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Project Title: Inequality and Discrimination against women in the workplace: Problems and prospects in the RMG (Ready-Made Garments) industry in Bangladesh.

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DECLARATION

I confirm that this thesis, written by me, Nusrat Jahan, accurately represents the results of my individual research investigations and findings. I have properly credited sources of information other than my own and have included a full list of references. This work has not been submitted to any other academic institution with the intention of receiving any type of academic degree.

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Abstract

This study explores the widespread gender inequality in Bangladesh's Ready-Made Garments (RMG) industry, to analyze its complex nature, outline its consequences, and offer practical solutions. The study thoroughly examines the discriminatory practices in the recruitment process, the unfair working conditions experienced by female workers, and the structural obstacles that impede their progress. However, this study explored two main discriminatory aspects, one regarding personal attributes and the other one including structural discrimination. Although 62% of the workers are women, still gender discrimination is a concerning issue in this sector. Due to the deeply rooted stereotypes regarding gender continue to exist, fueled by societal norms and workplace bias, these women suffer a wide range of obstacles, including hostile work environments and restricted chances for advancing in their careers, which worsen their susceptibility. Additionally, the study reveals the burdensome duties carried by female workers, which exacerbates the disparity between their professional and domestic lives. Structural discrimination perpetuated by patriarchal norms, increases these disparities, impeding women from achieving their best potential. Although women are constitutionally entitled to the right to form unions, many are still deprived of these rights, which hinders their capacity to advocate for gender equality. The study highlights the importance of giving women the ability to engage in collective efforts and emphasizes the need for comprehensive actions to overcome obstacles in both the structure and society. Nevertheless, this study suggests a crucial need for a holistic approach towards radical change which requires governments, businessmen, and international buyers to work together to bring about significant change.

Keywords: Inequality, Discrimination, women, Workplace, Readymade Garments Industry, Bangladesh.

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Abbreviation

BEPZA- Bangladesh Export Processing Zone Authority

BGMEA- Bangladesh Garments Manufacturers and Exporters Association

BLA- Bangladesh Labor Law

BTMC- Bangladesh Textile Mills Corporation

CEDAW- Convention on Elimination of Discrimination Against Women

EPZ- Export Processing Zone

GATT- General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade

GDP- Gross Domestic Products

GNI- Gross National Income

ILO- International Labor Organization

IMF- International Monetary Fund

JIT- JUST IN TIME

LDC- Least Developed Countries

MFA- Multi-Fiber Arrangement

NSD- Norsk Senter for ForskningsData

NWDP- National Women Development Policy

RMG- Ready-made Garment

SDG- Sustainable Development Goals

UN- United Nations

UNDP- United Nations Development Program

UNICEF- United Nations Children's Emergency Fund

WB- World Bank

Chapter One

1. Introduction

Gender equality is a basic entitlement that is crucial for eradicating the marginalization and inequality between genders. It necessitates granting women equal rights and advantages in all areas of life, including the labor market (Cotter et al., 1998). Both men and women are equally indispensable for fostering a harmoniously balanced society, as each gender possesses the capacity to contribute to the process of societal advancement. Hence, matters of gender parity and equitable opportunities for women are considered crucial for the holistic progress of the country. Women entering the paid employment sector, especially the non-agricultural sector, opens huge opportunities for them to challenge patriarchal norms and help to achieve economic independence. Particularly in the textile sector of Bangladesh, the situation of women workers is one of the notable examples that allows women to question traditional customs and build new social connections, thus helping them to improve their overall condition (Kabeer, 2005). Furthermore, women have a key role in the advancement of nations, particularly concerning the economic development of the country. According to the McKinsey Global Institute, bridging the employment disparity around the world would not only encourage fairness on a global scale, but it also has the potential to amplify the contribution that women contribute to the growth of the global GDP, effectively doubling their economic influence between the years 2014 and 2025 (Woetzel et al., 2015).

Concerning sustainable Development Goal 5 (SDG 5) aims to achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls, and SDG 8, aims to promote inclusive and sustainable economic growth, full and productive employment, and decent wages for all (The SDG Goal Report, 2017), women's rights and equality are considered important issues in the present world.

Like other parts of the world, the proportion of women in the workforce in Bangladesh is also increasing. The share of employed women is low at 36% in Bangladesh compared to other emerging nations in East Asia, although it is a prominent increasing ratio compared to the pre-1990s scenario (Jahiruddin et al., 2020a).

Conversely, there has been a significant rise in gender equality in recent years, as reported by the World Economic Forum in their 2023 publication on the Global Gender Gap. Based on the findings in the report, Bangladesh has emerged as the frontrunner among South Asian nations in the pursuit of gender equality.

The country has performed with 72.2%, standing at 59th in the global position, but concerning the

economic participation and opportunity subindex, the performance of the country is a bit weaker, standing at 139th in 146 countries, with a parity score of 43.8% (GGG Report, 2023). Bangladesh has been making efforts toward success in the area of gender equality from the year of 1990; however, the level of equality in every facet of life is still very low (N. Hossain, 2012a). Despite significant advancement in various sectors in recent decades, gender discrimination remains prevalent, creating a hostile workplace environment akin to a conflict ground. This study will investigate the specific setting of the Garment manufactured textile in Bangladesh, which is a very significant and rapidly growing sector for economic development and expansion.

1.1 Problem Statement

Bangladesh, officially the People's Republic of Bangladesh, is a country in South Asia. It is the eighth-most populous country in the world with a population now exceeding 170 million people in an area of 148,460 square kilometers (57,320 square miles). Bangladesh shares land borders with India to the West, North, and East and Myanmar to the South-east (S. I. Ahmed, 2023). The country gained independence from Pakistan after nine months of struggles on 16th December 1971. It was the second poorest country in the world after independence. After 50 years of independence, Bangladesh has been recognized as the second-largest economy in South Asia. Significant improvements can be seen regarding human development indicators (Ahmed, 2022).

In 1971, Bangladesh was among the poorest nations, but it has made significant strides in economic development over the years. The country achieved the lower-middle income status in 2015 and is expected to graduate from the United Nations' Least Developed Countries (LDC) list in 2026. Over the past few decades, poverty in Bangladesh has declined remarkably from 41.9% in 1991 to 13.5 % in 2016 (Rahman, 2023). Bangladesh has experienced strong GDP growth over the last few years with an average annual rate of over 6% and in 2023, the GDP contribution was 10.35% by the RMG sector in Bangladesh (Azmin, 2024).

However, taking into consideration the status of women in Bangladesh, despite such large contributions of the RMG sector in Bangladesh, women have failed to find an equal place with men in every sector. Mechanisms that systematically reproduce women's subordination have to be understood, to ensure their promotion of economic growth and social justice in the processes of attaining gender equality, especially in a highly patriarchal society where every sector bares inequality against women (Hossen, 2020).

In Bangladesh, it is believed that men have the responsibility of providing for their families, while women are expected to fulfill a supportive role toward men. Given the social structure in Bangladesh was established through the adoption of patriarchal customs, it is crucial to comprehend the concept

of patriarchy and the misconceptions surrounding it. The origins of patriarchy have been extensively discussed by many scholars. For a more profound comprehension of patriarchy, the following are some key aspects to explore regarding the concept:

According to the C.P Christ, “Patriarchy is a system of male dominance, rooted in the ethos of war which legitimates violence, sanctified by religious symbols, in which men dominate women through the control of female sexuality, with the intent of passing property to male heirs, and in which men who are heroes of war are told to kill men, and are permitted to rape women, to seize land and treasures, to exploit resources, and to own or otherwise dominate conquered people” (Christ, 2016, P-214).

Marlene LeGates (LeGates, 2001) stated in her book that, Patriarchy is a phrase derived from ancient Greek that signifies the governance or dominance of males, especially fathers. The term originally referred to the pastoral societies mentioned in the Old Testament, when the father’s dominion over family members was unquestionable.

Prior to delving into the primary focus of this research, which is the RMG industry and the issue of gender discrimination against women in the workplace, it is important to first examine the sectors that contribute significantly to the inequality and discrimination experienced by women. The following are some of the main sectors that require attention:

1.1.1 Literacy Rates

According to the preliminary report of “Population and Housing Census, 2022”, the literacy rate in Bangladesh is now 74.66 %. The rate is higher among the male population which was 76.56 %, while among the female population, it is 72.82 % (POPULATION & HOUSING CENSUS, 2022), which shows that the women in Bangladesh are lagging in education compared to men creating inequality in the most important sector for the development of the country. Examining the current literacy rates for males and females in 2024, there have been minimal changes. The overall literacy rate in Bangladesh remains at 75%, comprising a male literacy rate of 77.8% and a steady female literacy rate of 72% (World Population Review, 2024).

1.1.2 Employment Status

The female labor force participation rate is 34.9%, whereas the male participation rate is 78.8%. The ratio of female to male unemployment rate is 1.93 %, while the ratio of female to male young unemployment rate is 1.57%. According to 2022 statistics, the national unemployment rate of Bangladesh is 4.7 %. However, the male and female unemployment rates are remarkably large, with a great deal of females being unemployed (ILO, 2023). In Bangladesh, there is a gender disparity in

labor force participation, with women being less likely to participate than men, and when they do participate, they usually undergo discrimination in hiring, pay, and promotion (Gender Equality Brief, 2024). In Bangladesh, women only represent approximately one-third of the labor force, frequently occupying the lowest positions in the job hierarchy and facing limited job stability. Additionally, a significant number of women are involved in the informal economy, where the enforcement of social protection and legislation is lacking. Women are also more likely to work in low-paying and informal jobs such as unpaid care and household work, daily wage labor, and unpaid family businesses (Gender Equality Brief, 2024, P-7).

1.1.3 Political Participation

The political participation of women in Bangladesh has always been a very crucial matter. Although women constitutionally enjoy equal rights with men regarding participation in politics and representation, the exercise of this provision still is a highly contentious matter. The main causes of this inequality lie in the dominant social and cultural norms, inadequate access to education and resources, and limited opportunities for participation in formal political activities. In the national parliament of Bangladesh, 50 seats out of a total of 350 are reserved for women. This is approximately 14% of the total number of the parliament. Those seats were reserved to enhance the political representation of women. If 20 female candidates who won in the last parliamentary election of 2024 are added to this list still the number is comprised of only 20% of the total number. However, these women are not directly elected by the population and for this reason, this system is being criticized which highlights the importance of achieving a minimum representation of 50% to fulfill commitments to gender equality (Majumdar, 2024).

1.2 Significance of the Study

Approximately 80% of the labor force in the Ready-Made Garment business consisted of female workers for many years. But in recent years, this number has approximately dropped to less than 55% (Shahrier & Rahman, 2023). The decline in the percentage of women workers highlights employment-related barriers that women face in the industry, with their number having reduced. Even though the garment sector is female-oriented; industry working conditions present formidable challenges. The main challenges include low wages, long working hours, poor health and safety conditions, job insecurity, and psychological and physical harassment. However, one must consider the possible factors that could explain this reduction. Is it due to the influx of highly skilled males joining this area and displacing unskilled women? Are there any other elements that are contributing to this decline?

This study proposes that the observed discrimination and disparity can be attributed to crucial factors such as societal and cultural norms, workplace policy practices, and women's inadequate awareness of their rights. Bangladesh was established in 1971 and is currently the eighth most populous in the world. The country has shown growing economic development, with an increase of 252.0 % in GNI per capita between the years 1990 and 2021. Being a UN member state, Bangladesh is committed to attaining the SDG goals and places special focus on gender equality, as seen by its position in the UN's Sustainable Development Cooperation Framework 2022-2026. Although the country has made significant advancements in some of the gender equality measures, such as women's education and involvement in the workforce, its fast-paced economic expansion has also increased marginalization (Gender Equality Brief, 2024). This presents a major obstacle that could undermine both economic achievements and the goal of SDG 5, which focuses on gender equality and women's empowerment. Moreover, the opportunities for women in the professional sphere continue to be restricted, and this paradox will be further addressed here in this study.

1.3 Objective of the Study

All research is conducted with a certain aim in mind. The primary aim of this research is to ascertain the scope and characteristics of gender inequality and bias against women in Bangladesh, while also investigating the underlying elements and fundamental causes inside the Ready-Made Garments (RMG) in Bangladesh.

1.4 Research Questions

The main question for my research is: What are the main manifestations of gender-based inequity and discrimination faced by the female workforce engaged in the Ready-Made Garment (RMG) sector of Bangladesh, and what strategies could be considered to address these problems?

1.4.1 Following Questions

- What are the major symptoms of gender-based inequality and discrimination faced by women in the RMG sector of Bangladesh?
- How do these inequalities, and discriminated actions, impact the conditions of work and general experiences for women in the sector?
- What are the possible measures or interventions that can be effectively carried out to reduce these gender-related issues in the RMG industry?

1.5 Structure of the Research

The study is structured into six chapters. Chapter one provides an overview of the study and includes the issue description, the research aims significance, and primary research question. Chapter two provides an overview of the historical context of Bangladesh, the history and significance of the RMG industry, the gender distribution within the RMG sector, as well as the ideas of gender inequality and discrimination. The chapter also outlines the many policies of gender equality in Bangladesh. Chapter three provides an in-depth analysis of the existing literature and theoretical framework that are relevant to the investigation. Chapter four comprises the research design, study population, sample size and sampling methodology, data gathering method, data analysis technique, and ethical aspects of the study. Chapter five examines and provides the findings of the investigation. Chapter five of the study delves into the primary discoveries about the variables that contribute to inequality and discrimination against women in the RMG industry. The concluding chapter provides a summary and outlines prospects for the study.

Chapter Two

2. Background

Before delving into previous research, theory, and my findings, it is essential to consider the historical backdrop of Bangladesh's independence and the ensuing era, as well as the historical progression of the textile industry. The initial segment of this chapter will present a historical overview of the independence of Bangladesh, along with the subsequent efforts made to reconstruct the nation that had been severely damaged by war. The subsequent section will provide insights into the development of the RMG industry, with an emphasis on the variables that are relevant to my research study.

2.1 Historical Retrospective of Bangladesh: An Exploration of Bangladesh's Historical Progression

On June 3, 1947, The British announced their intention to divide British India into two separate entities: India, with a Hindu majority, and Pakistan, with a Muslim majority. Pakistan and India, as post-colonial states, came into existence on August 14, and 15, 1947, respectively. In 1971, following a civil war in Pakistan, India joined the conflict in support of the pro-freedom Bengalis of East Pakistan. This resulted in the birth of Bangladesh, marking the emergence of a new independent state (Rafiq, 2020). The partition of Pakistan in 1971 occurred after the declaration of Independence by present-day Bangladesh on March 25, 1971. This declaration led to a war that concluded on December 16, 1971, with the surrender of the Pakistani military (Bose, 2005).



Figure 1 Map of Independent Bangladesh

2.1.1 The Reconstruction Process of a War-torn Country

Under the leadership of Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, the newly independent country confronted major obstacles such as the reintegration of displaced people, the restoration of infrastructure, and the provision of necessities. Despite these challenges, notable economic achievements were made during the reconstruction period. The Government established a planning commission to facilitate the economic advancement of the nation. Subsequently, a five-year plan was revised and implemented to revitalize the commerce, industry, agriculture, and other sectors to reconstruct a country adversely affected by war, per the commission's recommendations (Jahan, 1973).

2.1.2 Economic Condition after the Reconstruction Process

Since gaining independence in 1971, Bangladesh has progressively shifted its economic focus from importing to exporting. In the early 1980s, Bangladesh implemented a series of economic changes under the supervision of the International Monetary Fund and World Bank to establish a new industrial policy focused on increasing exports. The emergence of the export-oriented RMG industry has greatly contributed to the country's economic progress during the past two decades (Akhter et al., 2017). The textile and garment industries are the primary catalysts for economic growth in Bangladesh's rapidly developing economy. The main driver of foreign exchange gains is derived from the exportation of textiles and clothing (Sikder, 2019). The relevance of the textile sector extends beyond the borders of Bangladesh, as it holds considerable value that surpasses national boundaries. The textile industry in Bangladesh holds a crucial position, not only due to its enormous impact on the Gross Domestic Product (GDP) but also as a significant provider of basic services. As a developing nation, the remuneration for workers in the garment industry is considerably cheap, but the expenses related to equipment and machinery are noticeably high (Khan et al., 2020).

2.1.3 Emergence of RMG Sector in Bangladesh

In 1974, one million people were killed in Bangladesh due to famine, which was also commonly referred to as starvation because of the swelling of the Brahmaputra River and a steep increase in rice prices. After the calamity, the public policy of the then-Bangladeshi government shifted away from the socialist economy. Denationalization and disinvestment were done and the role of the public sector in the textile sector started decreasing and private sector engagement was encouraged which is evident in the 1974 New Investment Policy (Maniruzzaman, 1975).

After the liberation war, Bangladesh continued to retain its focus on the agricultural industry to feed its poor and rural citizens. In 1978, there were only nine garment manufacturing units that were export-oriented. That year a Bangladeshi company exported its first consignment of garments directly to a

Parisian company, which consisted of 10,000 shirts. The government of Bangladesh realized the industry's potential and took necessary steps to ensure its success, which included incentives like duty-free import of machinery and raw materials, bonded warehouse facilities, and monetary incentives. (Jahiruddin et al., 2020b). The emergence of this phenomenon can be traced back to the Multifiber Arrangement (MFA) in 1974 which I will further explain in section 2.4. The implementation of garment export restrictions by the MFA, which targeted emerging industrializing Asian nations, even gave rise to the illusory phenomenon known as "quota-hopping," wherein entrepreneurs sought to establish production facilities in areas exempt from quota requirements (N. Hossain, 2012b).

2.2 History of the RMG Industry in Bangladesh

Bengal Subah had been a significant Muslin (A special type of clothing material) and silk trade center during the Mughal era, where Dhaka (The capital of Bangladesh) was the most important center for cotton production, and exported textiles to markets such as Central Asia, Europe, Indonesia, and Japan. British colonization in 1757 led to the creation of the Bengal Presidency in 1765 by opening the Bengali market to British goods while simultaneously availing protectionist policies. Following independence in 1971, the export-oriented industrialization strategy was adopted by Bangladesh, specifically the textile and clothing industry and, more precisely, the RMG industry, after the nationalization of the textile factories that had been privatized under the 1982 New Industrial Policy (Sikder, 2019).

Prior to the mid-1970s, Bangladesh's garment manufacturing sector for export purposes was relatively underdeveloped, despite the presence of a pre-existing local industry focused on made-to-order garments. The nation commenced its foray into the export market in 1976, when it established industrial facilities to accommodate private enterprises. Apparently, in 1977, Reaz Garments recorded history by exporting the first consignment to France, thus writing an unfading history (Khondkar & Honey, 2022). The remarkable event occurred in the late 1970s when a local entrepreneur and a South Korean firm agreed to a deal that led to the growth and successful future of Bangladesh's export-oriented garment industry (Rock, 2001).

Entrepreneurs from Bangladesh entered international garment markets quickly by leveraging their familiarity with export-oriented sectors in RMG to attract foreign buyers and access credit. Helped by the government, the apparel industry grew from 47 units in 1982 to an estimated 2,900 by 1999 to become one of the largest apparel exporters in the world. The remarkable economic change it has undergone is manifested by the change in its export from jute to RMG. And now, the new focus on the rights of workers adds a new dimension to its history (Chowdhury et al., 2014).

The newly formed government of Bangladesh after independence nationalized the textile sector, as well as several other enterprises primarily owned by entrepreneurs from West Pakistan. While there were some industrialists from Bangladesh, they were neither a large nor a politically strong group, so they ultimately gave up control of their factories to the government. Thus, national ownership was extended to all the textile mills in the country and they were organized under the Bangladesh Textile Mills Corporation (BTMC) (M. Islam et al., 2013, P-32).

Table 1 Significant stages in the evolution of the Bangladesh RMG sector (*M. Islam et al., 2013, P-33*)

Period	Event
1977-1980	Early period of growth
1982-1985	Boom days
1985	Imposition of quota restrictions
1990s	The Knitwear sector developed significantly
1995-95	Child labor issue and its solution
2003	Withdrawal of Canadian quota restrictions
2005	Phase-out of export quota system

2.3 Bangladesh Export Processing Zone Authority

The 1980s marked the rapid integration of Bangladesh's small and often home-based garment industry into the global garment chain, leading to significant economic impact in terms of export earnings and employment, with the garment industry now accounting for three-fourths of the country's export earnings and providing jobs to over four million workers (Shahrier & Rahman, 2023). In 1984, Chittagong became Bangladesh's first fully operational Export Processing Zone (EPZ). This decade saw a global rise in EPZs, specialized industrial zones for export-oriented industries where raw materials enter duty-free and completed items leave tax-free (Dowla, 1997). Presently, Bangladesh has a total of 8 Export Processing Zones (EPZs). The BEPZA serves as the government's official body for promoting, attracting, and facilitating foreign investment in the EPZs (*BEPZA, n.d.*).

2.4 Multi-Fiber Arrangement (MFA)

The MFA was a trade agreement established in 1973 under the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT). It involved approximately forty countries, including both developed and significant

developing textile exporters. The purpose of the MFA was to allow developed nations to impose import quotas on textiles and clothing from developing countries (Silberston, 1990).

MFA of 1974, which restricted RMG exports from developing countries, led producers to countries like Bangladesh that had cheap labor and were outside the quota restrictions; the first influx of investment into Bangladesh's RMG sector began during this period. (Chowdhury et al., 2014). Rahman elaborates an argument for the effect of post-MFA after 2005, Bangladesh not only sustained its previous achievements but also significantly enhanced its performance during both the post-MFA and economic periods. The remarkable and resounding expansion of Bangladesh's RMG industry may be credited to consistent assistance from the government, the lowest wage rate, cheaper export prices, a stable exchange rate, and political stability since 2007 (Rahman, 2015, P-93).

2.5 Importance of the RMG Sector in the Economy

The textile export performance of Bangladesh has shown remarkable and robust growth in recent years, underlining the vital importance of this industry to the country's economy. Bangladesh has been at the forefront among the global exporters of textiles because it has shown continuous growth and innovation. This gave way to the great performances and huge additions it gave to the trade balance of the country.

Value in Million USD (Fiscal Year Basis)

Table 2 Export performance of the RMG sector in Bangladesh (BGMEA, n.d.).

Year	Export of RMG	Total Export of Bangladesh	% of RMG's to Total Export
1983-84	31.57	811.00	3.89
1988-89	471.09	1291.56	36.47
1993-94	1555.79	2533.90	61.40
1998-99	4019.98	5312.86	75.67
2003-04	5686.09	7602.99	74.79
2008-09	12347.77	15565.19	79.33
2013-14	24491.88	30186.62	81.13
2020-21	31456.73	38758.31	81.16
2021-22	42613.15	52082.66	81.82
2022-23	46991.61	55558.77	84.58

Source: BGMEA

RMG business in Bangladesh is playing a crucial role in driving the country's economic development. There has been a notable increase in the total export of the RMG sector in Bangladesh since 1990, as shown in Table 2.

Bangladesh surpassed China to claim the title of the world's leading exporter of knitwear, with a total export value of \$9 billion, surpassing China's export value of \$8.9 billion in 2023 (*The Daily Star*, 2023b).

Despite such contributions made by the RMG industry toward the success of economic development and poverty reduction, many other pressing issues—salary disparities, limited career opportunities, and workplace harassment among them—continue unabated in the profession and personal life of the workers. Criticism of working conditions and the declining percentage of female workers indicates that equality in terms of opportunity and treatment is not adequately addressed in this sector in Bangladesh. (Matsuura & Teng, 2020).

Since there has been some improvement in the status of women in Bangladesh, research into the variables that have contributed to the disparities between men and women will help to underscore why women have not gained equal advancement and advantage like their male counterparts. Such inquiries would make it possible to implement changes that may help reduce gender-related problems and open equal opportunities for women like their male counterparts in the RMG industry.

2.6 Importance of Studying Gender Inequality and Inequity in the Workplace

Over the years, the problem of gender equality, equity, and discrimination has gained vast studies, but my research aims to find the root cause of gender inequality and discrimination and explore the scope of improvement, especially in one of the highly competitive sectors of the economy. Before moving further into the discourse, it is essential to define what is meant by gender inequality, inequity, and discrimination.

Equality, initially defined as a state of sameness in social status or legal/political rights, is an issue that has been debated within gender studies because, historically, men have been granted more social status and comprehensive legal and political rights in Western societies (Pilcher & Whelehan, 2004). However, Inequality emerges when a state of disparity persists in place of the desired state of equality.

