and I have assigned numeric numbers to the participants instead of using their names. I have deleted the recordings after transcribing the interviews, as promised to the participants. To prevent any potential threat (e.g. losing jobs) from the gatekeepers, I did not disclose any personal details of the participants to the gatekeepers as well. Alongside assuring the participants of the proper protection of their personal information, I have informed them if they feel any of their rights have been violated, they can contact me or the relevant authority mentioned in the information letter.

#### *4.4.2. Ethical Clearance*

The Norwegian Centre for Research Data (NSD) granted ethical approval to conduct this study through the University of Bergen. No approval was needed from the Bangladeshi authority as I did not interview any government official or contacted the government department for data.

### **4.5. Quality Assurance**

#### *4.5.1. Trustworthiness of Research*

Traditionally, trustworthiness as a part of the rigour of qualitative research has four criteria; credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability (Lincoln & Guba, 1986). All these criteria are interlinked; the absence of any affect the quality and validity of a study.

##### **4.5.1.1. Credibility**

I have incorporated established methodology besides familiarizing myself with the research settings (through the literature and discussing with relevant individuals) before I started

collecting data to ensure the credibility of the study (Neuman, 2014, p. 126; Shenton, 2004, pp. 64-69). While preparing the interview guide, I emphasized the facts found in the relevant literature and the experience of the people I talked to before recruiting the participants. As my research assistant helped to conduct the focus group discussions, I had introducing sessions with the participants to build rapport and to be more familiar with their context. before conducting each focus group discussions. Additionally, I have followed the triangulation (cross-checking) of data by choosing multiple participants from one department besides choosing participants from authoritative positions. I prepared a detailed description of the contexts, cross-checked the interpretation by the participants while transcribing. I also had debriefing sessions with my supervisor for further advice, and incorporated the inputs I received from the audience during class presentations (Shenton, 2004, p. 67). As I had to translate the data from Bengali to English during transcribing, I tried to avoid any kind of misinterpretation or distortion of words. For the Bengali words that do not have direct English translation, I chose the best possible options after cross-checking with the respective participant.

#### 4.5.1.2. Transferability

Transferability, which means the applicability of the gathered data for other contexts as well, is another significant aspect of the trustworthiness of research. I tried to ensure the transferability of data by describing the data collection process at length (Lincoln & Guba, 1986, p. 77). This also includes the problem I have encountered during the data collection and how I overcame those eventually. I also provided a detailed narrative of the context as well to make the audience feel connected to the whole process. Considering the potential cultural difference between the audience and the participants, I tried to explain the respective contexts thoroughly (Tracy, 2010).

#### 4.5.1.3. Confirmability and Dependability

Confirmability refers to the neutrality and utility of the data gathered in research (Yilmaz, 2013). To assure the confirmability of my study, I have used triangulation as I already mentioned above. To ensure dependability, which refers to the reliability of data, I have reported the study process as accurately as possible so that anyone who intends to research the same topic in the future can acquire information in a similar way (Shenton, 2004, p. 71).

Additionally, I have co-coded with one of my classmates to ensure dependability. Co-coding was a collaborative process where I discussed with my fellow classmates and exchanged our coding ideas for similar texts to produce the best suitable codes for analysing the data (Creswell

& Poth, 2016, p. 375). Furthermore, as auditing the research process and the data is the key to assure both confirmability and dependability the feedback from my supervisor played a significant role in this regard (Creswell & Poth, 2016, p. 204; Lincoln & Guba, 1986, p. 77).

#### *4.5.2. My Role as the Researcher*

The researcher's reflexivity, positionality experiences, rationality, motives, etc validate the research s/he conducts (Crabtree, 2019). I am no exception to this. My attributes have been an essential part of this study since these affected the way I have explored the study subject, methods, outcome, and conclusions (Malterud, 2001). Besides incorporating my academic knowledge, I also utilized my perception and experiences of coming from the same society. I have lived in Bangladesh my whole life; I am familiar with the attitude and perception of people from my society to a greater extent. This influenced the objective of my research and the preparation of the interview guides accordingly. Being a woman, I have experienced gender inequality at work as well and I know a lot of individuals around me who have gone through similar experiences. This commonality has been extremely useful for me to understand the meanings of the participants' views. This also influenced my interaction with the participants. For instance, whenever a participant tried to discard any of the facts (e.g., harassment) related to the research problem I would change the way of questioning to get to the point. While I tried to stay as objective as possible utilizing my academic knowledge, my personal experiences helped me to balance between theories and reality.

### **4.6. Challenges During Data Collection**

This study did not go as planned due to the deteriorated COVID-19 situation as I mentioned earlier. Since I was not present at the study sites, it was impossible to conduct the interviews especially the FGDs without getting timely assistance from someone there. On the other hand, recruiting a research assistant was not possible for me due to financial concerns. However, my husband acted as a voluntary research assistant throughout the data collection process. The overall challenges I faced during the data collection process are described below.

#### *4.6.1. Recruitment and the Number of Participants*

It was hard to recruit people online mainly because most of my target participants do not have access to the internet or a suitable platform for communication. The time difference between the study sites and Norway made it even more difficult to communicate with the participants. Therefore, my research assistant had to visit some areas (i.e., factory and residential areas of the workers, local grocery stores, etc) personally to recruit the rest of the participants and talk



to people in this regard. This worked really well as a means of snowball sampling especially for recruiting female factory workers. However, some participants did not respond despite agreeing upon interviews. This made the recruitment procedure more stressful and time-consuming as I had to constantly look for alternative options. Following the research objective, I intended to recruit roughly 40:60 male and female participants which I could not manage to maintain.

#### *4.6.2. The reluctance to Sharing Experiences*

I talked to the target participants to build rapport and provide them with a sense of safety (protection of personal data) before conducting the interviews. Despite everything, a few participants, especially the managerial ones reluctant to share their authentic expressions and experiences considering their liability to protect the reputation of the respective company. Concerning the factory workers, the issues related to gender (role) and harassment are still sensitive for them to discuss with an outsider. Therefore, I had to build a mutual emotional connection by sharing my own experience and the experiences of my acquaintances at the workplace. Also, a few of my participants were recruited by senior officials (gatekeepers) of the same factories. Those participants were overly conscious during the conversation considering the potential harm from the gatekeepers. I had to assure them about the security they are entitled to as per the ethical concerns and my moral obligation towards them.

#### *4.6.3. Conducting Interviews Amidst the COVID-19*

##### *Conducting Online Interviews*

Whilst several participants did not have access to the internet or suitable device (e.g., smartphones), a few of them did not have access to relentless internet connection or could not afford internet services due to the low-income job, having pay cut, or being laid off during COVID-19 situations. Therefore, my research assistant facilitated a few individual interviews, and both of the FGDs with the required devices and set up; I was connected over the phone.

During the whole process of data collection, I could sense the difference between online and Face-to-Face interviews. Unlike face-to-face interviews, online interviews do not offer the opportunity to build an immediate feeling of trust or amicability between the interviewer and interviewee, I believe. The insecurity and discomfort among the participants (female factory workers) were visible in their body language, facial or vocal expressions during the conversations. I felt it most especially during the audio interviews as a few participants were

not comfortable being on the video calls. In the video interviews as well, the participants seemed self-conscious about looks or opinions.

#### *4.6.4. Time Difference*

It was hard to find a suitable time for conducting interviews, especially, the FGDs owing to the different time zone I and the participants are in. Also, as all of my participants are working women/men, it was not feasible for them either to spare an hour or longer. Therefore, I had to schedule as per their convenience which led to conducting interviews even at midnight or too early in the morning, for instance, 3:00 am (Norwegian time).

#### *4.6.5. Ethical Dilemma*

A great dilemma was created initially as some people demanded payment for being interviewed. Therefore, I discussed with my supervisor to be clear about the facts in this regard. To avoid the violation of ethical commitment of not “buying information”, I had to make sure whether the money they wanted is basically for being interviewed. If so, I denied those participants and for the rest, the response I received from most of the participants was pretty much justified to me. They were supposed to work those extra hours that they would spend on my project. I offered a gift (instead of paying them cash), as well as a travel allowance for those who had to commute to a particular place for the focus group discussions.

### **4.7. Data analysis**

I have used thematic networks for data analysis that helped me to achieve systematic, transparent, and comprehensible data (Attride-Stirling, 2001, pp. 390-394). I have employed NVivo to code and dissect the (interview) transcripts into parts. I identified the themes from the assigned codes to reduce the data into more manageable themes that neatly summarize the text. Afterwards, I arranged the themes as basic, organizing, and global themes based on similarity and coherence, to build a thematic network in connection to my research objectives. In the next step I described the themes and summarize the thematic networks for another level of abstraction in the analytic process. The data analysis table has been attached in the Appendices (A.2).

I will present and discuss the findings in the next three chapters following the themes of the data analysis.

## **CHAPTER 5: STRUCTURAL DISCRIMINATION: PERCEIVED GENDER ROLE AND BEYOND**

### **5.1. Introduction**

The structural discrimination<sup>14</sup> with regards to this study is highly influenced by the social construction of gender roles indicating a “collective interplay of identities, interactions, and institutions in shaping the gendered distribution of power, privilege, and resources both among and between women and men” (Berkowitz et al., 2010, p. 133). This influence is reflected through the organizational policies, structure, and practices in the RMG sector of Bangladesh. Although most of the policies seem gender-neutral, the employer’s (or the people in the managerial positions) discretion in implementing these policies is not only affecting women to access to employment but also their rights and opportunities at the workplace; both directly and indirectly. Different other social identities of women also have an instrumental role in determining the extent of discrimination based on gender. Therefore, this chapter presents a comprehensive overview of the current scenario of gendered aspects in cultivating discrimination against women. This chapter is divided into three sections:

- Discrimination Regarding Participation, Payment and Representation
- Discrimination Based on the Reproductive Role
- Discussion: Time for Expanding the Discourse Beyond the Marginal Workers?

### **5.2. Discrimination regarding participation, Payment, and Representation**

The discrimination regarding participation, representation, and pay against women in the RMG sector involves recruitment and segregation of labour, pay, and promotion. Below I will be presenting the findings and discussion regarding the conventional discrimination women face at both factory level and office level in the RMG sector of Bangladesh.

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<sup>14</sup> “Structural discrimination refers to the policies of dominant race/ethnic/gender institutions and the behaviour of the individuals who implement these policies and control these institutions, which are race/ethnic/gender neutral in intent but which have a differential and/or harmful effect on minority race/ethnic/gender groups”.(Pincus, 1996, pp. 186-187).

### 5.2.1. Gendered Recruitment and Segregation of Labour

Despite the fact that women have been highly prioritized in the workforce of the RMG sector since its emergence, a study titled “Problem Surrounding Wages: the readymade garments sector in Bangladesh” conducted by Absar (2001) showed that the recruitment was limited to a few positions at both office and factory level. The alarming concern here is, as I started collecting data on the current recruitment practices nearly two decades later, I have found a similar trend despite improvements in both national and organizational policies. This is an unexceptional reality regardless of the type of the factories. On one hand, female participation in the RMG sector is constantly increasing, recruitment, on the other hand, is still confined mostly to a few lower-grade (informal) positions at the factory and entry-level jobs at the office settings. Even during the recruitment to these handful positions, there are two aspects that the employers take into consideration: “*the nature of the job*” and “*the nature of women*”, subsequently segregate the job (responsibilities) based on gender role. The management/employers consider women as soft-spoken, submissive, and physically weak. Therefore, for the positions that require mental strength (decision making/ managerial roles) and physical strength (heavyweight factory positions), they always prefer males over females.

#### **The Experience of the Office Workers**

The office workers are usually recruited through written exams and interviews, therefore, the scope for discrimination during the recruitment process might not be common; however, the recruitment of women is confined to only a few entry-level positions.

Jinia<sup>15</sup>, a former HR Executive of an international company mentioned that she never saw any woman being recruited in a relatively senior position during her tenure (6 years). Whilst discrimination to have equal access to the job is highly attributed to prejudiced recruitment practices, sex segregation of labour contributes to several other concerns that include establishing stereotyped job responsibilities, glass ceiling, increased career dropout, etc.

However, most of the participants think that men are more adaptive and flexible when it comes to enduring “everything” at work; e.g., working extra hours, night shifts, or even commuting far using any means of transportation. This is another reason male candidates get a higher preference for office-level positions. But of course, the gendered social system also contributes to this, especially, the institutionalised social structure in most Bangladeshi societies that consider men to be the only bread earner, irrespective of women’s economic situation. This

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<sup>15</sup> Jinia quit her job few days before this interview in late 2020, because of inadequate maternity and childcare facilities.

also depicts the burden of patriarchal norms on men themselves, for example, as highlighted by Kim:

*“Managements think because the males do not go through pregnancy or do not have household responsibilities like the females in our society, it is easy for them to focus on their career or work. So, they prefer males for most of the posts. Also, they can easily misbehave with the males I think, and get away with that. But they cannot do the same with a female employee especially those who are aware of their rights. The females (at the office level) will take initiative or quit the job without thinking much because they have the financial backup from family. Whereas the males have the sole responsibility of a family, they will think twice before going against the bosses. This is one of the reasons I think employers prefer males. but I think these issues are really visible in the local factories.”* (Kim, Former Junior Executive)

On the other hand, for a few participants, their recruitment experience led to a different understanding of their “identity” as women. Living in a patriarchal society that determines their roles and responsibilities, they (the female participants) were expecting more difficulties or discrimination but eventually, they rather ended up being “*surprised*”.

Ishika<sup>16</sup>, a former merchandiser of a Bangladeshi Multinational Company, who worked there for over 3 years mentioned she got the job through a multiphase competitive exam. She could not contain her surprise after being shifted to her aspired department (Merchandising) only after 3 months of probation instead of 6 months.

*“...it was of mixed feelings you know! As a female candidate, I was expecting more difficulties but surprisingly, it seemed quite easy for me! I felt being a woman rather came out to be an advantage, particularly during the interview session. They did not ask me anything about my qualifications or anything relevant to the position, it was like an informal conversation. I eventually realized they were trying to appoint females who are smart and presentable, at least by appearance!”* (Ishika, Former Merchandiser)

She elaborated the term “presentable” hinting that being attractive by appearance is more advantageous than qualifications sometimes, especially when someone is dealing with clients or business delegates. While I am aware of the objectification of women for some particular jobs, Ishika’s experience depicts a complicated side of the reality in the RMG sector which seems to encourage female participation through objectifying women.

Not only that, the owners sometimes portray themselves as progressive and inclusive to attract (or retain) international buyers. The owners in this case recruit females in the conventional “male roles”<sup>17</sup>, but limit the job responsibilities based on gender. The women in such positions

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<sup>16</sup> Ishika quit her job around two months prior to this interview, because of the environment at her workplace.

<sup>17</sup> By this I refer to the positions where women are not usually seen to be recruited in the RMG sector of Bangladesh. For example, Floor Manager, or Engineer.

are not usually allowed to take up equal or somewhat similar job responsibilities due to prejudice like *women are not supposed to do men's jobs*. Therefore, they (women) do not have the opportunities to learn by practice or access to the training, which affects their career development, as mentioned by Adrita:

*“My (male) team leader thinks I cannot go for floor (production) inspection or visit because as a woman I will not be able to handle the situation there. But I think, without working on the floor directly I cannot attain any experience or there is no way of developing my skill in this field. I want to work on the floor as well. So far, I know the official policy does not restrict the female but then it depends on the mentality of the authority. They think the desk jobs are more suitable for the female rather than physical work even if it is just visiting or looking after the floors. (Adrita, Procurement Officer)*

However, sometimes the division of labour depends on the other sociocultural aspects as well. For example, the crime rate in society. In the Bangladeshi social context, men are considered the protector of women, therefore, the job responsibilities that involve security risk are assigned to men irrespective of office rank. Nazla is working as a Procurement Engineer in a local company (manufactures for international buyers) shared that she expected the management to have a preference for male candidates over her because of the “*masculine nature*” of the job. Her position includes procuring or dealing with machinery. Sometimes they have to buy machines or spare parts of the machines from local suppliers which requires them (the buyers) to be tough and proactive; one would assume that this a man's job to do, as she described:

*“If we need to go in person to deal with the local sellers, my boss will either send my male colleagues alone or send me along with them. It is because we have to carry a lot of cash... and you know, these places are too dodgy, there would be a lot of people who will not take a female buyer seriously. So, the caution is due to the environment outside. Also, such procurement is a day-long process including the timely delivery of the products to the office. Sometimes it is late at night by the time you are done with the whole process; this is why they prefer the males over females.” (Nazla, Procurement Engineer)*

The imperative aspect of Nazla's experience, I would say is that there has been a minor transition in terms of employment opportunity for women, then again, the gender role and stereotypical portrayal of women are still present. Her concern of being rejected from the job is also shaped by the social construction of the image of women that has been highlighted by Heilman (2012) as the *Descriptive* and *Prescriptive* images to define how men and women are and how men and women should be, respectively. However, the safety and security of working women outside the workplace have not been highlighted much in the previous studies although these are some prominent concerns expressed by many participants.

Another significant aspect of recruitment at office-level jobs is questioning women's ability to take up a job owing to their motherhood or caregiver role. This begins with asking “personal” questions during interviews to make sure women’s private life will not interrupt the work. Such questions include relationship or marital status, family planning regarding having children, etc. In some cases, the candidates feel harassed due to the invasion of their privacy. For example, here is what Kim had to say:

*“In the final phase of my interview, my boss asked about my future plan, especially marriage and family plan in terms of having children, SEVERAL TIMES! But you know, I faced these same questions in each interview I have appeared in the garments or textile-related sector regardless of the type of companies (international, local, or BD MNC). I felt so offended! This is my personal space. But at the same time, I have to accept that this is not something I can control.”* (Kim, former Junior Executive)

Although the struggle of women to balance between private/family life and profession cannot be denied in this regard, then again, the employer's prejudice about women restricts women’s career opportunities. (I will discuss more on the reproductive role in section 5.3).

