



# **VIOLENCE AND HARASSMENT AGAINST WOMEN AT WORKPLACE**

**THE CASE OF BANGLADESH GARMENT SECTOR**

**UNDER THE PROJECT**

**LABOURING WOMEN AND FREEDOM FROM VIOLENCE:  
BUILDING WORKPLACES FREE OF VIOLENCE  
AGAINST WOMEN**

**SUPPORTED BY**



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# PREFACE

The life of a female garment worker in Bangladesh epitomizes the inconsistent yet much celebrated transformations that the society and economy here have been undergoing in recent decades. A garment worker in Bangladesh plays the role of nation's 'duty bearer' who sacrifices a lot and plays pivotal role in achieving desired high economic growth. She challenges deeply rooted ideologies of gender disparity; however, she also has to remain careful about the social prescriptions relating to ideal womanhood that focuses on conformity, chastity and piety. Her work in the factory is approached by the members of her family and community with much ambivalence as they do not give full recognition to her worker identity and expect her to act as a devoted wife and daughter by fulfilling all the reproductive obligations.

Though a lot have been talked about in recent years, the work environment in the factories remains charged with insecurity, inforamlism and sexualized disciplining regimes. Whereas much of the practices draw on the gender discrimination and class hierarchy prevalent in the greater society, the uncertainty and precarity that emanate from global supply chain contribute immensely to give shape to the harassment and violence that both male and female workers experience.

This work takes a deeper look into the ways the insecure and violent environment in the factory and living places is constituted. Based on interviews, group discussions and surveys, it assesses the impact of the measures that have been implemented in recent years – and shows that there are a lot of ways and areas in which relevant stakeholders can work further to ensure better environment for the *garment girls* in Bangladesh.



# ACRONYMS

ACCORD	: The Accord on Fire and Building Safety in Bangladesh
ALLIANCE	: The alliance for Bangladesh workers safety
BGMEA	: Bangladesh Garment Manufacturers and Exporters Association
BILS	: Bangladesh Institute of Labor Studies
CCC	: Clean Clothes Campaign
EPZ	: Export Processing Zone
FGD	: Focus Group Discussion
FI	: Field Investigator
GoB	: Government of Bangladesh
KII	: Key Informant Interview
ID	: Identity
IDRC	: International Development and Research Center
ILO	: International Labor Organization
NGO	: Non-Government Organization
NU	: Nagorik Uddyog
PC	: Participation Committee
PM	: Production Manager
RMG	: Ready-Made Garments
TU	: Trade Unions
VAW	: Violence Against Women



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# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- In the context of limited livelihood options available in the agrarian economy, internally migrant women and men are forced to make the decision to take up work in the factories located mostly in the capital city, Dhaka, and its surrounding areas. Many female workers are important earners and breadwinners for their natal households, and, like other migrants, a significant number of the garment workers send remittances to their families based in the rural areas.
- The vulnerability of the workers is much known to the factory owners and international buyers. The workings of this impoverished background instill a sense of insecurity in the ‘self’ of the workers and force them either to remain silent or condone the injustices and structural exploitation that they rampantly experience.
- National level desire for rapid growth defines the government policies that facilitate ‘adverse inclusion’ of the ‘surplus population’ into global labor force. Thus, a migrant woman desperately looking for a source of living for herself and her family becomes part of production regime of which the main driver is a motive to make clothes with the cheapest possible payment.
- In most cases the ‘first generation’ female wage workers as fail to make the best of their wage earning as they feel alienated from the ‘more formal’, ‘concrete-built’, ‘exotic’, ‘masculine’, and ‘sexually-charged’ work environment that they find hard to cope-up with.
- Achieving a ‘fair share’ in the decision-making process within the family or household as well as getting a dignified position inside the workplace remains a much desired but unrealized ‘dream’ for women workers of RMG sector. The hostile work environment comes in force in tandem with the adverse social practices and much arduous burdens of domestic and care work. This means that most of the newly migrated women find themselves rather ‘adversely included’ in the globalized system of production than becoming active agent in the change process.
- A factory worker is a person whose life is embedded in the social relations and shaped by the cultural practices – what happens to her in the factory floor, what ‘agency’ she is able to master in relation to her work, or what negotiation or resistance she can show in response to misbehavior or abuse by a supervising staff in the factory is closely related to the social environment that she and her family are in.
- A particular wage regime and production system does not function in isolation from the social, cultural and political settings. Neoliberal flow of capital and profit-driven supply chain dictate the financial orders that the factories embody and creates different forms of uncertainties and informalism. On the other hand, it is the social relations and cultural practices that give rise to the discourses and environment in terms of which the workers’ docility and vulnerability is made or unmade. The ways in which capitalist order and local cultural politics insect in the particular context important in shaping the lives of the workers.
- Achieving a ‘fair share’ in the decision-making process within the family or household as well as getting a dignified position inside the workplace remains a much desired but unrealized ‘dream’ for women workers of RMG sector. The hostile work environment comes in force in

tandem with the adverse social practices and much arduous burdens of domestic and care work. This means that most of the newly migrated women find themselves rather 'adversely included' in the globalized system of production than becoming active agent in the change process.

- In the aftermath of Rana plaza, it has been noted by some of researchers and commentators that past few years have witnessed a significant progress in terms of wage increment, updating of labor laws, and establishment of bodies for looking after workers welfare. Progress has also been made in relation to the specific areas of 'workers' right' – including areas such as regular and timely payment of monthly wages, provisioning of maternity leave, building safety and increased health care facilities etc. However, issues related to gender violence and wage discrimination, among others, are still less talked about and remain unhindered.
- This study makes a good use of mixed methods as it binds together both qualitative and quantitative research techniques and draws on primary and secondary sources of data and information. Surveys already done by the government and private bodies have been considered. It has also made use of available research documents, seminar and conference papers, proceedings, journal articles, books as well as reports and analysis published on daily newspapers and leading news sites.
- Primary data is collected from greater Dhaka district only. Four main apparel hubs of Dhaka region are covered: Ashulia and Savar, Gazipur, Narayanganj, and, Dhaka city (Mirpur area, in particular). The methodology of this study broadly included survey, in-depth interview, Focus group discussion, consultation and discussion with the stakeholders, newspaper screening and literature review. A set of pre-developed checklists were used while doing the interviews and conducting discussions.
- Both male and female workers have been brought under the purview of the interviews and FGDs. Workers interviewed included 'helpers', operators, supervisors, quality controllers. Some of the respondents were 'former' factory workers in the sense that they worked in the factories for long and then were terminated from there. Secondary data review has been done to understand the violence and harassment against women in the garment sectors.
- The trouble, pain or harassment that they face in the community, in living place or at the time of commuting remain quite alarming in many cases which impacts their health and well-being to a significant level.
- Salaries in many of the factories are not paid in the beginning of a month. In other cases, it is also seen that factories fail not pay salaries to the workers for months after months. This means that a worker-tenant fails to pay the rent of her room within the stipulated date at the beginning of a month. This gives rise to a form of vulnerability that some of the house-owners make use of in their bid to advance to a woman living in one of 'his' rooms with sexually charged intensions.
- Unmarried garment workers are particularly susceptible to be targeted by the house-owner. Among the respondents of the survey, 14% said were of the clear opinion that the house owners try to take advantage on female workers in many ways. They often try to develop intimacy with the female tenant in the pretext of romance or love.