Gender equality is an important dimension of human development. It not only means giving women and girls equal rights and opportunities but also is a proven strategy for improving long-term economic prospects and general human development within nations (Gaye et al., 2010). Hence, it can be

described as a situation in which gender does not affect the availability of rights or opportunities and denotes a society where both men and women possess equal rights and a fair allocation of power, status, opportunities, and rewards (Di Bella et al., 2023).

Here, I would like to mention gender equity, applying fair treatment for women and men regarding their own needs that might include unequal but equal opportunities and benefits. Unlike gender equality, equity in gender allows for varied outcomes so long as these outcomes can be perceived as being fair to both genders; thus, it is fairness rather than strict equality of results (ILO, 2000). For instance, the lack of support for women in balancing education and employment with motherhood leads to a reduction in the number of children they bear, reflecting their response to perceived gender inequity in their societal context (McDonald, 2000).

On the other hand, gender discrimination refers to the unfair treatment of an individual, typically a woman, based on their gender, resulting in less favorable treatment compared to men. This can be observed in other domains of life, such as the professional environment where women frequently receive lower remuneration compared to males for performing identical tasks, or in other instances of gender-based discrimination perpetrated by individuals (M. F. Haque et al., 2019).

Upon reviewing the various definitions related to gender equality, it can be understood that the rights of women are inherently linked with the broader concept of human rights. Regarding the economic development of a country, equality in accessing opportunities at workplaces plays a critical role in promoting equality.

Whereas participation of women in paid work has increased during recent years, systemic gender inequality has been sustained through discrimination against women in employment, lesser opportunities, higher unemployment rates, and non-participation in employment owing highly to gender norms and stereotypes in the labor market (Di Bella et al., 2023). Therefore, the field of social science research must scrutinize the pivotal aspects associated with the norms of inequality, inequity, and discrimination specifically within the context of the workplace.

2.6.1 Gender Composition in the RMG Sector

The table below provides an overview of the male and female ratio in the RMG industry in Bangladesh.

Table 3: Male and female ratio in terms of factory type (Shajahan et al., 2021)

Factory type	Number of factories	Male workers	Female workers	Total	Male to female ratio
Knit	1368	427,495	547,045	974,540	43.87:56.13
Woven	983	358,086	654,266	1,012,352	35.37:64.63
Sweater	534	201,306	131,311	332,617	60.52:39.48
Mixed	327	79,454	166,798	246,252	32.27:67.73

Source: MIB database

Whereas the rate of women participation in the country's RMG sector has been declining, the rate of male participation has gone up, thus making the sector's employment rate stagnate. At present, there are 4.4 million workers in the RMG sector, among whom 2.5 million are women and 1.8 million are men. In the past 5 years, the sector has added 0.2 million workers, with male inclusions rising at the rate of 4 percent per year, whereas the number of women workers has gone down by 0.6 percent every year, according to the Asian Centre for Development (ACD)(Bhadra et al., 2022).

However, an appreciation of the challenges women employees face in Bangladesh in the RMG industry, labor abuse, and gender-related bias underlines the interdependence of social equity with basic human rights. This would therefore emphasize the need for a comprehensive approach in trying to address such issues in this garment industry.

2.7 Discrimination through the human rights lens

As stated in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (*UDHR*, 1948), Article 1 proclaims, “All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights. They are endowed with reason and conscience and should act toward one another in a spirit of brotherhood.”

Article 2 declares, “Everyone is entitled to all the rights and freedoms outlined in this declaration, without distinction of any kind, such as race, color, sex, language, religion, political or other opinion, national or social origin, property, birth, or other status. Furthermore, no distinction shall be made based on the political,

jurisdictional, or international status of the country or territory to which a person belongs, whether it be independent, trust, non-self-governing, or under any other limitation of sovereignty.

The aforementioned articles elucidate the fundamental principles of human rights, emphasizing the notion that every individual is inherently entitled to freedom and equality in terms of their rights. Furthermore, they advocate for the cultivation of a sense of fraternity in all human interactions. The second declaration specifically highlights the notion that individuals are not entitled to any form of discrimination based on factors such as sex, race, color, and so on. Both articles affirm the fundamental principles of gender equality. However, despite these declarations, the reality fails to ensure gender equality as women face structural discrimination and inequality in many communities worldwide. Furthermore, the human rights declaration specifically aims for the need to eradicate gender discrimination in every sphere of life, ensuring that women have equal access to all opportunities they are entitled to.

2.8 Human Rights of Women and the Constitution in Bangladesh

The Government of Bangladesh, established after gaining independence, drafted a constitution in 1972. Various articles within the constitution explicitly safeguard women's rights throughout many different sectors. The subsequent articles (*The Constitution of the People's Republic of Bangladesh (ACT NO. OF 1972)*, n.d.) merit attention while examining women's rights in Bangladesh:

1. Article 27- "All citizens are equal before law and are entitled to equal protection of law."
2. Article 28(1)- "The State shall not discriminate against any citizen on grounds religion, race, caste, sex and place of birth."
3. Article 28 (2) - "Women shall have equal rights with men in all spheres of the state and public life."
4. Article 29 (1) – "There shall be equality of opportunity for all citizens in respect of employment or office in the service of the republic."
5. Article 29 (2) - "No citizen shall, on grounds only of religion, race, caste, sex or place of birth, be ineligible for, or discriminated against in respect of, any employment or office in the service of the republic."

Nevertheless, despite 52 years of independence and the establishment of the Constitution, the matter of women's equal opportunity continues to exist. Here in the context of my study, gender-based discrimination in the textile industry in Bangladesh is considered a violation of human rights. It undermines the principles stated in relevant articles and hurts female workers who have to suffer from

unequal pay, limited opportunities for advancement, and risks to their safety and dignity. It makes the less empowered practice of other human rights, such as the freedom to organize and be treated fairly at work. Human rights and social justice are inherently intersected since they provide a framework for comprehending all types of injustices and inequalities, especially within the garment sector of Bangladesh.

2.9 Women Development Policy, 2011 and Gender Equality and Equity

Despite the progress made by the government through programs like the Women's Development Policy in 2011, it is still difficult to address deeply rooted customs that perpetuate inequality. Bangladesh adopted Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) in 1984 and submitted its progress report to the CEDAW Committee in 2011, emphasizing its continuous efforts to reduce gender gaps and advance equality (*National Women Development Policy 2011*, n.d.).

Major key objectives of the Women Development Policy, 2011 in Bangladesh include ensuring gender equity in the affairs of government and the public, protection of women's safety, empowerment of women socio-economically, politically, administratively, and legally, and reducing the existing gender inequalities (*National Women Development Policy 2011*, n.d.).

Regarding equal rights in all the National economic activity, Section 23, sub-section 23.7 states that, " To ensure gender equal rate of wages, increase participation of women in the labor market, equal opportunity at the workplace, ensured security and removal of disparities in employment"(*National Women Development Policy 2011*, page, 17).

The mentioned policy has been designed to ensure the rights of women in Bangladesh. Therefore, the question persists as to why women in the textile sector continue to experience discrimination to their rights, despite the existence of several legislative frameworks. Nevertheless, this study seeks to investigate the fundamental factors that contribute to this discrimination and will be further discussed in this study.

Chapter Three

3. Literature Review and Theoretical Framework

This chapter delves into the topic of gender inequality and bias in the workplace with a particular focus on the RMG industry in Bangladesh. The chapter explores both theoretical and empirical literature on gender-based inequality and discrimination. The first section of the chapter examines empirical research that highlights the fundamental factors contributing to inequality and discrimination against women in textile manufacturing. The second section of the chapter discusses theoretical debates on gender in the realm of development, with a special emphasis on feminist ideas such as the integrated theory of social justice, the muted group theory, intersectionality, and the capability approach.

3.1 Literature Review

This section will examine the pertinent literature on gender inequality and discrimination against women in the workplace, focusing on the worldwide background as well as the specific case of the RMG sector in Bangladesh. I have conducted a comprehensive analysis of the literature on the gender-based discrimination experienced by women throughout the recruitment process and in the workplace. This includes examining issues such as unequal treatment in recruitment, disparities in wages, limited opportunities for promotion, excessive workloads, inadequate maternity protection facilities, and insufficient childcare facilities. Additionally, I have explored the socio-economic factors that contribute to these forms of discrimination. In addition, I have conducted an analysis of national laws, constitutional rights, and international legislation regarding the rights of female workers. In the final section of this chapter, I will provide a concise overview of the existing gap in the literature and highlight the potential impact of my work on the present body of knowledge.

3.1.1 Literature Search

Initially, I started the literature search by conducting fundamental electronic searches on three widely used databases. The databases used were Oria (Oslo Met library database), Wiley Web of Science, and Scopus. In addition, I have utilized Google Scholar, ResearchGate, and several national and international organization websites to gather supplementary information about the laws and policies that contribute to the achievement of the study's objectives.

Databases and search terms:

Database	Search words/ Keywords
Oria	“Gender Inequality”, “Workplace Inequality”, “Inequality in the Readymade Garments Sector in Bangladesh”, “Discrimination at the Workplace”, and “Working Condition”.
Scopus	(“Gender Inequality” OR “Inequality” OR “RMG” OR “Bangladesh”) AND (“Female workers” OR “Women workers” OR “Lady workers”) AND (“Problems” OR “Difficulty” OR “Issues”) AND (“Garments” OR “Textile” OR “Fashion” OR “Fast fashion”)
Wiley web of science	(“Gender inequality in Bangladesh” OR “Inequality against women in Bangladesh”) AND (“Female textile workers” OR “Female garments workers” Or “Clothing industry workers”) AND (“Problems in the workplace” OR “Issues in Workplace” OR “Rights in Workplace”)

Source: Author’s construct, October 2023

3.2 Global Pattern of Gender Inequality in the Labor Force: Causes and Implications

There is a widespread perception that gender disparity is only present in global southern countries. However, upon evaluating the distribution of the female labor force worldwide, it becomes clear that gender inequality is a pervasive issue. Nevertheless, gender inequality varies across the global labor force and is influenced by factors such as social class, ethnicity, race, country, and geographical region (Mills, 2003,page, P-42). Given the specific focus of this study on workplace inequality and discrimination against women, it is imperative to perform a comprehensive examination of the causes that exist in various regions of the world.

Various research provides evidence that patriarchal values play a dominant role in exacerbating inequality throughout many regions of the world. A study in Fez, Morocco found that women's involvement in the industrial sector challenged Islamic gender norms, particularly in the conservative lower class. In this class, patriarchal family structures maintain male dominance through women's economic dependence (Cairolì, 1999). Mills (Mills, 2003) in her study, noted that young unmarried people were preferred as they were cheap, flexible, and disciplined according to the historians of the Industrial Revolution. Similarly, Cairolì shares this view in the sense that unmarried women were preferred to married women since this action keeps intact the traditional family system and Islamic principles that marriage is an economic union, regardless of a potential counter to men's authority (Cairolì, 1999). Mills termed this labor force as "Nimble-fingered" while men hold most supervisory and managerial positions, reflecting patriarchal norms that deem women's labor as "cheap" and socially and economically worthless, a perception that is instrumental to the accumulation strategies of global capital (Mills, 2003). To maximize profits, producers cut down wages, and work-space quality and increase work hours that parallel with the historical devaluation of women's labor and wage in industries. The gender pay systems rationalize women's subordination in the economic structures by assuming they are supplementary workers in households headed by males (Beth, 2013). As patriarchal ideology affects the global economy, gender inequalities affect the workforce, but individuals' lived experiences often question these norms, causing conflicts and resistance that alter gender power dynamics (Mills, 2003). Despite performing similar tasks, women in departments like the weave room earned 40% less than men in the early 20th century in the US due to cultural expectations that men were breadwinners and women were temporary industrial workers (Beth, 2013,P-71).

Jobs in textiles and garment assembly in industrializing countries often fail to lift workers out of extreme poverty, with profits mostly benefiting retailers and middlemen, limiting women's advancement, and reinforcing their low-paying, labor-intensive roles as industries mature, thwarting economic progress (Beth, 2013).

The demand for female labor is primarily focused on unskilled positions that do not prioritize professional advancement. The feminization of labor encompasses both the quantitative growth of women in paid employment and the long-standing social norms that have perpetuated gender-based inequalities in the workplace, such as job segregation and unequal pay (Beth, 2013, P-72). While the differences in the labor force participation rates of men and women have declined, there remain considerable gaps in every part of the world, with women usually representing the majority of those in low-status and low-paid sectors. Women also still represent a minority of people in managerial and political leadership positions, despite having similar qualifications (Shang, 2022).

Although there is a high demand for female labor, it remains a concerning issue that these women are not adequately appreciated, treated equally, or treated fairly in the workplace. This situation is worsening gender inequality and discrimination. Hence, this global problem holds great significance for my research topic, making it imperative for the current study to investigate the elements linked to inequality in the Bangladeshi RMG industry.

3.3 Exploring Gender Inequality and Discrimination in Bangladesh

The participation of women in Bangladesh's economy is steadily increasing, as more and more women engage in formal employment sectors and play a significant role in the country's economic growth. However, there are persistent challenges in ensuring better working conditions for women, which are deeply rooted in long-standing biases and inequalities prevalent in cultural and social norms. It is crucial to recognize and prioritize women's rights in the workplace to enhance productivity and provide proper acknowledgment of their valuable economic contributions. Unfortunately, societal, and cultural expectations are rooted in patriarchy which often limits these contributions.

The subsequent aspects play a significant role in contributing to gender disparity in Bangladesh:

Prejudice:

Stereotypes are rigid, simplified attributions of characteristics by one social group towards another. In the field of psychology and social sciences, these concepts have been well studied. Examples of such concepts include 'women are more sensitive than men'. In Bangladesh, the garment sector provides almost 75% of the official female wage employment. However, it is stereotyped that female workers are more subservient, less likely to join unions, and willing to accept lower wages. This notion is quite common in the sector and, hence, a more informal approach toward female employment is given. (Ghosh, 2004). While stereotypes are a natural cognitive process in and of themselves, they are not inherently negative; they may form the core of prejudices, which involve judgments and evaluation and will more than often lead to discriminatory behavior, as seen in the belief that women are better suited to caregiving professions due to their perceived sensitivity (Di Bella et al., 2023). However, gender social norms have a significant impact on attitudes, social connections, and power dynamics (UNDP, 2023).

Cultural norms and values:

The appearance of female factory workers in Bangladesh's garment industry in the early 1980s was remarkable considering the historical absence of women in the public domain. Mostly originating from

destitute rural regions, these women pursued job prospects in the sector, where their disadvantaged status was viewed as beneficial by employers because of their apparent submissiveness (Kabeer, 2004). However, the country has made less progress when it comes to women's economic participation. Women are still mainly involved in a small number of economic activities, and the number of unpaid family jobs has recently gone up (Heintz et al., 2018). Women's empowerment, however, does not change the position of women in Bangladesh society. Women are expected to serve the males. Leadership is viewed as a "masculine" role all over the world, and in developing countries with low education rates, unavailability of resources, social and religious taboos, and the weak rule of law, these conditions actually strengthen the elements of the patriarchal society and therefore work against gender equality efforts (Jahiruddin et al., 2020b).

The cultural norms prevalent in Bangladeshi society significantly impede the advancement of gender equality and women's rights, as they prioritize traditional duties for women in raising children and managing home affairs. Engaging in employment outside of the household to contribute to income is met with societal opposition, often resulting in working women being subjected to criticism and scrutiny. Although there have been some changes in attitudes, women still do not have complete economic autonomy because of deeply ingrained cultural norms (Heintz et al., 2018).

Patrilineal society:

In Bangladesh, deeply rooted patriarchy has denied any government efforts to address gender inequalities. This has been despite constitutional obligations of gender equality, which in the end also builds a social system that has marginalized women's rights. The cultural tradition confines women to household roles and discourages participation in public affairs, thus perpetuating huge gender gaps that hamper progress toward the accomplishment of equality (F. Haque, 2019).

The patrilineal cultural structure, which is centuries old and is still functioning, is one of the historical fundamental factors that have been attributed to the problem. According to the Encyclopedia, "Patrilineality refers to the organization of family relationships in societies by lines of descent from a person's male ancestors. The term derives from the Latin words Pater("father") and Linea("thread"). A patriline consists of the generations of male descendants. Both male and female offspring belong to a patriline, but only male children can continue the line"(Patrilineality, n.d.).

Patrilineal inheritance, the prevailing custom of passing down descent and property through the male lineage, resulted in the genealogical marginalization of women and often deprived them of any property. In addition to this, traditional family arrangements established a hierarchy where the senior male member held the power to make decisions, while cultural norms restricted women's freedom of

movement, essentially restricting them to responsibilities related to reproduction and household tasks that could be done at home (Kabeer et al., 2018a).

Misinterpretation of religious practices:

Bangladesh, a country with a largely Muslim populace, has followed religious customs from its inception as a sovereign republic in 1971, with Muslims constituting 90% of the population and non-Muslims making up the remaining 10% (Bhuiyan, 2017). In Islam, men and women are considered respectable entities, though some limitations are specific to women, especially about dress and pattern of wearing. The veil system, known as "Purdah," is prescribed under Islamic religious practices for women. It is supposed to be an essential part of the religion and thus forms a significant basis for people's perception regarding the appearance and behavior of women (Haque, 2008).

It is important to investigate whether the concept of 'Purdah' (Veil) is also a contributing factor to inequality and discrimination, or if this practice does necessarily prevent women from participating in the economy. According to Quranic verse 23, Surah Al Qasas, women are permitted to work and make money if they need to do so. This is approved by Islam, although there may be certain conditions that apply (Halimah, 2023). Although purdah does not intrinsically restrict women's movement or economic involvement, globalization has facilitated women's participation in Bangladesh's ready-made clothes sector, thus undermining conventional gender norms. Despite the sector providing employment and income, many women struggle with managing work responsibilities, household duties, and societal norms, often working due to necessity rather than personal preference (Jennings et al., 2022). Nevertheless, women find themselves in a predicament where they are expected to fulfill two distinct roles - one within the confines of their home and another in the public domain. Unfortunately, society usually rejects this dual position, and this rejection is mostly based on sociological and cultural norms rather than religious beliefs (Halimah, 2023).

3.4 Recognition of Inequality and Discrimination against Women in the Ready-Made Garment Industry

Women's participation in the garment industry in Bangladesh disrupted traditional gender norms and increased their perceived worth within homes by highlighting their capacity to produce income. Integrating women into factory work offered a more reliable and steady income compared to sporadic and poorly compensated vocations that had traditionally been the main types of employment for women. Women's income had a substantial impact on home finances, leading to changes in gender

dynamics and questioning traditional ideas about gender, notwithstanding the different ways it was understood (Kabeer, 1997).

The following section will discuss the challenges and exploitative nature of women's garment work, marked by physically demanding jobs, hazardous working conditions, and gender-based bias in terms of wages and opportunities for advancement. The demanding nature of the industry and the unavailability of sufficient facilities for childcare make it hard for women to manage their caregiving duties with employment (N. Hossain, n.d.).

3.4.1 Gender Wage Disparities

All the workers in the RMG industry are seen in a state of vulnerability, though the vulnerabilities of men and women can be assessed with some visible differences. Women are, however, more vulnerable because of the relatively underprivileged socio-economic backgrounds they have and hence lesser bargaining power for improved work conditions (Kabir et al., 2018a).

This vulnerability is exacerbated by gender-based wage disparities, exposing female workers to substandard remuneration compared to their male counterparts. Most of the employees in the RMG industry work in the "production" department. The production division consists of seven wage categories, with grade 1 being the highest paid and grade 7 being the lowest and most of the women workers are employed in grades 4 to 7 (Matsuura & Teng, 2020, P-13).

Table 4 Grade-wise minimum wage: (“Gazette Published Fixing Minimum Wage ” 2023).

Grades	Minimum Wage (In BDT)
1	14,750
2	14,150
3	13,550
4	13,025
5	12,500
6	10,873
7	10,231

Source: TBS Report

Workers employed in the garment industry often do not receive remuneration sufficient to procure nutritionally adequate sustenance, which is essential in maintaining their physical capabilities for labor-intensive work as they age. Additionally, gender-based wage disparities exacerbate this issue, as

female workers mostly are employed at the lower grades (See *Table 4*) and receive lower wages than their male counterparts.

3.4.2 Underrepresentation of Leadership Roles

For ensuring women's employment rights, the National Women Development Policy of Bangladesh, section 26, sub-sections 26.3 and 26.5 illustrates that “to motivate all employment agencies to give women all kinds of equal opportunities under government quota and employment policy” and “to create the necessary environment to promote access of women to employment areas at an increasing rate, their position as such and continue their advancement”(National Women Development Policy 2011, page, 18).

Within the garment manufacturing business, women predominantly engage in physically strenuous jobs such as sewing and finishing, while men typically hold positions that involve technical expertise, such as cutting and dyeing. This results in a noticeable gender imbalance in both job allocation and leadership positions. A study report by ILO shows that 83.8% of employed women in the RMG in Bangladesh, are engaged in low-paying jobs that demand minimal abilities, specifically in the range of Grade 4 to Grade 7. Regarding senior positions, 96 % of factory managers, and 95 % of line supervisors are occupied by men (Matsuura & Teng, 2020). These results do not indicate any notable progress in the promotion of women to higher positions in this sector. Islam et al. showed in their study that, the obstacles faced by women in RMG organizations in Bangladesh encompass a scarcity of female leaders, an imbalance between work and personal life, hierarchical leadership structures that favor men, prejudice in employment procedures, and cultural gender stereotyping. The study suggests that to promote women's advancement into leadership positions, it is important to overcome resistance from male leaders and the tendency of participants to maintain the current state of affairs (A. Islam et al., 2018).

The study conducted by the Centre for Policy Dialogue (CPD) emphasizes gender inequality in skill levels and advancement opportunities. It reveals that while female workers generally have lower proficiency in operating machinery compared to males, participating in skills development courses does not guarantee promotions to positions that provide greater job security, social status, or compensation (Uddin, 2018). The patriarchal society gives men early advancements while women confront income discrepancies and limited promotion prospects, demonstrating deep-rooted discrimination. Women typically see societal impediments as normal and are oblivious to workplace gender-based discrimination, poor representation of women in various employment levels, and factories' neglect of gender-specific needs (Shahrier & Rahman, 2023, Page 30). Although efforts have

been made to tackle gender discrimination and advance equality, the percentage of women in high-ranking positions such as CEO, General Manager, and HR Manager in the RMG in Bangladesh is still less than 10%. This has led to demands for legal actions to guarantee equal opportunities and increase female presence in decision-making roles (A. Islam et al., 2018, P-3).

3.4.3 Verbal and Physical Violence

The number of female workers in the Bangladesh garment industry has been growing rapidly since the 1970s, predominantly composed of low-paid sewers who are very young, unmarried, and come from rural areas. On the other hand, men in the industry generally receive higher pay and hold supervisory and managerial positions that have to do with societal gender roles; a class dynamic is further introduced within the hierarchy of work, hence bolstering gender hierarchy while facilitating male control through the use of violence (Gibbs et al., 2019).

All workers in the RMG sector are vulnerable, but the women are specifically vulnerable because of factors such as coming from rural and disadvantaged family backgrounds, drawing lower wages than their male counterparts, and being frequently subjected to verbal and physical abuse, violent behavior, sexual harassment, and informal recruitment. According to the traditional patriarchal Bangladeshi society, women are weaker with less physical ability, and their social and economic lives are closely guided and guarded, making them more willing to tolerate exploitative job structures where they can be placed at inferior levels (Kabir et al., 2018a). One of the prime drivers of workplace stress in Bangladeshi garment factories is the 'Just-in-Time' (JIT) manufacturing regime, which transfers the seasonal pressures of the garment industry from the buyers to the factory floor; this increased managerial stress and the demand for high worker productivity has strategies, like apparently increasing productivity, including physical violence, shouting, swearing, and cursing at workers (Siddiqi, 2003).

3.4.4 Sexual Harassment

Significant contributors to the industry and the economy, female workers are subjected to sexual harassment from their male colleagues and bosses, which makes the work environment precarious. Even though labor regulations are in place to help protect women at work, the lack of enforcement has led to the continuous occurrence of harassment, assaults, and even homicide. This underlines the persistent challenges in the realization of gender equality and in assuring the safety and security of women within their places of work (M. F. Haque et al., 2019).

Sexual harassment serves as a crucial measure in assessing the actual condition of women working in textile manufacturers. A recent study (Basirulla & Tasnim, 2023) on violation of human rights reveals that male colleagues or bosses engage in many forms of sexual harassment towards female employees as their evil eyes fall on them. If the female worker refuses to accept the unethical offers, she is initially subjected to verbal harassment and public insults. Subsequently, she is coerced into performing additional tasks and falsely charged before the senior authorities, among other things.