Interestingly, Arzu a merchandiser in an international factory, mentioned the discrimination based on the family/reproductive role of women does not represent any forms of structural discrimination, rather this depends on one’s isolated perception about women. From his experience of working in three different companies for over 8 years, he believes the administration and the company policies have nothing to do with this:

*“I can assure you there is no policy or instruction, no separate criteria for the female candidates. Still, they (the candidates) often face unwanted questions because of the ideology the interviewer possesses. Even during one of my job interviews in an Indian company, I was asked a lot of personal questions like, why I am still single, when I am going to get married, etc which I did not like either!”* (Arzu, Senior Merchandiser)

The findings further indicate the difference in the policies or environment of the international and local companies. Nonetheless, there is not much difference between the companies from other parts of the South Asian subcontinent and Bangladesh when it comes to the organizational culture. The deep-rooted regressive cultural context of South Asian societies has been highlighted by Arzu. The phenomenon of cultural difference in a multinational industry like the RMG industry of Bangladesh seems barely explored. Although Alamgir, & Alakavuklar, (2018, p.298) highlighted how the discriminatory practices against women are embedded in the industrial structure in the Indian subcontinent.

Arzu further shared that his company offers a few specific posts including accounts job, welfare officer, quality or testing lab jobs, data entry, etc for the women, only because these positions

have fixed working hours; without any pressure for working late at night. In the social context of Bangladesh, it is still not common that a woman will stay outside at night and move freely without facing safety issues. Therefore, the office policies do not allow the women to work during night shifts, he further added. This is also determined by the national legislation and ILO convention of night shift work for women, which the international companies in the EPZ areas follow. Although the cautions are taken to protect women from unpleasant incidents, nonetheless, these delimit women's employment opportunities at the office-level positions.

### **The Experience of the Factory Workers**

Reportedly, at the factory level, the recruitment happens as per the skills and experience of the candidates. Nonetheless, besides the heavyweight works, nearly all the senior posts like in charge or supervisor, are occupied by males. Whilst many participants find it natural considering the "difference" in physical strength and overall qualifications of men, there were a few participants who feel that there is some prejudice that influences structural discrimination. Interestingly, while on one hand women's submissive nature is one of the main attractions for certain positions, on the other hand, this is one reason that women are not considered for the leading positions. With regard to this, Tanni had this to say:

*"A person needs to be rough, and sometimes, a little bit abusive to survive in the RMG sector which may not be possible for the females. Because we are soft-spoken and more kind-hearted (compared to the men), we are unable to "coerce" the workers to fulfil the daily target. So, being the supervisor if someone fails to make the workers finish the orders on time this will affect the productivity, why would the management prefer you to be in that post?" (Tanni, Sewing Operator)*

As we can see the descriptive gender stereotypes- "*what men and women are*" becomes very imperative for the factory level positions as described by Heilman (2012). Moreover, men are considered as "quick learners" and efficient at technical works because of their experience as well. The management mostly prefers experience over academic qualification, especially in the technical posts. Unfortunately, women do not have such experience either, a few participants described, as highlighted by Shefa:

*"Most of us (referring to the rests in the group) here are working for over 7-8 years and we have never seen females with sufficient qualifications, be it education or other potentials (i.e., Intelligence) ...I have noticed the males are quick learners and proactive in comparison to the females. For example, if we are provided with any sample of clothing, it is the males I have seen, quickly understand it (the sample) and manufacture accordingly; even without any extra instruction, they are this good!" (Shefa, Helper, Quality Control)*



However, several participants, including Julie, a senior sewing operator of a local factory disagreed with this claim as she noticed the management always has the prejudice that men are smarter and more qualified than women. Therefore, they (management) determine the job responsibilities without even knowing who is more suitable for the task, she described.

Furthermore, as recruitment through referees is a common practice in factory-level jobs, the scope for discrimination during recruitment, therefore, also depends on the referee of the prospective candidate. Female candidates without any reference are highly susceptible to discrimination. However, several participants in the FGDs (all of them were factory workers) shared that the female candidates always go through the skill-testing process regardless of the references; whereas the males, in most cases, do not have to face this. A few of them also mentioned that if a worker is recruited through both skill testing and interview, s/he is usually offered a higher salary in some factories.

### **Response of the Participants in the Managerial Roles**

The response of the managerial participants in this regard also suggests the social construction of gender roles and how femininity is highly appreciable in this industry for various reasons. This includes women's limited capacity for political activism, as suggested by Ronnie:

*“We prefer recruiting females at the factory level; around 80-90 percent of the workforce is female you would see. They (the females) are disciplined, abide by the guidelines and, of course, most of them are very submissive. They usually try to stay out of politics, industrial chaos, etc. On the other hand, the male workers are usually seen as the root of every unrest at the factory because of their arrogant and undisciplined nature. I believe the management (at every factory) analysed this very well since the emergence of this industry”.* (Ronnie, Production Manager)

However, it is important to note that such portrayal does not only reflect women's submissive nature that makes them obedient and disciplined but also recognizes women's apathy to participate in political activity (Evans, 2017 p.1620). This alternatively translates to women's limited capacity for collective bargaining in this industry. As men are socially believed to be the strongest and smartest, the organizational structures are also influenced by this thought. As much as men's eligibility to be in the key roles has been glorified, men's “impatient” nature and unwillingness to take up “monotonous” lower-grade jobs like sewing have been illuminated by the managers. Misbah, an assistant HR manager with 10 years of experience in the RMG sector, had similar sentiments: *“Working in production is monotonous and mentally tiring. Such works need extra focus and patience, the females are conventionally known to be like that, so they are considered as the perfect fit”.*

However, the other 3 managerial participants argued that the RMG sector in Bangladesh has already past the culture discriminatory recruitment behind. They linked their claim to the government's intervention with the pay-scale for the (factory) workers after the Rana Plaza incident, 2013. The payment was the only concern to discriminate against women as initially women were preferred at the informal production-level jobs because of the cheap labour. The participants claimed there is no scope for labour exploitation at present owing to the fixed pay-scale determined by the government. The further findings, unfortunately, refuted this claim. (I will discuss more on this in the coming sections)

Additionally, emphasising the interest of the (international) buyers in increasing female participation at all levels of this industry the managerial participants reckoned the local companies that manufacture for the local buyers are still following discriminatory recruitment policies.

While the participants tried to defend the discriminatory recruitment practice specifically referring to lack of qualifications among women in terms of experience, skill, and education, a few also referred to the ILO guidelines. Reportedly, ILO restrictions on heavy work and night shift duty for women are two major reasons that many factories do not want to recruit female workers, as explained by Farhad:

*“I do not know whether you will see this as gender discrimination, but we do not engage the female workers in the tasks that are physically demanding. For example, some jobs require great physical energy, the advantage of height or, require you to work standing for long hours like 10-12 hours, especially in the machinery sections. So, we recruit males for such jobs. We follow the ILO guidelines regarding heavy and intensive labour-oriented tasks”.* (Farhad, Deputy Production Manager)

### 5.2.3. Pay-gap

#### **The Experience of the Office Workers**

The trend in regards to pay-gap is interesting at the office level positions: the gap increases parallelly with tenure, position, and promotion of the women. Therefore, there is not “much” pay-gap in the entry-level positions, at least in the beginning. But the scenario changes overtime during time-to-time increments, promotions, in the mid-level positions, and onwards. Kim shared a few interesting perspectives of office-level jobs when it comes to salary and increment. The pay-gap between two of her senior (female and male) colleagues is a minimum of 6-7 thousand (BDT) despite working in the same position with an equal workload. She also talked about something she considers as “gendered favouritism” that we usually tend to overlook:

*“...you know, there is another example (of inequality), for a promotion you have to be working in the respective post for around 3 years but one of the boss’s favourite female workers got promoted within one and a half year. This happens during the increments as well.” (Kim, Junior Executive)*

A few other participants also shared the same about favouritism when it comes to payment. They, however, also referred to the absence of a fixed pay scale for the (office) workers in the RMG sector.

Reportedly, the favouritism towards the female workers most often comes with some kind of unethical “compromise”, especially if the worker is beautiful by appearance. The qualification of women in getting higher salary or increment is not always valued. However, in some cases, even at the entry-level jobs (of the same position and equal responsibilities), the payment varies depending on the “fondness” of the top management irrespective of gender. On the other hand, in the companies that follow a fair and neutral appraisal system, the scope of the pay gap is low, participants from the international factories shared.

The buyers’ role is very significant against pay discrimination and irregular payment, especially in international factories. Some of the buyers conduct a routine audit to assess such discrimination, findings suggest. However, several participants disagreed with this and described the buyers’ role as only concentrating on basic things like the overall working environment at the factory level or workplace safety, etc. With regard to this, Ishika had this to say:

*“You know, the buyers mostly focus on physical safety and infrastructural things instead of equal rights, healthy environment or so. Although some audit firms will evaluate the overall environment their focus is only on the factory workers.” (Ishika, Former Merchandiser)*

### **The Experience of the Factory Workers**

At the factory level, even in the entry-level positions, the men receive a higher payment than women, be it the monthly salary or the hourly wages for overtime. However, the heavy works the male workers are employed for attributes to this gap at the factory jobs, several participants described. The problem arises when women get discriminatory payments for similar posts with equal skills and work. A popular notion in this regard is that men are naturally better than women for any job so they deserve a higher payment. On the contrary, women have to “prove” themselves to earn a considerable amount.

There are some exceptions too. A few participants mentioned in their respective companies, females are leading in terms of payment because they are well skilled. For instance, Meena

mentioned she neither has experienced nor noticed any pay-gap as the authority value and respect the skill better. She also receives a higher salary than many of her male colleagues.

However, unfortunately, due to the issue of irregular payment or unpaid labour, the concern of most of the factory workers was getting salary on time rather than getting equal salary as men. Especially when the covid-19 situation made it even worse for them, for example, as mentioned by Tanni:

*“Even after the instruction from the government regarding salary we are not getting paid on time and all three months (the first three months of COVID-19 lockdown). On top of that, they are dismissing a lot of people. But the females are most vulnerable here. For example, let's say a factory can afford to pay 10 workers, so the first 10 workers they prefer is male”.* (Tanni, Sewing Operator)

This study found workers (especially in the local factories) are abused and assaulted even when they ask for timely payment or an increment, or payment for overtime. However, with the interference of BGMEA, the environment has reportedly begun to improve in a few factories.

### **Response of the Participants in Managerial Positions**

In response to the statements of the office and factory workers, all the participants in managerial positions admitted the existence of a pay gap. However, they think there is not that much pay gap at the factory level because of the government interventions. At the office level, the pay scale is solely determined by the top management. Especially at the mid-level positions, as the increments mostly depend on the skill, experience, etc; the female office workers lack such qualifications, they feel. Participants including Farhad, Misbah, and Reeta shared the extent of the gap whereas the rest two participants disregarded the claim. Those three participants said the pay gap is still high in many companies but no one talks about this. As Reeta shared her own experience:

*“I have started my career here (in the RMG industry) back in 2001. I got a promotion within a few months of joining. But it took me 20 years of hard work and dedication to be promoted to the position (Assistant General Manager) I am today. You know, I never received the salary she deserved, not only that, I am still being paid lower than some of my subordinate (male) colleagues”.* (Reeta, Assistant General Manager)

Misbah candidly agreed to this stating the pay gap between him and one of his senior female colleagues of the same position. However, despite working in one of the key positions of the company, this is impossible for her to work against such discrimination alone, Reeta further added.

#### *5.2.4. Underrepresentation of Women in the Key Roles*

The findings of this study suggest the participation of women at office-level jobs in the RMG sector is still less than 10% (with only 3-5% female in the key roles). Whereas the number is a minimum of 70% at the factory-level jobs; even in most of the well renowned international factories too. Despite the overwhelming female participation at the factory-level positions, this study found the male-female ratio in the decision-making positions and other significant roles is similar both at the factory and office jobs.

#### **Why Such Underrepresentation of Women in the Key Roles?**

The reasons for the underrepresentation of women the key roles are different for the office and factory workers. However, in both cases, the participants addressed various forms of systematic discrimination in terms of office structure and policies that do not allow females to be recruited or be promoted to significant positions. Also, several causes contribute to the career dropout of women, resulting in reducing the number of females in some departments have been brought up by the participants which are described below:

#### *Restricted Career Development Opportunities for Women*

To many participants, female participation is not only about recruiting females, it is also about ensuring a safe and healthy environment for them, besides ensuring equal rights and opportunities to develop their careers. The lack of opportunities for women to further their careers is one of the biggest reasons that women are underrepresented in almost all significant positions. This includes limited access to skill development programmes, training, and promotion.

A few companies are focusing on increasing female participation in higher positions. As a result, the assessment for promotions is comparably equal for both genders now; since the women do not have the scope to develop the required skills, they do not get promoted.

Even at the factory level, the males are promoted to senior positions like in-charge, supervisors, controller, technicians, etc, as highlighted by Tahira:

*“Skill is required, but only for the females. For the males, they are appreciated even without skills. They are preferred for promotion and increment, but if a female worker can maintain a “special” understanding (a romantic relationship) with the line manager or someone superior, will get the increment or get promoted”.* (Tahira, Overlock Operator)

The response from the rest of the participants resonated with this. They mentioned that even though there are a few females in the senior positions at the office level, there is no female supervisor or in-charge in pretty much all the factories. Only Nasrin and Shefa, who have been

working in two different Bangladeshi companies for around 9 years, mentioned having two female supervisors in their respective factories.

### *The Interplay of Social Background, Education, Skill, and Experience*

The socio-economic status of women determines their social identities, hence, their access to resources or opportunities. For the factory workers especially, this has been one of the biggest factors to lag behind their male counterparts, as several participants mentioned. The findings further suggest that the workers come from the marginalised part of the society, have no option other than working at any given position against a minimum payment. They do not tend to protest out of fear of losing their only means of earning. Besides, given their poor educational qualification, the factory workers are not usually considered for the leading factory-level positions.

As the women are not provided with a suitable environment and opportunities to sustain long in a company or to develop their professional skills, lack of technical skill and experiences are also major factors to hinder their career development. These are the reasons they do not sustain in one factory for long to be considered for a promotion with enhanced skills or experiences. This applies to both factory and office workers.

### *Unjust Workload and Compelled Overtime Affecting the Balance Between the Personal and Professional life*

Surviving in the RMG sector is very challenging for women from every possible aspect, especially due to their family responsibilities. Besides all the attributing inequalities that affect their career (in terms of payment, representation, overall rights, and opportunities), the long working hours against only one day off make it very difficult for most of them to balance between personal and professional life.

Every participant regardless of their position and gender has expressed the same view about the intense working hours and extra hours as they have to work more than 8 hours a day besides the compulsory overtime (a minimum of 2 hours) and (uncertain) extra hours during shipments of products. Especially in the local factories as they try to build their reputation to attract foreign buyers:

*“Ever since the government intervened with the minimum wage (legislation), many companies have withdrawn the system of (compelled) overtime. But we still have to work extra hours which most often is unpaid if the target is not fulfilled; in the previous local factory (with foreign buyers) I worked, they did not pay me for a lot of hours. In some months my overtime crossed 30 hours but at the end of the month, I would receive payment for only 10 hours. The male*

*workers also face the same but never to the extent we face. I have been through physical assault as I refused compelled overtime once.”* (Shefa, Helper, Quality Control)

FGDs participants have also discussed their experiences about unpaid overtime. Sometimes, BGMEA intervenes upon receiving reports on compelled overtime or assaults, however, a lot of (female) workers do not have sufficient information on reporting to this body which ultimately accelerates career dropout. Also, the factories that are not registered with BGMEA the situation is reportedly even worse there. A few participants mentioned in those factories unpaid or compelled overtime is not even a concern as the workers do not want to lose their job.

On the other hand, in spite of complying well with labour standards, the workload in the international factories is not less either, rather the authority creates a bit of a tricky situation to compel the workers in extra work. As the female workers do not tend to protest, again, they are the ones to suffer the most, for example, as explained by Adrita:

*“The authority doesn’t force you directly but they will not spare to pinch you repeatedly if you refuse to work extra hours. Still, you know, the females are more submissive than the males so they do not say NO to compelled overtime. The situation is dire in the Bangla garments (the local factories)”.* (Adrita, Procurement Officer)

Although some companies do not allow females to work after 8 to avoid any unpleasant situation at work and also considering the security issues outside, the total (daily) working hours are extensive there as well. Despite this overload of work that goes against the national law, the practice has become normal due to the lack of supervision from the responsible stakeholder including the certification bodies, buyers and the state. However, Arzu refused to label the compulsory extra hours as Compelled Overtime: *“...we have to work for two fixed extra hours and then we can work more if we want (two hours at most) but no female can work after 5 pm”*, he explained.

#### *Work Atmosphere and Support System for the Female Workers*

The hostile atmosphere in the workplace, alternatively, inadequate support for the female workers has been also addressed by both male and female participants of this study (especially by Ishika, Adrita, and Arzu). Several female participants mentioned they go through extensive scrutiny and there has always been constant pressure on them to prove their worth as office workers, unlike their male colleagues. If someone is late to come to the office three days a month, the person would be considered absent for one day irrespective of the amount of delayed

time. Asma, the overlook operator of an international factory, described the way the supervisors use even a minor mistake to punish or dismiss the mostly female workers:

*“One of my female colleagues took 10 minutes off to offer her prayers after fulfilling the daily target, but one of the bosses came to visit the floor at that moment and found her absent on the floor. Eventually, she received a written warning besides being shown absent with a pay cut for that whole day! ...the other day I was 10 minutes late to the office due to hartal (picketing) so, I was sent back home by the supervisor that day. I reported to BGMEA afterward. BGMEA asked me to get a few witnesses. I did accordingly but the scenario changed after the BGMEA authority visited our office ...it is of no use even to report to them because they have a **special liaison** (with the management). The office even did not offer me the due compensation I was supposed to get as per the (office) policies. But men get this (compensation) without even involving BGMEA because they can shout and threaten the authority. The workers union of the factory did not help me either saying I am not a worker of the company anymore.”* (Asma, Overlook Operator)

This similar theme has been explored by Alamgir and Alakavuklar (2020) as well in some factories based in Dhaka, but such rigid rules persist in more or less all factories across the country. However, the participants shared sometimes the male workers also face this but considering their “fierce” nature the authority does not take any chance to bother them to avoid further chaos.