- Although insecurity and threats that are sexual in nature are common in the social environment that the women live, in the interviews and FGDs it became evident that women workers were not much comfortable about detail narration of the incidents of this kind that happened in their lives. Their reluctance to divulge details can be explained in terms of cultural norms that encourage women to either condone or remain silent about different forms of abuse and exploitations are unleashed by men from the dominant class.
- In many cases financially ill-equipped garment workers have to depend on the 'kindnesses' or 'generosity' of the local grocery shop-owners in that the sellers allow them to buy rice, oil and other necessary items on credit. This dependence in some cases leads to some forms of vulnerability and exploitation of the women workers.
- The nature and extent of abuse in public buses and other public places vary depending on the time of the day as well as the mode of commuting. During the day, offensive, lewd, filthy and sexually suggestive coarse comments (e.g., What's your 'rate'? For how much will she be sold? For what amount will she go to bed?) are likely to be hurled. Moreover, pedestrians, rickshaw pullers, or shop-owners may blow a whistle or produce an ugly look along with verbal taunting.
- Many of the interviewees have talked about their experience of molestation as it took place at the time of their return from the factories in the evening and at night. The men who perpetrate such violence resort to whistling, whizzing etc. and sings song from Hindi movies; at times they horn their vehicles etc. loudly and try to show sexually explicit video clips from their mobile phone.
- During the interview most of the respondent said that there is row of harassment by all level of higher staff like administration, management, line chief, line/floor supervisors even by the male co-workers also. The female workers are often targeted and receive unethical proposal from them. In most cases the perpetrators take the advantage of vulnerable job security of female workers. When female workers do not comply with their bosses, they have to go through various types of harassment.
- Among the respondent 17% said those line supervisors, floor supervisors and other officers use to touch their body parts while conversation like patting on their back, cheek and head. 14% said that they experienced of unethical proposal from them. 20% of the respondent said about mean and sexually humiliating comments referring to body parts, 11% said about proposals for sexual relation, 9% of the respondents said that as they get trapped by the officers, female workers have to give 'consent' to physical relations. 16% of the respondents shared that officers often call them alone to their office room and pass time, 8% shared about taking photos and videos through mobile phone, and 5% said that female workers had to face harassment through social media.
- According to the respondents, the factories try to sack the senior and aged women to avoid salary raise; each year salary increase, but when it goes to a certain point the management tries to terminate the worker taking signatures in the white paper. This later becomes the evident that the workers resigned voluntarily. This is the practice inside majority of the garment factories, irrespective of compliance or non-compliance.
- 31% of the respondents said that during probation period, female workers mostly became victim of physical, verbal and sexual harassment. 69% of the respondents said that if they reach late in the office, they have to face violent reaction from the authority. 81% said that if

they make any minor mistake in their work the line supervisor uses abusive word, touch them or even pull by hair. On the other hand, 45% shared that they face sexual harassment being tempted by the line manager, general manager and other officers. They propose illegal relation in the name of increase of salary, granting leave, financial benefits such as providing overtime allowance without work, reducing targets. Besides, 38% of the respondent shared that the officers try to tempt them by praising their work, their beauty etc.

- The respondents also shared that those who is badly dependent on the job must face violence or harassment. The female workers who are vocal and make protest against abuse or irregularity face harassment by the authority. 'New workers, particularly women are preferred more over the senior one, as they don't argue' said a female garment worker in Savar; she also added, 'the supervisors use abusive words, sometimes it becomes extremely difficult to tolerate. Senior workers make argument on such occasion but the juniors keeps their head down and keep on working.'
- Among other practices, there are many recent examples in which naming and shaming has been adopted by factories as a mechanism for disciplining. Viewing women garment workers as fortunate not be pushed by poverty into prostitution (e.g., thoughts like this are commonly circulated: "What else could they do if they were not taken on as garment workers? How many of them would turn to be sex worker?) is a part of cultural politics that creates context for management of surplus population.
- Taboo of sexuality and new making of sexual discourse is one of the reasons that allow the factory managers to blame the victim and condone the perpetrator. The question is: who is sexualizing the setting and who is taking the blame?
- Male respondents understand and acknowledge that women are in more vulnerable position than them and are more exploited. However, the in-built culture of patriarchy means that they entirely or partially blame the women, particularly for sexual harassments at workplace.



## CHAPTER - I

# INTRODUCTION

### 1.1 THE STORY OF SALEHA

Saleha works in a factory in Kathgora Bazar area of Ashulia industrial sub-district under Dhaka district. She currently lives alone in a rented room in one corner of the locality and is socially supported by the friendship that she has been able to foster with the women living in the neighborhood. She tries her best to maintain a sober and submissive demeanor – most of the time she keeps her head down and covered. She also covers her full body in a bid to maintain purity and decency – and, as she says, to “keep the shameless hungry eyes of the men away”. She tries not to smile at all and tries to embody the figure of a sad and distressed woman who is mostly disinterested about things even though she has been working in the factories for more than ten years now.

Saleha grew up in an impoverished family and when she was still a child, her father abandoned her mother. In her early years Saleha had to work in other people’s houses in the village to earn a living. She hints that sexual abuse and torture was common during her adolescent years, though she does not elaborate. When she was around sixteen years old, she migrated to Dhaka. At one stage she took up work in a garment factory and got married to a co-worker. She has a daughter from this marriage – however, her husband left her and married another girl who is also a factory worker.

Her husband was hot-tempered and ‘characterless’. Saleha was a victim of domestic abuse and violence. Her husband would torture her physically almost all the time. Hitting and beating was a ‘normal’ thing to him as he would boast that a man is entitled to beat his wife any time he wishes. Verbal abuse and humiliating Saleha was common too. He would tell people that Saleha was not a faithful wife. The fact that Saleha was of fair complexion and looked attractive were the sources of his biggest insecurities. He would quarrel over minor things and say that she was having affairs with others. She tried her best to keep the marriage working – and she is still hopeful that her husband might come back to her.