Despite the widespread occurrence of workplace sexual harassment in Bangladesh, the 2006 Labor Act neither defines nor effectively addresses this issue, and the authorities have not yet ratified the ILO's Violence and Harassment Convention (C190), which mandates comprehensive protections to eradicate violence and harassment, including gender-based violence, in the workplace (*Bangladesh Events of 2023*, n.d.).

3.4.5 Barriers to Unionization/Male-Dominated Trade

Economic and political difficulties, along with deeply ingrained patriarchal traditions that exclude female viewpoints, challenge the trade unions in the garment sector, even though they have an important role to play in improving working conditions. Whereas the sector depends heavily on women workers, the presence of male-dominated unions keeps the power imbalance, hindering decisions that involve women and increasing gender inequality at work (Evans, 2017).

Union activism within the garment industry is challenged by gender ideologies as predominantly male factory supervisors, owners, monitors, regulators, and parliamentarians interact with predominantly female garment workers in a highly gender-segregated industry where lower-paid female sewers are surrounded by male mechanics, electricians, guards, supervisors, and managers (ILO, 2012).

Crisis management often proves ineffective in handling issues related to workers' rights, with workers sometimes forced to risk their lives by going to factories during strikes, and a lack of fair trade, suitable wages, appropriate working hours, and awareness initiatives further harming workers' wellbeing, while labor unions, often associated with political parties, remain relatively uncommon (Khondkar & Honey, 2022).

Workers who feel ignored are not willing to raise gender-related issues with union leaders, and deciding not to speak about issues of sexual harassment reveals the union's susceptibility. Union leaders in Bangladesh display paternalistic strategies; the consequence in workers is collaborative but dissociative behavior. This highlights the need to go beyond conventional notions to foster meaningful engagement (Evans, 2017). Due to employer opposition against unions and collective organizational

difficulties, garment workers have typically addressed concerns individually. Trade unions' neglect of women workers' issues has hampered collective action. Male and female garment workers in South Asia have minimal trade union membership despite their longstanding affiliation (Kabeer, 2004).

3.5 Challenges Faced

There have been significant issues faced by garment workers in Bangladesh, such as disregard for labor rules and substandard working conditions. Despite the high growth of industries in Bangladesh, many buildings in this country have been unlawfully converted into industrial facilities, which are dangerous to work in. The already oversubscribed factories are beyond the capacity of safety because of the poor electric system, unstable buildings, and expired fire safety equipment that put the workers' lives in danger (Vanpeperstraete, 2021).

3.5.1 Rana Plaza Incident and Aftermath

Although the ready-made garment industry in Bangladesh employs approximately four million workers, mostly uneducated women from rural areas who earn low wages (Table 4) compared to men, its reputation has been tarnished by significant industrial accidents. These include the Tazreen Fashions fire in 2012 and the Rana Plaza building collapse in 2013, which together caused over a thousand fatalities and numerous injuries (Akhter et al., 2019a).

Survivors often suffer poor physical and mental health, including post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). Other reports show that disasters increase the risk of suicidal ideation and suicide attempts; this happens regardless of the type of disaster and geographical location. These studies indicate that women are more vulnerable to PTSD and suicide risks than men (Kabir et al., 2021).

Reflecting the patriarchal ideologies that dominate Bangladesh's economy and cultural contexts, the Rana Plaza collapse affected male and female workers differently, with female survivors, unlike their male counterparts, not permitted to take on available labor roles such as rickshaw pullers or van drivers (Kabir et al., 2018b). Among the survivors of the Rana Plaza disaster, the trauma extends beyond the event itself: survivors must fight against social stigmas that become almost as painful as their physical injuries. This cocktail of trauma, fear of exclusion from society, family burdens, financial uncertainty, and the risk of future mental health complications may make the victims even more socially vulnerable, entailing another invisible disaster into their lives (Akhter, 2014).

3.5.2 Assessing the Impact of COVID-19

The COVID-19 pandemic has had a significant influence on the RMG industry. Given that most individuals employed in this industry are women who also serve as the primary earners for their families, the consequences have a significant influence on them. The pandemic has had a lasting impact, causing certain workers to continue grappling with economic and mental challenges. Numerous women had difficulties such as unemployment due to disruptions in the industry's production and supply.

The disruption, which included cancelled and unpaid orders, lockdown measures, increased costs for COVID-19 mitigation, and buyer demands discounts, has heightened women workers' vulnerabilities in terms of economic and job security, health, and wellbeing, and increased instances of sexual harassment and violence. These disparities can be linked to the gendered occupational roles in the industry, wherein women are primarily involved in sewing production lines, while men hold positions considered more skilled (Pamela Abbott et al., 2022).

The pandemic also saw new issues and challenges about women's rights and gender equality. Women workers in the RMG, who were already living with minimum wages, faced aggravated hardships during COVID-19: the loss of jobs, long-term unemployment, and not being paid severance pay. It was hard to seek new employment because of lockdowns and travel restrictions. During the national lockdown, employers took advantage of the situation by sacking troublesome workers, a move which had a greater impact on women workers, particularly pregnant women, or older women. The compensation due was denied to them, which they were entitled to under the 2006 Labor Law and subsequent amendments in 2013 and 2018 (Pamela Abbott et al., 2022, P-8).

3.5.3 Recent Protest for Wage Raises in Bangladesh

It is widely expected by factory owners that women are a source of more cheap labor, this concept enhances the exploitation of women in the workplace to a significant extent. As of 2023, less than 55 % of the workers in the RMG industry in Bangladesh were women (Shahrier & Rahman, 2023). The number still shows the majority employment for women in the RMG, but still are exploited in terms of many areas, especially regarding wages as depicted in *Table 4*.



Figure 2 : Labor erupts unrest in Dhaka, Bangladesh: Garment industry workers stage protests, Advocating for wage hikes (Paul & Ghosh, 2023).

The image depicted above showcases the textile sector workers in Bangladesh engaging in rallies to advocate for a long-awaited salary increase. The wage has remained stagnant for the past 5 years. The monthly income they receive is exceedingly low, making it nearly impossible to sustain a minimum standard of living.

In November 2023, the government reached an agreement to increase the minimum salaries by over 56% to 12,500 taka (\$114) per month. However, a significant number of workers still consider this amount to be insufficient. According to three labor groups representing 500,000 workers, Bangladesh garment manufacturers have terminated the employment of several workers since the October rallies, and, Additionally, many other workers are currently evading arrest (Paul & Ghosh, 2023).

The earnings of RMG workers in Bangladesh's shown in **Figure 3**, are lower compared to other competitive countries. The remuneration for laborers in the RMG industry in India, Cambodia, China, Indonesia, Vietnam, and Pakistan surpasses that of Bangladesh.

The figure provided below depicts the pay disparity among the major textile-exporting nations:

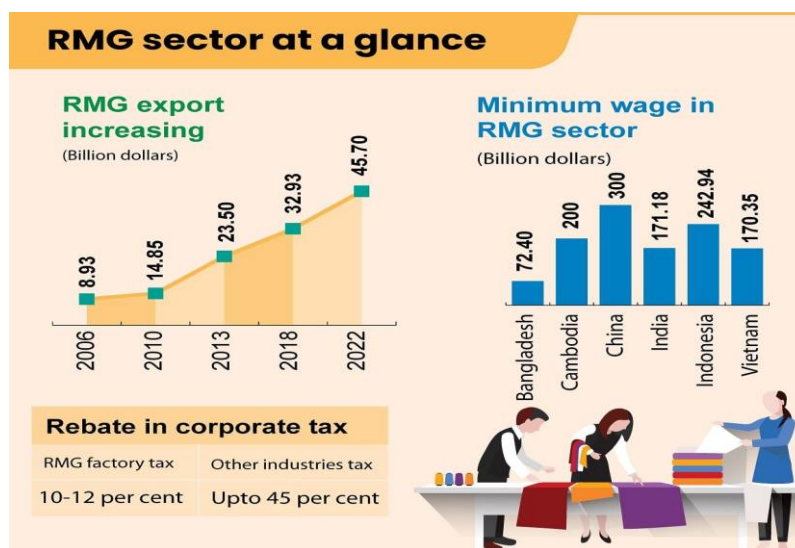


Figure 3: Dynamic shifts: Surging RMG exports in Bangladesh amidst global labor wage disparities (Shah & Karmokar, 2023).

3.6 Overview of Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework will provide the conceptual basis and an analytical lens by which this study explores the complex dynamics of gender inequality and discrimination within the RMG industry of Bangladesh. The following section will present the theoretical frameworks I used to explore and interpret gender inequalities and discrimination in the workplace.

3.6.1 Gender in the Development Field and Feminist Theories

The term "feminism" is used to describe the conviction that women are subordinated because of their gender and that they deserve, at the least, legally guaranteed equality. Feminist writers and activists, long before the popular usage of the term feminism, envisioned a changed world in which women might fulfill their potential, theorizing concepts previously unimaginable because women had no legal existence as individual persons (Pilcher & Whelehan, 2004). Feminist theories are multi-dimensional, and intersecting and include concepts like objectification, structural and economic inequality, power relations, oppression, gender roles, and stereotypes (Pope, 2000).

Feminist ideology criticizes binary thinking for oversimplifying intricate reality and sustaining power structures, instead pleading for dynamic processes that question traditional beliefs regarding women and stress ideals of equal rights, freedom of choice, and fairness (Ferguson, 2017). There are several ways that practical implications may be approached within feminist theory. When considering the

practical consequences of feminist theory, various approaches can be adopted. Michelle K. Ryan (2023) has identified four typical missteps in workplace programs aimed at achieving gender equality:

1. Focusing simply on numerical data,
2. Trying to address the issue by focusing on women rather than the underlying systems,
3. Being excessively enthusiastic about the progress made, and
4. Failing to consider the intersectionality of women's experiences (Ryan, 2023).

Based on Ryan's analysis of missteps made in achieving gender equality in the workplace, three main approaches may be identified for tackling gender inequality inside the organization. I have constructed a model that shows these three main approaches and examines the influence of Feminist Theory on workplace equality and access. The following diagram presents the three main strategies for addressing gender disparity in the work setting:



Figure 4: Feminist Theory's impact on workplace Equality and Access

However, the marginalization of women in leadership positions in the RMG sector of Bangladesh has brought enormous effects on exercising their rights and wielding authority. By applying feminist theory in this instance, the focus is on initiatives to establish human resource development programs that try to enhance the abilities of the mainly female workforce.

In line with the principles of feminist theories, this research study applied Nancy Fraser's 'Integrated theory of justice' along with 'Muted Group theory', 'Intersectionality' and 'Capability approach' as conceptual frameworks.

3.6.2 Integrated Theory of Justice

Nancy Fraser, an esteemed professor at the New School for Social Research, is a prominent figure in the recognition theoretical movement of the 1990s. She examines current societal dynamics from a normatively informed perspective, drawing from feminist theory, critical theory, and post-structuralism (Dahl et al., 2004).

Fraser (2007) suggested that to comprehend gender, one must examine it from two distinct perspectives: one that emphasizes its parallels with class, and another that highlights its parallels with status. By integrating both viewpoints, we observe that gender exerts influence over both the distribution of resources and the recognition of individuals within society (Fraser, 2007).

During an interview, Fraser discussed the development of her 'Theory of Justice' from the 1980s to the present, specifically examining the relationship between redistribution and recognition. At first, she examined how economic disparities and cultural issues intersected. However, she eventually realized that there was a gap between efforts to address wealth distribution and the need for recognition, which was caused by the emergence of identity politics and neoliberalism. Furthermore, she has introduced a third type of injustice 'Lack of political representation', and presented a theory of justice that includes three dimensions, 1. Redistribution, 2. Recognition and 3. Representation (Dahl et al., 2004).

Fraser countered Judith Butler's critique by supporting her emphasis on differentiating cultural and economic aspects, using Max Weber's influence to refute allegations of reducing culture to materialism. She also often integrates the paradigm developed by Pierre Bourdieu, namely his differentiation between economic and cultural dimensions. According to Fraser, public dialogue is necessary for justice; the sociology of Bourdieu, meanwhile, accentuates the structural reasons for inequality of participation, bringing both individual actions and the dynamics of institutional power into consideration (Fraser & Bourdieu, 2007).

Fraser's essay titled 'Abnormal Justice' presents a proposition that argues that justice claims should be evaluated on three dimensions: economic, cultural, and political. Justice is about removing institutional barriers that put barriers to the equal participation of persons because of economic distribution inequalities, status inequality or under-represented social hierarchies, and because of political status as non-represented (Fraser, 2008).

Within my research framework, it is of utmost importance to address the socio-economic injustices that the RMG industry women experience in their private and professional lives. Fraser's comprehensive philosophy of justice offers a broad understanding of the injustices related to my research topic.

Fraser categorizes socio-economic injustice into three types: the exploitation of labor's output, economic marginalization through limited access to desired employment or sufficient earnings, and the denial of a satisfactory material standard of living, she proceeds to identify three forms of 'cultural or symbolic' injustice that stem from 'social patterns of representation': cultural domination (being subjected to external standards of judgment), non-recognition (being rendered culturally invisible), and disrespect (being routinely subjected to negative stereotypes and disparagements) (Lovell, 2007).

3.6.3 Muted Group Theory

Muted group theory has been of immense interest to feminists who are concerned with the very nature of language. Muted group theory was developed by the anthropologists Shirley and Edwin Ardener in the late 1960s (Wall & Leary, 1999).

The Ardeners claimed that everyone must fit into a society's mainstream expression to make a point heard, and otherwise, 'muted' for breaking the trend, and the essential element here is whether a group can speak without constraints and make themselves understood. In cases of gender-based involvement, women are the muted group that cannot express themselves freely (Edwin, 1975).

3.6.4 Key Concepts of 'Muted Group' Theory

Muted Group Theory, formulated by Edwin Ardener and Shirley Ardener, is very pertinent for comprehending gender-related matters owing to its emphasis on the intricacies of communication and power hierarchies within societies. Three essential concepts (Edwin, 1975) of 'Muted group theory' holds significant importance in this study and these are:

- 1. Dominant modes of expression:** In my study context, the viewpoints of males are prevalent, as men in superior positions of authority exert control over female employees and they frequently employ verbal mistreatment to silence them and maintain unequal power dynamics inside the workplace.
- 2. Muted groups:** Women's viewpoints are excluded and repressed in society discussions, especially in factory environments, because of concerns about employment termination and instability, resulting in the continuation of the existing situation despite their significant contributions.
- 3. Suppression of alternative expression:** This theory emphasizes the role of communication channels in strengthening traditional gender norms, and despite playing a crucial role as breadwinners in the garment sector, women face discrimination and limited recognition, which contributes to societal obstacles towards accepting changing gender roles.

3.6.5 Basic principles of 'Muted Group Theory

The muted group theory posits three fundamental principles.

To begin with, women and men possess distinct perceptions of the world due to their different experiences resulting from the division of labor.

Secondly, as men hold political dominance, their mode of expression assumes a position of authority.

Lastly, for women to effectively express themselves and engage in society, they must employ the dominant mode of expression, thereby requiring translation or the acquisition of bilingual proficiency in both women's and men's languages (Wall & Leary, 1999).

3.6.6 The Theory of Intersectionality

In 1989, Kimberlé Crenshaw coined the word "Intersectionality" to promote a systematic approach in addressing many types of oppression. This theory achieved broad consensus in the fields of social sciences and humanities as a fundamental instrument for examining how power systems intersect to generate social disparities that impact various groups in distinct ways. Intersectionality highlights the intricate relationship between power and identity, providing a comprehensive examination while recognizing the diversity and flexibility of certain types of oppression (Cho, 2013).

The idea of "intersectionality" developed by Kimberlé Crenshaw has played a crucial role in tackling oppression by emphasizing the intricate power dynamics involved. As a result, it has been widely embraced in academic fields and political conversations (Cho et al., 2013). The intersectional framework recognizes that several social and political identities intersect, resulting in distinct kinds of oppression that go beyond the mere combination of separate categories. Initially centered on the experiences of Black women, it has since broadened its scope to include a range of identities such as disability, sexual orientation, religion, and others. By contextualizing intersectionality within structures of power such as racism and patriarchy, one may see how several forms of oppression contribute to systemic inequity for both individuals and communities (Lewis, 2022).

Organizational studies often investigate race and gender as independent factors, but they intersect and jointly influence individuals' experiences in the workplace. This study concentrates on women's experiences due to their scarcity in positions of power, employing an intersectional lens to dissect the perceptions and experiences of various subgroups, and elucidating their subordinate status (Rosette et al., 2018).

Acker further suggests that intersectionality provides a framework for understanding the complex interaction of segregated processes, such as inequality regimes, that sustain social disparities within organizations. It examines how specific patterns of gendered and racial differences are either perpetuated or reduced (Acker, 2012). Furthermore, in this study, gender stereotypes play a role in

determining which work roles women are assigned within businesses, which in turn affects their access to resources and prospects for career growth. Women encounter obstacles like occupational segregation and the negative impact of parenthood on their careers. Yet, when considering the confluence of gender and race, women from different socio-economic strata face both additional constraints and opportunities (Rosette et al., 2018). Such inequality and discrimination, however, abound in both the workforce and society, but more vividly so in the garment industry's workplace dynamics. The notion of inequality regimes offers a way to see how workplaces and industries can maintain and entrench class, gender, and racial inequalities; structural racism and gender inequality are very deeply intersected into the very fiber of the garment industry (Lewis, 2022).

3.6.7 Capability Approach

Amartya Sen points out that there exist three categories of conversion factors, personal, social, and environmental, which impact the translation of resources into functioning and capabilities, to show how complex human well-being evaluation is. These factors include aspects such as physical conditions, age, gender, social norms, and aspects of the environment, showing the multilevel nature of individual capabilities and their relation to the broader contexts of socio-physical settings (Dang, 2014). Sen explained how women are in disadvantaged positions in traditional economics and social arrangements (Sen, 1995). In my study, I have also applied Sen's capability approach to understand how the intersecting factors from cultural and patriarchal norms are hindering women from understanding their capability.

Chapter Four

4. Research Methodology

This chapter will examine the methods that were employed in this study to investigate the fundamental aspects and primary causes of the existing prejudice within the RMG business in Bangladesh. The following research questions were included in the entire process:

- What are the major symptoms of gender-based inequality and discrimination faced by women in the RMG sector of Bangladesh?
- How do these inequalities, and discriminated actions, impact the conditions of work and general experiences for women in the sector?
- What are the possible measures or interventions that can be effectively carried out to reduce these gender-related issues in the RMG industry?

4.1 Research Design

In this study, I conducted exploratory qualitative research to gain a better understanding of the subject matter. Since my research is focused on female employees in the RMG sector, I needed to have a comprehensive awareness of the issue and its relevance to my study before starting the project. I used one of the primary research procedures commonly associated with exploratory research design and conducted semi-structured interviews with the participants as part of the research procedure. Thematic data analysis was the chosen method for data analysis in this research.

4.1.1 Rationale for Qualitative Approach

Mies argues that qualitative research provides a platform for women to express their perspectives and achieve their objectives. In contrast, quantitative research frequently disregards women's voices, objectifies them, and tends to examine them in a value-neutral manner rather than focusing on their experiences as women (Flick, 2018). To gain a more profound understanding of the female perspective, conducting exploratory research is essential, and qualitative research provides the ideal means to accomplish this. My research focuses on amplifying women's voices, scrutinizing gender dynamics, and conducting a critical analysis of gender interactions. Therefore, I have employed qualitative methods to investigate the subject of gender disparities and discrimination (Flick, 2018).

4.2 Data Collection

4.2.1 Study Area

This research is being conducted in three specific cities in Bangladesh, which are well-known for their industrial zones specializing in textile exports. The study has recruited participants from three different factories situated in Dhaka City, Savar, and Narayanganj. To ensure the accuracy and depth of my investigation, I have chosen three distinct areas to avoid oversimplification of the data. To obtain authentic and unbiased data that truly reflects the workers' real-life experiences, I have selected these three different areas for data collection.

4.2.2 Unit of Analysis/Population

The study focuses on the demographics of garment workers employed in different sectors in Dhaka, Savar, and Narayanganj. As a Bangladeshi citizen, I found it easier to interview textile workers on the manufacturing side of the factory. I selected individuals for the interview using purposive sampling criteria, ensuring that they had sufficient knowledge and experience related to the problem being studied. The participants were capable of providing insightful responses during the interview and were willing to engage in the study (Flick, 2018, P-182).

Table 5 Breakdown of the sample size distribution

Area	Unit of analysis	Number of participants
Dhaka	Female RMG workers	5
Savar	Female RMG workers	4
Narayanganj	Female RMG workers	9

Source: Author's construct

Table 6 Female workers from different positions

Position	Number of Participants
Helper (Assistant to Operator)	5
Operator	12
Supervisor	1

Source: Author's construct

4.2.3 Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

This study aimed to refrain from generalizing and instead get a thorough comprehension of the socio-economic circumstances of the participants. With the specific objective in mind, it only concentrated

on the manufacturing sector of textile industries, where women constitute most of the workforce. The participants were chosen based on many demographic criteria, such as age, expertise, education, and family background, to guarantee a comprehensive representation.

Exclusion criteria were established to maintain a high academic standard and eliminate potential causes of bias. Specifically, individuals who had just begun working were not considered for interviews because their limited time on the job may not have provided sufficient information about their current working conditions. This strategic exclusion aimed to safeguard the quality of the data collection process by only involving individuals who were familiar with and experienced in their work environments.

4.2.4 Recruitment Strategy

While doing the data collection method, I encountered difficulties in accessing the participants due to ongoing protests by textile workers demanding higher wages. While employing purposive sampling using my contacts, I had partial access to certain people, which proved insufficient for my study. Conducting interviews with pre-determined interviewees proved to be challenging. I preferred to utilize the snowball sampling strategy, which enabled me to expand my participant pool by generating recommendations from existing participants. The snowball sampling strategy was advantageous for my study as it allowed for the selection of participants who, in turn, referred other participants who were closely interconnected and shared comparable qualities relevant to the study.

4.3 Data Collection Procedure

4.3.1 Semi-Structured Interview

The research was conducted through face-to-face in-depth interviews, which were carefully prepared in advance, and involved asking particular questions. In-depth individual interviews served as an effective instrument for this study to investigate the phenomenon from the participant's perspective. These interviews also created a comfortable environment for the participants to share personal and sensitive experiences (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2015).

The sequence of questions posed during the interview was subject to variation based on the circumstances, and any potential supplementary questions that emerged were also addressed. The individuals interviewed demonstrated the ability to respond to the questions without constraint and were able to expand upon their replies and perspectives. This form of interview is referred to as a semi-structured interview. Omolola A. et al. proposed that “Semi-structured interviews are the preferred data collection method when the researcher’s goal is to better understand the participant’s unique perspective rather than a generalized understanding of a phenomenon”(Olatunde & Olenik, 2021, P-

1360). During the interviews, I asked open-ended questions to cover various topics and followed up with confrontational questions to clarify the responses (Flick, 2018, P-227). The interviews were conducted in Bengali due to the interviewees' limited proficiency in languages other than their mother tongue. Being a native Bengali speaker, I found it beneficial to use my language skills to communicate clearly and ask questions to obtain accurate information and prevent any miscommunication. I conducted a total of 18 individual interviews, with each session lasting between 45 minutes and one hour.

4.3.2 Choosing Question Types for the Interview

To facilitate the data-collecting interview, I have initially formulated a series of primary questions based on the research inquiries. In addition to the major research questions, supplementary follow-up and probing questions are also utilized during the interview phase to delve further into the issue and achieve the project's objectives. Follow-up questions are used to obtain more particular information or clarification when a response is ambiguous or interesting. On the other hand, probing questions are designed to urge respondents to provide more extensive explanations and keep focused on the topic at hand (Durdella, 2020).

4.3.3 Interview Protocol

During the interviews, I adhered to the global interview (Durdella,2020) protocol system and organized the interview guide accordingly. The interview process adhered to the subsequent steps:

1. Greeting and transition into the interview session:
2. Adhered to the written informed consent procedure.
3. Interview: Primary inquiries, subsequent inquiries, and in-depth inquiries and prompts
4. Post-interview: A concluding phase of the interview process involves asking of the last questions, summarizing the discussion, and transitioning to the subsequent steps following the interview.