### **Response of the Participants in the Managerial Roles**

Upon being asked about less female participation and promotion, likewise the other male participants, the managerial participants also tried to defend their respective company policies and highlighted a few traits in the women themselves that do not allow themselves to progress. While two participants questioned the qualification of the female candidates in terms of educational and occupational experiences, the rest of them talked about the lack of ambition among the women to develop their career. For example, Misbah remarked:

*“...currently we are trying to maintain a balanced ratio of office workers in terms of gender. This is of course an influence of the buyers, but we are also aware of the significant terms like “gender equality” “gender sensitivity”! Unfortunately, we do not receive that many applications from the “qualified” female candidates. Just a few days back we published a vacancy for a junior executive post and received around two thousand applications. Surprisingly the number of female candidates was less than 100. That too not many of them could meet the educational and professional requirements”.* (Misbah, HR Manager)

Then again, they also feel that the work environment, pay gap, inadequate facilities for the female office workers, etc have been contributing to the lack of experience of the females as they do not sustain the long time to be promoted or recruited to higher positions. Two of the



managerial participants shared the organizational structure also never supports the females to be in the decision-making roles.

*“...I have noticed the (top) management determines some specific positions for the females: Quality Control, Computer Operator, Artwork, Supply Chain- placing orders, procurement, Digital Communication, Finance, HR- welfare, training and recruitment, Receptionist, etc. A very few of these positions will offer you to reach higher positions eventually”.* (Farhad, Deputy Production Manager)

The participants (including Reeta, Farhad, and Misbah) have been very critical of women as they feel women are not (self) motivated/ambitious and dedicated enough to reach the higher positions. Reeta in particular, was very vocal about this stating most of the female office workers she has come across so far are not progressive and dedicated.

Amit, a floor manager of an international factory, brought another perspective in:

*“Most often I see the female workers do not stick to the positions they are in; they switch the job very quickly. Reason? This is a male-dominant sector in the sense that all the power is vested in the males. Not every female can survive here. This is true for both office and the factory”.* (Amit, Floor Manager)

A few participants shared that the exhausting work schedule can be a major reason for the female workers to not be able to survive in the RMG sector. Reportedly, the people working in this sector usually have to head to the office at around 6 in the morning and work until 5-6 in the afternoon. They can never be home before 8 in the evening. Moreover, the mandatory overtime has made the schedule even more hectic. This ultimately affects the women, especially those with family responsibilities. This is why apart from everything, marital status, motherhood and child-rearing responsibility of the women have been very crucial to the office management regarding recruiting or promoting them to the higher positions, the participants described.

Whilst all the participants tried to respond diplomatically, Reeta mentioned that during assessing (performance appraisal) the office workers for promotion, no matter how qualified a female candidate is, they will always prefer the male candidate. This is because the male office workers are open to any kind of challenges at work, especially if it is related to working extra hours or working during the night shift or festive times. Reeta further explained the predicament of disproportionate male-female ratio in key roles:

*“My observation says most of the girls do not aspire for a higher position as this comes with the baggage of working extra hours and reduce their flexibility in terms of personal life. But I think when a girl joins (at work), she should know that she is a worker, not a Woman! If they*

*cannot get over their gender role themselves, there would be more and more obstacles ahead. You cannot always blame the environment or others. There was a time I would hear the management saying “we are not going to recruit anymore female; they are very reluctant to take responsibilities or work extra time, they lack dedication, etc...” see, the garments industry is a different sector considering the time and hard work it demands from someone. You must consider that!”* (Reeta, A. General Manager)

### **5.3. Discrimination Based on the Reproductive Role of Women**

Women’s reproductive role is one of the “weapons” the employers use to cultivate extensive inequalities in terms of gender, posing this role as a “weakness” of women. While the childrearing responsibility has been socially constructed to be women’s job to do particularly in the Bangladeshi society, the organizational policies and practices (both directly, and indirectly) make this role even stronger constraints for women to develop their career. Consequently, many women who are working in the RMG industry are deprived of their rights to enjoy maternity leave, benefits, childcare facilities, or facilities for lactating mothers. Moreover, of all the support provided, there is an extremely visible differentiation between the office and factory workers owing to the difference in social classes.

#### *5.3.1. Maternity Leave and Benefits*

The experience of women in the RMG industry is somewhat similar when it comes to maternity leave, benefits, or working during pregnancy. Whilst the international companies offer legally determined 112-days leave (BD Labour Law), most of the local factories (with and without foreign buyers) and Bangladesh-based MNCs usually offer 90-days leave. However, none of the leave schemes is sufficient considering the hostile environment for the new/lactating mothers regardless of work settings. As Adrita described:

*“You have to take leave 56 days prior to the due date, re-join after 56 days of delivery. Just think if this is sufficient for a new mother! How can she leave the infant alone and work, even she is not recovered fully! And in some cases, sometimes the new mother will get 7 days of sick leaves at most.”* (Adrita, Procurement Officer)

Whilst there is a great difference in maternity protection schemes depending on the factories, many workers are denied leave and get dismissed sometimes after reporting the pregnancy. The way maternity protection is being used as a means to terminate especially the office workers is a common experience shared by many (female) participants. Due to inadequate support from the management, the pregnant workers either resign or seek early leave from job. However, even if the leave is approved, re-joining the job is not guaranteed. Nazla (procurement engineer) shared the experience of her pregnant colleague who lost her job after

going on maternity leave. This depicts a lot about the scope of career development for women, especially those who have a caregiver or parental role.

### ***Office vs Factory Workers***

When it comes to other facilities that many companies offer, for example, special meals, providing multivitamins, flexible working hours, maternity cards, counselling etc, only the factory workers enjoy these. More facilities are available depending on the type of factories the women are working in but only from time-to-time medical check-ups are accessible to everyone regardless of their positions. Such discrimination against the office workers has created a sense of deprivation among them; they feel like their wellbeing is being overlooked. Several participants (including Adrita, Ishika, and Jinia) think their rights and opportunities are often compromised because they are not directly involved with the production; maternity protection is one of them. Even the support from BGMEA and BKMEA are also available only for the factory workers. For instance, a joint investment of BKMEA and Nutrition International supported by the Government of Canada, the NoWW (Nutrition of Working Women) initiative works to benefit the female factory workers, the study found.

In respect to the companies that have been part of this study, they offer paid maternity leave and the international companies also offer extra compensation or allowance. This implies the workers in Bangladeshi companies/factories do not have such benefits.

### ***5.3.2. Childcare Facility***

Inadequate childcare facility has been one of the major reasons behind the career dropout of the RMG office workers and workers. Many factories provide this facility to a limited extent with conditions, but the facility is provided only for the workers, not to the office workers. The conditions include the job tenure in that respective company/factory.

While Adrita highlighted the limited access to the childcare facility for the office workers, her colleague Joy mentioned their company does not restrict the office workers to have access to the childcare facilities. Rather, it is the office workers who chose not to take this facility as they do not think their children should be kept in the same place as the workers. Participants including Nazla and Kim also agreed to this statement; they feel like the facility is not upgraded enough, the environment does not seem healthy and safe either. The participants mentioned, in the existing facilities, the babysitter or the caretakers are not trained enough which makes the new mother overly worried about the safety of their children.

Due to inadequate support from the organization, the workers eventually, quit working permanently or switch the job, especially, the office workers. Jinia can be taken for an example in this case:

*“I did not think about all this, I just wanted access to the childcare room so I can continue working, but as an office worker, I was not allowed to use the facility. I am a career-oriented person, I never wanted to quit the job”.* (Jinia, former HR Executive)

### ***Response of the participants in Managerial Roles***

Reportedly, the tendency of dismissing pregnant workers depends on the mindset of the top management. In response to the overall situation described by the previous participants, the managerial participants responded diplomatically. However, the participants in this regard addressed the concern of the reproductive role of (working) women as sometimes this brings unwanted hassles for the employers. This includes financial burden on the employers in terms of maternity benefits and, short of workforce turned in a loss of productivity in terms of maternity leave.

For example, Farhad shared his experience of handling a situation as one of his female colleagues was granted consecutive leaves due to her wedding and pregnancy within a very short period. That caused extreme inconvenience for the management as they could not manage to find her replacement on such short notice. Reeta, on the other hand, shared a similar incident where the worker eventually lost her job.

However, as much as the companies care about the pregnant workers and provide them with a range of facilities during pregnancy, this is not the same for the office workers as discussed before. As Reeta previously shared about one of her subordinate workers, she also hinted that the inadequate childcare facility led to the situation of terminating that worker.

However, the participants including Farhad and Misbah mentioned their respective companies do not have separate criteria for the office workers in accessing the childcare facility, but they have never seen the office workers take this opportunity. It's more likely that because of the (social) class and many other differences they do not feel safe and comfortable to keep their children along with the workers' children, Misbah thinks. Unfortunately, none of the participants could inform if they have any plan to extend the facility for the office workers as well by improving the environment. Rather they questioned the interest of the female workers to continue with the job. Misbah put forward his opinion:

*“One of my colleagues would bring her baby to the office and place the stroller beside her desk. When the baby started crawling, he would roam around the office even around our desks as well; we never felt irritated rather we helped her to finish her (the colleague’s) tasks by sometimes taking care of the baby”.* (Misbah, HR Manager)

## **5.4. Discussion: Time for Expanding the Discourse Beyond the Marginal Workers?**

The findings suggest the presence of structural discrimination in the RMG sector of Bangladesh illuminates the embedded patriarchal norms in the organizational structure, and the extent of the “descriptive” and “prescriptive” stereotypes of women are perceived by the majority of the “male” decision-makers (Heilman, 2012; Starnarski & Son Hing, 2015). The discriminatory treatment women receive at work regarding recruitment, pay, promotion, and reproductive roles though cannot merely be attributed to “gender” but also different other identities including social class and occupational status, as supported by Adib & Guerrier (2003). The difference of treatment between the female office and factory workers strongly testifies this. However, the major concerns suggested by the findings of this study have been discussed below.

### *5.4.1. Prescribed Femininity and the Nature of the Job*

Women are considered apt mostly for entry-level or lower grade positions not because of any practical reason but because of the preconceived patriarchal portrayal of them, besides exploiting them as the most subjugated group of the society. The socially constructed feminine qualities: Submissiveness, Focus, Patience for performing “boring” tasks (according to the participants), Caring nature, etc are the requirement for most of the positions in this sector, as also highlighted in the previous studies (Anwary, 2017; Chowdhury, 2017; Nidhi, 2009; Dieckhoff, Gash, & Steiber, 2015). The differentiation between men’s job and women’s job in this context is a typical example of “doing gender” suggested by West & Zimmerman (1987), this also resonates with Acker (1990) projection of gendered organization where construction of gender practiced at the structural level through the policies and practices. Through an ethnographic study on a company, Sobairng (2016) also highlighted the role of organizational structure and culture in inducing gender inequality, in terms of promotion, payment and division of labour.

Interestingly, the factors that are contributing much to increase female participation in this particular industry are the same factors inducing constant discrimination against women creating the paradox of “highest” female participation while the gender gap is also higher. While the essentialization of women’s representation confined their participation to a handful of positions, the males are represented as physically fit, energetic, “tough”, quick learners, and born leaders, etc hence, they are considered apt to lead this labour-oriented industry as supported by other studies too (Islam and Jantan, 2017; Islam, 2016).

However, this conceptualization of men can be traced back to Kanter’s (1975) concept of “masculine ethic”<sup>18</sup> which showcases perceived superior qualities of men. As the findings suggest, the job responsibilities are also determined based on these perceptions which even widens the pay gap based on the “worth” of the worker. Lorber (1997, p. 12) described how this “worth-based” payment structure is defined by the “conventional worth” of the workers implying the stereotypical representation of women in the labour market.

However, although the scenario varies from factory to factory, especially depending on the type of factories, the local factories with or without foreign buyers have a bad reputation in this regard. However, the study does not have any compelling findings regarding the evident difference between the types of factories when it comes to recruiting or promoting women to mid or top-level positions. Rather the findings suggest a somewhat similar scenario irrespective of the factories.

#### *5.4.2. Gender vs Social Class*

Needless to say, for the factory workers, social class is one of the prevalent catalysts that induce inequalities in every aspect considering the socio-economic context of Bangladesh. The differences in social class, education, or occupational status do not come in isolation; for instance, access to education (subsequently, access to employment) is highly influenced by social class or one’s position in society as the control over resources is often determined by social relationships (Kabeer, 2005). Many female factory workers become easy targets as they are not educated enough, also, do not have the strength to take a stand against the inequalities they face. This connection between the socio-economic condition of these workers and vulnerability at their respective workplaces has also been identified in the other studies as well (Kabir, Maple and Fatema, 2018; Khan and Wichterich, 2015).

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<sup>18</sup> “The masculine ethics elevates the traits assumed to belong to men with educational advantages to necessities for effective organizations: a tough-minded approach to problems; analytic abilities to abstract and plan; a capacity to set aside personal, emotional considerations in the interests of task accomplishment; and a cognitive superiority in problem-solving and decision-making” (1975, p. 43)

In the context of Bangladeshi society, being a woman is already a disadvantage then again, if this woman belongs to a poor family this forms the most marginalized identity for her. The RMG industry exemplifies this because it is the only sector in Bangladesh that employs the highest number of marginalised women with the least educational qualification, poor economic background, and social support (Akhter et al. 2017). The female factory workers, therefore, are more susceptible to discrimination because of their poor socio-economic background. This indicates a simultaneous presence of both representational and structural intersectionality that have been shaped by multiple subordinate positions of these workers (Crenshaw, 1991; Durfee, 2021).

### *5.4.3. The Combination of Capitalist Interest and Patriarchal Social Practices*

The disproportionate participation and underrepresentation of women in the key roles imply the (seemingly) unbreakable glass ceiling for women in the RMG sector. This is related to the patriarchal social norms that glorify men's ability and demean women's ability regarding professional competence as these are evident in the organizational structure and practices (Acker, 1990; Islam and Jantan, 2017). However, I would emphasise the role of capitalist interest reinforce these patriarchal norms and cultivate further barrier for women.

The link between the capitalist interventions with cheap labour has been emphasised in several studies (Chowdhury, 2017; Islam, 2016; Salzinger, 2004), the impact of this relationship on marginal women is well known. The findings of this study suggest the same as the pay gap, forced labour, and undue overtime have been addressed by many participants. However, I would argue that the combination of capitalist interest and feminization of (cheap) labour is affecting both marginal and privileged<sup>19</sup> women simultaneously, however, the forms might differ.

The findings of this study depict how the owners/employers most often cash on the socially constructed gender norms and socially prescribed/described nature of women (Heilman, 2012) to discriminate against them in every possible way. The capitalist motto of yielding much profit against cheap labour makes this process easier as the organizations always seek cost-minimizing measures. Consequently, most of the low-paid entry-level positions are (unofficially) kept open for women. In one hand, the established prejudice about men being the

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<sup>19</sup> By privileged, I refer to their well-off condition, with access to all the basic needs unlike the marginal ones.

born leader restrict the women to be in the significant positions. On the other hand, if any women rise to a higher position (or to other conventional male roles), the reduced job responsibility would justify the lesser salary women are offered in comparison to their male counterparts. The similar theme has been explored by Kiser (2015) which showed the perception of men being more capable than women to be in the key roles, however, delimiting women's work scope reduces their worth, hence, the pay-gap established, as Lober (1997) described.

Unfortunately, most often we missed out on the impact of labour exploitation on women from privileged parts of society. The gap in the existent literature in this regard also strengthens this claim. Moreover, as one participant mentioned of being "presentable", to attract the business delegates, this implies the office workers are (sexually) objectified and utilized for the sake of profit yielding. Although this particular finding is not directly supported by other studies conducted on the RMG sector, various studies have identified (e.g., Adib and Guerrier, 2003; Flint et al., 2016.) similar themes on women's physical appearance for some jobs.

Concerning the factory workers, the issues of forced and unpaid labour are the most prevailing whereas, for the office workers the pay gap remains of the highest concern. However, this study suggests when it comes to the factory workers, the lack of opportunities to earn money, subordinate position in the family, and inadequate support system from both family and other social institutions contribute to their disempowerment. They cannot (and do not want to) protest because of the fear of losing the job. Therefore, they become the easiest target to exploit in terms of cheap labour, forced labour, unpaid overtime, and many other discriminations.

#### *5.4.4. Informal and Seasonal Nature of the Job*

In addition to typical and common forms of discrimination, the seasonal nature of the jobs at the production level adds up to the vulnerability of marginal workers, which has been discussed in existing studies as well (Anwary, 2017) regarding job security for workers, the findings of my study also suggest similar experiences of the worker especially in the local factories (mostly with international buyers). This study further highlights that the "peak hour" of production also induces forced labour and undue, unpaid overtime. The production pressure from the buyers is very instrumental in this regard as it increases the vulnerabilities of the female workers. The factory owners try to keep their reputation intact in terms of production otherwise the larger brands/buyers would cancel the orders. Even during the covid situation when many companies had due orders to deliver, it's the female workers who had to take up unpaid overtime. Furthermore, the financial loss of the companies during the COVID situation also affected the



female workers as they became the easier target of dismissal. Several (female) factory workers have been dismissed even without getting their due payments. The buyers' role, in this case, raises questions about their respective CSR policies and action plan to ensure labour rights. Also, this illuminates the need for a policy change at the organization level to prevent structural exclusion of marginal workers, especially, a proper documentation for the (female) factory workers are an essential so they can claim their rights in case of unjust incidents mentioned earlier.

#### *5.4.5. Reproductive and Caregiver/ Family Role: Are the Working Women Free to Make Strategic Life Choices?*

The reproductive and caregiver role of women has a great influence in building a higher glass ceiling for them, delimiting their access to employment or promotion to the deserved positions regardless of their competence. As the findings suggest, not only the existing (female) workers are being structurally discriminated against on the basis of reproductive or family and caregiver roles, but the aspiring female candidates are being discouraged during the recruitment process. Several studies have highlighted the discrimination against pregnant women to have access to employment and promotion (Stamarski & Son Hing, 2015), some others emphasised the hard choices a woman has to make in terms of marriage and having children if she wants to retain a job (Akhter, Rutherford, & Chu, 2017; Ahmed & Islam, 2015; Heath & Mobarak, 2015). Women especially at the factory-level positions even consider aborting the child although none of the participants of this study was comfortable talking about this; however, one participant mentioned she had to resign due to the inadequate maternity and childcare facilities her company offered. Akhter, Rutherford, & Chu (2017) presented data about the overall mental and physical stress a pregnant worker goes through only to save the job.