Now she lives alone while her five years old daughter lives with her mother-in-law in the village in northern part of Bangladesh. She sends money regularly to make sure that her daughter is fed and looked after well back home. She misses her daughter a lot and her distress is compounded because of the separation. However, she has to continue to work in the factory because otherwise she will have no other way to support herself as well as her daughter.

Despite all her efforts to remain submissive, meek and modest – and to appear detached from everything, she still is frequently subjected to verbal taunting and intimidation in the workplace as well as in the neighborhood. Many men tell her that she is beautiful, and they would love to have ‘fun’ with her. She ignores them, as she knows that she can neither confront them nor give up her work in the factory. Many of the women living in the neighborhood are supportive and this gives her strength and courage to keep on moving. However, life has been mostly unkind to her – she would say time and again.

As we conducted this study and talked to Bangladesh RMG workers, we came to know about many cases and stories similar to Saleha's. It became clear that a factory worker is a person whose life is embedded in the social relations and shaped by the cultural practices – what happens to her on the factory floor or what 'agency' she is able to muster in relation to her work is closely related to the social environment that she and her family are in.

The achievements or sufferings that working women experience in the workplace cannot be understood without relating them to the social, economic, and cultural undercurrents of her life. A particular wage regime and production system does not exist in isolation from the social, cultural or political setting. Whereas neoliberal flow of capital might dictate the financial orders that the factories embody, it is the social relations and cultural practices that create the greater environment and discourses in terms of which the workers are seen as 'docile' and 'vulnerable' or are able to claim their rights and resist 'injustice'. It is this understanding of an interconnection between the workplace and the larger socio-cultural context that informs this study where we try to understand violence and abuse in the Bangladesh RMG sector.

## 1.2 GENERAL BACKGROUND

The readymade garments (RMG) industry of Bangladesh is considered to be the most important economic sector that provides much needed impetus to achieve desired growth at national level. The sector is the second largest apparel exporter globally – ranking only behind China. The export earning that the industry has been generating has played a pivotal role in giving a newer shape to the economy and society of the country over that past couple of decades.

As the single biggest export earner, the sector accounts for 17% of GDP and 81% of total export earnings of the country.<sup>1</sup>In 2017 its earning was US\$34.85 billion. In light of its key contributions in the areas of employment, production, export, and foreign exchange earnings, the BGMEA and others claim that RMG sector constitutes 'the backbone' of Bangladesh economy (BGMEA 2017; Hossain 2017).

Bangladesh is a society – a 'classical patriarchy', as Kandiyoti (1988) argued – where women traditionally were secluded from the public space as men were expected to play the role of bread-earner. For last four decades, the norms and practice have gradually been changing. The wider introduction of micro-credit as well as other NGO-led intervention in the agrarian village setting, along with the shift in government's policy paradigm, provided significant stimulus to the process of change.

The transformation brought about in the social and cultural landscape of the country by the development intervention was further accentuated by the structural adjustment programs and neoliberal industrialization advocated by the International Financial Institutions (IFIs) and donors (Feldman 2008). Policies to set up Export Processing Zones (EPZs) made in a context of declining sources of livelihood in the informal economy thus opening up a vast reserve of women's labour available as 'cheap labor', which could be exploited by global capital to earn super profits via 'primitive accumulation' and operationalization of a new international division of labor (Frobel, Heinrichs and Kreye 1980; De Jenvry and Garramon 1977; Frank 1978). Bangladesh was not a unique case – the transnational flow of capital was shaping the production sector of other developing countries too. Since the 1980s the open-market economic

<sup>1</sup><http://www.bgmea.com.bd/home/pages/about-garments-industry>; access date 10 October, 2018.

policy – through the mechanism of structural reforms and privatization of the enterprises - has given rise to the level of industrialization in many of the Asian developing countries (Smith 1996). It is in this context that the restructuring boosted the RMG industry to emerge as one of the leading sectors in a number of countries (ibid.). This has become the ‘pillar’ of economic growth (ILO 2015); in 2014, the Asia-Pacific region accounted for US\$601 billion (59.5 percent) of global exports of garments and textiles (ILO 2015).

In Bangladesh, according to information from the Bangladesh Department of Inspection of Factory and Establishment (DIFE), there were about 4,809 garment factories in operation in 2018 (DIFE 2018). The department also estimates that the sector employs around 2.2 million workers (DIFE 2016). The Bangladesh Garment Manufacturers Association (BGMEA), however, places the number of RMG employees to be higher: in their estimation there are more than four million workers employed in the sector. According to DIFE, 52% of the workers are female and 48% male. However, researchers, labor unions, and activists estimate that about 80% of the garment workers here are female – some studies have even estimated that over 80 percent of workers are women (Hossain, Rana and Ahmed 2016; ILO 2016).

Employment in these export oriented global factories provide a potential route of escape from the hardship and destitution that otherwise appears to be almost inescapable for the marginalized women. Social coercion inflicted upon the girls and women through the conventional institutions and practices of patriarchy, with sanctions from religious orthodoxy, are also expected to be challenged by the new dynamism of women’s entry into waged work outside the home. Since it is the first major manufacturing sector in the country to employ a predominantly female workforce, the sector is seen as a potential major facilitator of women’s autonomy and self-sufficiency, mobility, financial literacy and inclusion, and economic and general empowerment (Khundker 1998). In a country with endemic gender inequities and high rates of early marriage, the RMG sector is seen to provide an alternative path for young women (Ainul et al. 2013). Factory work is also seen as enabling young women to be independent, through residential and financial autonomy and self-sufficiency (Kibria 1998).

Most development literature equates women’s wage work with autonomy and independence. However, the findings of our study show that mere entry into wage work is not enough; The workspace and environment has to be more supportive and focused as regards women workers overall wellbeing. Although wage employment has improved women’s financial situation and given them ways to survive, female factory workers are still vulnerable to a industrial production system that generates super profits for the corporate bodies and factory owners without addressing or reducing workers’ vulnerabilities. In most of the cases terms and conditions of wage work as well as overall work environment remain prominently gender-segregated and causes significant distress and suffering for the women workers in particular (Anker 1998; European Agency for Safety and Health at Work 2016). An indicator that contradicts the expectation of financial wellbeing and autonomy is the fact that amongst the countries that export to the USA, Bangladesh has the lowest garment sector wage, at 68 USD (Quadir, Hookway and Narin 2014).