4.4 Ethical Clearance and Considerations

The Norwegian Centre for Research Data (NSD) provided ethical approval for this study, which was conducted through the University of Oslo Met. Since I did not conduct any interviews with government officials or request data from government departments, I did not require consent from the Bangladeshi authority. Flick emphasized that the principles of ethics necessitate the avoidance of causing harm to individuals by respecting and considering their needs and interests (Flick, 2018, P-136). Considering the ethical ground, I have adhered to the ethical guidelines that mandate research to be conducted with informed consent, ensuring participants willingly accept to participate after being provided with

relevant information. I have refrained from interfering with their privacy or misleading the participants regarding the objectives of the research. I handed out an information letter to the participants of my study. I also explained the contents of the letter to those who needed more information before giving their consent. The information letter included a summary of the study, assurances of anonymity, protection of personal data, procedures for data storage, potential risks and benefits, their rights, and contact details for further communication. I considered the participants' personal and cultural backgrounds and assessed privacy concerns following Norway's General Data Protection Regulation, specifically Section 2 of the Personal Data Act. The letter was provided in English and Bengali to ensure accessibility for all participants. The identifiable data has been anonymized, with participants being assigned different colors of scarves as signifiers instead of their real names. To obtain more clearance for my research, I have also taken measures to anonymize all names, including those of names who helped me to collect data, factory names, particular factory locations, the residential locations of workers, and any other identifying information. This is done to safeguard the privacy and confidentiality of the participants and in the analysis chapter, different names of colors are used to represent those who participated. I have discarded the field notes following the transcription of the interviews, as I had promised to the participants.

4.5 Quality Assurance

This study focuses on three criteria, namely reliability, validity, and objectivity, for evaluating the techniques and outcomes of qualitative research (Flick, 2018, P-541).

4.5.1 Reliability

Throughout the interviews, I carefully took notes to document all the information gathered. To prepare for the interviews, I conducted a thorough review of the literature and consulted with experts in the field to prioritize information. After conducting the initial interview, I refined the writing by using concise language, constructing simple sentences, and incorporating direct quotes from the conversations (Flick, 2018, P-340). Following each interview, I transcribed all the information into my computer. As I gained more experience after the first interview, I started to use simpler words and phrases, which saved time. I wrote a detailed account of the circumstances and made sure to verify the participants' understanding during the transcription process.

4.5.2 Validity

To ensure the accuracy of the data, I took careful notes during each interview and promptly transcribed them onto my personal computer, as I mentioned earlier. Before transcribing the notes into texts, I confirmed the validity of the information by conducting a second check with the participants to

evaluate the accuracy of the key statements (Flick, 2018, P-544). Moreover, I had debriefing sessions with my supervisor to receive more guidance and incorporate the feedback provided by the participants.

4.5.3 Objectivity

To ensure the research's neutrality, I represented the data by directly reflecting the participants' perspectives and fully discussed the study's significant findings. During the discussion, I conducted a thorough analysis of the outcomes of my study and cross-referenced them with similar findings from other sources to exclude any potential personal biases, values, or assumptions (Flick, 2018, P-547).

4.6 My Position as a Researcher

Before coming to Norway to pursue my master's, I served ten years as a secondary school teacher in Bangladesh, which gave me many insights into gender discrimination at work. During my teaching career, I met several forms of discrimination based on my gender. Those experiences kept on compelling me to think about the inequalities and discrimination most females face. My evaluation of working conditions, based on personal experiences, has been rather dissatisfactory so far, and this is one of the main reasons I wanted to study it further.

Since 2022, I have been working with Framtiden I våre hender, which is a Norwegian environmental organization. This organization, being the largest Norwegian environmental and solidarity organization in Norway, is actively fighting against the immoral fast fashion industry and further works for better working conditions for the hardworking laborers in the industry. Throughout my work in this organization, I gained the opportunity to learn much about the textile business and know about the rights of workers, which served as a huge encouragement for me to work on this project. Because of my constant desire to raise my voice against the oppression of women in Bangladesh, I started searching for more enlightenment in this sector. As a result, I explored the working conditions that female textile workers go through. As I went deeper into researching the topic, my enthusiasm for working on this project increased. After researching it thoroughly, I found that many studies had been conducted regarding the matter. However, my research will aim to draw the differences that lead to discrimination and make more specific suggestions that will help improve the future of this sector by empowering of women and reducing gender inequality.

Throughout my journey, I have witnessed the amazing endurance and energy of the women of Bangladesh, making considerable contributions in all sectors of the economy, especially in the textile

industry, which would not work without them. However, it is also an undeniable fact that despite their extremely valuable contributions, gender disparities have not died out yet and undermine their full potential. This reality therefore acts as a driver in the active push for transformation and in challenging the status quo.

Being a Bangladeshi woman, I am set upon a will to rise against gender injustice and work for change. I envision a society where opportunities are abundant and women's rights are protected, enabling every woman to thrive without the constraints that traditional norms have placed upon them. This is also a matter of creating a level playing field for every qualified woman, who seeks recognition and equal opportunities in her career goals.

4.7 Challenges during Data Collection

A substantial amount of time and financial resources were required to carry out this extensive study. However, the constraints of limited time, financial resources, and lack of experience hindered the ability to go deeply into the topic. The challenges during data collection are addressed below:

1. Significant time was required when the respondents were unable to comprehend the purpose and goals of the investigation.
2. The respondents exhibited hesitancy in divulging specific personal details, such as their age, educational background, and occupational status. In each instance, I had to clarify that their personal information would not be utilized in the project. Several individuals expressed apprehension when it came to providing details about their salaries, factory policies, and other related matters.
3. While staying in Bangladesh and conducting field visits, I observed persistent protests and demonstrations by textile factory workers demanding an increase in wages. Several regions remained inaccessible because of the demonstrations and road blockades, represented in *Figure 2*. Several workers from various factories were unreachable owing to safety concerns. In addition to that, the field study was impeded by another instance of strikes and roadblocks due to the upcoming national parliament election in Bangladesh. The opposition political party initiated strikes to assert their demands to the government.
4. This study also planned to collect data from NGO workers who were part of a project that focused on gender discrimination among RMG workers in Bangladesh. Nevertheless, due to road blockades and protests, it became impossible to reach them. If I could conduct these interviews, my research would have gained considerable value from it.

5. Similarly, I had planned to interview Trade Union workers for a better understanding of the situation regarding workers' rights and their perceptions of the discrimination that exists. My fieldwork visit was interrupted by protests, and security concerns ruled out any possibility of reaching them.

4.8 Data Analysis Method

In my data analysis process shown in **Figure 5**, I employed a thematic network methodology. This method involved carefully examining the dataset to discover any repeating themes or patterns (Braun & Clarke, 2006). I carefully examined and acquainted myself with the written data from the interview. Initial codes were created from the concepts and phrases found in the textual material. I have classified the codes into various themes that reflect overarching trends in the data. I have thoroughly checked the themes multiple times to ensure they appropriately represent the data and refined the themes wherever necessary.

The six phases of the data analysis procedure are outlined by (Braun & Clarke, 2006) are as follows:

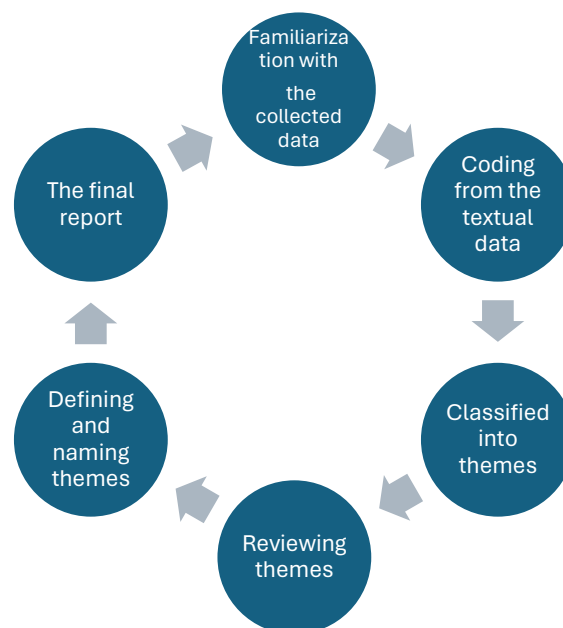


Figure 5 Data analysis procedure.

I will outline and explain the findings and discuss them in the upcoming chapter based on the themes identified in the data analysis.

4.9 Exploring the Living and Working Conditions of Study

Participants: Insights from Field Visits and Interviews

Before delving into the narratives of my study participants, as expressed by themselves, and further exploring the various concerns uncovered in my results, I would like to acknowledge the living conditions of these women. This acknowledgment is based on my visits to their locations during the interviews. During my interviews with participants from Dhaka, the capital city of Bangladesh, and Savar, I was unable to visit the factories owing to their closure because of protests (See **Figure 2**) demanding higher wages. However, I was permitted to visit the residential areas of these workers through my contacts. All my study participants reside in rental accommodations near the industries where they are employed, except a few individuals who live a somewhat greater distance away from the factories. Some individuals reside in slums, while others live in relatively improved living conditions. I have also conducted visits to several factories in Narayangonj to interview the participants. Furthermore, I had the privilege of observing the factory in its original state. Unfortunately, I was unable to get photographs of those locations due to confidentiality concerns. However, the average living and working situations are depicted in the images provided below:



Figure 6 The average living conditions of RMG workers in Bangladesh.

The above-presented picture is downloaded from Flickr.com which illustrates the average socio-economic condition of the RMG workers. During my field visit, I had visited some of the places where the workers live and therefore, they were hesitating to offer me a sitting place due to the condition and some were feeling sad for not being able to offer me at least a cup of tea or something to eat. All the interviews were conducted alone, except a few where some family members were present. Nevertheless, these interviews prompted caution from the participants when it came to discussing their experiences.



Figure 7 The average working condition of the RMG workers in the factories

The images depicted in **Figure 7** represent the typical working circumstances experienced by RMG workers. Nevertheless, I managed to get a quiet place to conduct the interviews by obtaining permission from the factory owners through my connections. It is worth mentioning that the factories I visited had people who endure high levels of noise and operate in hot. Moreover, minimal to no gear is provided to protect health conditions, such as earplugs or breathing protection, and there's uncertainty regarding the provision or regulation of equipment to address climate conditions like air conditioning or air cleaning devices.

Chapter Five

5. Presentation of Findings and Discussion

This chapter delineates the findings of the study and engages in comprehensive discussion within a broader theoretical framework, which encompasses data collected from workers in two pivotal Export Processing Zones (EPZs) (See 2.3) operated by the Bangladesh Export Processing Zone Authority (BEPZA) - specifically, the Dhaka Export Processing Zone in Savar, Dhaka, and the Adamjee Export Processing Zone, Narayanganj. The gathered data underwent thematic analysis, with the findings derived from (5) weeks of data collection involving female workers across various production sectors. This chapter has been divided into two distinct sections. The first section outlines the demographic characteristics of the respondents based on the collected data, while the second section will detail the results with the discussions according to the data analysis themes.

5.1 Demographic Attributes of the Participants

This section provides the background information of the participants. The importance of the respondents' characteristics is their ability to provide valuable insights into individual viewpoints and experiences, which is crucial for workers who make up the main labor force in Bangladesh. The demographic attributes examined in this study include age, education level, marital status, years of experience, and household size.

Age group:

This study examined the age distribution of participants. This study aimed to investigate the understanding of workplace inequality and discrimination among young, middle-aged, and older workers to provide a comprehensive perspective. This information is provided in table 1.

Table 1: Age group of respondents

Age group	Frequency	Percent (%)
15-25	12	66.66%
26-35	5	27.77%
36-45	1	5.55%
Total	18	100.0%

Source: Field data, 2023

In Bangladesh, the term "youth" officially refers to individuals aged 18-35. The data above indicates that the study participants primarily consist of young individuals who are devoting a significant portion of their lives to the rapidly growing economic sector of Bangladesh. The data also indicates that the younger age group is sought after for this job, as it entails more demanding requirements from the production sector.

Education level:

The educational level of the study participants is significantly important in comprehending the awareness of the rights among women. Education plays a vital role in positioning the workers in the factories determines the requirements to hold senior positions and contributes to comprehending the knowledge of the participants regarding workplace policies and practices. The findings of the study regarding the educational attainment of sampled respondents (Female textile workers) in Bangladesh are presented in Table 2 below.

Table 2: Educational level of respondents

Level of education	Frequency	Percent (%)
No formal education	00	0.0%
Primary/basic education	13	72.23%
Secondary	5	27.77%
Total	18	100.0%

Source: Field data, 2023

Based on the provided frequency distribution, it is evident that nearly all the individuals participating in the study possess a specific degree of formal education. Most of them possess a minimum level of primary education, allowing them to acquire basic reading and writing skills. Additionally, a small portion of them have received secondary education.

Marital status:

In Bangladesh, the institution of marriage and family plays a vital role in determining the social position of women. This has a considerable impact on upholding patriarchal standards within the socio-economic framework and organizational structure. Therefore, it is crucial to identify the marital status of the female employees, and this information is provided in Table 3.

Table 3: Marital status of respondents

Marital status	Frequency	Percent (%)
Single	05	27.78%
Married	11	61.11%

Widower/Divorced	02	11.11%
Total	18	100.0%

Source: Field data, 2023

The frequency distribution indicates that most of the study participants are married, while a small number are single or divorced/widowed. To ascertain the prejudice linked to the socio-economic position of female workers, it is essential to consider their marital status. This is because marriage significantly influences the social standing of women in Bangladesh.

Years of experience:

The study highlights workplace gender discrimination, so it is crucial to determine the time female workers dedicate to their careers to assess the extent of discrimination in promotions to senior positions and how superiors treat them based on their skills and experience. Table 4 presents data on the number of years of experience of the participants in the study.

Table 4: Work experience of respondents

Years of experience	Frequency	Percent (%)
01-04	03	16.67%
05-08	08	44.44%
08-12	07	38.89%
Total	18	100.0%

Source: Field data, 2023

The results indicate that all the study participants possess over 1 year of expertise in production. This information is crucial for understanding how the workers are dealing with the structural changes in the industry and their views on the working conditions. particularly in terms of inequality and discrimination, they have experienced over their time of employment.

Household size:

The study further investigated the household size of the participants as it could offer insights into their financial needs and their ability to sustain employment to meet the fundamental necessities of their family members. Table 5 will provide the information regarding household size of the study participants.

Table 5: Household size of respondents

Household size	Frequency (N)	Percent (%)
1-3	04	22.22%

4-6	12	66.68%
7-9	02	11.10%
Total	18	100.0%

Source: Field data, 2023

The frequency distribution reveals that most of the study participants reside in areas with a high concentration of homes. Some of them make up a modest household size.

Type of family system:

The study participants' family structure is examined to understand the extent of their decision-making authority. In Bangladesh, the extended family system is still prevalent, yet women are experiencing increasing economic empowerment, which in turn influences their ability to make independent decisions. Given that these women are the most marginalized individuals in society, and their socio-economic status is determined by their family situation, it is crucial to recognize the impact of their family members, particularly their in-laws, on their economic contributions. Table 6 will contain information about the specific family system category.

Table 6: Type of family system

Type of family system	Frequency (N)	Percent (%)
Single mother	02	11.11%
Nuclear family	04	22.22%
Extended family	12	66.67%

Source: Field data, 2023

The data presented indicates that most of the participants reside in extended families, with only a few livings in nuclear households. Additionally, there are a small number of single women who live with their parents. These findings emphasize that women who reside in extended families primarily live with their in-laws after getting married.

5.2 Factors Contributing to Discrimination and Inequality Against Female Textile Workers

The complex interplay of intersectionality is apparent in the widespread discrimination faced by women in the RMG industry in Bangladesh. Women face obstacles based on their intersecting social identities, including gender, class, and cultural background, despite their substantial contributions to the sector. These intersecting factors worsen the obstacles faced by women, thus increasing inequality, and hindering their progress. Gender stereotypes are culturally engrained, and they inhibit most women

from realizing their full potential at work. Moreover, a hierarchical structure within Bangladesh shaped by patriarchal culture results in predominantly male leaders in most organizational hierarchies. In addition, other factors contribute to the discriminatory treatment of women such as societal norms, managerial perspective, and in general employee-employer relationship making it an unsafe place especially for women to work. Despite progress made towards achieving gender parity through female empowerment programs across the country, enduring oppression from the patrilineal system, coupled with multidimensional Social inequalities embedded in socio-economic status and race, sustain systematic gender inequalities. (Jahiruddin et al., 2020a). The subsequent sections of my study will present the internal and external challenges derived from my research and subsequently analyze these findings:

5.2.1 Presentation of Findings: Internal Factors Regarding Gender Role Perception and Systemic Bias

Societal norms are evident in the policies and practices of organizations, the attitudes toward women, and the workers' lack of information about their rights. Nevertheless, this section will highlight the findings associated with the internal dynamics inside the industry that are responsible for gender role perception and systemic bias:

1. Ensuring Job Stability and Outlining the Process of Hiring and Retaining Employees

During the interviews from my field study, a notable finding emerged regarding workers' apprehension about their current placement. No woman reported being employed through any methodical process. A significant number of women expressed an urgent need for this employment opportunity, and there is a lack of awareness of the recruitment procedure. A woman wearing a red scarf stated that she did not get any formal contracts outlining the terms of her employment before she started her job. She further stated in the following way that,

"I wasn't given such contracts since I started this job, and I have never heard of anyone else receiving them." When we come to look for a job, we are consistently instructed to begin the following day. I was in desperate need of employment, but the circumstances did not provide me with any guidance regarding such matters. I have been working here for several years without anyone ever requesting evidence from me. However, I have witnessed instances where women have been terminated from their employment and the responsible authority has taken appropriate measures to address the situation. They have the authority to terminate anyone at any time if their specified demands are not fulfilled promptly."

Two other women shared their same experience and further explained that, because of the absence of job security, they are hesitant to request any time off. If any woman requests leave, they are promptly instructed to terminate their employment immediately. Due to their desperate desire for this employment, they are unable to speak a single word.

The woman wearing a black scarf elaborated, "When I requested a three-day leave to visit my village and see my ailing father, I was immediately asked to provide immediate evidence of his illness." I was sobbing intensely, fearing that I might not get the opportunity to see him again if I arrived late. However, this fails to elicit any pity from them. I was compelled to resign from my position at that very moment, but upon my return from my village a few days later, I resumed my work. However, I was informed that I am not permitted to take any additional days off unless it is a compulsory vacation".

Several other women expressed that there is corruption on the part of the authorities in relation to the recruitment process and the increase in wages. The management grants higher compensation to male employees. Occasionally, this issue pertains not only to male employees but also to the practice of favoring relatives in hiring and promotion, known as nepotism. They elaborated that those who secure employment through personal connections is granted higher salaries along with additional benefits. By personal contacts they meant someone they knew already working in the factory.

In addition, they frequently work beyond their regular working hours without any prior notification. This also has an impact on their personal life. Sometimes, they are required to remain until 10:00 PM, which they perceive as somewhat unsafe due to the need to travel unaccompanied to their residence. In addition to their familial obligations, individuals often find themselves having to make compromises due to the absence of employment stability.

Another woman responded tactfully, expressing her conviction that although there may be some inequality in the treatment of women, it is crucial to acknowledge that males can spend more hours at the factory without encountering any hazardous situations. ... "I comprehend that due to their (Male colleagues') greater effort, it is reasonable for them to have a higher wage than us. However, equal treatment can be achieved if the authority consistently applies the same rule to all individuals. Although we are all putting in the same amount of effort, it is unfair to discriminate against us in terms of wages just because we are unable to work at night. We are all employed here primarily for financial reasons, as money is a fundamental necessity."

The findings of my study indicate that women are confronted with widespread obstacles, such as formal employment agreements, inadequate work stability, and wage inequities. The narratives

recounted by these women illuminate the institutional discrimination linked to nepotism, which exacerbates the susceptibility of these women and further constrains their access to equitable opportunities.

2. Adoption of Fair Wage Policies in the Factories

Before delving into the matter of wage inequality and equitable compensation, I was not anticipating that workers in the same positions and with equal lengths of service would encounter payment discrepancies. However, I was a bit astonished when I had the opportunity to hear about the workers' firsthand experiences.

In certain sections, helpers are involved in prolonged and uninterrupted periods of labor on foot, often lasting 8 to 10 hours (including overtime), without access to appropriate seating arrangements. Workers who spend significant periods standing during their workday are typically rewarded with a slightly higher salary, but the increase is rather small.

A woman expressed her dissatisfaction with the wage disparity by saying, "I comprehend that men who undertake excessive workloads and engage in physically demanding labor are deserving of receiving additional compensation. However, I get upset when I observe that my male colleague is receiving a better salary than me, even though we hold the same positions and possess the same abilities."

On the contrary, others were voicing their apprehension about receiving timely payment rather than receiving higher wages equal to that of their male colleagues. In addition, they stated that certain employees are also terminated from their positions without prior notification. Consequently, they believe that they should refrain from expressing any grievances or unhappiness over their payment. If they become unemployed, it would be challenging to promptly secure another work due to their current circumstances, which necessitate their continued employment for the sake of their family.

Another woman expressed that she knows they are receiving below the minimum average by stating, "If I disregard this factor due to my obligation to labor at this location and resign from my current position, I may encounter difficulty in finding alternative employment due to my proximity to the factory. I am prohibited by my husband from leaving the region since I am required to remain with my spouse and children. If I relocate to a different location, my living expenses will increase compared to the current situation." In addition, she mentioned that the organization is providing lower compensation to employees, but they are not obligated to take on excessive workloads, which she views as a form of workplace flexibility.

However, the most troubling aspect of the wage increase issue is that a significant number of women are still earning less than the minimal average wage, and they are unaware of this fact. The government-mandated minimum wage (before the current reduced value) of 8000 BDT (equivalent to

USD 73) per month is considered inadequate given the present living standards. Nevertheless, it is important to mention that the women in question do not receive even the bare minimum. They are given a salary per month of 6000 BDT (equivalent to USD 55), which is lower than the minimal level set. In certain other factories, workers may receive the minimum average wage, but they are then compelled to separate from their families, which is an impractical situation for them.

A relatively small percentage of women indicated that they were happy with their current job, but they still felt that there should be a pay raise because living expenses are rising, and it is becoming harder to cover basic needs with the existing income.

These findings reveal that women are adapting to their unique circumstances, as they are unable to assert themselves and some are making compromises for the sake of their family's needs. However, a notable insight occurred when a woman wearing a white scarf indicated that favoritism also exists in certain instances. She stated "Regardless of being employed at this place of employment for a decade, I am still receiving a lower salary compared to my colleagues. Male supervisors consistently demonstrate empathy towards young and attractive women."

Therefore, these discoveries illuminate the presence of both favoritism and nepotism, which are further intensifying wage inequalities in the workplace.

3. Maternity Leave as a Matter of Concern

The Government-approved maternity leave in Bangladesh is 16 weeks, equivalent to 112 days. However, Bangladesh Labor Amendment Act, 2023 has expanded this duration to 120 days. Female employees are now entitled to a total of 16 weeks of maternity leave, with 8 weeks allocated before childbirth and 8 weeks following the birth ("The Daily Star," 2023a). Furthermore, when the question was posed to the participants, nearly all of them shared similar thoughts and personal experiences on this matter. Due to the absence of job contracts at the beginning of employment, women in factories do not have access to any facilities. Women are often terminated from their employment even when they explicitly request it.

A woman, who was wearing a yellow scarf, described her story of the pregnancy stage. She was crying while recalling the episode, "Despite being entitled to government-approved maternity leave, similar to other positions in this factory, my manager did not permit me to take leave. My husband and I were experiencing financial difficulties and were often unable to meet our basic demands. At that time, my husband was without a job while I was the sole breadwinner in our family. My husband decided to terminate the pregnancy, which came as a surprise to me since I was eagerly anticipating the arrival of our baby. However, I had no alternative but

to undergo the abortion procedure. Simultaneously, I was frightened about the possibility of not being able to conceive again, and if this were to occur, my in-laws would hold me responsible for it."

Only a small number of women, who have had many years of experience, have stated that they do not possess the necessary understanding of this issue and have not engaged in any formal agreements before starting their careers. Nevertheless, there have been reports indicating that specific factories are adopting maternity leave programs that offer advantageous remuneration for women. They are not obligated to address this issue, nor do they need to request maternity leave or familiarize themselves with the regulating bodies and their laws. They stated that they have never observed a case when an employee in this profession has been given maternity leave.

Nevertheless, there exists a substantial disparity in the maternity leave policy across different workplaces. Particularly in the case of factory workers, such a scheme is rarely issued to anyone. If anyone seeks the agreement, they will either accept it willingly or face termination from their employment. Therefore, returning to the post is not guaranteed in any way. In such instances, those who have acquired experience and developed skills must commence their journey anew. These challenges create an uneven playing field for career progression. Women who make significant contributions to this sector are not even guaranteed an opportunity to fulfill both the roles of mother and breadwinner.