The inadequate access to maternity protection and women's hardship around the reproductive role has been identified by other researchers (Akhter., et al., 2017; Alamgir and Alakavuklar, 2020; Hasan et al., 2020) as well.

Such difficulties for a woman to make strategic life choices are contributing to disempowerment despite their financial independence (Kabeer, 2005). The inadequate facilities in the factories for pregnant workers, lactating mothers, and children despite having clear instruction from state legislation concerning all these direct to the mismanagement and poor coordination among the stakeholders.

Furthermore, the differentiation between the (female) office and factory workers in terms of maternity support (e.g., the reported medical support, additional meals, access to the childcare

facility, etc) has developed a sense of deprivation among the office workers as the difference in social class has a reverse effect as well on them. Due to their privileged social status, they are denied access to many basic facilities at the workplace which indicates discrimination among women owing to their different social identities. This phenomenon is worth focusing for further study.

As much as this differentiation is apparently based on the social status/location of women, several findings suggest the employers use this technique to exclude women from employment opportunities as this employing woman comes with additional costs. For example, the maternity benefits, which the employers are bound to pay by the labour law of Bangladesh and ratified ILO convention (C183). Furthermore, maternity leave also causes decline in productivity at both factory and office level positions. Therefore, reproductive role of women has become an imperative in their exclusion from labour market. Restricting women due to have a job or to have the opportunity to further their career owing to their reproductive and caregiver roles also indicates structural intersectionality as the organizational structure reinforces these discriminatory practices (Crenshaw, 1994; Verloo, 2006).

Even though, the existing studies I have come across do not present adequate comparable data in regards to the type of factories (when it comes to childcare facilities or supportive facilities for lactating mothers), based on the findings of my study I would argue that the condition of women working international factories and the Bangladeshi factories with international buyers is comparably better. Because these types of the factory are obliged to follow the international labour standards (e.g., ILO convention, Rules from Accord alliance, European Commission) to retain their trade certificate or international buyers.

## **CHAPTER 6: INDIVIDUAL DISCRIMINATION: OBJECTIFICATION AND EXPLICIT DISCRIMINATION**

### **6.1. Introduction**

In this chapter, I am going to present and discuss the findings on Individual Discrimination<sup>20</sup>. By “Individual discrimination” I refer to the inequalities that are not (necessarily) in the organizational structure rather it lies in the ideology and behaviour of an individual; such inequalities, however, have become inseparable elements of organizational culture in the RMG sector. This study suggests individual discrimination are reflected through abuses to different forms of gender microaggression<sup>21</sup> and physical assault.

### **6.2. Types and Extent**

#### *6.2.1. Verbal Abuse and Gender Microaggression*

Verbal abuses and gender microaggression towards women have always been a persisting concern in the RMG sector of Bangladesh. While many participants talked about this, a few chose to skip on this presumably because of the gatekeepers (as the gatekeepers were their superiors at work). Although they shared a few incidents that occurred in different other factories that they know of. However, the findings in this regard include verbal abuses, direct or suggestive derogatory comments and attitude, over scrutiny of work etc at both office and factory settings. Surprisingly, some of these behaviours are not even considered abuse/harassment in most of the factories, the findings suggest.

#### *The Experience of the Office Workers*

The office workers mostly face gender microaggression than verbal abuses. The forms of microaggression existing against the female workers include derogatory comments on occupational competency, leadership skill, or the “little” workload they have. To mention, many participants shared that a very common tendency among their male colleagues is to compare the workload between the genders. The majority of the participants mentioned such behaviours persist everywhere regardless of the types of factories. Interestingly, even if the female workers are superior to the males, they would still try to harass the females. As Adrita shared her experience:

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<sup>20</sup> “Individual discrimination refers to the behaviour of individual members of one race/ethnic/gender group that is intended to have a differential and/or harmful effect on the members of another race/ethnic/gender group” (Pincus, 1996, pp. 186-187).

<sup>21</sup> Defined in chapter 2, page 11

*“...you know, I don’t want to say I have not been harassed just because it was not physical. This happened to me several times that I am walking around the floors for inspection or so, the male workers would pass (indirect) derogatory comments on me. One day during the first lockdown due to COVID-19, I was visiting a floor and found a few workers not wearing masks properly. The masks were placed on their chin. I asked them to wear it properly. The moment I walked past, one of them whispered- who is going to listen to you, you idiot women! Most of the time they would comment in such a way that you will realize it is you they are targeting at but you cannot take an initiative against them because they did not directly address you.”* (Adrita, Procurement Officer)

Although owing to the sensitivity of the topic many participants were uncomfortable sharing their own stories, however, participants including Nazla, Julie, and Meena shared a few incidents that they either witnessed at their respective workplaces or know of many victims from the local factories. Of all these incidents, the one shared by Nazla was quite unanticipated to me. One of her former colleagues, who was the only woman in a higher position (senior manager) of the company was compelled to quit the job due to the conspiracy of one of her male colleague (supposedly, as the office did not disclose names):

*“Someone kept a clothing sample (meaning yet to be approved for manufacturing) in her bag. we are not allowed to keep samples without prior permission from the authority. Anyways...we have a digital scanner by the entrance of the office; hence, anyone seldom goes through manual checking especially, the higher officials. But surprisingly on that particular day, the manager (victim of the incident) had to pass through manual checking and the guard found that sample in her bag...although the office did not dismiss her, she had a mental breakdown due to the humiliation she faced, so, she resigned consequently”.* (Nazla, Procurement Engineer)

This particular incident that happened to Nazla’s colleague depicts the vulnerability of women higher positions due to their potential power over men’s dominance going beyond the typical gender roles assigned to women. This incident also echoes the “Power-Threat Model” that describes the susceptibility of women in higher positions in terms of harassment (McLaughlin, Uggan, & Blackstone, 2012, pp. 626-627).

Nonetheless, the social and educational background of the (office) workers safeguards them in some cases as they are considered to be more aware of their rights, hence, they can seek legal action against such incidents, a few participants mentioned. This implies the role of embedded class differences in Bangladeshi societies that make the workers from the marginal parts of the society even more vulnerable owing to their poor educational background.

### ***The Experience of the Factory Workers***

A common misconception about the female-centric production sections (factory settings) is abusing women is not possible here considering their superiority in terms of numbers. Unfortunately, the workers in these sections do not only face verbal and physical abuses, they

are also given unjust punishment in case of a little mistake or working slow. Sometimes the supervisors would throw chairs at the workers, making them work standing still the whole time, turn off the “ceiling fans” as a punishment for not being able to fulfil the daily target.

As Tanni described:

*“The male workers are privileged in this case, they can work the way they prefer, whereas we have to follow particular rules. We cannot even lean on anything during work or work slowly as these will be counted as “an hour late” (and the management will deduct money from the salary).”* (Tanni, Sewing Operator)

Moreover, the normalization of abusive behaviour with the workers deteriorated the situation. Participants including Julie and Meena felt the workers in the production floors are verbally abused most often but “no one takes this to heart”. Some participants mentioned that since the male workers also face abusive behaviour, no one usually relates this to gender. One established logic behind normalizing abusive behaviour is, this keeps the workers going which results in increased productivity, several participants suggested.

While the excessive scrutiny of the female workers affects both office and factory workers, for the factory workers, this is extreme as they are punished for even taking a break.

Reporting to the national associations (BGMEA and BKMEA) also does not work for the workers as these organizations can also be manipulated by the owners/management. However, considering the negative or failed role of the supervisors and the management, the workers developed their own coping mechanisms.

### *6.2.2. Physical Assault, Sexual Harassment and Assault*

In comparison to verbal abuse and microaggression, sexual harassment and assault are more sensitive to women especially considering the patriarchal social context of Bangladesh where often the victim gets the blame. Therefore, many participants were reluctant to share their experiences in this regard. However, a few male participants have come forward by sharing the rough statistics of cases they usually receive on sexual misconduct and physical assault. The statistics depict the number of physical and sexual harassment or assault is comparably low. For instance, Misbah mentioned receiving 3-4 authentic cases of harassment against several other misconducts each month, followed by a thorough investigation. On the other hand, Arzu mentioned he witnessed at least three incidents of harassment during his 5 years tenure at the current workplace, but he “heard” about many; a minimum of 10 incidents have been reported last year to his knowledge. Although sometimes fake cases are also formed based on a personal vendetta, regardless of gender. Arzu also highlighted the normalization of abusive behaviour and assault at the factory level, he talked about the improvement as well:

*“...initially it was so intense that sometimes the supervisor or in charge would throw the sewing machine towards the workers or wouldn’t let them sit in the machine again or take away the chair so they cannot seat while working if they make mistakes. The extent has reduced noticeably because the committee (an assigned committee to reduce harassment at work) started to visit the floor most often to maintain direct communication. Also, the office follows zero-tolerance against sexual harassment. Still, I have to say several kinds of abusive behaviours have been normalized over the years.”* (Arzu, Senior Merchandiser)

A common form of sexual harassment that specifically comes from the people in the key roles is the explicit proposals of romantic or sexual relationship in exchange for promotion, increment and other facilities. The “good looking” women are bound to get such “unethical” proposals, participants including Jinia and Ishika described. Based on their interactions with younger colleagues, the percipients believe the elderly men are more likely to harass women at work. *“The generation gap contributes to their regressive mentality”*, Ishika believes.

*“...you won’t believe even if they do not harass you physically or verbally, they will do by staring at you in a very inappropriate way which also I feel like some kind of harassment. If the environment was better and friendly, I believe many more women would have joined (and survived) this sector.”* (Ishika, Former Merchandiser)

As much as Ishika was vocal about the harassment against women, she also observed that sometimes women also take advantage of their personal (romantic) relationship with their male colleagues and blackmail/harass them to get promoted or to get increment. Ishika’s claim I would assume is one of the less explored concerns as I have not found any supportive literature yet. However, besides sexual harassment and assault, incidents of physical assaults are also quite common in the RMG sector. Both male and female workers face physical assault most often, especially in the local factories. A participant shared her story of being physically assaulted by the supervisor upon requesting an (wage) increment. Fortunately, she was able to report the incident to the national authority (BGMEA) with the support of her colleagues. This consequently increased the time-to-time inspection which lowered the rate of harassment and assault in that company. However, as mentioned earlier, reporting harassment does not always work, as the national authority often maintains a friendly relationship with the factory owners. therefore, the factory workers try to protect each other, especially from sexual harassment. As Kohinoor described:

*“...because we are a lot of females working in the factory level, we usually try to stand for each other. So, it becomes quite impossible for someone to sexually abuse you. But we can never avoid verbal abuse. The males face the same sometimes but when it comes to the females, the abusive language indicates the gender of course”.* (Kohinoor, Sewing Operator)

## 6.3. Measures

### 6.3.1. Organizational policies and Initiatives

The organizational policies and initiatives against misconduct or harassment are not similar in every company or factory. Despite the obligatory instructions from BKMEA and BGMEA, following the – HC directive (2009) against harassment, several registered companies still do not have independent antiharassment bodies. The instruction a committee should be formed with a minimum of 5 members that includes the owners, management, administration and the workers; if otherwise, the company registration with BGMEA/BKMEA might get cancelled if otherwise. Although the international factories and Bangladesh-based multinational factories are ahead of the local factories either with the foreign buyer or local buyers in terms of reporting and redressing such issues, most of them do not have an independent antiharassment body.

*“...we have an international body assigned by the European Commission, they conduct the audit in this regard. The body conducted special training on sexual harassment because a lot of our female workers do not even consider reporting inappropriate touches. But these are also counted as harassments, hence, should be reported. They also informed the worker about verbal harassment. The office workers were also a part of these programmes. The initiatives started back in May-June of 2019”.* (Amit, Production Manager)

Companies without anti-harassment bodies usually depend on the HRD to look into such issues or they rely on their compliance teams. These committees are commonly formed with 3-6 members either from management only or from both management and TU/WU/floor leaders. A few companies on the other hand follows open-door policies that allow everyone to report directly to the management. The companies having their own policies aligned with the national and international regulations follows similar measures when in this regard. They investigate the case upon receiving complaints. During the investigation period, the probable perpetrator is suspended for a few days. Depending on the extent of the offense committed, the actions vary from verbal or written warning to permanent termination. The cases with strong evidence of sexual harassment and assault are transferred directly to the police besides terminating the perpetrator. Sometimes the management receives fake complaints as well but they do not take any harsh step against the (fake) reporter giving the benefit of doubt to the accusers. Joy, who is working in the HR department of an international company, mentioned they have received 415 reports of harassment against female workers last year (2020). But he also said that at least 40% of them are fake (which is quite normal according to his experience).

*“...we understand that lack of sufficient proof may also make the complaint looking like a fake one. In such cases, we try to warn both sides- the accuser and the accused. Regarding the*

*authentic reports (with proof), the management follows the procedure after investigation beginning with temporary suspension of the accused. Depending on the extent of the misconduct the punishment varies from a written warning to temporary suspension or permanent termination. In case of verbal abuse, we warn the perpetrator first and they are given a chance to amend themselves; if they do this repeatedly, we terminate them. But in case of sexual harassment (starts from inappropriate touch), we directly terminate them after proven guilty.”* (Joy, CSR Officer)

In contrast to Joy’s response, it was interesting to look into what Adrita (Joy’s colleague) mentioned. The authority often tries to save the senior workers even if they are guilty. Also, some workers use their political power to get away with any kind of misconduct they commit. Adrita feels the scenario would have been different if there were an independent body (anti-harassment cell) to investigate the case of harassment. In her company, the HR department is solely responsible for looking into the issues of harassment.

This was disappointing to find out that despite the HC directive (2009) that ordered the mandatory formation of “anti-harassment cell” at all the workplaces, many participants including the one in the decision-making roles were oblivious about that. Only two of the managerial participants are aware of that ruling. Almost all the existing anti-harassment bodies or compliance or audit committees that deal with harassment have been introduced only after coming under the pressure of the buyers and the international certification bodies. However, even the companies that comply properly with national and international guidelines, have effective measures in place seldom receive any report. Therefore, in some factories the complaint boxes are set in the toilets (or common rooms) so that the victims can report secretly; only the welfare officers have access to those complaint boxes. For instance, several participants mentioned the management distributes information regarding anti-harassment measures through a time-to-time announcement, posters and stickers placed on the walls of each production floor. However, the office workers are again, not covered by such initiative. *“We hardly receive any reports from the office workers. On the other hand, from the associates (factory workers), we sometimes receive only one or two in a week and sometimes 3-4 even in one single day”*, Ronnie described.

The findings suggest, because of the patriarchal social system and the male dominant workplaces, the women lack trust in the system despite being provided with protective measures by the authority. Not only that, the fear of being blamed/misjudged and losing jobs retain them from taking a further step against harassment. The findings took an interesting turn when the statement of the only female managerial participant (Reeta) suggested internal sabotage from the management corrupts the investigations against harassment:



*“I think sometimes they cannot rely on the company following their preconceived notions or personal experiences. You know, if you (being the authority) provide them with every protective measure but you on the other hand, also make sure that they get harmed because of reporting against you or one of your favourites, who would feel safe to report or even discuss this? It can be the supervisor or can be someone from the management who intimidates them in some way, you never know! So, we should not keep any stone unturned. These are the reasons the harassments prevail even after so many measures.”* (Reeta, A. General Manager)

Reeta’s statement further implies, the management encourages victims to report to them and threatens the victims simultaneously, either to save the reputation of the company or out of favouritism towards the “male” perpetrator. She also mentioned sometimes the victim would report directly to the state authority or international bodies which might cause the company trouble retaining their trade license, this is why her company tries to offer every possible service to the workers.

However, while all the managerial participants were confident that they have taken enough measures to inform everyone at the workplace about the reporting procedures and the measures afterwards, a few of the participants from the factory and office were completely oblivious of this. Nearly all workers especially at the office ones shared, they have never been informed about any such measures in place. Moreover, instead of being proactively formulating or informing about their policies against harassment, a few companies (local, with international and local buyers) rather wait for an incident to be registered by the victim. The women are already reluctant in disclosing their traumatic experiences and such apathetic behaviour of the management discourage them more. *“No (registered) incident, no policy”*, Kim summarised from her experience as neither had any incident being reported, nor the office provided necessary guidelines or so regarding harassment at her workplace. This represents the contextual interrelation between individual and structural discrimination.

### *6.3.2. Helpline and Web Portals*

The workers are often intimidated and reluctant to share or report their experience of harassment. The idea of creating helpline and web portals, therefore, is to support the victims in the RMG sector, regardless of gender, so that they can report the incidents to a neutral body anonymously. Although this initiative came as a part of compliance instruction from international trade associations and buyers, a few NGOs have played an instrumental role in influencing them highlighting CSR. In addition to the hotline presented by the Accord and Alliance, “Asta” and “Amader Kotha” (*“Faith”, “Our Story”*) are two of such services for the workers.

*“In addition to the hotline from the international authority (Accord and Alliance), we have software to register such cases. We provided training to the workers on how to use that digital platform. We eventually signed an agreement with a telecom company so that they offer convenient and affordable schemes to our workers to buy smartphones with a very little monthly instalment.”* (Ronnie, Production Manager)

As a part of the grievance redressal system, a few companies have their own software for the workers to register harassment or discriminatory behaviour anonymously. Both BKMEA and BGMEA also have their own helpline so if any issues persist even after the inference of the respective management the workers can use that helpline. Unfortunately, the office workers are not offered such services although a few participants mentioned they are not sure if these services are open for everyone at the office level as well. Himadri, the representative from BKMEA stated they are working to develop another direct helpline for the HR and compliance department for every member company. In response to that, Misbah confirmed that both BKMEA and BGMEA usually resolve issues related to general compliance issues or disputes in association with BKS (Bangladesh Kolkarkhana Songstha), not harassment.