The female workers employed in Bangladesh RMG sector are generally young, unmarried or just married, and newly migrated from rural areas. In most of the cases, these girls and women have little formal education and are in desperate need to earn a living. In the context of limited livelihood options available in the agrarian sector, they make (or, are forced to make) the decision to take up work in the factories located mostly in the capital city, Dhaka and its

surrounding areas. Many female workers are important earners and breadwinners for their natal households, and, like other migrants, a significant number of the workers send remittances to their families living in the rural areas (Amin 2006, Newby 1998, Hewett 2001, Amin et al. 1998).

The vulnerability of the workers is well known to the factory owners and international buyers. Impoverishment and poverty cause insecurity and force workers to either remain silent or condone the injustices and structural exploitation that they rampantly experience. On the other hand, national level desire for rapid growth and compulsion to provide employment shapes government policies that facilitate adverse inclusion of the surplus population into global labor force. Thus, a migrant woman desperately looking for a source of living for herself and her family becomes part of production regime in which the main driver is a motive to make clothes at the lowest possible cost.

As the studies (e.g., Karim 2014; Kabeer 1991; Ahmed 2004) have noted, in many cases, instead of generating empowering impact as such, one consequence of women's participation in wage earning process has been that the patriarchal mechanisms of control have been reproduced in the newer ways, and this has given shape to the relations and practices that dominate factory floors. Our study findings show that, to make the best of the transformation has been particularly challenging for the first-generation female wage workers because in most cases they feel alienated to the more formal, concrete-built, exotic, masculine, and sexually charged work environment that is hard to cope-up with.

Achieving a fair share in the decision-making process within the family or household as well as getting a dignified position inside the workplace remains a much coveted but unrealized dream for women workers of RMG sector. The hostile work environment comes in force in tandem with the adverse social practices and much arduous burdens of domestic and care work. This means that most of the newly migrated women find themselves rather adversely included in the globalized system of production than becoming active agent in the change process.

Although wage employment in the garment factory help to improve women's financial situation, many workers remain vulnerable to myriad forms of discriminatory and abusive practices within the household and beyond. This impacts her health and well-being in negative ways and triggers distress. Practices relating of male dominance, violence within marriage and family, neglect as regards burdens of household chores as well as lack of care in terms of menstrual hygiene and reproductive health, give way to new forms of stress and anxieties for women workers.

As of health and well-being, it has been reported that both unitary and reproductive tract infections are common among female workers, and many of them miss work during their menstrual cycle due to pain and embarrassment (Rashid 2007). In addition to limited access to family planning and reproductive health (FP/RH) services and products at the workplace, many female workers do not get opportunities to learn about these issues in the context of cultural biases and gender-based power structures. Sexually insensitive and aggressive environment in workplace means that most of the workers often feel reluctant and uncomfortable to question or seek advice in public settings about reproductive health, and family planning. Pregnant workers are particularly vulnerable, and many have to quit their jobs although there are official provisions for maternity leave and associated financial support.

In 2015 The International Labor Rights Forum (ILRF) reported that there is a significant confluence of violence inflicted on the bodies and beings of women workers: "The workers we

interviewed describe a chilling web of social relations of intimidation and violence that spans factories and apparel companies, workers' communities, government agencies, law enforcement, and even their families. The effect of this web is that workers are silenced. They emphasize that until it is broken, they cannot be safe" (ILRF 2015: 8).

Many (e.g., Rahman 2017) argue that workers' insecurity and prevalence of abusive environment is related to the overall business environment that has been promoted in neoliberal Bangladesh in a bid to attract foreign investment and ensure economic growth. For decades, the pro-business policies here have meant that various fiscal and rights-restricting incentives such as restrictions on trade unionism have been ensured to safeguard the investment of the entrepreneurs. This has meant that wages have been kept low and investment in workers' safety and security also has remained at the barest minimum to attract the foreign investors to invest in the sector vigorously. As a result of these contrasting arrangements –generous incentives to the investors on the one hand and minimum investments on workers on the other - has produced two different outcomes, one at macro level growth and the other at the suffering of the micro or worker level situation (Yunus & Yamagata, 2012).

In fact, Bangladesh's RMG sector has been in race to the bottom in terms of workers' wage which has been designed to ensure so-called competitive edge in the global market. The implication of this has been that factories have paid the workers less than a living wage and there has been little investment in their safety and security provisions. The harsh consequences of this desperate drive for growth have been evident through numerous industrial accidents, killing and injuries of thousands of workers, mostly young women, over the years (Saha, 2016; Rahman, 2015). The RMG sector's inequities and its starkest injustices have also been witnessed in the now infamous the Rana Plaza incident.

In the aftermath of Rana plaza, it has been noted by some of researchers and commentators (e.g., Kabeer 2020) that past few years have witnessed a significant progress in terms of wage increment, updating of labor laws, and establishment of bodies for looking after workers welfare – a finding corroborated by the primary data collected in this study too. The initiatives of Accord and Alliance – the initiatives taken by Western buyer brand that have been publicized much – have brought about remarkable positive shifts in some areas that include achievement of compliant status – that means fulfilling some prescribed labour right requirements – by more than fifty percent of garment factories. Business leaders and policy makers also boast that the number of green factories – which are considerate about both labour rights and environmental impacts – has increased notably in recent years. Progress has also been made in relation to the specific areas of workers' rights – including areas such as regular and timely payment of monthly wages, provisioning of maternity leave, building safety and increased health care facilities etc. However, issues related to gender violence and wage discrimination, among others, are still less talked about and continue unhindered.

In the meantime, in 2008 the Supreme Court of Bangladesh delivered a judgment in relation to a writ petition (WP No. 5916, 2008) and mandated all private and public bodies to ensure prevention and protection against sexual harassment in the workplace, which is binding on all authorities and private bodies. However, in the absence of specific directives to the Ministry of Labor and Employment, and with the failure to incorporate the provisions of the judgment into any statute, compliance with the guidelines has been low.

In spite of the efforts taken by some labor organizations and women's rights organizations, various forms of gender-based violence, including physical violence, sexual assault, psychological abuse, verbal abuse etc. – in addition to wage exploitation – are still widespread at factories. Workers also face significant violence, harassment, bullying and taunting while commuting to and from the factories, particularly when availing public buses and walking by the roads, streets or pavements.