4. The Emergence of Childcare Services as an Imminent Issue

Women work in the production sectors for six consecutive days, commencing at 8:00 am and concluding at 5:00 pm. Mothers who have children at home and no one else looking after them are constantly in a state of fear. Due to the absence of organizational rules and practices governing childcare for workers' children, it becomes extremely challenging for them to sustain their work after giving birth. Individuals who rely on their family members for support are unable to work adequately due to their preoccupation with childcare responsibilities. This situation is particularly critical for lactating women, as evidenced by a participant's statement during the interview. The woman draped with a pink scarf narrated her recent encounter as a new mother, and this is what she had to express:

"I conceived a child after being employed at this place of work for a continuous period of 5 years." Before starting work, I was unmarried and experiencing a seamless progression in all aspects. However, the issue arose when I entered marriage and conceived a child. I requested a maternity leave, but my request was denied, and I was instructed to resign from my position. I experienced complications during my pregnancy that required me to be on complete bed rest. I resigned from my job and afterward returned to this place as a helper (Grade

7: See Table 5) after the birth of my child. However, in the past, I was employed as an operator. Additionally, it is challenging for my mother to assist in caring for the baby."

In addition to her, only a small number of other women in this study also had comparable experiences. Furthermore, they expressed that this job is essential for them to support their children. Their husband is unable to single-handedly provide for them. The sum they receive is insufficient for a single individual, let alone for a group exceeding two individuals. When inquired about the daycare facilities, they all responded uniformly. They desire to have access to equivalent privileges as other factories and to be able to continue working even after giving birth. Their concern for the protection of their children is a significant element leading to the decline in women's performance at work. Another woman reported that one of her former colleagues had to resign from her work due to a lack of childcare options. She is a single mother who is the sole caregiver for her child, and generating money is an essential requirement to support her child. However, the safety of her child is her utmost priority. She expressed her concern by sighing and stating,

"I feel extremely anxious about her well-being as I imagine how she is managing this particular situation."

In contrast, a few women stated that they had access to these facilities at their workplace, but very few individuals are interested in utilizing this benefit. Workers at these workplaces have reported that a small number of their colleagues have attempted to take advantage of this situation but have found it to be unsafe for children due to the lack of adequate facilities. The environment poses risks and dangers that are detrimental to the well-being and health of their children.

Therefore, a significant number of women choose to abstain from their jobs because of the difficulties they face in maintaining their employment during and after pregnancy. Some prefer to return to work once their children have reached a more advanced age, as they have no alternative but to continue their employment.

5. Lack of Formal leave (Including Sick leave) Protocol: Consequences for Women in the Workplace

While there are national laws surrounding leave of absence, discrimination in granting sick leave or emergency leave is sometimes prevalent and not severely enforced. The substantial contribution of women to the labor force is crucial for the nation's economic growth. Given the abandonment of the labor force, the ongoing growth of this industry presents concerns in multiple areas, particularly about the sustainability of the industry, which heavily depends on providing a suitable working environment for female workers.

Several women revealed that they are expected to stay at work until the lunch break even if they become ill. However, starting on the following day, if individuals are absent from work due to sickness,

their salary is deducted for each day of absence. When asked about the monthly menstrual cycle and related health issues, women must perform their work responsibilities until noon before being allowed to take the rest of the day off. In addition, they mentioned that there is currently no option for granting paid sick leave via telephone. Furthermore, they stated that in specific areas, women are involved in prolonged and uninterrupted periods of work on foot, which can last for 8 to 10 hours, without having access to sufficient seating arrangements.

One woman wearing blue scarf expressed her feelings by stating that,

"When I began working there, the management behaved in a commendable manner and made promises regarding several benefits. However, she later discovered that those were void of meaning, as they urgently required work at that time but did not provide any written documentation for it. Furthermore, they currently show little concern for their previous commitments. When I request emergency leave, I often encounter derogatory remarks, which are occasionally made publicly."

Two other participants expressed discontent while describing instances of workplace discrimination related to intervals at their place of employment. Additionally, they clarified that,

"We have observed that male colleagues are granted time to rest or take short pauses more often, sometimes with durations as low as 15 minutes. Men are granted breaks at work whenever they desire, even if it is to go outside for smoking. However, it is challenging for us to obtain a few minutes of relaxation, regardless of whether we are physically drained after extended periods of work."

Being a woman, I can empathize with these issues, particularly when it comes to menstruation. This situation can be indescribable for a woman experiencing it. During this time of the cycle, women have a usual need to use the toilet and often require breaks or a comfortable seating arrangement. In this context, there exists a gender equity gap that requires attention to the unique challenges faced by women, including menstrual cycles, childbirth, and societal expectations regarding household duties. Implementing additional accommodations, such as providing extra breaks for women during menstruation and maternity periods can fosters workplace gender equality and diminishes barriers stemming from gender-based inequities. Typically, the response is unsatisfactory since women often struggle to articulate their concerns to male managers. The woman wearing a white scarf described her distressing experience, stating that,

"I experience intense menstrual pains during my monthly menstrual cycle, which necessitates me to sit down and rest. This scenario occasionally exacerbates to such an extent that I am unable to refrain from shedding tears owing to intense discomfort. However, if I desire to request a day off, I am obliged to disclose the details

of my illness to my male supervisor, which is a source of humiliation for me. I feel somewhat uncomfortable discussing these matters with men. On one occasion, I attempted to provide an indirect hint regarding the issue at hand, but unfortunately, I was met with a situation of ridicule that intensified my feelings of distress."

The narrative of these women and their encounters reflect that the operational regulations and procedures are not being implemented in most of the factories. Most of them are employed without a formal contract that explicitly outlines policies for sick leave or other types of emergency leave. Women who enter the workforce have a pressing need for employment owing to their familial responsibilities, which is one of the reasons why industries exploit this situation. Women's perceived inclination to remain silent in certain instances, particularly when it involves matters of their privacy, often results in being overlooked and disregarded. However, the daily challenges that women face regarding their health issues are significantly affecting the productivity of workers.

6. Limited Access to Health Care Facilities

Women employees have additional health-related challenges due to the demanding nature of the work environment. Although several groups have distinct workspace requirements, such as women operators who require uninterrupted sitting for eight hours without back support, and others (Helpers) who need to stand. Women continue to have challenges in managing their health in various circumstances. Their occupations are becoming more challenging due to the stress they experience. In addition to that, all the study participants voiced discontent with the insufficient treatment facilities available at their workplaces. Among all the study sites, there is one that provides amenities for doctors who work continuously during the day. However, this is inadequate for an emergency. Several participants shared their viewpoints on this matter, expressing that even when they are required to meet deadlines and engage in tasks that include stinging needles in their fingers, they occasionally experience intense pain that is challenging to tolerate, especially when they must continue working despite it.

When questioned about the treatment facilities, one woman shared her experience by stating, "I once accidentally pricked my finger with a needle, and it resulted in significant bleeding. I immediately visited the doctor, who instantly applied a bandage to my finger. However, I did not receive any form of pain relief. Despite experiencing discomfort, I had to persevere through my workday as I was prohibited from taking leave on that day. There was a significant amount of work-related stress, and I was informed that if I were to quit, there would possibly not be an opportunity for me to return to work."

This narrative suggests that despite the presence of treatment facilities, the workers are not permitted to take a break in the event of a work-related incident due to their fear of losing their jobs. The workplace lacks adequate measures to protect occupational safety. Several others, including those who

have been employed for over a decade and are a bit more senior, have remarked that they get intense back pain because of the extended working hours. Additionally, those who spend the entire day standing have reported experiencing knee issues. At one of the factories where I collected data, medical professionals were present to handle emergencies. Nevertheless, the workers are unable to avail themselves of this opportunity for routine medical examinations due to the time limits imposed by the necessity to swiftly fulfill orders. Doctors are inaccessible after their work hours, making these services unproductive for them.

Another participant said that upon commencing work at the factory, she was in good health. However, over the years, she began experiencing various health issues, such as respiratory problems caused by dust on the floor, as well as back pain.

In addition, she stated, "I require additional funds to cover my children's tuition fees and other educational costs." Whenever I am asked about overtime, I always accept the offer. However, these extended working hours have a significant impact on me, causing considerable back discomfort. Occasionally, I am unable to achieve restful sleep because of the discomfort, and the following day I must resume my work responsibilities."

All study participants hold positions as operators and helpers, and they occupy the lowest positions within the factory hierarchy. There are male floor managers and supervisors on the floor. Consequently, many find it challenging to disclose their troubles when they require assistance. Additionally, they assert that this occupation offers a higher wage compared to positions such as housekeeping, based on their educational qualifications. However, they are willing to compromise their health to earn a modest income. This is the tale of a teenage girl who toils as an assistant on the lower level. At the age of 17, she possesses a 5th-grade education and has voiced her apprehensions regarding her future fate. She expressed that she commenced her employment at this establishment a few months ago, but she holds concerns that if she remains employed for an extended period, she may encounter similar health problems as those already being experienced by others. In addition, she expressed concern that experiencing issues such as back discomfort or knee pain could potentially hinder her ability to enter marriage. Men tend to avoid selecting women who have physical ailments. Additionally, she expressed, "Due to our impoverished circumstances, we are compelled to marry at a young age. However, I am concerned that my health issues may deter my potential husband. My parents are elderly, and they are unable to assume responsibility for me indefinitely. As a result of my financial circumstances, I was unable to sustain my education. In addition, I am responsible for the care of my parents as I do not have any siblings."

These findings imply that women with health problems are sacrificing their well-being to meet financial needs, as they are unable to survive without money. However, they also face the obligation to meet the expectations of their family members, resulting in a significant increase in their burdens in both their personal and professional lives which I will present in the section 5.2.5

5.2.2 Discussion: Patriarchal Societal Norms Shaping the Context of Inequality and Discrimination

The present study suggests that multiple factors are contributing to the inequality and discrimination against women in the growing sector of the economy in Bangladesh. However, all the elements that have been found are intersected with the perceived gender roles that are associated with the established patriarchal societal norms. These norms are still present in every aspect of women's lives and are impeding the development of the perception of equal opportunity.

In my research setting, it can be argued that Fraser's (Lovell,2007) three aspects of integrated justice for female workers in the RMG sector can be used to address workplace inequality and discrimination. Women who work in the lowest tiers of the production industry often face discrimination in terms of their pay, opportunities for growth, and fair access to resources. The pay gap between male and female employees contributes to an uneven distribution of resources in the workplace, which is one of the economic dimensions of the issue. Additionally, cultural practices within the patriarchal framework of Bangladeshi society lead these women to undervalue themselves and even internalize patriarchal norms, even though they have the potential to be promoted to leadership positions at work. These patriarchal norms contribute to women being misidentified in society. Finally, discussions and implementation of organizational policies sometimes fail to address women's rights in the workplace. Power dynamics and gender roles in society hinder women's involvement in decision-making processes.

The findings of the recent study have highlighted the fact that women often lack knowledge about their employment rights. Many women lack knowledge about employment and their rights before, during, and after employment. This indicates that they face limitations in accessing opportunities and exercising their rights. However, this lack of awareness is not random or arbitrary. These women already are dealing with cultural restrictions and patriarchal norms, which further hinder their capability to fully exercise their socio-economic rights. Women who are marginalized in society face numerous obstacles when they join the workforce to improve their living situations. These barriers hinder their ability to fully utilize their skills and capacities. This condition of women reflects the 'capability approach' developed by Amartya Sen to establish a comprehensive framework for evaluating personal welfare and societal structures by emphasizing individuals' freedom and capacity

to attain desirable outcomes, rather than focusing solely on income or consumption metrics. Sen also emphasizes the importance of economic resources and environmental circumstances in influencing the experiences of those with limitations (Frediani, 2010).

In another study, it is explained that in the 1980s and 1990s, women were motivated to leave rural areas and move to cities due to factors such as severe poverty, unexpected events at home, the opportunity for paid work, and the chance for a better quality of life. Many of these women found employment in the RMG sector, which resulted in a significant increase in independent migration and the formal employment of women at the lower levels of the industry (Mamun & Hoque, 2022). Nevertheless, the inflow of inexpensive labor enables businesses to increase their profits at the expense of workplace discrimination across various dimensions, in line with other prevailing conditions.

These RMG workers are facing discrimination in terms of payment, advancement, and division of work due to societal expectations of gender and the specific nature of their employment. Organizational policies and practices are exacerbating this prejudice in conjunction with cultural and societal norms. The discussion will continue accordingly in the following sections:

1. Lack of Formal Job Contracts and Accessibility to the Labor Force

During the interviews, most women exhibited either a lack of awareness regarding their rights or a reluctance to discuss them. Consequently, employing many women in the factory has become a significant advantage for industries. Due to the women's reluctance to engage in conversation or assert themselves vocally, it becomes more convenient for others to exert dominance over them and subject them to uneven treatment in terms of salary, working hours, promotions, maternity leaves, and other pertinent matters. Women are referred to be the 'Muted Group' in this instance, while employers exercise their 'Dominance forms of expression' (Edwin, 1975).

By looking at how Fraser's ideas about class and status (See 3.6.2) connect with Ardener's idea, we can see how complicated a person's place in society can be when it comes to making stories that everyone agrees on, as explained in the Muted Group Theory. It becomes clear that a person's place in society in relation to class and status system is important for understanding how society works. It means that someone from a muted group might find it hard to express because they aren't socially advanced enough to gain attention and respect from people around them who might have different views. In this situation, women, who are considered the muted group, are greatly influenced by the dominant group. For instance, the dominant group typically considers women's perspectives to create a feeling of shared consensus. Furthermore, there exists a correlation between a woman's societal standing and her ability to confidently express herself and engage in public discussions. Women of lower social standing may encounter heightened degrees of suppression or restrictions, consequently

maintaining prevailing power hierarchies and social disparities. Given the lower position of the women in my study, it is evident that they are more restrained in their expression compared to others in so

The study's findings suggest that the fear of job termination is often linked to the surplus presence of a labor force that does not require specific formal education or professional skills. In the following section, I will thoroughly explore the complex issues related to the absence of official employment agreements and the availability of the workforce, analyzing their consequences and underlying causes.

a. The Workforce Availability

The availability of the workforce is a key factor that allows for the implementation of low wages, pre-announced job termination, unfavorable working conditions, and most significantly, the lack of career advancement opportunities.

Similar to the present study's findings, Brown also found that Women in the workforce, experience long working hours for inadequate pay, encounter multiple safety risks, and face widespread gender-based harassment and violence. These challenges often arise from rural areas with limited formal education and persist as they transition to industrial urban areas where factory conditions dominate their lives (Brown, 2021).

Marx referred to women as the 'Reserved Army of Labor' in this context. It presupposes a certain comprehension of women's position within the family, the connection between the family, and the concepts of capitalism and capitalist patriarchy (Yanz & Smith, 1983), however, Marx subsequently conceptualized it as a pivotal component of capitalism. He stated that the surplus laboring population is crucial for the capitalist accumulation process since they serve as a conveniently accessible workforce that can be exploited by capital. The surplus population's existence facilitates the rapid expansion and contraction of production in modern industry, leading to repetitive cycles of activity, crisis, and stagnation (Marx, 1919).

Many women who urgently need employment often turn to textile factories as they lack formal education and skills for other occupations. These factories require fewer qualifications and can provide employment quickly. However, employers often take advantage of the women's urgent situation and hire them without a formal agreement. Due to their educational and compatibility deficiencies, these women do not hesitate to accept job placements without considering the need for written contracts. Kabeer explained the relationship between strategic life decisions and empowerment is highlighted, emphasizing the interplay of resources, agency, and achievements. women with limited access to resources, such as work or education, face limitations in their decision-making capacity. Agency refers to a combination of factors such as self-efficacy, autonomy, and negotiation (Kabeer, 2005). Kabeer

pointed out how poverty and lack of power have a greater effect on women than men, thus making gender disparities worse and further undermining women's capability to act and pursue life opportunities in line with their talent and capacity argued by Sen. Consequently, these two standpoints underline the significance of intersecting approaches that would eliminate entrenched barriers preventing upward mobility for everyone within a society. Consequently, they both underscore the need for holistic policies aimed at removing these entrenched obstacles hence promoting empowerment as well as overall development (Sen, 2001).

The existence of paid employment in this sector offers women a chance to engage in the formal economy, thereby enhancing their economic empowerment. On the other hand, the existence of informal agreements inside the growing formal sector raises concerns about the stability and fairness of these possibilities, which could impede women's complete access to and advantages from their involvement in the economy.

All participants in the study expressed that their current work is crucial to fulfilling their basic needs and those of their families. Despite facing several restrictions on their rights and opportunities, most women are afraid to speak up as they fear losing their employment. Employers can easily terminate employees without any hesitation as there is an abundant labor pool and job seekers are willing to accept wages below the minimum. The availability of a continuous supply of labor is making the recruitment process more flexible for employers. As mentioned previously, the challenges faced by women in the workplace are exacerbated by Karl Marx's concept of the 'Industrial Reserve Army' (Marx, 1919). This implies that employers are quick to dismiss current workers when faced with demands from them, due to the abundance of available labor force. Consequently, female workers often choose to remain silent because they know they can be easily replaced by the reserve labor pool. The fear of women is supported by one of the fundamental principles explained in Ardeners' 'The Muted Group Theory' (Edwin, 1975), where women are rendered voiceless in this context due to concerns of job loss and anxieties in various areas. Most women believe that speaking out against discrimination may result in them losing their jobs. These are the established and long-standing norms for female workers that have developed within the factories over a significant period. These women have become so accustomed to the current system that they are unaware of their ability to change it, despite being the primary contributors to the industry. In contrast to Ardeners', Fraser's theory of recognition justice highlights the significance of recognizing and affirming individuals' identities, experiences, and contributions within society frameworks. Within the depicted factory setting, female employees adopted enduring norms and expectations that influence their experiences and perspectives of their positions within the industry. Furthermore, the absence of acknowledgment and appreciation for the efforts and impact of female employees sustains a pattern of disempowerment and acceptance

of the existing situation. Therefore, they may not see themselves as catalysts for change or acknowledge their power to challenge and transform the existing norms in the workplace.

Another study highlighted that, in family settings, there are varying levels of poverty, and women often occupy the most disadvantaged position, with limited control over financial resources, particularly if they are young. Due to societal expectations, people may choose not to pursue employment as sharecroppers and instead choose to work in garment factories, which are presented as an alternative by industrialists. Initially, women and their families believed that working in these factories would protect their reputation, but in reality, factories prefer to hire women because they are obedient and cheap, paying them significantly less than workers in industrialized countries (F. E. Ahmed, 2004).

However, due to the constant availability of this surplus workforce, women who attempt to advocate for their rights are frequently silenced, as they recognize that they are not seen as essential by employers and can be readily substituted by others. Conversely, the economic pressure they are under is increasing their vulnerability.

Furthermore, the enormous influx of people who possess the necessary qualifications sought by employers is a crucial factor that compels the exploitation of workers. There is typically an excess of highly skilled workers seeking employment compared to the number of job openings available. Consequently, they are compelled to accept low-wage positions due to the difficulty they have in negotiating employment terms, mostly because of the glut of available workers. In instances where such an occurrence arises, employees may exploit the situation by paying below minimum wages, depriving workers of their rights, and subjecting them to unfavorable working conditions. Thus, it may justify the correlation between the exploitation of labor and the surplus of skilled workers in relation to the scarcity of job opportunities. Particularly with the readily available female workforce that is urgently seeking employment to meet their essential needs. When women are immersed in patriarchal and cultural norms from childhood, it becomes challenging to break free from the circumstances. Women find themselves trapped in a self-perpetuating cycle where they are unable to adapt to their current circumstances and are also unable to break free from them. Within the capitalist system, accountability should play a crucial role as poor women experience marginalization and are regarded as abundant workers, vulnerable to being terminated at any time due to the abundance. Undoubtedly, Bangladesh has made remarkable progress in its journey towards achieving middle-income status in recent decades. Nevertheless, it is crucial to carefully analyze the expenses linked to this advancement. Regrettably, it seems that women bear a disproportionate burden, enduring significant exploitation that perpetuates patriarchal hierarchies. These women are methodically conditioned to accept and tolerate such mistreatment from a young age, reinforcing societal standards of oppression and inequality. In addition, male relatives and colleagues are also trained to continue this pattern of exploitation.

However, for people positioned in the bottom tiers of the social structure, this apparent progress does not result in concrete advantages.

b. Absence of Maternity Leave Facilities

The key finding regarding maternity leave facilities emphasizes that despite significant advancements in gender equality in Bangladesh, the economic sector that prioritizes women due to their accessibility is still falling behind in ensuring and implementing such facilities. The rights of women in Bangladesh are governed under the Bangladesh Labor Act of 2006. According to this Act, “Maternity leave of women workers has been increased from four months to six months” (BLA, 2006, n.d.). All participants expressed that if they become pregnant, they are unable to continue working after giving birth. However, the most recent reform to the labor law in 2018 has ensured that workers are entitled to receive paid maternity leave (Bhuiyan, 2018). The implementation of most of this legislation has been mostly ineffective in practice, primarily as a result of inadequate government and law enforcement oversight (Kabeer et al., 2018b). However, in most factories, these regulations are not adhered to rigorously, resulting in numerous women being denied the opportunity to take maternity leave, ultimately compelling them to resign from their positions upon becoming pregnant. Due to their significant economic vulnerability, they consistently make concessions with their managers or superiors to maintain their employment (Basirulla & Tasnim, 2023). Without a contractual agreement in place between employers and employees, pregnant women working in factories are unable to continue their employment. Their apprehension of being terminated arises in such instances. Similar to the current study, another study (Shahrier & Rahman, 2023) also indicates that gender discrimination in maternity protection is evident in the treatment of pregnant workers in RMG workplaces, where managers may put pressure on them to resign to maintain production targets. Pregnant women often face verbal mistreatment and the risk of job loss if they request time off or show vulnerability during pregnancy, fostering an environment of silence and discouragement and dissuading women from conceiving due to unfavorable working conditions and fear of termination. However, this violation of existing laws offers a glimpse into the relationship between capitalist interventions and the exploitation of inexpensive labor, which disproportionately affects vulnerable women. The capitalist ideology, which prioritizes maximizing profits, disregards the specific issues faced by women, including those related to maternity conditions, as demonstrated by the findings of the current study.

5.2.3 Presented of Findings: Internal Factors Regarding Gender-Based Obstacles-Navigating Workplace Challenges

The study reveals a strong correlation between structural discrimination and the influence of patriarchal institutions in sustaining gender differences. An overarching concern is the marginalization of women in this field, where their important contributions are being suppressed and their entitlements are being ignored. During the interviews, most women demonstrated either a limited understanding of their rights or a hesitancy to engage in discussions about them. Therefore, the practice of hiring a substantial number of women in factories has become a notable benefit for businesses. As a result of women's hesitancy to participate in conversation or express themselves verbally, it becomes easier for others to exercise control over them and subject them to unequal treatment in terms of recruitment, working hours, promotions, unequal opportunities for career advancement, and other relevant issues.

The next presented findings will reflect the workplace challenges inside the factory:

1. Recruitment and Division of Work based on Gender

Despite women making up most of the workers in this profession, they remain stereotyped as being soft-spoken, physically weak, and incapable of fulfilling performing tasks. These attitudes and values discourage women from attaining higher positions that include more demanding responsibilities. The study participants were recruited based on their employment, without the need for a contractual agreement or formal interview procedure. All women said that they sought employment by directly approaching the workplace after observing the prominently displayed posters, which explicitly stated the factory's urgent requirement for labor. Since my study participants hold lower-grade (Grades, 4-7, See *Table 4*) employment, they all reported having the same experience. A woman wearing a green scarf recalled her recruitment experience, noting,

"One of my relatives is employed at this factory and informed me that there is a vacant supervisor position that needs to be filled urgently. I reached out to the individual responsible for hiring and arranged to meet the following day. Given my educational attainment of completing 10th grade, I had anticipated being selected for the position. The day after, I commenced my employment at that establishment and was subsequently instructed to begin as an assistant operator, with the primary objective of acquiring the necessary skills. However, I was surprised to discover that the supervisor role was occupied by a man who lacked any academic education."

Additionally, she mentioned that she has been employed at this establishment for nearly a year, yet she continues to perform the role of an assistant. There is currently no commitment to promote her to the role of supervisor. This factory location is near her residence, and due to her husband's restrictions, she is not permitted to step outside their familiar territory and continuing to work at the same place.