### *6.3.3. Training and Counselling*

Many women working in the RMG sector are not educated or aware enough to understand or question the individual discrimination that they face every day at work which makes them more vulnerable without them knowing, findings depict. Surprisingly, educated women are also walking the same path not because they are unaware of the issues rather, they do not know about the safeguards that are in place to protect them. Also, a very common tendency among women regardless of their knowledge is to hide the misconducts they face either to save their job or save their image in society or to avoid victim-blaming, a few participants shared. Several participants mentioned they would feel “empowered” and “safe” if they are well informed about the programmes and policies in effect against such behaviours, a they would able to take measures to protect their rights. However, besides focusing on the vulnerable group of individuals here, many factories also focus on the potential perpetrators based on their (management’s) analysis of previous incidents.

Considering the social and educational background, the (male) workers have been identified as the potential perpetrators by many participants from all categories. As Farhad put light on the need for education and training:

*“The fact is, this (RMG sector) is basically a labour oriented, skill-based sector which does not necessarily require institutional education or training (for recruiting the factory workers). my observation says that comparably uneducated workers are not well aware of basic*

*etiquettes. Their upbringing and social perspective matter here. In most cases, they are not even aware of the fact that their behaviour might not be acceptable to everyone. This is the reason now we try to inform them regularly and we came up with new policies.”* (Farhad, Deputy Production Manager)

However, this notion generally leaves the female office workers vulnerable and ignored as the management think because the male office workers are from well off background and educated, their female colleagues cannot be subject to harassment or other individual discrimination. Consequently, when it comes to training and counselling, both the male and female office workers remain out of focus. For example, some companies offer training programmes in collaboration with the government and NGOs regarding basic training like educating them about their rights, especially for the females. The necessity of training and counselling for the workers and office workers on behavioural issues have been addressed by the buyers, NGOs, TUs and national authorities; all these stakeholders claimed to make efforts for training the factory workers with a special focus on identifying and reporting harassments. Surprisingly, none of the workers (who have been a part of this study) has been offered such training so far rather all the training programmes are more or less about building and workplace safety. Furthermore, the office workers have never been part of such awareness training and they are not well-informed about the policies and legislation by the official authority. One of the managerial participants was kind enough to admit that, his statement as follows:

*“For the office workers, this (training) is not here yet, we need get trained by ourselves, especially in the local MNCs or local factories... and actually, the RMG sector itself is very backdated when it comes to managing human resources”.* (Misbah, HR Manager)

Although most of the companies have counsellors or counselling officer, not all of these positions are aimed at behavioural compliance. However, there are a few international companies that include misconduct, harassment or failure at job responsibilities as part of their counselling programmes. Female counsellor for the female and male counsellor for the male. (because the female would feel more comfortable sharing everything with the female but when it comes to the male workers, they will never respect the female counsellor/their opinion or leadership).

#### **6.4. Discussion: Normalization of Abusive Behaviour?**

While all women irrespective of positions in the RMG sector can be susceptible to individual discrimination, their intersectional identities involving the social class, educational and occupational status of women determine the extent of the discrimination. This study suggests abusive behaviour is considered as a means of increasing productivity, therefore, abusing

(verbal abuse, to be precise) has been a customary practice in the production level jobs in many companies. In a recent interview a Bangladeshi female activist, Mishu illuminated this issue emphasizing that even if it seems like the situation for the female workers has improved but unfortunately the extent of oppression on them rather increased. She further claimed that sexual abuse has been a persisting issue therefore her association is working towards eradicating this (Mishu, 2021). The severe vulnerability of the (factory) workers has also been highlighted in the existing literature as well (Akhter, Rutherford, & Chu, 2019; Hossain, 2012).

The fact that differences between the working environment of offices and factories, the types and extent of individual discrimination vary implies the intersection between different social identities (class, professional status, and educational qualification, etc.) determines how the women will be treated by their coworkers and management. While the female office workers are subject to serious gender microaggression, the female workers are more susceptible to verbal abuses, sexual harassment and physical assaults, if not sexual assaults commonly. Also, the way a woman from a relatively affluent social class gets affected by such discrimination or stereotypical gender norms, someone from a poorer class does not get affected to a similar extent. However, in regards to the office workers social status, and their representation makes them reluctant to speak up against the microaggression they face at work. This positionality of these two groups of women representing different social class and occupational status somehow makes them both subject to extensive individual discrimination.

Gartner & Sterzing (2016) emphasised that the victim of gender microaggression is more likely to face sexual harassment or assault, many participants except for a few were reluctant to talk about their experiences. Furthermore, the factory level participants were not sure how to identify individual discrimination especially when it comes to verbal abuses which attribute to the normalization of abusive behaviour at the factory level. However, physical assaults (for example, being beaten by the supervisors), sexual harassment, and assault have been addressed as sensitive issues by all the participants in variant degrees mostly because of the higher stake of losing the job, and social position is also very high. A Deutsche Welle report published on the work environment in Bangladesh also testified this concern, specifically about losing the job (Rashid, 2019). While the fear of losing the job is universal, the workers are more vulnerable to this considering their poor economy. On the other hand, the office workers are more concerned about being socially shamed owing to their social status that creates the complexity of “middle-class respectable femininity” highlighted by Ansari (2016) and Hussein

(2017). This is again, reinforce the “doing gender” concept Zimmerman & West (1987) described.

However, the abusive behaviours have normalized in such a way that most of the workers think yelling and abusing them are justified to increase their productivity although they feel bad at times. Unfortunately, there is no comparative research in terms of assessing this supportive logic for abuses, and how the workers perceive this. However, the vulnerability in this scenario represents lack of transformative agency among the factory level workers that delimit their capability to challenge this norm of abusive behaviours Kabeer (2005). This can be attributed to their poor education and lack of job security.

Interestingly, the difference in social class and educational background also makes a difference in the types and extent of harassment the (office) office workers go through, the findings depict. However, passing derogatory comments, abusing, assaulting or making sexist jokes questioning the ability of women to carry out the assigned responsibilities are some of the very common forms of harassment, the findings showed. Several other studies also explored this issue (Haque et al., 2019; Hasan & Mahmud, 2017). While several participants were reluctant to speak about harassment, a few participants shared how victim-blaming restrains the victim to remain quiet and continue their job or, to quit the job.

Based on the interplay between gender, social class and educational status, the individual discriminations mostly interpret representational intersectionality but, in some cases, this can be related to structural intersectionality as well (Crenshaw, 1991; Durfee, 2021). Given the differences of experiences between the (female) office workers and workers, perhaps the “intercategorical approach” of intersectionality proposed by McCall (2005; pp. 1784-1794) could explain it better, however, considering the scope of my study, I will not extend the discussion further.

The prevailing nature of individual discriminations illuminates the poor formulation and implication of the legal framework in Bangladesh which has been highlighted by the World Bank (2020) as well as their latest report on the Workplace indicator for Women, Business and the Law score. The findings of this study also support this alarming concern as the only potential protection for women from workplace violence and harassment, the High Court Directive 2009 is still not an established law in the country. Moreover, most of the policy and measures are concentrated on the factory workers, although the efficacy of these initiatives has not been measured by any latest study.

Coming under the pressure of the buyers and the international certification bodies<sup>22</sup>, the international factories and the factories with international buyers have either formed anti-harassment committees or activated a cell in their human resources department to deal with harassment issues, as the findings suggest. This could have been considered as a beacon of hope but unfortunately, most of the victims do not consider taking action against harassment because of the power politics and patriarchal norms as discussed earlier. Thus, abusive behaviour becomes a part of women's daily life in this industry, particularly at the factory level.

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<sup>22</sup> For example, The International Organization for Standardization (ISO).

## **CHAPTER 7: EMPOWERMENT: INTERVENTIONS, POLICIES AND THE ROLE OF THE STAKEHOLDERS**

### **7.1. Introduction**

A very significant objective of this study was to explore the role of the legal framework, policies and the relevant bodies who operate empowerment programmes, also, influence the policy formulation and implementation towards empowering women. Therefore, in this chapter, I will present the findings related to the empowerment interventions, the role of the Non-Government Organization (NGO) Trade Union Federation (TUF), Bangladesh Knitwear Manufacturers and Exporters Association (BKMEA) and the buyers. I will discuss the findings in relation to the policies, law and international conventions reviewed (see chapter 2).

### **7.2. Unionism/ Collective bargaining**

The workers' right to collective bargaining is indispensable for voicing their rightful demands at the workplace; trade unions are specifically considered to be the best capacity for representing the disadvantaged workers, the participants shared. However, this study found that a lot of factories in the RMG sector in Bangladesh do not allow unionism. Moreover, Trade union or similar associations are open only for the factory workers whereas the office workers have to rely on the respective Human Resources Department for their wellbeing. Below I have discussed the present situation of the trade unions and their role in supporting the female factory workers in attaining equal rights as their male counterparts.

#### *7.2.1. Trade Unions and Women's Voice*

Despite the national labour law provides clear instruction about the rights of collective bargaining for both the factory and office workers, the scope of exercising this right in the RMG sector is only open for the workers. Therefore, participation in the trade union or any kind of occupational association is open only for factory-level workers. When it comes to office workers, the HR department is usually considered to be the guardian agency. *“It (unionism) is only open for the workers. And on top of that, it is highly restricted for the office workers. If we do not abide by this, we will lose our job”.* (Adrita, Procurement Officer)

Maruf, a representative from one of the national level Trade Union Federations (TUF) confirmed that there are less than 600 registered (at the Ministry of Labour) trade unions in over 6000 factories. He (Maruf) has been engaged in activism towards the welfare of the workers of different sectors through policy advocacy and policy movements. From his

experience of working with the TUF for 11 years, Maruf shared various information about unionism. However, most of the registered Trade union are controlled by the owners which Maruf labelled as “the pocket Trade union of Owners”. In some factories, the management allows “Workers Union” which is an internal association works as a link between the management and the workers at the individual level, unlike the Trade union that is more of political entities having a connection with various other external association or federation. However, either way, the managements try to manipulate the workers’ rights by interfering even in the formation of the union committees, as Ronnie described:

*“We decide the candidates for the WU elections. The primary criteria for the candidates are to be disciplined and abide by the rules of the company, or else you will be denied the approval based on the probability of creating unrest at the factory. This is why most of the buyer also does not want us to support forming trade unions, unfortunately. However, we try to balance the male-female ratio because the factories are female-centric, but I have to admit they are not always leading.”* (Ronnie, Production Manager)

Now, this is a complicated scenario where several stakeholders are involved besides the owners and the workers. Larger buyers, local politicians, bureaucrats, and the law enforcement force mostly. The buyers do not want any interruption in production that can be induced through internal or external chaos; on the other hand, the owner does not want to lose the existing deals or ruin the reputation to lose future deals either. Therefore, the owners always make moves to control the situation by not only getting a hold on the workers (e.g., threaten of dismissal) but also the trade unions using their connection (build on monetary power) with the politicians or law enforcement or bureaucrats to threatened the workers of jail or judicial trials.

On top of that, the EPZ Act of 2019 created ambiguity in this regard as the act contradicts the findings of this study. While the act assures the workers’ right to collective bargaining (section 94.5), my participant Joy stated:

*“We cannot introduce TU because of the regulation we have to follow under EPZ law and also, the buyers also do not want any hassle in this regard. Because Trade union are more like political entity and they organize rallies or movement to forward their claims which the buyer does not welcome. Also, the Trade union actually interfere in managerial decisions as well, so the companies rather prefer internal committees. In the committee, I just mentioned we have 8 members from the management and 12 members from the workers of which the only one is male.”* (Joy, CSR Officer)

This leads to the assumption that the absence of the opportunity to exercise collective bargaining is affecting the trade union’s role in voicing the workers’ rights/interests. The little opportunity they (Trade union) get they always try to focus on collective things in general for



example, getting a timely payment (monthly, wage, overdue payment for overtime, festive bonus, etc), holidays, ensuring safety, etc.

The findings suggest, there are female representatives in a few factories from each section (at the production level) who deal with the issues female factory workers face at work, then again, under the close supervision of the management. This limited participation of women in the decision-making role of the trade union is another significant reason for the women and their voices to be ignored at both individual and national levels. Despite the collective effort from the TUF, workers associations, and NGOs to increase female participation at every level the opportunities for women are yet to flourish. *“I have never seen any female-led or female-centric trade union in my 20-year long career”*, Reeta disappointedly shared. Also, the women with comparably better education and social background show apathy towards activism or participation in associations, she added.

Rebeka, the project coordinator of the empowerment and skill development programmes in a global NGO that works with Bangladeshi garments factories, emphasised the willingness of the owners to comply with the maternity protection provisions as she knows of a few female workers who lost their job after reporting pregnancy, without getting their due payment. Respective Trade union tried to resolve the issues by negotiating with the owners but in vain. *“This is not always about the role of the trade union, rather the role of the owners”*, she added.

### **7.3. Interventions, Policies and the Role of the Relevant Bodies/Stakeholders**

#### *7.3.1. Interventions*

Considering the connection between “disempowerment” and poverty (Kabeer, 2005; Islam, S. 2017), the concept of empowerment is most often seen as a result-oriented intervention-based approach aimed at only the marginal community. The NGOs have a great role in this. In regards to the RMG sector, the NGOs in collaboration with the government and buyers, have been operating interventions as a means of empowering female workers for the past few years. Most of these programmes have been initiated after the horrific fire incident in Tazreen Fashion Ltd (2012) and the Rana Plaza collapse (2013).

#### *The Role of the NGOs, TUF and BKMEA*

The NGO representative Rebeka shared her experience of working in such programmes and about the transition that happened in their interventions. Initially, the programmes from their organization were focused only on skill-based work (ex. sewing) eventually the programmes took a transition after. Rebeka mentioned they offer training on developing basic work skills,

communication skills, workplace etiquette, occupational health and safety, harassment/bullying, domestic violence, property rights and any kind of violation of human rights. They currently run projects with companies that own 5 to 7 large factories with around 10 thousand workers. Rebeka seemed very hopeful while she discussed the success rate of their projects. She mentioned, around 80 % of their programmes have been successful so far. However, considering the glass ceiling in the RMG sector, Rebeka's organization also has a plan to initiate digital literacy programmes, leadership quality and skill development training, etc for the women to take supervisory/leading roles. Unfortunately, in this plan too, the (female) office workers are not included.

Although these empowerment programmes are considered as bottom-up so far, however, most often these come as “corporate” requirements from the buyers in the form of a collaborative approach with NGOs. Initially, these independent NGO interventions would be seen as an unnecessary interruption that might create chaos at the factory. With the range of professional skill development projects funded by buyers or trade associations, the NGOs are now able to draw more attention from the owners. Many of the companies are now aware of the fact that they can get a skilled worker through the partnership with the NGOs, which will also reduce their training and recruitment cost. *“The scenario is changing gradually because we have started providing skill development training which is directly related to productivity”*, the NGO representative shared.

Sharing very thought-provoking insights about “Women’s Development” and “Women’s Liberation”, Maruf described the TUF’s initiatives to empower women to question the social norms and patriarchal structure at work:

*“Women’s development vs women’s liberation: Women development as an ideology or programme is extremely involved with funding, investment, finance. So, there are many NGOs or so are working towards women development (rights, environment) with a special concentration on the RMG workers. But I do not think they have been able to break down the patriarchal structures.”* (Maruf, TUF representative)

TUF’s interventions involve multiphase training that begins with awareness creation on the rights and opportunities, training on the state law and human rights, collective bargaining, and associations followed by the training on philosophy (e.g., feminism, empowerment). Unfortunately, these programmes are offered to the workers only. *“We prioritize the female because we have to, considering the number of the female workers”*, Maruf explained.

On the other hand, the national level associations of the RMG manufacturers also operate Government-funded programmes that are also focused on the female factory workers offering

them employment training, legal help, welfare, training on gender equality, and workplace cooperation. For example, BKMEA is planning on more programmes to ensure inclusiveness and equal participation of males and females in the future, as Himadri, the representative from BKMEA mentioned. He further discussed their efforts in increasing equality in terms of participation in every department. He further elaborated on their support to protect the factory workers' right to collective bargaining and association, skill development programmes, etc. in collaboration with different NGOs and government departments.

As the study progressed, I have explored even there has been a constant exclusion of the female office workers in terms of empowerment interventions, which however has somewhat been an unexceptional trend in this study as well.

However, Himadri shared their awareness of the disproportionate male-female participation in office-level positions of the RMG sector. As a means of inclusiveness, BKMEA will soon be working on increasing female participation especially in the mid and top-level positions through the pipeline plan of integrating “gender into the management systems”. Referring to the official website<sup>23</sup> he requested to visit that for further information regarding their projects towards sustainable gender-sensitive enterprise management in the knitwear sector Himadri mentioned some existing initiatives to ensure gender-sensitive policies and programmes at the factories.

Maruf on the other hand believes the abusive behaviour persists because of the patriarchal social system in Bangladesh and abusing is a form of dominance over women. He shared his recent experience of a few “unnoticed movements” about recruiting more male workers in the RMG sectors. He said the females are chosen just because they endure abusive behaviour. Without “liberating” the women it is not possible to get rid of this toxic situation, he said. He denied seeing this overwhelming participation of the poor women in the RMG sector as empowerment of women rather, this exploitation of these poor women redeems “modern slavery” through cheap labour. He indicated the hitches of capitalism at this point.

However, Rebeka drew attention to a very practical reason behind such labour exploitation: the imbalanced relationship between the supply and demand of skilled workers.

*“Speaking from my experience, the demand for skilled workers has always been there but the supply is a lot lesser, rather we have a huge number of unskilled women who want to work. Here comes the role of cheap labour. Then again, there is another term, “peak hour”. Sometimes the demand for workers with some specific skill is high considering the season or*

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<sup>23</sup> <https://bkmea.com/projects/we-women/>

*the number of orders a factory gets; once their target is reached, they will cut the workforce short (of course, the women come first).”* (Rebeka, NGO Representative)

Therefore their NGO is aiming at training the women for supervisory roles and also, for training the present supervisors to carry out their roles properly, Rebeka added.