In this backdrop, this study intends to explore further how the workers employed in the garment factories of Dhaka city and its suburbs experience violence and abuse, and if the situation has changed in recent time. It also focuses on the social and institutional setting that either contributes to or inhibits the practices related to gender-based violence and abuse.

### 1.3 OBJECTIVE OF THE STUDY

This study seeks to understand the main ways in which gender-based violence and abuse is practiced in different domains of production and reproduction that are closely linked to the lives of women garment workers in Bangladesh. It focuses prominently on the views and understanding of the workers and unravels the ways in which workers talk about the violence, abuse and insecurity that they come across in the social and community space and as well as in workplace. Also explored are the ways in which they experience, interpret and resist or condone the incidents of violence and abuse.

The study gives particular focus on the social and cultural settings that make the abusive practices possible. It is in line of enquiry that the study also tries to assess the impact of sexual harassment on the work environment, productivity, and workers' self-esteem.

In other words, the aim of the study is to explore and understand workplace violence and abuse (particularly based on gender) against women workers who are employed in the RMG sector; along with the causes, magnitude and changes in recent years. It also looks into the wider social relations and cultural discourses that enable or prevent violence and have the potential to contribute toward creating a safe workplace.

While trying to achieve the objectives, the study also attempts to address a number of critical issues, for instance:

- the reasons for the women to take up work in the factories;
- whether the employers prefer to have women workers instead of men and, whether this preference has anything to do about the vulnerability of the women workers;
- what factors create the context for the women to continue doing work in the adverse environment;
- what the current situation of worker rights and laborer benefits is and how the practices in this regard differ from dominant developmentalist rhetoric;
- to what extent the factories follow the international standards and national legal or policy frameworks;
- types of problems and challenges women workers face at the workplace;
- in case of injustice whether and how workers register their protest, and what roles different actors (i.e., state, employers' association and unions) play and with what outcomes.

The study thus identifies the gaps in the policy and practices and outlines the possible ways for advocating measures for ensuring workplace safety in Bangladesh RMG sector. The question as to what strategies might be formulated - based on workers' experiences and critical reflections – by the state and labor right groups is also taken on board.

## 1.4 RESEARCH FOCUS AND QUESTIONS

### Research Focus

In line with the research objectives stated above, this research intends to further illuminate the issue of 'gendered violence in Bangladesh's RMG sector' by -

- Unravelling the nature, prevalence and various forms of workplace violence.
- Generating better understanding about the factors, processes and wider context that either enable or restrain women workers – both individually and collectively – in their efforts to substantially challenge gender based violence, abuse and discrimination.
- Assessing the strengths and weaknesses of the ways in which factories enforce their corporate mechanisms to redress abuse and harassment in the factory floors and premises.

### Research questions

The specific questions that this study put to the fore are:

- What are the most prevalent forms of violence, abuse or harassment that the women workers face in their workplace, at home or in the community? Has the nature and extent of gender-based violence changed or improved in recent years?
- What are the ways in which the women workers themselves perceive, view and understand the violence and abuse that they come across and experience in the workplace and in the social setting?
- How do male workers view and talk about the vulnerabilities and gender-based violence that the women workers go through?
- What is the state of women's response to violence and harassment? Do they condone the abuses or do they take it for granted? Or, do they try to resist and protest? What tactics, strategies or measures do they take on while trying to mitigate or confront the abusive behavior of the colleagues, superiors, supervisors or the managers?
- What is the existing mechanism or policy that factories generally employ to address the issues of violence, abuse and harassment? In what ways do these prove to be effective or futile?
- What are the government guidelines or oversight means to reduce or eliminate violence and abuse against the women workers? What are areas to improve monitoring and ensure effective intervention?
- What are the steps or measures that might be taken by the government agencies, labourer organizations, or other civil society organizations to bring about changes in policy and practice with a view to fight against harmful and abusive practices?

## 1.5 STUDY METHODOLOGY

This study uses mixed methods binding together both qualitative and quantitative research techniques and draws on primary and secondary sources of data and information. Surveys already done by the government and private bodies have been taken into account. It has also made use of available research documents, seminar and conference papers, proceedings, journal articles, books as well as reports and analysis published on daily newspapers and leading news sites.

Primary data is collected from greater Dhaka district only. Four main apparel hubs of Dhaka region are covered: Ashulia and Savar; Gazipur; Narayanganj; and Dhaka city (Mirpur area, in particular). The methodology of this study broadly included survey, in-depth interview (IDIs), focus group discussion (FGD), consultation and discussion with the stakeholders, newspaper screening and literature review. A set of pre-developed checklists were used while doing the interviews and conducting discussions.

Structured questionnaire was used for collecting quantitative data. In the *questionnaire survey* a total of 173 persons from different areas of Dhaka, Gazipur and Narayanganj districts were interviewed based on structured questions. Prior to formulation of the questionnaire, relevant literature was reviewed to have an overview of situation relating to violence against women in Bangladesh RMG sector.

9 sessions of *focused group discussion* have been conducted with women garment workers. On an average 12-15 workers participated in the FGDs. *In-depth interviews* were conducted among both male and female workers as well as among the trade union leaders. Generally, same issues were addressed in the in-depth interviews and group discussion – however, the issues to be emphasized were determined based on who the interviewee was. While interviewing the workers, focus was aligned with the study objectives and key questions. 22 factory workers – 15 female and 7 male – were interviewed at length in the IDIs. In interviews with the leaders, primary emphasis was to explore the capacity of the trade unions in dealing with the rights of the workers’ – however, particular focus was on women workers’ experience of abuse and harassment.

17 *Key Informant Interviews* were conducted among the labor leaders, government officials and administrative personnel of RMG sector.

Geographically, the areas that respondents and interviewees were located in included Mirpur, Mohammadpur, Uttara, Khilgaon, Rampura, Jatrabari, Sayedabad, Savar, Dhamrai, Nabinagor, Ashulia, EPZ and Zirani areas of Dhaka district; Tongi area of Gazipur District; and Fatulla, Gausia, Sonargaon area of Naryanganj district.

Both male and female workers have been brought under the purview of the interviews and FGDs. Workers interviewed included helpers, operators, supervisors, quality controllers. Some of the respondents were former factory workers in the sense that they worked in the factories for long and then were terminated from there.

Secondary data review has been done to understand the violence and harassment against women in the garment sectors. Although statistics on sexual harassment is not available, it has been widely documented in existing literature that violence against women, especially harassment and abuse of sexual nature is quite prevalent in factory settings – even though the situation has improved in recent years.