Similarly, a small number of other women expressed that they did not receive any form of career progression or development based on their talents or present positions. Their sole means of advancement is through a wage raise; however, this amount is not even sufficient.

Out of all the study participants, just one individual who occupies a supervisory role mentioned she has been employed at the factory for around three years. After a year, she was assigned the role of supervisor. She additionally stated, "It is rare for a woman to be promoted to the position of supervisor. I felt content knowing that I no longer had to be subordinate to anyone. However, reality had a distinct and striking impact. When the meetings are conducted in the managers' room, I am not allowed to even occupy a chair, regardless of the meetings' duration. In addition, I am not consulted on the meeting agenda. I feel as though I am a mere statue, positioned solely for display."

On the flip side, several participants voiced their opinions in a contrasting manner. They were compelled to assert that men possess significant physical strength and can endure any task in the workplace. Typically, female employees are unable to move large items that need physical endurance. Working additional hours and occasionally taking night shifts, is not advisable for women. They acknowledge their obligations towards their family and understand the importance of spending time with their children at home after work. However, men don't have to engage in the same activities. Additionally, staying overnight at the factory is a safety risk, particularly for women.

An 18-year-old machine operator shared her perspective, stating that,

"If I work until 5:00 PM and stay at the factory for night shifts, I will have to travel home alone. There is currently no transportation specifically for the workers, and it is not safe to rely on public transportation for travel. If any undesirable circumstance arises at work or after work, my parents will be profoundly distressed."

Despite patriarchal social standards perpetuating the assumption that women are less capable than males and should only occupy subservient roles due to their perceived lack of physical power, some individuals argue that authority consistently chooses men for supervisory positions. The management lacks defined criteria for determining the suitability of individuals for different positions. The management holds the belief that women are mentally and physically weaker than men, and as a result, they want women to remain silent in all situations and endure any circumstances to preserve their dignity.

These data demonstrate that structural discrimination in recruitment and promotion is not solely due to prejudice and men's subservient attitude but also derives from the societal perception of women as naturally soft-spoken and muted. This observation implies that women tend to be submissive, as it implies that the supervisors have the responsibility to ensure that the workers finish the order within

the time frame given. This position necessitates a stricter attitude and a firm voice to uphold efficiency in the workplace. Women are typically shy and reluctant to assert their authority, particularly when it comes to giving orders to others.

2. Insufficient Opportunities for Advancement and Low Representation in Leadership Roles

The study's findings indicate that women employed as operators and helpers face limited prospects for professional progression. Several women with over a decade of work experience reported that their earnings increased with time, but they did not have the chance to enhance their abilities or advance to higher positions. According to several other women, despite the availability of opportunities for female workers to be promoted to leadership positions, they prefer to refrain from accepting such roles due to concerns about safety and security. Money is the sole priority for them. They must satisfy their familial obligations and if they are receiving compensation, they are content with the situation. However, other participants believe that the limited availability of chances is a significant factor contributing to the underrepresentation of women in key positions. The managerial authority consistently gives priority to men in such positions. Men who began their employment as helpers were able to quickly advance to the positions of supervisor or floor in-charge. A woman voiced her dissatisfaction by stating, "Skills are exclusively for women, while men can manage without them. If the leadership position genuinely necessitates abilities and expertise, then how can an individual devoid of any skill be promoted to an in-charge role? The sole purpose is to establish a connection. We are unable to proceed with this task due to our need to prioritize the well-being of our family. Consequently, we must depart from our current location and return home at the earliest opportunity."

Since this study interviewed only one supervisor role among the participants, it was imperative to inquire about their perspective on it. Almost all participants from the same research area acknowledged the absence of opportunity to obtain leadership positions. They cited other factors contributing to this, such as nepotism, favoritism, traditional mindset, and the indifference of women themselves towards having their voices heard.

However, the only female supervisor of my study conveyed her sentiment by noting, "Whenever there is a need to hire for the supervisor position, they consistently request the operators to submit applications. They also require a minimum educational qualification for such employment. However, their lack of adequate educational qualifications sometimes disqualifies them from being considered for high-level positions in

factories. Many women who meet the criteria often have concerns about their ability to perform the responsibilities in a higher-ranking role”.

The data gathered indicates that these women have limited educational qualifications due to their socio-economic position and inadequate awareness concerning the importance of education. When individuals migrate to urban areas in pursuit of employment opportunities, they are provided convenient entry into the textile industry that mostly employs women in lower-ranking positions. Due to the urgent need for job placement, both employers and employees are willing to make compromises. In this case, women are willing to compromise on other benefits and accept minimum salaries because they have limited alternatives for employment. Once they commence their work, they persist in it without any further requirement for addressing their demands. Their familial obligations also restrict individuals from taking further action to assert their legal rights against the authority, as there is a persistent fear of job loss. Nevertheless, the prevalent culture of fear among the participants concerning potential job loss is evident in this study which is greatly impeding their advancement.

3. Inadequate Support for Career Advancement

The women face a problem due to insufficient support for them to maintain their current positions and pursue further professional growth. There are no training facilities available in any of the study areas. Women always face the burden of heavy workloads that demand them to enhance their efficiency and skills. Regrettably, all the participants highlighted their genuine desire to witness career improvement, although they find themselves stagnant in their current positions for an extended period without any chance to strive for promotion. Individuals with over a decade of experience in the field often have increased challenges in sustaining their roles as sewing operators. These chores can become repetitive for them and at times, they may not fulfill their emotional needs. A 35-year-old woman, who has been working as an operator for 10 years, expressed her experience by stating that, “I occasionally have feelings of inferiority when I see younger men who joined the factory much later than me, now in positions of authority. The worst feeling is that sometimes they disregard our age. As a result of the heavy workload, the supervisors consistently exert pressure on us. When the demand is not fulfilled, they may resort to using abusive language, which contributes to my negative feelings. This emotion is akin to the grief I would have if my kid were to behave in a similar manner.” The woman was weeping, and further stated,

“I am capable of performing the same duty as the supervisors, as I possess extensive years of experience. However, the authority does not allow us to do so. During a conversation with my manager, I requested a promotion to a higher position. However, I was informed that I lack technical skills and formal education, which

are prerequisites for the role. However, I am confident that with sufficient training, I can certainly handle the post."

The findings suggest that women are not receiving the necessary assistance and favorable conditions from authorities that would encourage them to remain in the same workplace for an extended period. Shockingly, some factories do not have training facilities, leaving women to learn through observation without any structured instruction. While some may develop their skills through observation, others may require consistent and continuous observation to learn effectively. Despite their efforts, women are continuously subjected to rigorous evaluation by managers to showcase their abilities. Failure to do so can result in immediate termination without any prior notification. The presence of insecurity in the workplace is also preventing women from acquiring the skills they need for their desired roles and responsibilities.

4. Lack of Representation and Voice (Unionization)

Trade unions are the most effective means of aiding workers who are at a disadvantage by advocating for fair wages, minimizing discrimination in the recruitment and promotion processes, and providing overall support. The results of my study emphasize that the factories prohibit workers from participating in any form of trade union activity. Some participants are completely unaware of the concept of collective bargaining through trade unions. However, certain participants possess knowledge regarding the significance and undertakings. Two of my study participants disclosed their prior involvement with labor unions. Yet they were unwilling to disclose any information about their activities, except for mentioning that they occasionally attended meetings in secret, without the knowledge of the authorities. A woman wearing a brown scarf stated,

"My colleague and I decided to join an organization after learning about their activities advocating for our rights. We previously participated in the weekly gathering. I have not observed any female worker representatives. Every single one of them was male. We would like to discuss the issues we are facing about workplace mistreatment. However, there was no apparent improvement in the opportunity to address our issues. After a few visits, we discontinued visiting that place."

Given that this statement was chosen arbitrarily from all the participants, it is difficult to ascertain the specific circumstances and actions of the trade unions. Obtaining information and thoroughly examining the significance of worker involvement with trade unions is essential for my study. Therefore, it was critical to inquire about their concerns and extent of awareness regarding workplace unionism. The following sub-section will shed light on few of the important findings regarding workplace unionism:

a. The limited understanding of unionization

Lack of knowledge about unionization is also impeding women from advancing toward workplace equality. Throughout the data collection period, textile workers in many regions of the country staged a significant protest (See **Figure 2**) demanding an increase in wages. Following five years of stagnation, the workers became more frustrated as they demanded their rights. This agitation escalated when the Government refused to accept their proposed salary. Given that women make up most of the workforce, a significant number of women took to the streets to protest and advocate for their rights. However, when the question was posed to the participants in my study, none of them provided a particular response to the scenario. Several women also surprisingly responded by stating that they were unfamiliar with the idea of organizing for their rights, as it was their first exposure to such concept of a Trade Union.

In addition, they were queried about the ongoing demonstrations resulting from the salary increase, but surprisingly, no one possessed knowledge on the matter. While workers in one area of the region were protesting for their rights, workers in another area of the same region (All my participants are from the capital Dhaka, and adjacent locations) displayed indifference towards the situation, as they were unaware of such issues. These disparities highlight the increasing need for unionization for my study participants, which was absent among them.

b. Challenges in Interviewing the Women Participating in Protests: Implications for Research and Future Inquiry

I wanted to meet a few more women from another Dhaka suburb, an important study region where protests and demonstrations happened. I could not interview the intended participants in person for security reasons. Phone contacts refused to discuss their protests and demonstrations, citing security protocols as this also emphasized the violation of their rights. The women were anxious about discussing the issues, despite their involvement in unionization efforts. The absence of information and identification from workers on their association involvement inhibits my research in this area. I could only have gotten information about trade union activities and the reality of the situation from those participants, which could have been a crucial determinant of progress toward equal opportunities. This study highlights the significant aspect of unionization, revealing the indifference among certain women and refusal to express their opinions among others who were not available for interviews. Therefore, as a matter of concern, this study's unexplored investigation leaves room for further research and improvement.

5. Gender-based Misconduct

It is a common misconception that gender-based misconduct cannot occur in the production sector as it is predominantly made up of women. With most supervisory positions held by men, the issue of misconduct becomes even more significant. Several women reported experiencing numerous instances of unwelcome and unpleasant behavior. One respondent expressed concern that “such misconduct has now become normalized. Conversely, male employees are not subjected to such circumstances. They have the freedom to work according to their preferences, and even if they make mistakes, superiors do not display any hostility towards them. Male colleagues are also more vocal and assertive, while we often endure unfavorable opinions out of fear.”

The workers often engage in misconduct, which leads to punishments for failing to meet the targets within the specified time frame. A 19-year-old sewing operator mentioned that,

“I was unable to handle the task due to its excessive nature. Despite being instructed to complete the task within the designated time frame, I was unable to do so. The floor manager checked the orders and found that only a few shirts were left to be completed. As a result of the delay in completing the work, it was me who was held responsible and received a punishment of a one-hour standing sentence.”

The worker further also claimed that if a male worker had made the same mistake, it would have been overlooked.

6. Appearance-based Judgment

Objectification is a pervasive issue that affects women worldwide, often reducing them to mere objects based on their physical appearance and gender rather than acknowledging them as unique individuals. This perception of women leads to misconduct in all areas of life and is not limited to any form of misconduct within an organization. Therefore, it is crucial to recognize the various forms of objectification that take place within the organizational structure, particularly when it comes to female workers in some workplaces, employees are judged based on their physical appearance. Those who maintain a professional appearance and attire are often given preferential treatment. Unfortunately, male superiors tend to overlook mistakes made by these employees, even if they lack the necessary skills and expertise.

A respondent shared her story, stating that despite her 12 years of experience, her performance was never evaluated favorably due to her inability to communicate effectively with her superiors. She expressed her disappointment at how individuals who look more aesthetically pleasing and presentable are frequently acknowledged and valued in the workplace. She stated her frustration by saying this,

"I feel disturbed every time I witness the preferential treatment of certain women by male superiors only based on their ability to uphold a favorable appearance and dress beautifully. Despite any errors they may make, they are not subjected to the same level of criticism as we are. Throughout my 12-year career, I have dedicated my time and effort to this factory, consistently fulfilling any work-related requests that arise. However, despite my diligent efforts, my hard work has not been acknowledged or recognized in the workplace. I am responsible for taking care of my two children and my ailing mother-in-law both before and after my job hours. I get extremely fatigued to the point where I am reluctant to contemplate the simple task of grooming my hair, let alone consider the selection of my outfit. This condition is exacerbated when I work overtime. Sometimes I believe that being well-groomed and having a polished appearance is valued more than putting in a lot of effort."

However, individuals like her, who have been employed for a significant amount of time and perform at a higher level, are often overlooked. After returning home from work, she is burdened with family obligations and tends to neglect her own well-being. Still, this should not be a factor in evaluating her performance or worth as an employee.

Nevertheless, not every instance follows this pattern of behavior. When asked about discrimination against other colleagues, some participants felt uncomfortable sharing their opinions. Additionally, some individuals mentioned that they were aware of such incidents occurring in the workplace before joining the company. However, they have not experienced or been informed of similar incidents in their current workplace.

7. Emotional and Verbal Abuse

Verbal and emotional abuse are consistently a significant worry in the workplace, particularly for women. Compared to their male coworkers, women encounter a higher incidence of abusive behavior. However, due to the sensitive nature of this topic, many women were reluctant to openly share their experiences. Nevertheless, one participant recounted her personal experience and expressed that, "It is typical for women to encounter verbal abuse when we are unable to fulfill our assigned responsibilities. Occasionally, it occurs for minor causes. I clearly recall a particular incident where I mistakenly used a wrong color thread. Upon discovering this, my manager made an offensive remark directed towards a woman. I was told that I could not perform a task of such clarity, but if I were to marry at this moment, I would be able to effortlessly conceive a child. He additionally asserted that women could accomplish any duty except for the specific one assigned at the workplace. We attempt to gain sympathy by openly displaying our tears in the presence of others."

The remaining participants did not share any specific personal workplace stories, although nearly all agreed that at some point during their employment, they had encountered similar incidents. They experience trauma due to the belief that each mistake they make will subsequently generate doubts about their character. These findings indicate that verbal and emotional abuse contributes to women's silence, even when they hear unpleasant comments. They are unwilling to drag out it anymore as it may compromise their sense of self-respect. However, none of the participants reported accepting these assaults as normal. These occurrences have a detrimental effect on their emotional well-being, which in turn hinders their productivity in the workplace.

8. Sexual Harassment

Despite the local policies and existing international laws that require improved and secure working conditions for women, there is still a significant concern regarding whether women are receiving all the necessary security measures to maintain their dignity in the workplace. Given that most top positions are held by male colleagues, it is crucial to prioritize the safety of female employees. The findings of this study do not uncover any significant accounts of sexual harassment, such as rape or severe misconduct, occurring in the workplace. However, certain individuals in the study showed unwillingness to discuss this problem and actively avoided disclosing any information related to it. Particularly, this occurred during my interview with them inside the factory, which drew my attention to the fact that these women were uninterested in discussing this matter.

Nevertheless, only a small number of individuals dared to highlight specific incidents that they frequently encounter in the workplace. They stated that it is usual for male co-workers, particularly floor supervisors, to touch inappropriately their female coworkers.

The woman, wearing a black scarf, recalled a particular incident she experienced. She explained, "After enduring a long and exhausting day, which included four hours of overtime, I found myself wondering how to make my way home alone. The delay of the hour made it difficult to secure transportation, and none of my female colleagues were available to accompany me. One of my bosses, who has recently been promoted to another post, asked me to accompany him on his bicycle. I experienced a sense of discomfort over his motives and declined his proposition. While I did not have any significant incidents that night, he consistently made rude and disrespectful remarks whenever he saw me at work after that night. I get that discussing this topic is undesirable for many, but I feel that a significant number of us have encountered similar uncomfortable circumstances."

Nevertheless, none of the participants reported any instances of severe sexual harassment at the workplace but this study suggests that such type of provocative mistreatment by the male counterparts

is making the working conditions more difficult for those women. However, a few participants did express their feelings of fear due to being subjected to vulgar language by their male counterparts. Therefore, as this study does not reflect any vast quantity of data from all the textile factories in Bangladesh, it is necessary to conduct additional exploratory research in this regard.

9. Influence of Technological Advancement and Gender Shift: Exploring the Declining Presence of Women in Bangladesh's Textile Industry

The textile sector has made significant technological progress, which has both positive and negative impacts on workers, especially women workers who have limited abilities and lack formal education. The statistics presented previously (see 2.6.1) indicating a decline in the number of women in a particular field cannot be solely attributed to technical improvements as evidenced in this study. There may be other factors at play that require further research. The limited number of participants in the study is not sufficient to fully understand the situation. However, it is worth considering whether these participants received any formal training when the new technology was introduced at work. No one responded positively to this question. This research highlights the importance of providing workers with adequate training opportunities to promote career growth.

The studied women are employed in export-oriented enterprises that produce clothing for both local and international consumers. Except for one, all factories have increased their production skill requirements to keep up with technological advancements. The industry needs to maintain a fast production speed to meet the deadlines set by buyers. As a result, these factories are installing innovative machinery and equipment to achieve faster and more accurate output.

Technological progress is crucial for the advancement of all industries. However, implementing these new technologies can be challenging for people without formal training, which is a major obstacle. Only a few women in my study who have received secondary-level education have acquired the necessary skills through their efforts. Unfortunately, the majority of participants are struggling with the new system, making their jobs more insecure and requiring more attention to complete their tasks. The women reported that a few workers who had been employed for over 15 years and lacked formal education were forced to resign because they were unable to understand and adapt to the new machinery at the production section. However, this is not a comprehensive number. Those who left their jobs were also of an advanced age, which made it difficult for them to continue fulfilling their responsibilities in the workplace.

The supervisor among the interviewed participants mentioned "There are several opportunities for promotion, especially for those with extensive experience. However, individuals must regularly use technology to maintain records of employees, manufacturing, and distribution processes. Unfortunately, people with prior

experience often lack technological proficiency in addition to their formal education. As a result, it becomes increasingly challenging for individuals to maintain employment as the demand for manual labor decreases." In addition, she stated that, "women with limited education who prioritize their economic empowerment over meeting the basic requirements of their family members are increasingly prioritizing their dignity and self-respect. In the workplace, I have observed that a small number of women were unable to adapt to the unpleasant work environment and the verbal mistreatment they endured. As a result, they opted out of their jobs and instead focused on domestic activities such as sewing and repairing, utilizing the skills they had acquired from their previous employment."

In the subsequent sections, I will analyze the results that are associated with the outcomes:

5.2.4 Discussion: Confronting Hostile Conditions and The Reality of Work Environments for RMG Workers

The working conditions prevalent in the garment industry of Bangladesh are commonly described as arduous and exploitative, wherein women endure extended work shifts, meager remuneration, and precarious occupational settings. The work process engenders significant pressure to achieve production targets, resulting in both physical and mental strain. The results of this study indicate that women workers in the study area also encounter the 'Just-in-Time (JIT) manufacturing regime' described by Siddiqi in her research. This regime involves managers exerting pressure on workers to increase productivity when there is seasonal demand for timely production. This pressure often takes the form of abusive behavior, which further exacerbates the stress experienced by the workers (Siddiqi, 2003). Women frequently come across gender-based discrimination in the form of both verbal and physical harassment perpetrated by their male colleagues in the workplace.

ILO defines violence and harassment as, "A range of unacceptable behaviors, practices or threats thereof, whether a single occurrence or repeated, that aims at, result in or are likely to result in physical, psychological, sexual or economic harm" (ILO, 2012). Based on this definition, it is crucial to emphasize that although the women I interviewed did not specifically mention cases of severe sexual harassment like rape, their emotions indicated experiences of emotional and psychological harassment, which should not be ignored under any circumstances.

Similar to the current study, Einarsen also emphasizes that workers often encounter workplace bullying from their male colleagues, in addition to other forms of hostile work environments. This can lead to mental distress, increased pressure, and a reluctance to speak up for fear of job loss, among other negative effects. Workplace bullying is the deliberate and repeated exposure to harmful behaviors in a

professional setting, occurring over a prolonged duration, where the targeted individuals have limited or no means to protect themselves (Einarsen, 2000).

However, in another study, it is argued that, after the Rana Plaza collapse and the Tazreen Garment factory fire, Bangladesh's RMG industry has improved labor rights and working conditions. These projects prioritize "Decent Work" as defined by the International Labor Organization. Fair salary, employment security, welfare support, personal growth, inclusive decision-making, and equal treatment for all staff members are the goals (Karim, 2022). While Karim acknowledged certain favorable features of working circumstances, he also recognized that there is still a lack of acknowledgment among employers in the informal sector about the recognition of equal opportunity and treatment for women (Karim, 2022). Nancy Fraser's conceptual framework on justice explains the interdependence between gender-based economic disparities and the persistence of inequitable allocation of resources, as evidenced in the findings of my study on wage inequality among women in the workplace (Fraser, 2007, P-26).

A significant contributing element to the unequal distribution of earnings among the study participants is the suppression of these women's voices due to the fear of employment termination as previously mentioned in Ardener's 'Muted Group Theory' (Edwin, 1975), which is causing them significant distress. These women are unaware of the fact of misrecognition existence that they are being improperly characterized in their workplace, despite their equal efforts at the workplace. The following section will discuss the underlying causes that have firmly instilled fear within this vulnerable group:

1. Unfavorable Economic and Social Conditions

The present study's findings suggest that women from disadvantaged socio-economic backgrounds face discrimination inside the workplace due to structural issues. Women who experience marginalization and are exposed to prevailing discriminatory forces in society are also the ones who encounter discrimination in terms of their working conditions in workplaces. In the context of my study, intersectionality has been applied to examine the various interconnected factors that influence women's lives as they navigate the challenges of meeting societal expectations as mothers, wives, and daughters, while also being key contributors to the thriving industry in Bangladesh. Moreover, the theory of Intersectionality is used to discover the interconnected socio-economic components that contribute to the intensification of structural discrimination in the workplace (Lewis, 2022). As these women from my study are the most vulnerable due to their disadvantaged socio-economic backgrounds, hence, such conditions also shed light on the simultaneous existence of representational and structural intersectionality exacerbated by their subordinate positions (Crenshaw, 1991).

Similarly, another study (Kabir et al., 2018a) suggests that RMG workers, especially women, encounter notable vulnerabilities in the workplace as a result of their disadvantageous backgrounds, resulting in a limited ability to advocate for improved circumstances. These women frequently receive lower wages than their male colleagues and experience verbal and physical mistreatment, along with sexual harassment, which reflects the deeply rooted patriarchal norms in Bangladeshi society. As a result, women workers are forced to accept job structures that exploit them and hold lesser positions, frequently working with dangerous materials.

2. Efficient and Regulated Workforce

One factor, indicated by Kabeer and Mahmud in their study is that certain factories opt to exploit their employees by offering them meager wages and demanding excessive work hours, to maintain competitiveness in the international market. Employers seeking to reduce expenses and maintain a competitive edge in the industry view women, who frequently encounter limited job opportunities and receive lower compensation than males for the same work, as a cost-effective and compliant labor force (Kabeer & Mahmud, 2004). Nevertheless, this study emphasizes the significance of global capitalism, in which specific factories are using their tactics for such competitiveness in the international market by seeking cost-effective labor. Unfortunately, these women bear the brunt of this pursuit, as they are severely exploited for the sake of this capitalist interest. Furthermore, there is a lack of interest in addressing this exploitation, as there is no legislation in place to hold industries accountable.

3. The Predominance of Males in High-Ranking Positions

The results of the study suggest that women are being prevented from discussing their experiences of wage disparity, skill-based promotion, positions based on educational qualifications, and most crucially, the lack of basic human rights in terms of working amenities. However, a significant reason for their restrained approach is the prevalence of men in high-ranking positions. The owners are hesitant to hire women in supervisory positions because they know if the majority of women hold such positions, they would be able to identify issues within the factory structure and potentially unite to assert their rights. However, they only hire a small number of women primarily for ornamental purposes and to provide the appearance of gender diversity in such roles. Therefore, those women are not actively engaging in leadership positions that would enable them to discuss their rights.

The CPD (Centre for Policy Dialogue) study on women workers in the Bangladesh RMG sector reveals a significant gender gap in managerial and HR positions, with females occupying only 0.5% and 9.3% of these roles, respectively. Moreover, the study highlights a disparity in proficiency between male

and female workers in machine operation, as a higher proportion of women are employed in the sewing area (73.9%), while a lower proportion of women work in the cutting part (22.7%) (Uddin, 2018).