While discussing their respective roles in reducing the individual discriminations (as discussed in chapter 6), both the NGO and TUF representatives mentioned such discrimination against women is still prevailing although many companies deny this. The factory authority usually hides such incidents rather, they make the situation tougher for the victims so that the victim herself leaves the job. The availability of workforce, especially for the (entry-level) positions women are hired for encouraging such malpractices.

*“When a female worker reports harassment, instead of taking just action the authority would create a technical situation that goes against the victim which many a time compels the worker to leave the job. Most of the women work in entry-level positions and the authority feels there would never be any deficit of workforce in such positions. But they cannot lose someone working at the supervisory level or so. This is why a male worker is more valuable to them.”* (Rebeka, NGO Representative)

After the empowerment projects started, Rebeka expected an increase of reports against harassment or any kind of discrimination, but surprisingly, the number of reports has reduced substantially, she said. On top of that, no one can talk to the workers personally without having someone from the supervisory positions (of the company) being present. Just to ensure that the workers do not release any information that might affect the reputation of the company. Oddly enough, many companies react like *“because everyone is aware of the outcome of such conduct, they are behaving better...”*, she added.

About the collaboration between stakeholders, Rebeka mentioned their organization does not have any direct collaboration or involvement with the Trade union as the Trade union are regarded as a political body. The management does not usually maintain a friendly relationship with the NGOs already and a minimum involvement with the Trade union would harm the earned rapport. Besides, the Trade union are extremely male-dominated which makes it unlikely to work with them in gender equality. Although lately a few females are seen in significant roles through the quota system enforced by the buyers or the certification bodies.

### ***The Role of the Buyers***

In a recent study regarding labour rights Cotula, & Mouan, (2021, p. 13) emphasised buyers’ role besides policy or legal framework when it comes to exercising labour rights, especially

about collective bargaining. Unfortunately, I did not manage to have any representative from the buyer's side, however, the narratives from the respective participants provided an idea about the role of the buyers in terms of women's empowerment. Especially, when it comes to increasing female participation at the offices, skill development interventions, and participation in the Trade union. In relation to the participants' explanations, it is evident that their role so far can be considered as inconsistent because on one hand, several buyers sponsor empowerment programmes through the NGOs whilst on the other hand, the buyers try to reduce unionism to avoid industrial unrest.

### 7.3.2. Policy Advocacy: Obstacles

Policy advocacy<sup>24</sup> targeting the RMG sector is the toughest initiative to take because of the conflict of interests among the stakeholders especially the owner, buyers, and politicians. This is, again, linked with the impact of the capitalist ideology of these stakeholders that only aims at yielding profit against cheap labour, as Rebeka suggested. The common fear among the owners is, the more the workers will be empowered and protected by the legal framework the lesser is the scope of exploitation:

*“They (owners and management) think the NGO interventions will fuel the dissatisfaction among the workers and they will claim each of the rights, create chaos which will eventually affect the business. We face great difficulties in executing our projects based on the rights and opportunities of the workers as per the law. The owners would always say that they have their internal committee or Trade union for this, so they will not allow NGOs. – (Rebeka, NGO Representative)*

Therefore, the majority of the recent improvements in the lives of the workers in the RMG sector has been achieved either through the life-claiming accidents or the intense movements of the workers from both in and outside the unions. Maruf disappointingly discussed the concern of the authority/ owners as they choose to profit over human lives:

*“They only bother about the workplace or building safety especially when something affects their reputation, profit or productivity, like the Rana Plaza collapse. If only workplace safety or building safety need the lives of over 2 thousand workers, how many lives would all the rights claim? If you are only concerned about the profit, you do not see the lives working behind this, the dream of equal opportunity at the workplace would not be easy to achieve.” (Maruf, TUF representative)*

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<sup>24</sup> “Policy advocacy is an advocacy effort or campaign is a structured and sequenced plan of action with the purpose to start, direct, or prevent a specific policy change”. Source <https://advocacyguide.icpolicyadvocacy.org/21-defining-policy-advocacy>

The TUF initiated various movements and activities to ensure equal pay for equal work, equal participants in significant positions in the factory level Trade union to National level unions two decades ago as Maruf described. Unfortunately, he does not see much improvement yet except for a few changes in the maternity benefits and recent initiatives to increase female participation. However, there is still discrimination between the maternity protection policies adopted by the public and private sector:

*“We have seen changes in maternity protection laws following our 10-year long movement, in 2006. However, we wanted the same policies for both public and private workplaces, but there is a huge gap between these two sectors. In each public workplace, the women are granted 6 months of maternity leave whereas (specifically) in the RMG sector it is tough to even ask for 4 months leave.”* (Maruf, TUF Representative)

Likewise, the other participants, Maruf also mentioned that a worker would lose her job without any prior notice once she reports pregnancy before the Labour Act 2006 was in effect. The malpractice is still there but the extent has certainly reduced now. Upon receiving the report of mismanagement in this regard the TUF tries to notify the owner and relevant bodies first and call for negotiation. But in most cases, TUF has to file a criminal case as the owners usually do not want to take further responsibilities. In the past three years this particular federation alone handled over 250 such cases, Maruf shared.

### *7.3.3. Implementation: Gaps and Prospects*

Following several fatal incidents (fire incidents and building collapse) in many RMG factories, Bangladesh attempted to raise its labour standards to acquire the GSP (Generalized System of Preferences )plus status in the European Market (Bhuiyan, 2018). That included the amendment of the national labour law; as discussed in the previous chapter (2.5.2), the new provisions were expected to provide all workers with increased capacity of collective bargaining and for the female workers, better maternity protection. Unfortunately, in September 2020, a Dhaka based online newspaper “The Financial Express” reported Bangladesh has been held accountable for discontinuing a few of the ratified ILO conventions: C87 on freedom of association and right to organise, C98 on right to organise and collective bargaining, and C81 on labour inspection.

In addition to such gaps in policy implementation, the TUF representative emphasised the inadequacy of the law in terms of responsiveness to the (female) workers: *“The labour laws and relevant policies in effect in Bangladesh are not very employment friendly for the women, be it the factory or office workers”*. (Maruf, TUF Representative)

Also, despite the amendment in the maternity protection law, none of the provisions of the labour law and EPZ law ensures job security of the respective worker rather allows the employer to some extent to terminate the worker with the due benefits she is entitled to. On top of that, the law prohibits workers with two or more children from getting maternity benefits (EPZ Act, 2019; Labour Law, 2009). On the contrary, owing to the absence of a guaranteed social security fund for pregnant women, employers are responsible for providing maternity benefits. Therefore, as much as the maternity protection measures are considered to be necessary to protect the reproductive role of women, the maternity benefits increase the cost of employing women. This ultimately works as a discouragement for women's employment in the private sector.

The TUF representative expressed his extreme dissatisfaction about the inefficient labour law as there is no definite clause about a non-discriminatory workplace, there is nothing specific about the outcome of harassment or violence at the workplace, etc. He feels both the state and the owners treat the workers as industrial slaves as all the changes in the policies and implementation process have been achieved through the movements of the workers (being mobilised by the Trade union or TU federations at the national level). For example, the movement for maternity benefits in 2006.

Besides demanding effective amendments in the state legislations, both the TUF and NGO representative emphasised that the owners must show concern to at least implement the existing laws. While both of them pointed towards the role of the regressive social setting that influences the male decision-makers at all levels, the TUF representative elaborated his statement highlighting the need for inclusiveness during policy formulation:

*“Both the owners and the government need to believe in democracy and involve the worker during policy formulation. They need to be more progressive because we live in a globalized and modern world. They (owners) still believe in the feudal system and try to take advantage of marginalised workers. We need to come out of this system.”* (Maruf, TUF Representative)

Both of the representatives also expressed their concern regarding the efficiency of the association like BGMEA and BKMEA as they (associations) are controlled by the owners. The diplomatic response from the BKMEA representative Himadri in this regard led to ambiguity about their role. He claimed each policy is being implemented in the factories they inspect or follow up regularly. They also conduct special audit or inspections upon receiving complaints or reports from any victim regarding misconduct or discrimination: payment and harassment

to comply with both national and international labour standards<sup>25</sup>. If the allegation is proven, the registration of the company/factory gets cancelled from the association. To ensure efficiency at the administrative level BKMEA offer training on corporate liability and compliances.

However, Rebeka highlighted the poor implementation of the HC directive 2009 that orders every workplace to form an anti-harassment cell. Unfortunately, the enforcement of this directive is not much evident yet, at least in most of the companies Rebeka's NGO has been working with. Since the anti-harassment measures are sometimes demanded by the buyers, several factories have formed committees but most of them are just "eyewash", Rebeka described. She referred to the deviated intention of the owners who use the "existence" of the committee only to attract the buyers. Therefore, besides advocating for forming this committee, their organization also initiates to "activate" the existing (inactive) ones. Rebeka further mentioned their NGO used to arrange workshops with the workers, factory management, and HRD. They used to distribute videos, posters, banners, etc regarding the HC directive among the workers. They would provide checklists for the management and follow up through their own monitoring and assessment team for this. However, eventually, the organization realised that factory owners are not happy about this "interference". Now they (the NGO) have adopted a different approach: building partnerships with the buyers. The buyers are now the funding bodies for a few projects. For instance, H & M Foundation donates to their implementing partners to ensure the wellbeing of the workers. Besides, Rebeka's organization has collaborative programmes for policy advocacy and implementation with organizations like women activists' organization Naripokkho, BLAST (Bangladesh Legal Aid and Services Trust), SNV (Stichting Nederlandse Vrijwilligers, Netherlands), Christian aid, Sojag platform. Together they organize national level seminars as well with the factory owners, workers, government officials and industrial policies being present. *"But above all, the buyers play an important role here in comparison to the NGOs."* (Rebeka, NGO Representative)

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<sup>25</sup> National-Bangladesh Labour law Misconduct: Section 332, Equal Remuneration: Section 345, EPZ Law: Section 189.  
International-ILO convention C100: Equal Remuneration, C190: Violence and Harassment Convention.



## **7.4. Discussion: Need for an Alternative Approach for Empowerment?**

### *7.4.1. Understanding the Concept of Empowerment: Context and Inclusiveness*

Empowerment as an ideology is highly relative and contextual. This idea is shaped by the surroundings and the social class the individual belongs to (Huis et al., 2017). The findings reveal owing to the difference in social class, educational background and social values, the women working in the office settings and the women working at the factory see empowerment from a different perspective. For instance, the women working in the office level positions linked their sense of empowerment to having access to information in terms of policies and legislation, access to training, or career development opportunities. On the other hand, to the factory workers, higher (and timely) payment would make them feel empowered besides education, and support from both the trade union and office management which can be related to the concept Perkins & Zimmerman (1995) described.

However, either way, focusing on only one particular group of women whilst neither of them have equal access to rights and opportunity cultivates even more inequality. I would argue that such selective empowerment interventions are also responsible for the paradox created over the years. Having access to both tangible and intangible resources is essential to avail agencies, as Kabeer described (2005). We can take the UN's SDG 5 (Gender Equality)<sup>26</sup> as an example in this regard as it promotes the need for women to have equal access to the resources and effective policies and legislation to ensure women's empowerment intending to end all forms of discrimination against women and girls. But to sustain the output earned through agencies accountability that includes obligation and answerability (Cornwall & Rivas 2015) is an instrumental element. In the context of this study, the individuals as both groups and single entity, or any institution that reproduces patriarchal norms to discriminate against women can be held accountable depending on one's individual and social context.

As empowerment and equality go hand in hand especially in the context of my study, however, selective interventions in terms of empowering women and treating empowerment as one size fit all created the paradox of increased female participation and a wider gender gap over the years. However, this study also found empowerment as a non-linear, context-based concept

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<sup>26</sup> Source: <https://www1.undp.org/content/oslo-governance-centre/en/home/sustainable-development-goals/goal-5-gender-equality.html>

which has also been illuminated in the previous studies (Fatema, 2019). Moreover, empowerment as an approach in the RMG sector has been “demonstrated” as a bottom-up approach by the stakeholders including the NGOs and buyers, besides the governments and national/global welfare associations; but this is debatable when the concern of empowerment is induced and imposed sometimes by the buyers or international monitoring bodies. Such imposed interventions coming from the decision-makers open up the ground for further debate considering the interventions as “top-down” approaches.

#### *7.4.2. NGO Interventions, Economic Independence and Gender Equality*

The NGO interventions in terms of empowering the women are often based on the concept of feminization of poverty (Chant, 2006). Therefore, the primary goal of these interventions lies in the economic independence (or financial solvency) of women. However, it is important to take into account that mere economic independence cannot ensure gender equality, as this study suggests. While the empowerment interventions mostly focus on capacity building in terms of economic activities, training on building cognitive and structural social capital<sup>27</sup> has also become imperative; especially pertaining to the intersection of social class and gender that controls access to resources (Crenshaw, 1991). Therefore this study reinforces Hossain’s emphasis on collective and political empowerment of women to challenge structural constraints (2012, p. 13).

The political empowerment of women is also essential to increase their participation in the process of the collective bargaining process. This study found as similar to every other section of the RMG sector, female participation in the trade unions is only confined to the basic memberships of the unions. That too their role is limited to only participating in the rallies or showdown to earn the credibility of the movements. While all the leading positions are held by the male members, many female (factory) workers do not even have a clear idea of unionism. These trends have been highlighted in the previous studies well (Chowdhury, 2017; Evans, 2017; (Khan & Wichterich, 2015). Political exclusion of women and women’s rights as worker represents their different intersectional identities of being a “woman”, a “marginal woman” and a “worker”, which induces further discrimination against them in the male-dominated trade unions (Crenshaw, 1991, pp.1251-1258).

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<sup>27</sup> “Structural social capital refers to the presence of a network of access to people and resources, while cognitive social capital relates to the capability for resource exchange”: (Tristan Claridge, Social Capital Research) <https://www.socialcapitalresearch.com/structural-cognitive-relational-social-capital/>

The gradual “improvement” in the RMG sector in terms of women’s empowerment as described by the NGO representative Rebeka, loses its credibility to a certain degree as the companies/factories allow such programmes to get more business deal and to yield more productivity being benefitted with skilled workers. Therefore, this study further emphasises that despite several other awareness programmes offered by the NGOs, profit-oriented interventions can provide more agency to the owners to exploit the female workers as the legal and policy frameworks are not strong.

#### *7.4.3. Policy Gap, Advocacy and Gender-Responsiveness*

This study found that the role of collective bargaining alongside the gender-responsive policy framework is essential in closing the gender gap (Rubery & Koukiadaki, 2016). While the absence of adequate law and policies to eliminate discrimination against women could have been the only major concern, this study found a substantial gap in the existing policies and their implementation.

Additionally, the gap between the national laws and implementation regarding collective bargaining questions the role of stakeholders, especially the buyers, who reportedly, do not “want the hassle” in the factories through the activity of unionism, as described by a participant. Such restrictions on workers’ right to collective bargaining do not only contradicts the national law (2006, section 176) but also the international labour standards (ILO convention 154). This can be attributed to the lack of cooperation and coordination among the stakeholders, besides the lack of monitoring from the government. Several studies also confirmed similar findings in this regard (Akhter, Rutherford, & Chu, 2017; Islam, 2016). On the contrary, a few studies suggest buyers increased concerns over the workers’ rights in the wake of Corporate Social Responsibilities (Kabeer, Huq, Sulaiman, 2020).

In regards to the harassment on the ground of gender, the labour laws in Bangladesh failed to recognize harassment, specifically sexual harassment at work rather used vague and dated language ignoring the severity of the situation. This is where the HC directive against harassment (2009) should complement the gap. Unfortunately, owing to the lack of monitoring from the authoritative stakeholder, many companies/factories do not comply with the HC directive. In terms of organizational policies, a major policy gap in the RMG sector is discriminatory maternity protection policies in comparison to the public sector. Despite having provisions in the national law (2006 section 45-50) and chapter 3 (section 29-34) of EPZ law 2019. The National Women Development Policy 2011 also reflects a clear course of actions in this regard.

Although I have not come across any literature stating this discriminatory policy between the public and private sector workers, Moghadam (2017) addressed a similar trend in Tunisia. However, several other studies also explored a similar trend in connection to the gap in policy, implementation and discriminatory policies (Addati, 2015; Al-Amin, & Hoque, 2015). Moreover, stakeholder's syndicated nature to interrupt the movements of the trade unions has been explored in several other studies, especially focusing on the relationship of the Trade union and the factory owners (Chowdhury, 2017; Kabir, Maple & Fatema, 2018;). Nonetheless, the obstacles around policy advocacy have remained less explored

## CHAPTER 8: CONCLUSIONS

### 8.1. Introduction

Previous studies have linked the gender inequalities in the RMG sector in underdeveloped countries to the large-scale interventions of transnational capital production that require cheap labour, the nature of the job, and the stereotypical portrayal of women. The findings of this study resonate with this; additionally, this study illustrates further interactions between gender, social class, educational background, and the occupational positions of women to determine the extent of inequalities in many companies. The inequalities are manifested in various forms of discrimination against women in this industry.

Following the objectives of exploring these discriminations, identifying the role of the relevant stakeholders, and the policy/acts/international guidelines to reduce the inequalities, I will summarise the key findings concerning the research questions. Furthermore, I will discuss the limitations and implications of this study in further research.

### 8.1. Discrimination Against Women in the RMG Sector of Bangladesh

#### *8.1.1. The forms and extent of discrimination against women in terms of rights and opportunities, and the reasons that these discriminations prevail*

In the process of exploring the forms and extent of discrimination against women, this study found two prevailing discriminations that come at different degrees depending on the work settings and social background of women: structural and individual discriminations.

#### ***Structural Discriminations: Perceived Gender Role and Beyond***

Gendered recruitment and segregation of labour, gender pay gap, underrepresentation at key roles, limited career development opportunities, compelled and unpaid overtime, restricted maternity protection, etc. are the most persisting examples of structural discrimination against women in the RMG sector. The stereotypical prejudice about women and the socially constructed gender roles come first to shape these discriminations. Additionally, the social background in terms of class, occupational status, reproductive and caregiver roles, etc. intersects in prevailing structural discriminations.