## **1.6 WORKERS' EXPERIENCE OF VIOLENCE AND ABUSE: REVIEWING EXISTING LITERATURE**

Literature review has been a continuous process throughout this study. Two different sets of literature were particularly reviewed: findings of earlier studies, research papers, journal articles; and review of policies and relevant laws. As the review was done, it was kept in mind that a triangulation of information collected from primary and secondary sources was needed. There has thus been a conscious effort to analytically integrate the findings of primary data with that of secondary data.

A report by a leading research organization (ICDDRDB 2015) highlights how in Bangladesh context very little is known about workplace violence (WPV) against women, particularly in low-income settings. A National Survey on Violence against Women was conducted and brought to the fore that women in Bangladesh perceived the workplace as the second most likely place to experience violence, whereas household is the first likely domain. It has been noted that WPV against female workers in garment factories is also understudied. Despite the apparent positive impact of formal employment on women's economic and social empowerment, female workers remain prone to violence and abuse widely practiced in the factories. The study (ICDDRDB 2015) found that sixty percent of female garment workers experience sexual harassment while working in the factory.

Fair Wear Foundation in one of its reports (Fair wear 2018) has noted that at workplace in Bangladesh 75% of garment workers experience verbal violence, 20% experience physical violence, and 30% have to put up with psychological violence. It also found that severe emotional and economic violence is common in the sector, while physical and sexual violence is not uncommon. It is noted the most common perpetrators of workplace violence are mid- and low-level factory management staffs, the majority of whom are male. The forms of violence that female garment workers generally experience includes name-calling, shouting, yelling, teasing, rough behavior, being referred to by use of slangs and rough words.

In one of the pioneering studies on workplace violence in Bangladesh RMG, Siddiqi (2003) draws particular attention to the point that researchers, activists, and union organizers in Bangladesh have generally been silent till the end of 1990s on the topic of sexual harassment. This silence, she explained, had to be understood in relation to the workers' priorities that are formed in the context of pervasive social and economic insecurities. Whereas most of the garment workers readily acknowledged that their most pressing problems were irregular wage payment, stolen wages and arbitrary dismissals, they were barely able to make a livelihood by holding on to a job. Not losing the job was certainly more pressing a need than demanding for the elimination of all workplace exploitation. Fear of being sexualized further in public discourse deterred women workers from speaking out on the issue. On the other hand, cultural taboos associated with sexuality did not encourage research on the subject.

Siddiqi also observes that women workers in Asia are typically employed in a narrow range of occupations, characterized by high job insecurity, low pay, bad working conditions, low status

and minimal bargaining power. These characteristics enhance the risk of workers being subjected to sexual harassment. Working women in Bangladesh face a double jeopardy when it comes to sexual harassment: not only are they vulnerable to physical, verbal and sexual abuse inside the workplace but they are also frequently subjected to harassment in public places, as they commute to and from work.

Azim and Sultan (2010) note that violence and sexual harassment is prevalent across all social and economic groups in Bangladesh's rural and urban areas. High direct costs of violence against women can be seen in the forms of health care, displacement, social service, legal service and criminal justice; however, there are also economic and social multiplier effects in the form of reduced productivity and inter-generational impacts of violence on children.

A coalition of five organizations, Shojag<sup>2</sup>, conducted a survey in 2017 and found the situation regarding sexual harassment and violence against women was much better than what the researchers expected (Shojag 2017). They found that 89% of the women feel secure in the workplace whereas the environment outside factory is more insecure for them. 22% women reported that they had faced physical, psychological or sexual harassment in the factory or on their way to and from work. Though the workers shared that complaint committees existed in the factories, the research team did not find the committees in operation; it only existed on paper and was not functioning. In eight factories that they worked with, there did not exist any functioning committee.

A Centre for Policy Dialogue study on RMG (CPD 2003) highlighted that highest 84.7% of their respondent-workers reported about experiencing verbal harassment, while 71.3% mental harassment, 20% physical harassment, 12.7% sexual harassment, and 52% experienced physical harassment from supervisors. It has also observed that many women garment workers are not getting their rights as stipulated in the labor law of the country. The report – surveying a total of 150 workers from knit, woven, and composite factories – found that violation of rights provisions, at varied degrees, was common at the workplaces of almost all workers.

## 1.7 LIMITATIONS

There are constraints on research in the ready-made garment industry in Bangladesh which had to be accommodated in the study design. We had to consider the real circumstances of location on the ground and were also not able to match intervention and control factories by location. We have no reason to believe this will affect the results. The primary and secondary outcomes are based on self-reporting and we cannot know if there is underreporting.

There is always a risk in questionnaire-based outcomes and especially where participants may feel the need to protect their family by under-reporting partner violence or may fear reprisals for accurate reporting of workplace violence. We have taken very considerable care around confidentiality, including interviewing women outside work.

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<sup>2</sup>Shojag is working to end gender-based violence in our garments industry. It is a coalition of five organizations—Bangladesh Legal Aid and Services Trust (BLAST), the Human Rights and legal Aid Services (HRLS) Program of BRAC, Christian Aid, Naripokkho (in the lead), and SNV Netherlands Development Organization



## **CHAPTER -II**

# **DEMOGRAPHIC AND SOCIAL FEATURES OF THE RESPONDENTS**

The demographic features of the respondents of the survey are presented in this chapter. As we made a particular combination in case of selecting the respondents – choosing them from a mixture of areas around Dhaka city; interviewing those of the workers from a particular locality who were available and accessible to our research assistants through the snowball sampling method that we adopted in the given circumstance; and an attempt to take respondents from different age groups on board – the respondents are not fully evocative of the vast demographic variation that the women workers in Bangladesh RMG represent in general.

However, as the survey data presented in the report relates to social and demographic background of the respondents, we present the basic features in what follows. Many of the participants of our IDIs, KIIs and FGDs were from outside the pool of respondents who took part in the survey; but, we don't incorporate full details of their demographics here as this will complicate the presentation.