The current study findings suggest that the lack of female representation in supervisory positions hinders female workers from openly discussing personal matters such as menstrual problems, health issues during pregnancy, and back pain resulting from long working hours. This lack of discussion negatively affects their productivity both at work and at home. Another study (Akhter et al., 2017) also emphasizes the physically demanding and mentally stressful aspects of industrial labor for female employees, which are intensified by extended working hours, the constant threat of job loss, and substantial household and societal obligations. According to the findings of this study, women with the capability to perform dynamic tasks are being recruited less frequently for higher positions. This raises questions about who is benefiting from this discrimination and the accountability of those involved. The answer to this issue may vary, but it is mostly women shouldering the burden in a profit-oriented capitalist system.

4. How the Absence of Trade Union Representation Impacts Female Textile Workers?

The current study suggests that women employed at the lowest level of the production sector in the factory are the most marginalized when it comes to their rights. Except for two study participants who had attended monthly meetings, none of the study participants had any affiliation with trade unions. However, to avoid the possibility of being fired, they had to cease participating in the activities, even though they were limited to formal meetings and agendas. While workers have the legal right to engage in trade union activities, internal organizational policies are now limiting their ability to do so. The lack of opportunities for women to participate in such activities is a significant concern. These women are recognizing this adverse condition as normal. These recurring behaviors at the factories have been occurring year after year, and the incoming workers are adhering to the existing regulations. The prevailing state of indifference or apathy for their rights is impeding the overall advancement against inequitable and discriminatory circumstances.

The limited knowledge regarding collective bargaining and the apprehension of being fired are two intersecting aspects that are exacerbating structural discrimination and facilitating the authorities' more efficient utilization of their regulating techniques. As Rock supported in her study, endeavors towards unionization frequently lead to immediate termination, hence necessitating the pivotal involvement of non-governmental organizations (NGOs) in educating workers about their entitlements and facilitating initiatives for enhancement (Rock, 2003).

The study findings indicate that these women prioritize meeting their basic needs over career progression. As supported by another study (F. E. Ahmed, 2004), the garment factory owners, driven by the need to minimize labor expenses, specifically focus on female workers in their attempts to hinder the formation of labor unions. Although women workers possess individual bargaining power, their lack of ability to form unions hinders their capacity to engage in collective bargaining for increased salaries, rendering them susceptible to exploitation.

A recent study by Hossain and Akter suggests another crucial fact that, despite a small rise in female presence in trade unions, it remains lower compared to their engagement in the RMG workforce, with certain unions having a smaller number of female members than males. The COVID-19 pandemic has worsened the problem, resulting in a decrease in union membership as a result of causes like as layoffs, shutdowns of factories, and workers voluntarily quitting their positions (J. Hossain & Akter, 2022).

Fraser emphasizes the importance of qualitative factors, such as participatory parity, in addressing the issue of the underrepresentation of women in organizations. She argues that achieving equality requires more than just increasing the number of women in leadership positions, but rather ensuring equal treatment in terms of both distributional and recognition-based aspects of social justice (Fraser, 2007). From Fraser's viewpoint, the findings of the current study also suggest that although there are a small number of women in leadership roles in the RMG industry, there is still a significant concern regarding the fair distribution and recognition of their rights regarding existing inequality and discrimination. Furthermore, this concern has a connection to Fraser's concept (Fraser, 2007, P-31), which she highlights as the crucial factor in the established cultural framework that obstructs women from escaping subordination.

However, the present study has also revealed a dominant feeling of subordination among the RMG workers. Surprisingly, the factors such as submissiveness, vulnerability, etc. that contribute to the greater engagement of women in the RMG sector are also the same factors that continue to perpetuate discrimination against them, resulting in a paradoxical situation where there is a high level of female involvement but also a considerable gender gap. Women's representation is often simplified, restricting their roles to a small number of positions, while men are frequently portrayed as physically fit, energetic, resilient, quick learners, and innate leaders. This perpetuates the idea that men are more suitable for leadership positions in this labor-intensive industry, as supported by previous research (M. A. Islam & Jantan, 2017).

In the following sub-sections, I will discuss important details regarding the lack of involvement of trade unions:

a. Sense of Security

The current study reflects that women employed at the factory level prioritize timely payment and protection against arbitrary termination. They also value a work environment that is free from abusive behavior, particularly when such behavior undermines their dignity. The present study suggests that abusive conduct has become tolerated as common practice in the RMG industry, as victims are compelled to remain silent due to the fear of losing their sense of worth, and being poor is another significant issue that is also fueling the issue. Nevertheless, the vulnerability in this situation also signifies a lack of transformational agency among the workers at the factory level, which limits their ability to confront the prevailing abusive behaviors (Kabeer, 2005). The sense of security they experience is crucial for their financial well-being and influences their decision-making in many areas of their daily life. They have the challenge of maintaining a balance between their personal and professional commitments. These women show little inclination to seek assistance from any trade union activities that could swiftly enhance their working conditions. For these individuals, this is an ongoing crisis that has the potential to significantly alter their lives. Alice Evans also indicated in his study that, gender disparity in garment unions is evident, with men occupying leadership roles despite the female workforce. This is often seen as patriarchal and dictatorial, with female workers often assigned subordinate roles, highlighting unequal power dynamics and limited active involvement (Evans, 2017). Articles 37 and 38 of the Constitution clearly state the right of all citizens to freely gather and establish organizations or unions (*The Constitution of the People's Republic of Bangladesh*, n.d.). However, female textile workers in Bangladesh, despite the constitutional protection of their freedom to associate frequently encounter violence, coercion, and the risk of unemployment while pushing for their right to establish trade unions (Basirulla & Tasnim, 2023). Furthermore, the larger background emphasizes a systemic problem where there is a lack of accountability. Although Bangladesh's economic progress and advancement are praised, they are frequently achieved through the exploitation of low-cost labor, with women bearing a disproportionate burden. While there has been a rise in the participation of women in the organized labor market, the absence of accountability within the supply chain and among factory owners continues to sustain the mistreatment of workers. This situation underscores the need for systemic change to address the root causes of gender inequality and labor exploitation in Bangladesh's garment industry. It calls for concerted efforts to uphold workers' rights, ensure accountability throughout the supply chain, and empower female workers to actively participate in decision-making processes without fear of reprisal.

b. Segregation within Factory Premises

The intersection between the socio-economic circumstances and perceived gender roles of these women is preventing them from making any strategic life decisions, which is crucial for addressing issues of discrimination and inequality. Kabeer argues that most male trade unionists not only show little concern for the needs and interests of women as workers, but they also perpetuate attitudes and behaviors that consider women as inferior and disregard their specific needs and objectives as women (Kabeer, 2004).

Similarly, Ahmed also highlighted in her study that, union organizers face challenges in organizing garment workers due to various factors, including the fear of layoffs and the creation of a multiclass workforce by industrialists, which reduces cohesion. Spatial segregation in factories reflects gendered wage segregation, with few men at the top having jobs with more control and higher wages, leading women to fear progression due to concerns about sexual harassment and resulting in their inability to unionize and lack of voice on the factory floor (F. E. Ahmed, 2004). The present study also highlights the presence of a fear culture among women, which is instilled in them over a prolonged period of discrimination. It suggests that women being part of a union is not necessarily a pathway to their empowerment. The unavailability of interviews with women protesters due to security concerns serves as evidence of the fear they experienced.

5. Suppressive Tactics for Silencing Women? Or Women are Silenced amid Abusive Behavior?

The predominant nature of structural discrimination, highlighted by patriarchal standards, is evident in the types of abusive behavior that instill fear in many women, preventing them from speaking out. However, although several participants brought up the topic of abuses, conversely, some were reluctant to tackle these issues. Remarkably, these were the women who voiced concerns about being fired and chose to persist in their jobs while being aware of their ability to assert their legal entitlements. The acceptance of abusive behaviors in the workplace has led to a normalization of such conduct. Many women in this study expressed their view of yelling and verbal abuse as legitimate means to improve productivity, despite their feeling uncomfortable from such behaviors.

A study conducted by Action Aid (Groen & Cunha, 2020), argues that women have a higher incidence of human rights breaches because of economic activity and suffer more obstacles in their pursuit of justice compared to males, primarily due to patriarchal standards also have a heightened risk of sexual violence and gender-based harassment, as evidenced by a survey conducted in Bangladesh in 2018, where 80% of women reported experiencing such incidents (Action Aid, 2019). It is reported in another study that female employees endure verbal mistreatment from their superiors, predominantly in the

form of raised voices and severe criticism, resulting in emotions of humiliation and devaluation. The individuals conveyed apprehension about potential job loss if they were to voice their concerns about abuse and depicted a work setting characterized by limited contact among colleagues (Akhter et al., 2019b). According to Bangladesh's National Women Development Policy, 2011, Section 509 of the Bangladesh Penal Code in the schedule of the Mobile Court Act, appropriate measures can be implemented to combat and prevent the acts of eve-teasing and sexual harassment against females in all aspects of life (NWDP, 2011). Both the current study and existing literature suggest that offenses such as the abuse of women, sexual harassment, and other offenses against women persist in the workplace due to ineffective control systems. Furthermore, both the present study and existing literature lack to provide any evidence that shows accountability for discriminatory attitudes towards women. This highlights the necessity for the implementation of existing rules and regulations.

6. Gender Considerations and Ethical Imperatives in Fast Fashion Policy and Consumption Patterns: A Critical Evaluation

While my study largely focuses on a different element, it is also important to address that international cooperation, particularly the 'Fast Fashion' business has significant influences on the dynamics of the RMG sector in Bangladesh. This highlights the potential of Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) initiatives to address important issues. Vijayarasa & Liu argue that there is a general notion that policymakers do not consider gender issues as an essential component in policy formulation. Instead, gender concerns are often seen as optional (Vijayarasa & Liu, 2022). In another study, it is argued that "Ethical fashion" is not only limited to environmental sustainability rather it should be extended beyond it to emphasize the need to address the women workers' rights simultaneously. Therefore, it is necessary to have a critical evaluation of the "Fast fashion" companies' business policies which mainly focus on their profit-oriented promotional activities (Gordon & Hill, 2015). Consequently, it is also argued that the best solution can be the changing of consumption patterns with more concern for sustainability as indicated in one study that, one of the best ways to promote better sustainability is by educating consumers about the inequitable circumstances faced by women in the textile industry (Geiger & Keller, 2017). Furthermore, it may not always be possible to assign complete accountability to the supply chain alone, as regular inspections may not consistently uncover underlying problems. This emphasizes the advantages of conducting unannounced visits to achieve a more thorough evaluation. However, the interconnection of economic systems all over the world is highlighted by the smooth running of the export-import capitalist system and the global ideology of pervading consumerism. Within such a system, nonetheless, emerges a neocolonialist trait as exemplified by the

colonization of women involved in industries such as Bangladesh's RMG sector by consumerist desires from the West. For example: colonial frameworks exploit labor and natural resources from states in the global South, with a focus on generating profits for wealthy employers and stockholders in the global North (Lewis, 2020).

Thus, the labor of these exploited workers aids the production of things for use in the West which enables the maintenance of colonial-like tendencies based on economic dependency and abuse in a more modern context.

5.2.5 Presentation of Findings: External Sources Contributing to Inequality and Discrimination

The discrimination faced by female RMG workers is also exacerbated by external factors beyond the scope of the industry, such as social and cultural norms, familial expectations, and the influence of their husbands. The following sub-sections will present the result from the findings of my study incorporated with the individual struggles of the studied women:

1. Individual Struggle and Work-Life Balance

In Bangladesh, women are consistently viewed within the confines of traditional gender roles, determined by a patriarchal culture and societal conventions. These roles mostly involve domestic responsibilities such as caregiver duties for their husbands and children, cooking, cleaning, etc. However, when it comes to women who are working, this impression remains unchanged, even for those who have significant obligations. Most women expressed that their primary motivation for work is financial gain, and they do not envision themselves progressing to higher positions for professional growth. To meet the fundamental demands of the family, each member must make a financial contribution, as relying just on one person's income is exceedingly difficult in today's time. This position is particularly dire for women who are the sole provider for their families. However, the question arises as to whether it is still crucial for them to simultaneously handle their family responsibilities. In response to this aspect, the majority of the women stated that it is becoming increasingly challenging to cope with. Their suffering is consistently ignored and dismissed, exacerbating the difficulty they face. The absence of motivation and support from family members and the environment act as obstacles to their empowerment.

In the subsequent subsection, I will present the findings of the challenges encountered by women in the workplace and the personal concerns arising from the work environment:

a. Correlation between Physical Labor and Productivity in Everyday Life

The women who work from 8:00 am to 4:00 pm are mostly dedicating a significant portion of their time away from their homes. They begin their morning with the anxiety of arriving at the workplace

punctually, which is of utmost importance to uphold. Upon departing from their residence, women anticipate returning to their residence after a predetermined duration of time. However, frequently this is not the situation as they are required to remain for additional hours to complete their tasks. Conversely, these women also fulfill significant roles as mothers, wives, and daughters. These significant responsibilities necessitate spending time and fulfilling obligations towards their family members. However, the issue arises when they encounter burdensome tasks that require them to endure physical challenges.

A participant expressed that being a single mother and balancing both work and family responsibilities is overwhelming and beyond her capacity. However, she is compelled to persist in her employment solely for financial reasons. She stated,

"I have two children who are currently attending school. My partner left me while I was pregnant for the second time and married someone else. He fails to support the children for whom I am working, a situation I hadn't imagined would persist. There are occasions when I contemplate resigning from my job owing to the demanding workload and the work of the surroundings. However, simultaneously, I must alter my perspective by considering my children. Still, these ideas have a significant impact on me and prevent me from focusing on my work. Our emotional state of mind is completely disregarded by everyone."

However few other individuals held the same viewpoint, and they voiced their dissatisfaction with their personal lives. Upon departing from work, it requires a considerable amount of time for individuals to arrive at their place of residence, resulting in a state of exhaustion following their work duties. They have a limited amount of time to prepare meals for their family members and need to eat and prepare for the following workday. Frequently, it becomes challenging to simultaneously handle all tasks. When participants were queried about their work-life balance, some intriguing yet disheartening findings were uncovered. A woman wearing a red scarf stated that,

"I was questioned during job placement about my ability to work standing for over 10 hours."

She additionally stated, "I am above the age of 30 and I have an ailing mother-in-law at my residence whom I must attend to. During the daylight hours, while I am working, I must leave her alone at home, which causes me constant concern. I am unable to focus on my work due to the constant barrage of criticism I receive. Upon commencing my employment, I consented to the provision allowing me to work over 10 hours if necessary. However, at that time, I was unaware that I would encounter unexpected situations within my family. The management threatened me multiple times that if I was unable to work diligently, they would terminate my employment."

Similarly, other participants also expressed that this job often comes with physical challenges due to the demand for extended hours. Upon returning home, individuals experience fatigue that hinders their ability to fulfill other essential domestic tasks. However, they are persisting in their work to fulfill their essential requirements. These women are also expected to fulfill the responsibility of working the third shift, either at their workplace or at home as a mother, wife, or daughter. The study participants discussed the problem of mandatory overtime at their workplace, which necessitates them to labor late into the night.

b. The Increasing Workload is Leading to a Decline in Productivity

While government-approved holidays are intended to apply to everyone, several factories are disregarding these rules to fulfill their production demands and ensure timely supply. However, these organizational demands have a direct impact on the production workers. Since my study participants are factory workers, I had the chance to thoroughly investigate the effects of these considerations. Most women reported that they often cannot fully enjoy their mandatory holidays owing to work-related stress. They are allotted approximately seven days for two Eid holidays (Festivals of the Muslim community), but in practice, they only receive a maximum of three days out of the total seven days. In such instances, individuals are required to work on Fridays, which is considered the weekend in Bangladesh, and also the single day off they receive during the entire week. There are other holidays throughout Puja (Festivals of the Hindu community) as well as the Christmas holiday, that are not uniformly enjoyed. Only individuals in positions of greater authority, such as managers and supervisors, are eligible to partake in these holidays. However, as manufacturing workers, they are obligated to fulfill the orders without any alternative.

Several individuals from the hand tag/Label section voiced their discontent when discussing their workload. According to their statement, they have been given a time limit of one hour to finish labeling seventy shirts. If they fail to meet this challenge, the management will prohibit them from using toilets for the following few hours. They perceive this circumstance as punishment for their incapacity to do the task at hand. I was astonished upon hearing these claims, but my belief was solidified when I interviewed with a woman who recounted her own experience of this incident. Here is her statement: "I failed to finish generating seventy shirts within a time frame of one hour. Due to the scarcity of available workers, my manager prohibited me from using the toilet for the subsequent two hours. Within the following two hours, more tasks were set for completion, resulting in an increased load of work stress. This is not an unusual experience that I encountered here; rather, it is a recurring situation that occurs daily at work."

These findings emphasize the additional burden is resulting in increased levels of stress, exhaustion, and work-related obstacles. Managing both of their responsibilities and ensuring financial stability at the same time is becoming challenging for them. Nevertheless, the mounting stress and problems are negatively affecting the productivity of workers, which is a significant concern for the rapidly expanding textile industry. Ensuring a work-life balance by satisfying the fundamental needs of employees is an indisputable aspect of fostering business growth.

2. Cultural and Societal Norms Shaping Women's Experiences

Most of the studied women believe that working in these factories will enable them to live a better life than what they had before. However, most of these women lack proficiency in technology, which limits their ability to work effectively. As a result, they are often excluded from opportunities for growth and advancement. The fact that women are facing discriminatory remarks in both their personal and professional lives further hinder their progress. This situation is a clear example of the feminization of labor and the challenges that come with it.

In societies that adhere to patriarchal systems, there are often doubts about women's abilities due to cultural and societal norms. The demographic makeup of participants in my study is a crucial factor that significantly affects women's attitudes toward personal development and awareness of their rights. Some of the women who face these limitations respond in a typical manner, indicating that their cultural and societal characteristics are influencing their ability to consider making changes. However, many women are actively questioning their own beliefs, which greatly influences their views and ultimately shapes their identities.

The following results of my study will highlight the discrimination faced by the participants due to societal and cultural norms in their personal and professional lives:

a. Marriage and Family Expectations

One of the study participants of 35-year-old who has been employed for over a decade, expressed her belief that the safety of women should be the top priority. She also mentioned that "It's not necessarily a bad thing if my husband prefers to avoid jobs that require long hours at the office and restrict my activities outside the home. I believe that women should not feel obligated to hold certain beliefs or get offended by such limitations." In addition to her previous comment, she elaborated on the rights and conditions regarding employment before and after marriage by asserting that,

"In the majority of the cases, individuals who are employed before getting married are expected to maintain their employment even after marriage. If my husband needs to keep his job to provide financial support for our

household, I will certainly continue working for a few more years. However, I also must meet the needs of my children in addition to my family responsibilities, which can often make it challenging to balance both."

Only a small number of women reported encountering marital difficulties as a result of their profession. They stated that they began working before being married but had to stop after marriage due to their husbands' objection to leaving the house. Their relationship with their spouses was impacted and they considered ending the job. However, after a few years of being married, they were compelled to resume the workforce because of the rise in living costs. Additionally, they experience discomfort as it contradicts their partner's will. However, in cases where the male head of the household is occasionally unable to fulfill the needs of the children, it is their responsibility to provide financial assistance to improve the quality of life for the family.

The findings suggest that the decision-making process is frequently influenced by prevailing patriarchal norms and values. Generally, husbands do not approve of their wives going outside and working with men in the same spot. However, when faced with the matter of survival, husbands have no alternative but to persist and ultimately be obligated to make compromises. However, women continue to experience a sense of anxiety around potential difficulties in their relationships with their spouses. Consequently, some women are sacrificing their progress and empowerment in the workplace, while others are seeing a decline in their productivity. A woman with eight years of tenure at a consistent manufacturing employment and possessing a higher level of education beyond primary schooling expressed her discontentment while recounting her narrative.

She stated, "Throughout my employment, I have consistently demonstrated sincerity in my tasks and a rapid ability to learn new skills. The authorities observed this and extended an offer for me to assume the supervising job, considering my possession of the necessary qualifications for the task. However, this particular role requires additional hours of work at the factory, which was difficult for me as my husband was not even willing to let me work there, let alone stay longer than normal time."

She expressed her interest in the supervisor position as it would allow her to avoid doing monotonous work. However, she prioritized her family above all else, worrying that pursuing her career could lead to her husband leaving her, which was something she couldn't imagine in her life. This assumption had a major impact on her professional growth and left her aspirations in ruins.

b. Spousal Influence: Controlling Income in Marital Dynamics

As part of my research, it was important to investigate whether women have control over their income and are truly advancing towards economic empowerment. It is crucial to ensure that women who are

making significant contributions to the country's powerful sectors are rewarded properly for their hard work, both professionally and personally. Many of the women I spoke to said that they work solely to support their families financially, which raises questions about whether they have full autonomy over their earnings. Unfortunately, most respondents reported that they do not have control over their income. Many said they are required to hand over their wages to their husbands, who are the primary decision-makers in their families. While some participants said that this arrangement works for them because both parties are contributing to the same household expenses, others do not have a say in how their earnings are used. Regardless of who has control over the money, women's economic empowerment is still a work in progress.

However, some participants disclosed a significant fact: they are not permitted to independently withdraw their salary. The husbands make a withdrawal of the funds, and if the wives require money for personal expenses, they must request it.

One participant shared her experience of dealing with numerous incidents caused by her income and how the money would be spent. She noted that nobody would believe the extent of these incidents. "On multiple occasions, I have tried to quit my job due to difficulties in maintaining a work-life balance. However, my husband is urging me to continue working, and I lack access to information about my income, which is causing problems in my relationship. Every morning, I wake up to loud shouting and harsh scolding, which has become a regular occurrence in my life. I continue to work despite the significant stress, but if any errors occur, my supervisor subjects me to oral warnings and criticism."

As a result, some women may be hesitant to ask their husbands for financial support, which can hinder their progress towards achieving financial independence. However, this finding only applies to women who reported that their husbands earn more than they do. Furthermore, only those who have access to their own money can provide for their families. Additionally, the women who are financially supporting their parents are typically the youngest and unmarried.

5.2.6 Discussion: External Influences: Factors that Trigger Inequality and Discrimination

To effectively address the intricate difficulties, it is crucial to embrace an intersectional strategy that recognizes the intertwined and interwoven nature of the discrimination experienced by women in the textile industry. This entails not only analyzing and questioning traditional gender roles and male-dominated systems, but also challenging the interconnected disparities rooted in socioeconomic status, racial and ethnic backgrounds, and other social classifications. To promote inclusivity and fairness in the textile sector of Bangladesh, governments, employers, and advocates should acknowledge and

tackle the various types of discrimination that intersect and affect women. The preceding section of findings has outlined the variables that contribute to discrimination beyond the confines of factory premises, which women encounter in their daily lives, separate from their work but connected to their professional lives. However, the following section of the discussion will now delve into addressing these comprehensive challenges:

1. Unveiling the Power Dynamics of Patriarchal Authority Structures: Assessing Male Dominance

Despite efforts to promote gender equality, many organizations still have a patriarchal structure that favors men in positions of authority, regardless of whether women possess the same skills and qualifications. This creates a significant barrier for women to advance in their careers, as they often face an unbreakable glass ceiling (An unofficially acknowledged barrier to advancement in a profession, especially affecting women) that prevents them from challenging the hierarchical perception of women's value (M. A. Islam & Jantan, 2017). In addition, another study (Mawa, 2021) suggests that Bangladeshi society exhibits deeply rooted patriarchal values, wherein male dominance is established as the prevailing standard. Women are predominantly confined to home responsibilities, lacking much power or influence in public domains. This sustains a recurring pattern of gender disparity, strengthened by societal norms on an idealized concept of femininity. Nevertheless, Fraser believes that women can be classified as either a social class or a status group, but not both simultaneously. Additionally, the injustice they experience can be attributed to either unequal distribution of resources or lack of recognition, but not at the same time (Fraser, 2007, P-26). However, those who were interviewed in this study usually represent all these categories depending on the situation. For example, in their families or cultural settings, they might be assigned lower positions suggesting a recognition based on status. On the other hand, when these women engage in income-generating activities such as working for wages it places them in a certain economic class, especially in capitalist systems. Thus, these women occupy a gender-based class status, wherein gender serves as a delineating factor despite not constituting the primary basis of class distinction.

Additionally, Women from my study are disadvantaged by unfair resource distribution and misrecognition of their efforts by society. For instance, when women are paid lower salaries than men for equal work it leads to uneven resource distribution in my research settings; this has negative implications for their ability to support and sustain their families. These inequalities have been perpetuated through the maintenance of an income gap in the workplace between men and women while leading to the economic marginalization of the latter. Several social identities intersect in

people's lives hence necessitating an intersectional perspective on justice in society whereby two or more dimensions overlap.