As the women are considered submissive, disciplined, patient, and significantly apathetic to politics, they seem fit for certain positions, particularly in the lower grade or entry-level. Moreover, there was a clear tendency among many participants to blame the women themselves for not being “passionate”, “aspirational” and “enthusiastic” enough to have a

successful career. Another oversimplified misconception here is the women themselves walk out failing to balance between professional and personal life; rather, the workplace is constantly failing to support them despite having instructions on international labour standards and state legislations. Reportedly, the ratified ILO convention on maternity protection (C183) has a reverse impact on female employment as this increases the employment cost in terms of providing maternity benefits and childcare. Therefore, employers disregard female candidates during recruitment and promotion, as a result, the pressing concern comes as “disempowerment” of the women by constraining their rights to make strategic life choices, especially regarding family and motherhood.

This representation of women is evident in the numbers. In all the represented 14 factories the number of women at the factory level job is over 70% whereas at the office level, less than 10% including mere 3-5% in the key roles. As much as the underrepresentation of women is attributed to perceived gender roles, lack of skilled, and experienced workers, this study suggests the profit-yielding capitalist motivations are reinforcing the discrimination. Furthermore, the seasonal nature and informal recruitment without documentation also increase the vulnerability of the female factory workers.

However, the (female) office workers are more susceptible to structural discriminations than the factory workers concerning the higher glass ceiling at the office level positions, absence of secured pay scale, also, the difference of treatment in terms of maternity protection.

Although the majority of the discriminations against women do not mandatorily reflect in the existing organizational policies of many factories, the discretionary practice of the authority and inadequacy of gender-responsive state policies establish this form of discrimination in the organizational culture and structure.

### ***Individual Discriminations: Objectification and Violence***

The individual discriminations are related to an individual’s objectification of women that induces violence. In addition to the verbal and physical assault, different forms of microaggressions i.e., extensive scrutiny, negative judgments, derogatory comments regarding their occupational competence, etc. are prominent examples of individual discriminations against women in both office and factory settings.

Although there are several organizational policies and other measures (e.g., helpline, and software for reporting incidents) to prevent individual discrimination, women are subject to individual discrimination regardless of their status. However, in most cases, a woman’s social class and educational qualification determine how she would be treated by her (male) co-

workers. Therefore, the female factory workers are frequently subject to such discriminations compared to the office workers, owing to their poor social class and lack of education. A very significant example of classist ideology in this regard is “normalizing” abusive behaviour with the factory-level workers. However, such treatment has become normal not only because of its undisputed existence in this labour-oriented industry as a perceived means of productivity, but also this can be attributed to the lack of transformative agency among the workers to challenge such behaviour. However, this study also suggests lack of job security, victim-blaming, the concern of respectable femininity, etc. restrain the both factory and office workers from taking necessary steps. Furthermore, the office workers are not provided with sufficient information about the protective measures and policies. They are not provided access to many of the measures as well, for example, the helplines “Astha” and “Amader Kotha” (*“Faith”, “Our Story”*).

Another significant perspective regarding individual discrimination is, overlooking the abuses, and gender microaggressions that come from the educated male office workers as the authority often perceive the uneducated (or, relatively less-educated) workers are more likely to perpetrate abuses and assault.

Sometimes it is hard to differentiate individual discrimination from the structural ones, particularly when the management supports the perpetrators due to favouritism. In addition to the lack of awareness among both the male and female workers regarding individual discrimination, the support from the authority attributes to the prevailing nature of such discriminations.

### *8.1.2. The role of the People in Managerial/Key Positions in Addressing the Discrimination?*

Considering the limited number (only 5) of participants from this category, this might not be ideal to conclude their role based on the findings of this study. Nonetheless, following the findings, I would claim that the role of the people in the key positions in regards to gender inequalities cannot be considered commendable in addressing this issue. Despite their power to make organizational decisions to some extent (for instance, recruitment, promotion, following up misconducts, etc.), they have to abide by the instructions from the owners and buyers primarily. However, based on the narratives from the participants of all categories, it was evident despite the power these decision-makers have, they chose to follow the conventional path at their own discretion. Although a few participants tried to remain unbiased

while discussing this issue, they also tried to justify the situation of women sliding the blame on them. The inefficient mechanism for human resources management and accountability can be held responsible for the failure of the decision-makers in this sector.

### *8.1.3. The Differences Between the International and Local Factories in Terms of Gender-Responsiveness*

There are different kinds of factories depending on the origin and buyers of the companies: the local factories with local buyers, the local factories with international buyers, and the international factories with international buyers. The gender-responsiveness in the RMG sector of Bangladesh is, however, very disappointing regardless of the types of factories. Whilst the rest of the concerns of discrimination against women remain relatively unaddressed in connection with the respective organizational policies in effect, only one international factory of this study has a potential plan for increasing female participation to initiate gender equality in higher positions.

The findings regarding different types of inequalities against women in this sector exemplify the poor gender-responsiveness reflected through organizational culture. Although the social context and norms of Bangladesh attributes to this, the role of international stakeholders is also significant here. Structural discrimination is universal regardless of the types of factories whereas individual discrimination is greater in the local factories, especially the ones with local buyers. The major differences between the factories are primarily regarding the forced labour, working environment, facilities & benefits, implementation of global regulations & national legislations. Most of the local factories engage the female factory workers in forced labour and undue overtime, besides depriving them of full maternity protection. Unfortunately, some of the renowned international factories as well do not comply with national policies and legislations in most cases when it comes to gender-responsiveness. Besides the lack of enthusiasm from the international stakeholders, the inefficient role of the state or the national associations in terms of monitoring and evaluating the implementation is also imperative in this regard. This also highlights the gap in coordination between both national and international stakeholders.



## **8.2. The Role of the Relevant Organizations and Policy/Acts/International Guidelines in Promoting Women's Empowerment to Reduce Gender Inequality**

### *8.2.1. Women Empowerment: The Role of TUs, NGOs, Buyers and the National Associations*

Despite various empowerment interventions ranging from skill development training to awareness building about rights opportunities, misconducts, or discrimination, to institutional education for the (factory) workers initiated by the TUF, NGOs, buyers, and manufacturers associations, women's empowerment is yet to be achieved.

The presence of disempowerment in terms of "to be denied choice", is at the very core of many of the findings in this study. The women are not only denied access to the resources and opportunities, but they also have the least freedom to practice their skills, to incorporate their ideas and decisions at work due to the reduced job responsibilities. This study suggests that the concept of empowerment is neither constant nor confined to any universal understanding. This varies depending on an individual's own perception of feeling empowered. For instance, the women working in the office level positions linked their sense of empowerment to having access to information in terms of policies and legislation, access to training, or career development opportunities. On the other hand, to the factory workers, higher (and timely) payment would make them feel empowered besides the support from both TUs and office management.

Although this study echoes the previous studies that illuminated the connection between disempowerment and poverty, it is important to note that the sense of disempowerment is not always shaped by poverty. As I have discussed the workers' socioeconomic condition and its impact on their ability to make life choices, the findings also suggest the sense of disempowerment also prevails among economically privileged women. The intersection between gender role and social class is highly imperative in shaping the aspects of (dis)empowerment in terms of making life choices.

Therefore, women's empowerment as a concept, cannot be confined to one single framework, it is rather a context-based and sometimes, relative perception. While one's ideological transformation (e.g., developing power within) to question the discriminatory social norms and having access to resources to achieve a visible outcome are two essential factors, ensuring accountability is crucial for far-reaching development in terms of gender equality. In addition to the economic aspects of empowerment, the political aspect (that is based on the social

construction of gender roles) should be considered in the interventions of women's empowerment. Otherwise, the paradox will remain unchanged as we will measure women's empowerment by looking at the statistics of female participation in economic activities, ignoring the underlying elements that hold the glass ceiling strong or cause career dropout. In other words, as much as the result-based interventions for ensuring equal access to resources and opportunities for women are required, self-awareness and reform in legal or policy framework are also essential in the social context of Bangladesh where challenging the patriarchal social and organizational system is itself a great challenge for women. Therefore, this study reinforces the need for women's political and collective empowerment to dismantle the stereotypes of them being inferior to men especially in terms of representation in the labour market.

This study further suggests that the role of the aforementioned stakeholders has not been consistent enough either to empower women working in this sector or, to sustain the impact of the existing interventions. Moreover, the majority of their initiatives lack inclusiveness as these are solely focused on marginal women. oddly enough, despite working towards the same goal there is barely any effective coordination among the stakeholders, especially the TUs and the NGOs.

However, compared to the other stakeholders, the buyer's role is supreme here as they can create pressure on the manufacturers to retain the business deal in exchange for making the occupational opportunities and resources accessible for women. Unfortunately, this study finds instead of working towards ensuring workers' rights to collective bargaining, the buyers are violating this right, going beyond the national law. Although several buyers are bringing forward the issue of female participation and a healthy working environment for women, and commissioning the NGOs for empowerment interventions, they (buyers) lack proactiveness due to their profit-oriented thoughts. This profit-yielding nature of the buyers is being complemented by the availability of cheap labour in this female-centric industry, therefore, be it the production pressure from the buyers or the cost-effective measures, ultimately the female workers suffer the most.

### *8.2.2. Gender-responsiveness of the Company Policies, State's Legislation and International Labour Standards*

The few organizational policies discussed by the participants were not (female) worker friendly in the sense that the policies do not ensure women's equal access to rights, opportunities, and

resources. Moreover, in the factories with international buyers, the anti-harassment policies and maternity protection policies are more of a precondition from the buyers than the implication of national legislations.

As much as most of the factories do not comply with national legislation or international policy framework, this study found that the existing policies lack gender-responsiveness. Even the policies that target women, for instance, the maternity protection law also does not provide an absolute safeguard despite the recent amendment (2018). However, the amendment can be a far-reaching step pertaining to the worker's right to collective bargaining as the law now calls for 20% of the workforce of any establishment to be associated with the recognized and legitimate TUs of the respective industry. To earn legitimacy of the TUs the workers need support from all stakeholders; unfortunately, this study found the hardship in this regard especially owing to the political power play involved to refrain the workers from exercising their rights to collective bargaining.

Proper implementation and a regular follow-up in this regard could be useful to reduce discriminatory practices against women. For example, implementing the HC directives (2009) against harassment could reduce individual discrimination substantially. On the other hand, ratification of the ILO convention for "Workers with Family Responsibilities (C156)" could be aiding the working women to have the basic facilities based on their reproductive and caregiver roles, for example, having access to childcare facilities regardless of their office ranks, job tenure, etc. However, when it comes to the international labour standards, a close collaboration between the national government, ILO, and the international certification bodies for compliances is the demand of time.

### **8.3. Limitations and Implications of this Study**

Despite garnering a wide range of data, this study has several limitations particularly regarding the data I aspired to gather. My motivation to include male participants in this study was to understand the perception of men regarding gender equality and their compassion for the women who are being discriminated against. Considering the limited number of male participants, I could not extract the "standard" amount of data to have a commendable projection of "men's perception" in this regard. Moreover, this remains unanswered that despite NGOs and TUF's apparent largescale empowerment programmes (regardless of the nature of the programmes) why are most of the participants oblivious of the programmes whilst they are supposed to be the firsthand beneficiaries. Besides, having no representative from the

buyer's side and only one key informant from each of the remaining three stakeholders is far too limited to generalize.

As described in Chapter 4, participants' distinctive perception of gender (in)equality, image-consciousness or reluctance in sharing experiences and lack of trust or rapport which can be attributed to the "online" interviews might have affected the quality of data to some degrees. Also, exploring gender inequality at the workplace in the social context of Bangladesh could potentially offer a much broader scope to offer ground-breaking findings, but this was not possible considering the limited span of this study. Nonetheless, a very unanticipated yet thought-provoking finding of this study I would say is the difference of experiences between the office and factory workers in terms of discrimination shaped by their multiple other identities besides gender. This implies the privileged social identity might create reverse impact too which can widen the praxis of the intersectional framework for further studies. This study therefore also calls for an inclusive and more contextual approach for women's empowerment as well.

However, as this study is highly relevant to global development through promoting SDG 5 and SDG 8, there should be some potential implications of it. Focusing on the various forms of discrimination against women at different levels of this female-centric industry helped to yield some interesting findings that can be a useful resource to assess the latest development in terms of gender equality and to identify the role of the relevant stakeholders to act further. Furthermore, the insights of this study, highlighting the gap in coordination among the national and international stakeholders, and the gap in policy implementation, should draw the attention of more researchers. I believe this is one area we need to extend our focus on for sustaining the outcome of the interventions related to reducing gender inequality.

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## Appendices

### A.1.1. List of Reviewed Literature

Gender Inequality at Workplace: Global Perspective			
Subject	Title	Author	Publisher/ Journal and Year
The Role of Organizational Structure	Gender Inequalities in The Workplace: The Effects of Organizational Structures, Processes, Practices, And Decision Makers' Sexism.	Cailin S. Stamarski and Leanne S. Son Hing	<i>Frontiers in Psychology</i> , 2015
	Hierarchies, jobs, bodies: A theory of gendered organizations	Joan Acker	<i>Gender and Society</i> , 1990
	Producing and Reducing Gender Inequality in A Worker-Recovered Cooperative	Katherine Sobering	<i>The Sociological Quarterly</i> , 2016
Support System/Legislation and Women	Measuring the Effect of Institutional Change on Gender Inequality in The Labour Market	Martina Dieckhoff, Vanessa Gash, Nadia Steibe	<i>Research in Social Stratification Mobility</i> , 2015
	Assessing Women's Empowerment: Towards A Conceptual Framework	Sarah Mosedale	<i>Journal of International Development</i> , 2005
Patriarchal Notion and Gendered segregation of Labour	Workplace and Leadership Perceptions Between Men and Women	Angelina Kiser	<i>Gender in Management: An International Journal</i> , 2015
	Women's Economic Empowerment and Inclusive Growth: Labour Markets and Enterprise Development	Naila Kabeer	<i>International Development Research Centre</i> , 2012
	Gender Stereotypes and Workplace Bias	Madeline E. Heilman	<i>Research in Organizational Behavior</i> , 2012
	Workplace Rumors About Women's Sexual Promiscuity as Gender-Based Insults under Title VII	Wendy N. Hess	<i>ABA Journal of Labor and Employment Law</i> , 2016
Discrimination and Harassment	Sexual Harassment, Workplace Authority, and The Paradox of Power.	Heather McLaughlin, Christopher Uggen, Amy Blackston	<i>American Sociological Review</i> , 2012
	The interlocking of gender with nationality, race, ethnicity and class: The narratives of women in hotel work	Amel Adib, Y. Guerrier	<i>Gender, Work and Organization</i> , 2003
RMG Sector			
Gendered Division of Labour, Wage Gap,	Feminization of Employment and Gender Inequality of Bangladesh Labor Market: The Case of Garment Industries	Shafiqul Islam	<i>Developing Country Studies</i> , 2016

Female Participation in The Key Roles	<p><i>Women in The Global Factory</i></p> <p>Revealing the Unmarked: Finding Masculinity in A Global Factory</p> <p>Factors Influencing Female Progression in Leadership Positions in The Ready-Made Garment (RMG) Industry in Bangladesh</p> <p>Feminised Workforce in Transnational Production: Bangladesh Ready-Made Garment Industry</p> <p>The Glass Ceiling: Career Barriers for Female Employees in The Readymade Garments (RMG) Industry of Bangladesh</p> <p>A Working Paper On- Gender Wage Gaps and Worker Mobility: Evidence from The Garment Sector in Bangladesh</p> <p>Closing the Gender Pay Gap: A Review of The Issues, Policy Mechanisms and International Evidence</p>	<p>Annette Fuentes, Barbara Ehrenreich</p> <p>Leslie Salzinger</p> <p>Md Asadul Islam, Amer Hamzah Jantan, Haslinda Binti Hashim, Choo Wei Chong, Mirza Manirajah Abdullah</p> <p>Afroza Anwary</p> <p>Md Asadul Islam, Amer Hamzah Jantan</p> <p>Andreas Menzel Christopher Woodruff</p> <p>Jill Rubery and Aristeia Koukiadaki</p>	<p>South End Press, 1983</p> <p><i>Ethnography, 2004</i></p> <p>Journal of International Business and Management, 2018</p> <p>History and Sociology of South Asia 2017</p> <p>Academy of Strategic Management Journal, 2017</p> <p>National Bureau of Economic Research, 2019</p> <p>ILO Publication, 2016</p>
Impact on Personal Lives of the Factory Workers	<p>Made in Myanmar: Entrenched Poverty or Decent Jobs for Garment Workers?</p> <p>Physical and Mental Health of The Workers in The Readymade Garment Industry of Bangladesh</p> <p>Manufacturing Growth and The Lives of Bangladeshi Women</p> <p>The ready-made garments industry in Bangladesh: A means to reducing gender-based social exclusion of women?</p>	<p>Daisy Gardener and Jasmine Burnley</p> <p>Shaheen Ahmed, Nazrul Islam</p> <p>Rachel Heath, A. Mushfiq Mobarak</p> <p>Nidhi Khosla</p>	<p>Oxfam, 2015</p> <p><i>Pearl Journal of Management, Social Science Humanities, 2015</i></p> <p><i>Journal of Development Economics, 2015</i></p> <p>Journal of International Women's Studies, 2009</p>
Collective Bargaining/TUs	<p>Patriarchal Unions = Weaker Unions? Industrial Relations in The Asian Garment Industry</p> <p>Women 'S Rights and Voice in The Ready-Made Garments Sector of Bangladesh: Evidence from Theory and Practice</p> <p>Compliance Codes and Women Workers' (Mis)Representation And (Non) Recognition in The Apparel Industry of Bangladesh</p>	<p>Alice Evans</p> <p>Dilruba Shoma Chowdhury</p> <p>Fahreen Alamgir, Ozan N. Alakavuklar</p>	<p>Third World Quarterly, 2017</p> <p>Journal of International Women's Studies, 2017</p> <p>Journal of Business Ethics, 2020, Received 2017</p>
Maternity Protection, Childcare Etc	<p>Corporate Social Responsibility, Economic Globalization and Developing Countries.</p>	<p>Mohammed Ziaul Haque, Fara Azmat</p>	<p><i>Sustainability Accounting, Management Policy Journal, 2015</i></p>