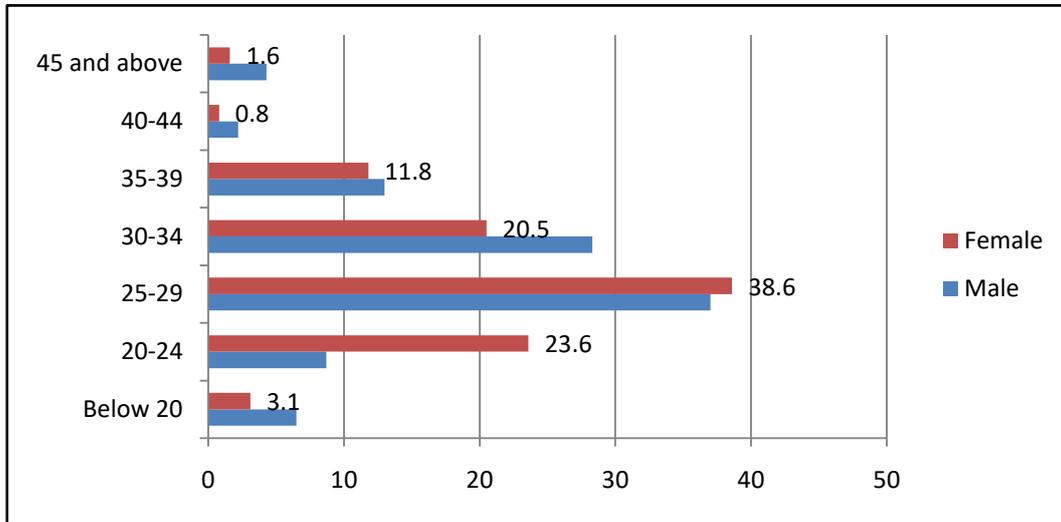
We describe the features of the interviewees and participants of FGDs while describing the relevant data and analysis in chapters III, IV and V.

## **2.1 BASIC DEMOGRAPHICS OF THE RESPONDENTS**

### **2.1.1 Age of the respondents**

The demographic features of the survey respondents of this study are in keeping with the general perception. Most of the workers in the survey were young. The highest number of respondents, that is 38%, are from the age group of 25-29 years; 23% belong to the age group 30-34; 20% are in the age group 20-24 years; 4% of them are from the age group of 20-24 years, whereas only 2% of them are aged above 45.

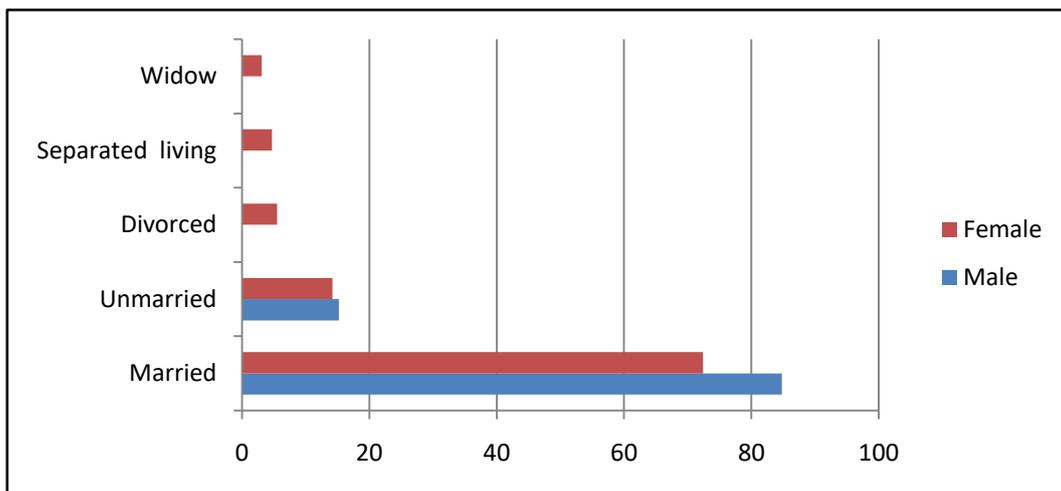
**Figure-2.1: Age group of the respondents**



**2.1.2 Marital Status**

Most of the respondents of our survey (76%) are married whereas about 14% of them are unmarried. Of all the survey respondents 4% are divorced; 3% live separately from their husband whereas 2% are widows.

**Figure-2.2: Marital status of the respondents**



**2.1.3 Educational status**

It is a general understanding that women taking up work in the garment factories are mostly devoid of any formal education. However, as the literacy rate in the country has increased in recent years, the scenario as regards literacy and level of formal education of the workers has also gone under some changes.

Among the men and women among who responded to survey questions, 27% have attended secondary school whereas 25% completed primary level schooling. 9% of the respondents passed secondary school certificate exam whereas 1% completed higher secondary.

11% of the respondents did not attend school at all whereas 23% dropped out from school before they could complete primary level education.

Among the respondents (women garment workers) who took part in the FGDs, nearly half of them (48%) have studied in secondary school – that is, they stopped going to school while attending school between grade VI and X. More than one-quarter (27%) of the women workers have studied at primary level, that is, between grade I and V. 15% of the respondents are barely literate and can sign their names.

#### **2.1.4 Family composition and living arrangement**

Of the respondents 19% have 2 members in their family, 44% have 4 members, and another 19% have 6 members whereas 10% have more than 7 members in their families.

Among 127 respondents who took part in the survey, 90% expressed that their husband and family members are supportive about their work in the garment factories.

In terms of composition of the family, most of the workers (59%) are living with their immediate family – that is, along with their husband and children. On the other hand, a small section (5%) live alone in the rented houses; 8% of the women live with their children as they are either widowed, abandoned or separated from their husbands; 6% live along with other female coworkers; 8% live with other relatives than parents or spouses; and 14% stay with their parents.

#### **2.1.5 Monthly expenditure for house rent**

Monthly expenditure for ‘house rent’ (that is, the rent for the tiny room that they live in) is the major area their concern the workers most. Considering the burden of this expenditure, we tried to know how much they have to pay for this particular expenditure every month.

Of the 173 respondents, 36% said that they have to spend 2000-3000 taka as rent for the room whereas 27% spend 3000-4000 taka. 16% of the respondents spend 1000-2000 taka. However, for 12% of the respondents who live more in the ‘proper’ Dhaka city spend about 5000 taka or above for the purpose of house rent.

## **2.2 THE ‘CONTEXT’ OF TAKING UP JOB IN GARMENT FACTORIES**

To make sense of the greater social context that plays role in constituting the precarity, insecurity or vulnerability of the female workers, it is important to look into the social processes through which women migrate from village to the city and then take up work in the factories. The cultural discourses that are made, unmade or remade in this process are important areas that hold key toward understanding how the workers are poised in social positions of weakness or strength, or how their docility is created – and, how they inevitably become available as cheap labor vulnerable to violation and abuse.

In contemporary Bangladesh society, work in RMG sector is not as ignominious or stigmatizing as it was around three decades back when the sector first started to flourish. However, greater social acceptance does not mean that it has reached the level to be a desired or sought-after job. In most cases workers say that they have made the choice to go for the work as they did not

have any other options available before them. Where the informal work options that others in their same age group go to, they find those to be of no value.