Crenshaw (Cho et al., 2013) makes Fraser's framework better by giving a more complex understanding of how people's experiences of oppression and unfairness are affected by shared social characteristics. The Muted Group Theory, in conjunction with Crenshaw's intersectionality and Fraser's framework, emphasizes the significance of amplifying the voices of marginalized groups of women to challenge prevailing issues or discussions and foster societal transformation. These theories together explore the identical phenomenon: the status, value, and discrimination faced by women. Although these theories possess unique traits, they all intersect and agree on the diverse obstacles experienced by women. By adopting different approaches, these frameworks collectively supported my comprehension of the reasons behind these women's resilience in enduring exploitative circumstances without seeking to break away from the situation.

2. Struggling to Achieve Equilibrium: The Dual Responsibility of Female Textile Workers as Breadwinners and Homemakers

The findings of the study suggest that female workers in factory positions are more likely to face challenges in maintaining work-life balance due to the need for perseverance in their assigned tasks. These women not only have to manage the tasks assigned to them by the authorities but also take up the vital responsibility of caring for their families. Women are also facing the pressure of establishing their reproductive identity by bearing children, often due to the expectations of their in-laws. These challenges make it difficult for women to meet their fundamental demands as breadwinners while also proving that their responsibilities do not affect their productivity at work. The following sub-section will examine the factors related to the dual responsibility of female workers:

a. Challenges of Working the 'Third Shift'

An executive at McKinsey & Co. notes that numerous women are engaged in a triple workload. One area where women still tend to take on the majority of the work is in the household. Additionally, their occupation should be taken into consideration. Furthermore, individuals have taken on additional duties in their professional environment (Yee, 2021). The findings of my study illustrate that female workers in the RMG sector often labor six days a week from 8:00 am to 17:00, with overtime required to meet production quotas, followed by additional domestic duties at home, resulting in a cycle of sleep deprivation and stress, which also enables their exhausting work routine. They endure a night-long period of sleep deprivation and then resume work the next day, carrying the same level of stress. This cycle repeats for an indefinite duration. Similarly, another study (Venn et al., 2008) finds that Women

often bear the responsibility of providing both physical and emotional care for young children at night, without discussing it with their partners. Even after returning to work, they continue to do multiple shifts, including daytime, evening, and nocturnal care, compromising their sleep needs for the sake of their family's welfare. Despite engaging in paid work, women still tend to assume the gender-stereotypical role of the primary caregiver, which is influenced by societal expectations and has a lasting impact on their sleep patterns and overall well-being.

b. Lack of Amenities for Breastfeeding Mothers

The study findings indicate that mothers after childbirth working in industries are not provided with any facilities to care for their newborn children. However, these women are unable to exercise their legal rights and are facing difficulties in balancing their home and professional lives due to the insufficient resources available at their employment. This scenario is exacerbated when these women are given the chance to return to work after having a baby. The absence of daycare services is causing them to constantly think about their newborn children, which is negatively impacting their mental well-being, particularly for breastfeeding mothers. One study shows that providing support for breastfeeding mothers, and access to antenatal services not only leads to healthier children and happier families but also promotes gender equality, enhances workforce productivity, and fosters sustainable economic growth (UNICEF, 2022).

3. Discriminatory Practices of Laws and Regulations

One of my studied women shared that she underwent an abortion because she had no other option but to keep working due to extreme poverty. With the COVID-19 pandemic, many people are facing increased challenges in meeting their basic needs, leading to difficulties for both partners in addressing these demands.

This issue has also been recognized by other researchers, who are asserting, amidst the nationwide lockdown, several companies exploited the circumstances to terminate workers deemed troublesome, with a particular focus on female employees, including those who were pregnant or elderly. These individuals had their contracts ended without receiving the appropriate compensation as required by Bangladesh Labor Law 2006. This discriminatory practice emphasizes the susceptibility of women in the labor force during periods of crisis (Pamela Abbott et al., 2022).

The implementation of most of this legislation has been mostly ineffective in practice, primarily as a result of inadequate government and law enforcement oversight (Kabeer et al., 2018b). However, the current study also suggests that these regulations are not adhered to rigorously, resulting in numerous women being denied the opportunity to take maternity leave, ultimately compelling them to resign from their positions upon becoming pregnant. Similarly, another study sheds light on the female

garment workers experiences persistent anxiety due to the fear of job loss. Due to their significant economic vulnerability, they consistently make concessions with their managers or superiors to maintain their employment (Basirulla & Tasnim, 2023).

The ongoing understanding of gender issues in the textile industry can be further supported by several research studies done during the national shutdown. The incidents documented by the researchers are similar to those I encountered during my study on job-related hurdles, which were influenced by factors such as pregnancy and age. This brings to light the disjunction between what is legally protected about these workers on the one hand, and what happens to them daily within the industry on the other hand.

To address my primary research question, which seeks to ascertain the underlying causes of women's rights violations in the RMG sector, it is imperative to comprehend Bangladesh's position within the broader framework of the global capitalist system, where Bangladesh occupies a relatively tiny position. However, to effectively address the widespread problem of discrimination against women, many laws have been implemented at both national and international levels. Nevertheless, tackling the fundamental reasons behind these abuses necessitates a comprehensive and diverse strategy. Female employees are highly exploited, as capitalists frequently take advantage of the opportunity to give them very low wages while maximizing profits through other methods. What happens today reflects what was happening during the Industrial Revolution times in Europe when there was no protection for these vulnerable groups. During the Industrial Revolution, workplaces were highly hazardous, and female and child laborers often suffered severe injuries that rendered them unable to continue working. This was exacerbated by the practice of *laissez-faire* capitalism, which meant that there were no government regulations or initiatives in place to address these issues (Beck, 2016).

There are significant parallels between historical eras that require the implementation of accountability by law enforcement, rather than waiting for a disaster to happen, as has occurred in the past. Neglecting certain groups, such as female textile factory workers, has resulted in immense suffering. This is especially pertinent in nations such as Bangladesh, where there is a substantial pool of inexpensive workforce and susceptible individuals. Hence, it is crucial to abide by the principles of Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR), even if its execution is not immediately evident.

The exploitation of women in businesses such as the RMG sector in Bangladesh extends beyond the actions of individuals; larger systemic factors also contribute to this issue on a global scale. There are numerous scapegoats in this situation, including governments, multinational firms, and consumers in the Western world. However, the fundamental institutions that support global capitalism or neo-colonialism ensure that there is always an uncontrolled system for exploiting underprivileged women.

The Western world's reliance on products manufactured by underpaid and marginalized women in countries like Bangladesh highlights the unequal distribution of power in the global economy. However, despite the efforts to promote sustainable supply chain methods, there is still a high demand for cheap labor and rapid fashion driven by consumerist impulses and profit-oriented objectives. Therefore, reducing it requires not only ensuring responsibility and control over the supply chain but also changing the principles and standards of Western cultures with sustainable and equitable consumption habits.

Once again, countries such as Bangladesh may have boosted their Gross Domestic Products (GDPs) by developing the RMG industry. However, this growth has come at a significant cost to the women who have contributed to it via their strenuous labor and perspiration. However, the work they perform is often undervalued and they are not adequately compensated, which prevents them from improving their living standards. This ultimately results in a cycle of poverty and exploitation. In addition, this research uncovered a gap between the current policies and the actual monitoring system implemented by the government and buyers. This discrepancy highlights the perpetuation of discrimination and inequalities within the RMG industry in Bangladesh.

Hence, genuine inclusive growth and prosperity can only be achieved via the implementation of development policies that uphold human rights, including those that advance gender equality, especially for women in the workforce. This entails allocating resources towards education, healthcare, and welfare programs that can empower women to support their families financially and socially. By doing so, it fosters an inclusive economy that benefits everyone in the long run. Consequently, this would promote enduring expansion throughout the entire nation.

Chapter Six

6. Summary and Conclusion

This research tried to analyze gender inequality in the RMG sector of Bangladesh: forms and consequences of the discrimination, possible measures to decrease and remove it, and finally, the remedies. The main questions focused on identifying discrimination, its impacts on the conditions at work, and the formulation of remedies.

The findings of the current study reveal that, despite the advancement in the most growing economic sector of Bangladesh, women in the RMG industry still encounter inequality and discrimination although this industry is renowned for the huge employment of women's labor force. Gender inequality in the textile industry is the result of the interconnection between societal norms and structural discrimination which further exacerbate this discrimination to systemic challenges for women. Women face several challenges at work which start with discriminatory recruitment practices and continue to many other obstacles including hostile workplace environments, violations of minimum wage regulations, inadequate measures for career advancement, limited opportunities to acquire new skills, restrictions on unionization, objectification of women, gender-based harassment, inadequate maternity leave policies, childcare services, and sick leave protocols.

These women, who come from disadvantaged socio-economic and familial circumstances, are the most marginalized in society. They seek better lives and believe that working in the RMG industry will improve their economic conditions and empower them in society. Expectations are fulfilled in certain instances when individuals begin to contribute towards the financial requirements of their family. However, the current discriminatory factors in the industry often cause them to continue discriminating against women even after they have adapted to the structural discrimination. This is followed by favoring male workers, which ultimately leads to a lack of sufficient representation of women in managerial or leadership positions. Nevertheless, the fundamental truth behind the difficulties women encounter is intensified by the deeply ingrained patriarchal traditions in society. These women are unable to break free from the cycle of prejudice due to their insufficient understanding of their rights and lack of necessary skills for progress. In addition, those with a basic understanding and expertise in achieving personal development are also constrained by the apprehension of job termination, which they perceive as the optimal choice for their own and their family's survival. Job instability is

exacerbated by the rapid technological improvements in the sector, which need greater technical abilities and consequently favor the employment of male employees in leadership roles.

In addition to the various challenges that women encounter on the job, a significant discovery of this study is the escalating workloads in the production department, which exacerbates the disparities between their home and professional lives. These women are simultaneously fulfilling the tasks of being highly sought-after laborers and providing additional financial support for their families. Consequently, such differences in their daily lives are gradually limiting women to move beyond their boundaries. Because of the patriarchal culture and societal norms and the prevalence of gender inequality, businesses are taking advantage of this easily available labor to take the industry to more profitable growth. In the system of profit-driven capitalism, women are the most vulnerable group, and the violations of the existing norms in Bangladesh as well as in the global scenario are plenty.

However, the results of the research point to the many causes that intersect to cause women to face inequality and discrimination. This underscores the need to understand the modifications at the individual and institutional levels to have effective strategies for redressing the problem. Although the constitutional provisions have guaranteed women the right to unionize, the benefit has not extended to many women as a majority are being excluded from union membership. This barrier prevents female workers from arguing for equality and fighting discrimination.

What this means is that for women to come into this sector, clarity of understanding of their rights and acting to overcome the intimidation of demanding their rights is very necessary. The result of the silencing of voices against discrimination is the perpetuation of entrenched patriarchy, and changing behavioral aspects is an important feature in the fight against the status quo. This issue was not created overnight; instead, it is an issue that over time has been deeply engraved in the societal and cultural psyche, particularly in the form of patriarchy. The challenging aspect of this issue is that it is entrenched and requires collaborative action rather than individualistic efforts. Additionally, women must be empowered to engage in trade union activities and advocate for their rights so that the collective voice may spread and drive out the systemic disparities. Women workers can be a source of significant change in the sector when they are involved in collective action and showing their solidarity.

Both the structural barriers and the perceptions toward this mean the need to find a holistic approach to sort out the gender imbalance in the textile industry through immediate intervention.

However, the systematic discrimination of the industry is surprisingly proving that the thought of equal opportunity is in the face of different changes within the dynamics of power. Since Bangladesh is one of the major exporters of textiles to developed countries, the owners of factories try to ensure that the

buyers comprehend that the idea of gender equality is being given due importance and that steps are being taken to decrease discrimination. But if the findings of the present investigation are compared with such improvements, then such steps could be considered as superficial attempts to maintain the attention of customers while neglecting the main problems within the production process. This study concludes with the sad news that even those who get the opportunity to move to higher levels are still unable to attain a voice, as is the case with other women working in this industry.

One of the most critical challenges for sustainability is gender fairness, but it is even more vital that higher authorities acknowledge this and take decisive action to bring about change. A small proportion of leadership roles in textile mills are occupied by women. While many workers in the factories are female, it is observed that nearly all individuals have positions as operators. There are a few who have been promoted to the role of supervisor, however this proportion is quite limited.

However, it is imperative to confront these concerns and establish a secure and nurturing atmosphere for women in the professional setting. To effectively address inequality and discrimination, it is crucial to prioritize these issues and recognize the problems both within and outside the workplace. Collaboration among policymakers, businesses, and foreign buyers is essential to implement existing policies and reform regulations, and thus implementation of policies can actively challenge and reduce existing inequality and discrimination. The working conditions of female workers, including unequal pay, excessive workload, unregulated overtime, and workplace harassment, contribute to inequality and discrimination. These concerns not only violate workers' rights but also infringe upon their human rights. The buyer's insistence on low production costs is a significant concern for businesses in exporting countries such as Bangladesh. As a result, these businesses exert pressure on workers to meet production demands promptly, which worsens existing inequalities and discrimination. Furthermore, purchasers should enhance their control methods to foster transparency, encompassing the maintenance of fairness in the recruitment process, equitable distribution of wages, equal access to opportunities, providing workplace safety measures, and other types of just treatment in the workplace. Making companies report publicly on their gender policy will lead to transparency in policy implementation. If buyers universally demand gender equality as a human right, the sector will be highly concerned with maintaining its reputation to attract investment, their core concern. Additionally, such necessary steps can enhance consumer awareness of the importance of workers' rights and could, in turn, shift the business operations of companies that contribute to discrimination within the RMG sector.

In my concluding remarks, I would like to highlight the Norwegian Transparency Act, which was implemented in 2022 to safeguard the human rights of workers and promote decent working conditions. Section 1 of the Act specifies the aim of the Act as “The Act shall promote enterprises' respect for fundamental human rights and decent working conditions in connection with the production of goods and the provision of services and ensure the general public access to information regarding how enterprises address adverse impacts on fundamental human rights and decent working conditions” (*Transparency Act, 2022*). As a result of working for the Norwegian environmental organization, Framtiden I våre hender, I got more insights concerning the Transparency Act since this organization was in close cooperation with the act in Norway. Although the Act is still far from ensuring decent working conditions, I believe that it might inspire other buying countries to take into account the practice of implementing similar regulatory strategies or, at least, this might be of help in dealing with issues of inequality and discrimination.

6.1 Challenges Ahead and Scope for Further Study

This study investigated the factors contributing to the problems of inequality and discrimination faced by female workers in the RMG business. The entire scenario presents a complex issue that requires addressing the fundamental aspects firmly embedded inside the system, which are interrelated and mutually influencing one other. However, in the context of my research, I successfully identified numerous significant problems that are widely acknowledged in other studies, yet this study identified certain difficulties in fully examining all the factors necessary to determine who is ultimately responsible for the problems and how these challenges are addressed to reduce the problems, however, overcoming the hurdles faced by the most marginalized segment of women in society demands significant research. Additionally, the concepts of 'Just in Time' and 'Fast Fashion', previously discussed, are intricately linked to consumerism, capitalism, and sustainability, intersecting with global dynamics between the global South and the North. While such concepts are indeed intertwined with the issues of my study yet beyond the scope of this thesis, they also necessitate independent research due to their complex character. An analysis of the overproduction of garments worldwide and its relation to Western gender ideals underlines wider implications of the global capitalist system, as women are forced to succumb to unattainable beauty standards. My research does not directly address these challenges, but it also relies on gender discourses and underlines the importance of investigating bigger systemic questions from a broader perspective.

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Appendices

Appendix 1: Interview Guide

Part 1: Demographics

Name (not required):

Age:

Gender:

Level of Education:

Job Title:

Years of Experience in the RMG Business:

Where the job is located (city or district):

Part 2: Understanding Inequality and Discrimination Based on Gender

1. Could you explain what you know about discrimination and inequality based on gender in the RMG business in Bangladesh?

1. Do you think you have same salary as men?
2. Do you think you have same working hours as men?
3. Can you keep your job after marriage? If not, why?
4. Can you keep on working if get pregnant?
5. Any adjustments made for women to come back to work after child births (day care, others?)?
6. Do you have adjusted facilities as toilets etc. for women?
7. Are there traditions for trade unions for women? And: who represent women in right-based work?
8. Is salary always paid to you personally, or to anyone (male) in the family?

Section 3: The main signs of inequality based on gender.

2. In your opinion, what are the main ways that discrimination and inequality based on gender show up in the RMG business in Bangladesh?

Section 4. culture and social norms

3. How do societal norms and cultural norms affect unfair treatment of women and discrimination in the RMG business in Bangladesh?

1. From your experience, are girls and boys treated any different inside Bangladeshi families?
 - a. If so, in what ways?
 - b. Why is this so, do you think?
2. Are there any relatedness / patterns from how gender / men/women/boys/girls are treated in kin and family settings, that you recognize in work life / in the RMG sector?
 - a. If so, why is it like this do you think?

Section 5: Rules and regulations at work

4. How do you think that policies and practices in the RMG industry's workplaces keep gender-based discrimination and unfairness going?

1. Are there any policies and practices in the RMG industry's workplaces that treat men and women differently?
 - a. If so, how?
 - b. Are there any consequences for giving unfair/different outcomes for either of the genders?

Section 6: Ways to Reduce the Effects

5. What do you think are some possible ways to reduce discrimination and inequality based on gender in the RMG business in Bangladesh?

6. Have you or any of your coworkers ever been a part of efforts or practices that tried to make the workplace fairer between men and women? If so, please explain what these projects are and how they affect people.

Section 7: Less involvement of women

7. Which of the following do you think are the main reasons why fewer women are working in the RMG business in Bangladesh?

8. How do these factors relate to differences between men and women and the difficulties people face when trying to find work in the RMG industry?

Section 8: Inequality and discrimination

9. How extensive do you believe gender-based inequality and discrimination are in the RMG industry in Bangladesh?

Not Extensive

- Somewhat Extensive
- Very Extensive

10. Can you give specific examples of the kind of gender-based abuse and unfair treatment that happens at your workplace?

Section 9: Factors that really matter.

11. In your opinion, what are some of the main reasons why women are treated unfairly and unequally in the RMG business in Bangladesh?

Section 10: Root causes

12: What do you think are the main reasons for discrimination and inequality based on gender in the RMG business in Bangladesh?

Section 11: we have more comments.

13. Is there anything else you'd like to say or add about the unfair treatment of women and discrimination in the RMG business in Bangladesh?

Appendix 2: Consent Form

Are you interested in taking part in the research project?

Inequality and discrimination against women in the workplace: Problems and prospects in RMG (Ready-Made Garments) industry in Bangladesh?

Purpose of the project

You are invited to participate in a research project where the main purpose is to identify the extent and nature of inequality and discrimination against women and examining the underlying factors and the root causes in the RMG industry in Bangladesh. The main research question of my study is: What are the primary manifestations of gender-based inequality and discrimination experienced by women working in the Readymade Garments (RMG) Industry in Bangladesh and what potential strategies exist for mitigating these challenges? The research project is for my master's thesis.

Which institution is responsible for the research project?

Oslo Metropolitan University is responsible for the project (data controller).

Why are you being asked to participate?

The population of study will be Garments workers from several industry and NGO employees working for the rights of female RMG (Readymade Garments) workers. I am a citizen of Bangladesh, and I will be visiting Bangladesh for my field study. During my stay, I will be using some personal contacts for interviewing RMG female workers and OWDEB employees. For this study, I am aiming to propose 40 participants to be recruited.

What does participation involve for you?

My study will follow the qualitative method. Through the personal interview, a semi-structured interview guide will be prepared in conducting the interview of the respondents to collect data. Because of exploratory research, a qualitative approach will be used here by which an understanding of the real scenario could be gained from the respondents. This will provide a qualitative concept of the situation.

Participation is voluntary.

Participation in the project is voluntary. If you chose to participate, you can withdraw your consent at any time without giving a reason. All information about you will then be made anonymous. There will be no negative consequences for you if you chose not to participate or later decide to withdraw.

The respondents from garments factories may face some challenges which make them anxious about sharing sensitive information. I may find this fact challenging for my study if the participants do not open up about some issues which are related to discrimination caused by the managerial authority of the factory that may include any violation of human rights and internal regulations. Before starting the interviews, I will clearly inform to participants the purpose of the research, how their data will be used, and the measures in ensure that the participants are fully informed about the objectives by providing them with a concise description of the project. Additionally, I will prioritize obtaining their informed consent of the interview. The right to withdraw data is the fundamental aspect of research ethics. The consent form will clearly state that the participants have the option to withdraw their data at any point during the study. This information will be conveyed in the informed consent process, ensuring that participants explicitly indicate their agreement to participate while fully comprehending their rights and responsibilities. If any participant withdraws data, I will make sure to delete securely or destroy the data using appropriate methods. To ensure data destruction after a participant withdraws, I will use secure methods such as using appropriate data destruction tools or techniques to permanently delete digitally stored data or securely shred physical forms of data such as paper documents. I will double-check the storage systems, devices or locations to confirm that the withdrawn data is no longer accessible.

Your personal privacy – how we will store and use your personal data

We will only use your personal data for the purpose(s) specified here and we will process your personal data in accordance with data protection legislation (the GDPR).

- My supervisor, Sissel Egden, Assistant Professor, Oslo metropolitan University *will have access to the personal data.*

For the purpose of data storage, I will solely document the data in the form of written notes. In doing so, I will take precautions to ensure that no names or personally identifiable background information is included or recorded in the data material. For example, I will remove the personal identifiers such as, names, addresses, and the contact details from the written notes. I will replace them with unique identifiers or codes that cannot be linked back to specific individuals. For the storage of written data that the employees of NGO and the female workers will provide, I will use my personal computer or

Oslo met OneDrive. I have access to Oslo met OneDrive and after having all the necessary credentials, I will sign into institutions' OneDrive platform. I will then organize my data by creating folders within my OneDrive account. This will help to categorize and manage my files effectively. I will set sensitivity to confidential while using the program. While using my personal computer, I will protect the data by encrypting the files or using password protection to prevent unauthorized access.

What will happen to your personal data at the end of the research project?

The planned end date of the project is 28.06.2024.

At the end of the project, I will delete all the personal data including any kind of recording or paper form of data.

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 Norwegian Data Protection Authority regarding the processing of your personal data.

What gives us the right to process your personal data?

We will process your personal data based on your consent.

Based on an agreement with *Oslo Metropolitan University*, The Data Protection Services of Sikt – Norwegian Agency for Shared Services in Education and Research has assessed that the processing of personal data in this project meets requirements in data protection legislation.

Where can I find out more?

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

- *Oslo Metropolitan University* via Nusrat Jahan, Project leader. Email:nusratsust@gmail.com, and Sissel Egden, Assistant Professor, Oslo Metropolitan University.
- Email: Sisseleg@oslomet.no
- Our Data Protection Officer: Ingrid Jacobsen

If you have questions about how data protection has been assessed in this project by Sikt, contact:

- email: (personverntjenester@sikt.no) or by telephone: +47 73 98 40 40.

Yours sincerely,

Nusrat Jahan

Sissel Egden

Project Leader

(supervisor)

Student

Consent form

Information to the project – delete after reading: Consent can be given in writing (including electronically) or orally. NB! You must be able to document/demonstrate that you have given information and gained consent from project participants i.e. from the people whose personal data you will be processing (data subjects). As a rule, we recommend written information and written consent.

- For written consent on paper you can use this template
- For written consent that is collected electronically, you must choose a procedure that will allow you to demonstrate that you have gained explicit consent (read more on our website)
- If it is necessary/more appropriate to provide oral information and gain oral consent (e.g. for research in oral cultures or with people who are illiterate) we recommend that you make a sound recording of the information and consent.

If a parent/guardian will give consent on behalf of their child, or someone without the capacity to consent, you must adjust the information letter and consent form so that this is clear. Remember that the name of the participant must be included.

Adjust the checkboxes below so that they fit your project. It is possible to use bullet points instead of checkboxes. However, if you intend to process special categories of personal data (sensitive personal data) and/or one of the last three points in the list below is applicable to your project, we recommend that you use checkboxes. This because of the requirement of explicit consent.

I have received and understood information about the project “Inequality and discrimination against women in workplace: Problems and prospects in RMG (Readymade garments) industry in Bangladesh” and have been given the opportunity to ask questions. I give consent:

to participate in an interview.

I give consent for my personal data to be processed until the end of the project.

(Signed by participant, date)