	Work and Breast Milk Feeding: A Qualitative Exploration of The Experience of Lactating Mothers Working in Readymade Garments Factories In Urban Bangladesh	A M Rumayan, Hasan, George Smith, Mohammad Abdus Selim, Shahinoor Akter, Nazib Uz Zaman Khan, Tamanna Sharmin And Sabrina Rasheed	International Breastfeeding Journal, 2020
	What Makes Pregnant Workers Sick: Why, When, Where and How? An Exploratory Study in The Ready-Made Garment Industry in Bangladesh	Akhter, Sadika Rutherford, Shannon Chu, Cordia	Reproductive Health, 2017
	Extending Maternity Protection to All Women: Trends, Challenges and Opportunities	Laura Addati	International Social Security Review, 2015
Violence and Misconduct	Female Garment Workers' Experiences of Violence in Their Homes and Workplaces In Bangladesh: A Qualitative Study	Ruchira Naveda, Tabassum Rahmana, Samantha Willanb, Rachel Jewkesb, Andrew Gibbs	Social Science & Medicine 2018
	Corporate Social Responsibility, Economic Globalization and Developing Countries.	Mohammed Ziaul Haque, Fara Azmat	<i>Sustainability Accounting, Management Policy Journal, 2015</i>
	Risks Management of Ready-Made Garments Industry in Bangladesh	Md. Morshadul Hasan, Appel Mahmud	<i>International Research Journal of Business Studies, 2017</i>
	Violence Against Women Workers in The Ready-Made Garments Industry in Bangladesh	Md. Al-Amin Mohammad Mozammel Hoque	World Vision 2015
	Sufferings in silence: Violence against female workers in the ready-made garment industry in Bangladesh: A qualitative exploration	Sadika Akhter, Shannon Rutherford and Cordia Chu	SAGE Publications, 2019
Miscellaneous	Women's Empowerment Revisited: From Individual to Collective Power among the Export Sector Workers of Bangladesh	Naomi Hossain	the Institute of Development Studies, 2012
	Improving Decisions That Affect Gender Equality in The Workplace	Edward H. Chang, Katherine L. Milkman	Sciencedirect, 2019
	Ready Made Garments' (RMG) Contribution in Women Empowerment: A Study on Bangladesh Perspective	Mohammed Masum Billah, Md. Rafiqul Islam Manik	European Scientific Journal, 2017
	Safety and Labour Conditions: The Accord and The National Tripartite Plan of Action for The Garment Industry of Bangladesh	Mohd Raisul Islam Khan, Christa Wichterich	Global Labour University, 2015

	Women Empowerment or Gender Equality: Which One Should Come First for Augmenting Satisfaction and Performance of Female Employees: A Study on The Readymade Garment Sector of Bangladesh	Nusrat Fatema	International Journal of Business and Social Research, 2019
Reports	Workplace indicator for Women, Business and the Law (2020), World Bank Everything you need to know about the gender gap in 2020, World Economic Forum World Trade Statistical Review 2019, World Trade Organization European Semester Thematic Factsheet: Women In The Labour Market, 2017, European Commission The Industry Gender Gap: Women and Work in the Fourth Industrial Revolution, 2016, World Economic Forum		
News Article	“EPZ Labour Act to protect rights of workers, owners”- The Financial Express, September 29, 2019 “BD finalises reply to ILO complaints”- The financial Express, January 23, 2020		

### A.1.2. Reviewed Documents

Document Types	Description
International Labour Standards	ILO- Declaration on Fundamental Principles and Rights at work- <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Equal remuneration convention 1951, C100</li> <li>• Discrimination (employment and occupation) convention 1958, C111</li> <li>• Maternity protection convention (revised) 2000, C183</li> <li>• Workers with family responsibilities (revised) 1981, C156</li> <li>• Violence and Harassment Convention, 2019, C190</li> </ul>
High Court Directive	The high court directive of 2009 regarding workplace safety
National Policy	National Women development policy 2011
National labour law	Bangladesh labour act 2006, 2018 (amendment), Bangladesh EPZ labour law 2019

## A.2. Table of Data Analysis

Basic Themes	Organizing Themes	Global Themes
- Gendered Recruitment and Segregation of Labour -Gender Pay-gap -Underrepresentation of Women in the Key Roles	Discrimination Regarding Participation, Payment, and Representation	Structural Discrimination: Perceived Gender Role and Beyond
-Maternity leave -Childcare	Discrimination Based on the Reproductive Role	
-Verbal Abuse and Gender Microaggression - Physical Assault, Sexual Harassment and Assaults	Types and Extent of the Incidents	Individual Discrimination: Objectification and Explicit Discrimination
-Organizational policies and Initiatives -Helplines/web portals -Training and Counselling	Measures to Prevent/ Reduce the Incident	
-TUs and Women's Voice	Unionism/ Collective Bargaining	Empowerment: Programmes, Policies, Implementation and the Role of the Stakeholders
-Empowerment Interventions -Policy Advocacy: Obstacles -Implementation: Gaps and Prospects	Interventions, Policies and the Role of the Relevant Bodies Towards Empowering Women	

### **A.3. Interview Guide for Data Collection**

#### *Questions for the female participants*

Opening Question: Can you tell me a little bit about yourself, please? For instance, your family, place of birth, your childhood, your age, education and your life before you got this job etc.

#### ***Main Questions: Intersectional Perspective***

1. How did you get this job? Did you face any discriminatory criteria/experience during the recruitment process that somehow refers to your gender?
2. How has your experience been of working in this sector so far especially as a "female"?
3. Do you think as an employee you enjoy as equal rights as your male colleagues? Especially, in terms of payment and benefits, promotion, and overall work environment.

#### ***Empowerment***

4. Do you feel the company you work for is supportive enough when it comes to resolving gender issues or to look after the unique need of the female employees? (Resources)
5. Are you informed about the organizational policies, labour law, and other provisions that are in effect to preserve your rights? What is your source of information? (Agency)
6. Do you have a direct association with the Trade Unions or other labour organizations? If no, would you mind sharing the reason? If yes, how did you manage to join? How has your experience been so far? (Achievement)
7. Have you ever been a part of any (empowerment) project conducted by NGOs or any advocacy organization?
8. What are your expectations from the NGOs, trade unions, also, your own company in terms of assisting you to enjoy equal rights?

#### **Questions Participants in Managerial Positions**

Opening Question: Can you tell me a little bit about yourself, please? For instance, your family, place of birth, your childhood, your age, education and your life before you got this job etc.

Main Question: 1. What do you think about the status of "gender" issues in your company? Would you mind sharing the number of cases/complaints you receive and resolve per month in this regard?

2. Do you have any specific recruitment policies for female candidates? Also, why do you think the promotion rate among female employees is lower in comparison to male employees?

3. What is your company policy regarding harassment against women?

4. Are the employees/workers well informed about the policies in place regarding all kind of discriminations and harassments? Does your company provide any training regarding gender-sensitive code of conduct?

5. Do you have any specific policy for the women to join the trade unions or other labour organizations/quota for women?

***Questions for TU, the activists/relevant body***

Opening Question: Can you tell me a little bit about yourself, please? For instance, your educational background, your career in this organization, your life before you got this job etc.

Main Question: 1. How many projects/programmes you have run to empowering the female garments' workers? Would you mind sharing your experience? (Q. for the representative from NGO and BKMEA)

2. Have you ever worked in association with the Trade Unions? If no, is there any reason?

3. Do you see any positive change in the situation now in comparison to the time you started working for female workers?

4. What do you think about the implication of labour laws in Bangladesh in particular for the female workers? Do you have any association with any organization that is involved in policy advocacy in this regard?

5. Do you think that all the (registered) garment companies in our country have sufficient or effective policies and instructions to address discrimination against women or any kind of harassment? If not, what steps do you take in this regard? (Q. for the representative of BGMEA/BKMEA).



6. How do you usually deal with the company owner/management when it comes to ensuring equal rights regardless of gender or any sensitive issue like (sexual) harassment? Would you mind sharing any case in this regard? (Q. for the representatives from trade unions).

7. What is your recommendation for the public policymakers or the decision-maker for the garments sector (e.g., Bangladesh Garment Manufacturers and Exporters Association-BGMEA) regarding gender issues? (Q. for the representatives from trade union and NGO).

## A.4. Letter of Information and Consent Form

### Information Letter and Consent form

Are you interested in taking part in the research project- **“Gender Inequality in Workplace: A Qualitative Study on the Readymade Garment Industries of Bangladesh”?**

This is an inquiry about participation in a research project where the main purpose is to explore the status of gender inequality in the readymade garments industries of Bangladesh.

In this letter, I will provide you with the necessary information concerning the purpose of the project, your participation, and your rights to protect your personal data.

#### **Purpose of the Study**

I am conducting this research for my M.Phil program through the Department of Health Promotion and Development (**The HEMIL Centre**) at the University of Bergen. The purpose of this project is to explore the current status of gender aspects in the RMG sector of Bangladesh and to explore the role of the legal framework and advocacy organizations in support of the (female) garments workers/employees.

Also, with your consent, I intend to use the findings of this project for further studies.

#### **Responsible Institution**

The University of Bergen is the institution responsible for the project.

#### **About your Participation**

Your participation involves either an Individual Interview or Focus Group Discussion to collect data on your perspective and experience on gender inequality in your workplace. The information you will provide will be recorded both electronically and on paper. If you want to take part in the individual interview it will take around 1-1.30 hours (approximately) and if you intend to participate in the Focus Group discussion, it might take around 2 hours.

**The language for the interview to be conducted is Bengali, but if you are comfortable to continue in English, that is also absolutely fine.**

#### **Participation is Voluntary**

Your participation in this project is voluntary. You can withdraw your consent at any time you want without any explanation. All information about you will be made anonymous and, also,



your information will be deleted if you don't want to be a part of this project or further studies any longer. Also, if you feel threatened/unsafe to provide any information about your work/employer, you can withdraw your consent. There will be no negative consequences for you if you chose not to participate or later decide to withdraw.

#### **Privacy of your Personal Data**

I will only use your personal data for the purpose(s) specified in this information letter. I will process your personal data confidentially and following **data protection legislation (the General Data Protection Regulation and cf. section 2 of the Personal Data Act)**. In connection with the University of Bergen, **Professor Siri Lange** will have access to the anonymized data. I will store the data in a safe and password protected computer drive. Also, I am planning to store the data using **SAFE (Secure Access to Research Data and E-infrastructure)**, which is provided by the University of Bergen for processing of sensitive personal data in research.

I will not publish the traceable details of you and will use anonymous forms like «percentage» instead. Data will be processed using **NVivo**. Your personal data will be processed outside Bangladesh as ethically as possible. Besides storing in a password-protected computer, I will store the data in **SAFE- Secure Access to Research Data and E-infrastructure**, authorized by the University of Bergen, as I mentioned earlier.

The project is scheduled to end after June 2021. All recordings will be deleted and personal data will be anonymized at the end of the project. The anonymized transcriptions (written copies of the interviews where personal data is removed) will be stored for use in future research.

#### **Your Rights**

So long as you can be identified in the collected data, you have the right to: - access the personal data that is being processed about you -request that your personal data is deleted -request that incorrect personal data about you is corrected/rectified -receive a copy of your personal data (data portability), and - send a complaint to the Data Protection Officer or The Norwegian Data Protection Authority regarding the processing of your personal data.

*M. Brin*

**Researcher's Right to Process the data**

I will process your personal data based on your consent. And, based on an agreement with the University of Bergen, NSD – The Norwegian Centre for Research Data, has assessed that the processing of personal data in this project is under data protection legislation.

**Further Contact**

If you have questions about the project or want to exercise your rights, you can contact:

1. Siri Lange Professor Department of Health Promotion and Development (HEMIL)  
University of Bergen  
Email: [Siri.Lange@uib.no](mailto:Siri.Lange@uib.no)
2. Data Protection Official: Janecke Helene Veim  
University of Bergen  
Email: [personvernombud@uib.no](mailto:personvernombud@uib.no)
3. NSD, The Norwegian Centre for Research Data AS,  
Email: [personverntjenester@nsd.no](mailto:personverntjenester@nsd.no)  
Telephone: +47 55 58 21 17

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**Researcher: Naznin Sultana**  
**MPhil Student**  
**Program: Global Development Theory and Practice**  
**Department of Health Promotion and Development, Faculty of Psychology**  
**University of Bergen, Norway**

**Supervisor: Siri Lange**  
**Professor, Department of Health Promotion and Development**  
**University of Bergen, Norway**

*Naznin*

**Consent Form**

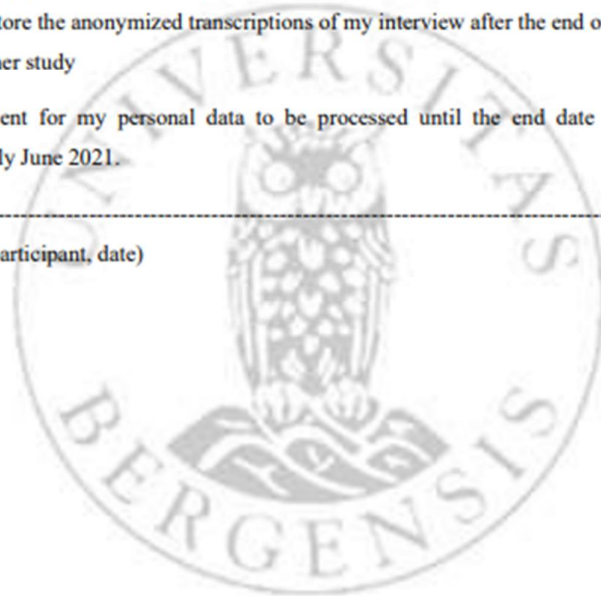
I have received and understood information about the project **“Gender Inequality in Workplace: A Qualitative Study on the Readymade Garment Industries of Bangladesh”** and have been allowed to ask questions.

I give consent:

- to participate in interviews/observation
- for my personal data to be processed outside Bangladesh
- to store the anonymized transcriptions of my interview after the end of the project for further study

I give consent for my personal data to be processed until the end date of the project, approximately June 2021.

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(Signed by participant, date)



*N. Amin*

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## A.5. Ethical Approval from NSD

### NSD's assessment

**Project title**

Gender Inequality in Workplace: A Qualitative Study on the Readymade Garments Sector of Bangladesh

**Reference number**

754210

**Registered**

08.07.2020 av Naznin Sultana - Naznin.Sultana@student.uib.no

**Data controller (institution responsible for the project)**

Universitetet i Bergen / Det psykologiske fakultet / Hemil-senteret

**Project leader (academic employee/supervisor or PhD candidate)**

Siri Lange, Siri.Lange@uib.no, tlf: 95147687

**Type of project**

Student project, Master's thesis

**Contact information, student**

Naznin Sultana, Naznin.Sultana@student.uib.no, tlf: 45486972

**Project period**

01.08.2020 - 30.06.2021

**Status**

20.07.2020 - Assessed

**Assessment (1)**

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**20.07.2020 - Assessed**

Our assessment is that the processing of personal data in this project will comply with data protection legislation, so long as it is carried out in accordance with what is documented in the Notification Form and attachments, dated 20.07.2020, as well as in correspondence with NSD. Everything is in place for the processing to begin.

**NOTIFY CHANGES**

If you intend to make changes to the processing of personal data in this project it may be necessary to notify NSD. This is done by updating the Notification Form. On our website we explain which changes must be notified. Wait until you receive an answer from us before you carry out the changes.

**TYPE OF DATA AND DURATION**

The project will be processing special categories of personal data about trade union membership, ethnic origin and health, and general categories of personal data until 30.06.2021.

**LEGAL BASIS**

The project will gain consent from data subjects to process their personal data. We find that consent will meet the necessary requirements under art. 4 (11) and 7, in that it will be a freely given, specific, informed and unambiguous statement or action, which will be documented and can be withdrawn.

The legal basis for processing special categories of personal data is therefore explicit consent given by the data subject, cf. the General Data Protection Regulation art. 6.1 a), cf. art. 9.2 a), cf. the Personal Data Act § 10, cf. § 9 (2).

**PRINCIPLES RELATING TO PROCESSING PERSONAL DATA**

NSD finds that the planned processing of personal data will be in accordance with the principles under the General Data Protection Regulation regarding:

- lawfulness, fairness and transparency (art. 5.1 a), in that data subjects will receive sufficient information about the processing and will give their consent
- purpose limitation (art. 5.1 b), in that personal data will be collected for specified, explicit and legitimate purposes, and will not be processed for new, incompatible purposes
- data minimisation (art. 5.1 c), in that only personal data which are adequate, relevant and necessary for the purpose of the project will be processed
- storage limitation (art. 5.1 e), in that personal data will not be stored for longer than is necessary to fulfil the project's purpose

**THE RIGHTS OF DATA SUBJECTS**

Data subjects will have the following rights in this project: transparency (art. 12), information (art. 13), access (art. 15), rectification (art. 16), erasure (art. 17), restriction of processing (art. 18), notification (art. 19), data portability (art. 20). These rights apply so long as the data subject can be identified in the collected data.

NSD finds that the information that will be given to data subjects about the processing of their personal data will meet the legal requirements for form and content, cf. art. 12.1 and art. 13.

We remind you that if a data subject contacts you about their rights, the data controller has a duty to reply within a month.

**FOLLOW YOUR INSTITUTION'S GUIDELINES**

NSD presupposes that the project will meet the requirements of accuracy (art. 5.1 d), integrity and confidentiality (art. 5.1 f) and security (art. 32) when processing personal data.

To ensure that these requirements are met you must follow your institution's internal guidelines and/or consult with your institution (i.e. the institution responsible for the project).

**FOLLOW-UP OF THE PROJECT**

NSD will follow up the progress of the project at the planned end date in order to determine whether the processing of personal data has been concluded.

Good luck with the project!

Contact person at NSD: Kaja Amundsen  
Data Protection Services for Research: +47 55 58 21 17 (press 1)

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