What is important to note is that most of the workers view their time in the garment job as a temporary phase in their life: in a given time as a man or woman does not find other ways to earn their livelihood, she/he goes for this factory job as a transient option. None of them thinks about persisting with the job. Almost none of the workers – neither male nor female – are of the opinion that ‘laborer’ is an identity that they should feel comfortable with.

In the IDIs or FGDs, they all said it in same voice that they did not think they were going to do ‘garment work’ for life. The job did not have any dignity and it involved so much of hard work that no one could do it year after year. One could bear the hardship only for a few years with a hope that after making some savings, they would move on to something more usual, more humane, more secure and more in zone of comfort and dignity.

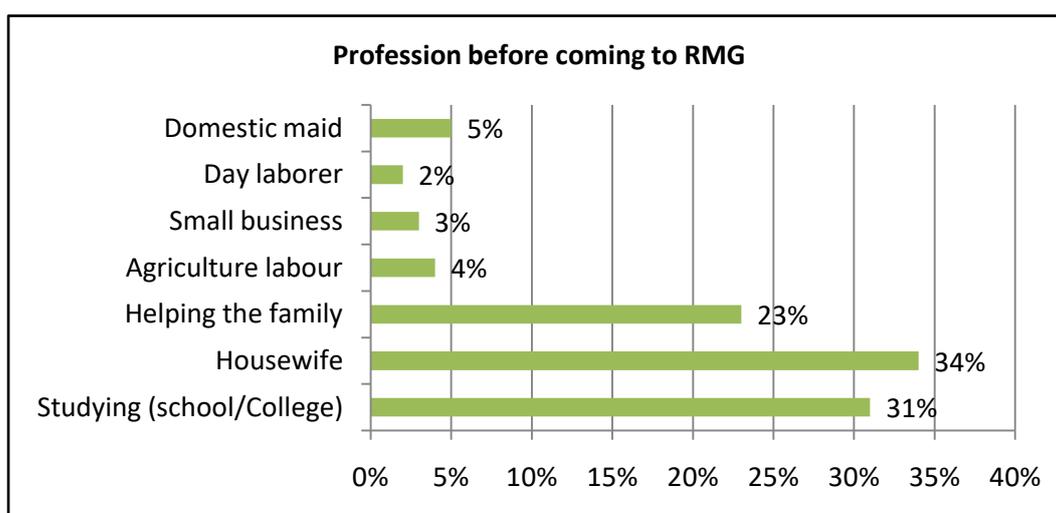
### 2.2.1 Status of the women before they entered into garment factories

In our survey, 31% of the respondents revealed that before taking up job in the a garment factory they were studying at school and college – which means that because of the given level of harsh poverty in the family, they could not continue with the school education and had to go for the factory job. For 23% of the respondents, it was for helping the family that they decided to go for the job.

In case of 34% of the respondents, they were housewives – but because of pressing need in the family, they decided to take up work in the factory.

4% of the respondents were trying to earn their living as agricultural laborer before joining the factories; 3% were in small business; 2% were day laborer and 5% used to work as domestic worker.

**Figure-2.7: Status before coming to RMG sector**



**2.2.2 The reasons for the women to take up job in the factories**

As the women respondents talked about their background and reflected on why they decided to come into the world of wage work, it became evident that they have mostly been pushed by the poverty and hardship of the situation that they were in. Since it proved almost impossible for the household to run without the women members taking up a job in the factory, the male members gave consent to her to do so.

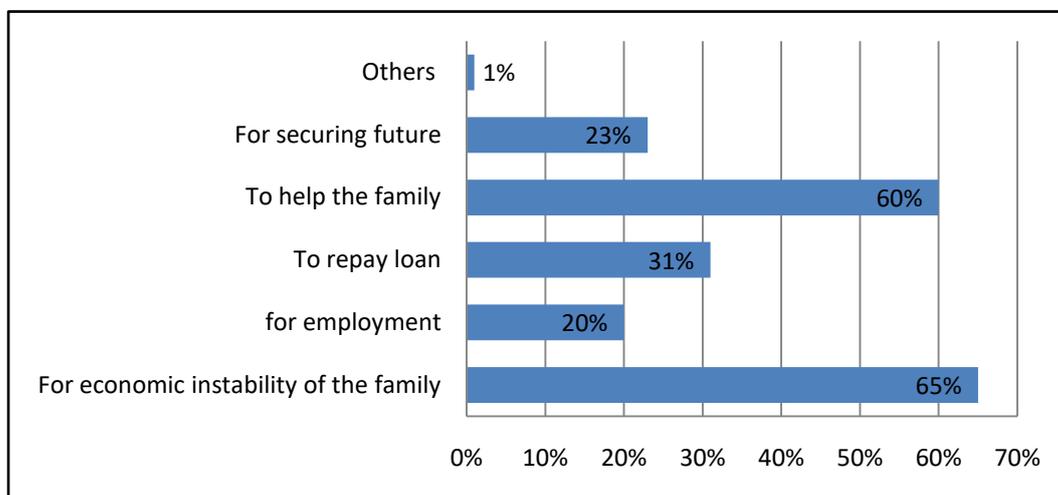
In the current social and economic condition, they explained, it is difficult for a poor household to survive only on the income of a single earner. Whereas traditionally the male head of the family was the sole breadwinner, it now has become impossible for him to provide for the family with his earnings alone. More importantly, with the shrinking of agrarian economy, the options for seeking a living in the village setting are becoming scarce. In the context of the prevalence of extreme poverty in some of the regions of the country – particularly in the northern part of the country, most of the poor men find it difficult to eke out a livelihood.

Poverty and hardship puts the peace and stability in the household in jeopardy. Quarrels and violent behavior become common as the relationship inside the conjugal life gets strained, and there rises tensions between the husband and wife as well as among the in-laws. *65% of the respondents* in survey said that they decided to come into this job sector due to the economic hardship and instability that they were experiencing in the family.

It was because of hardship and extreme poverty that many of the household get indebted. In our in-depth interviews we came to know about many of the household which took loans or micro-credit from a number of sources then failed to find a way to make the repayment. This explains why *31% of the respondents* have said that they have come to this sector basically for repaying the loan or debt that had been incurred by themselves or their parents.

A section of the female respondents explained that even though poverty was the main driving factor for them to go for wage work, they also had a desire to achieve some independence and self-esteem by earning their own income. However, they also talked about the new agonies and tensions that have accompanied their new status as income earner.

**Figure-2.8: The reasons behind joining garment work**

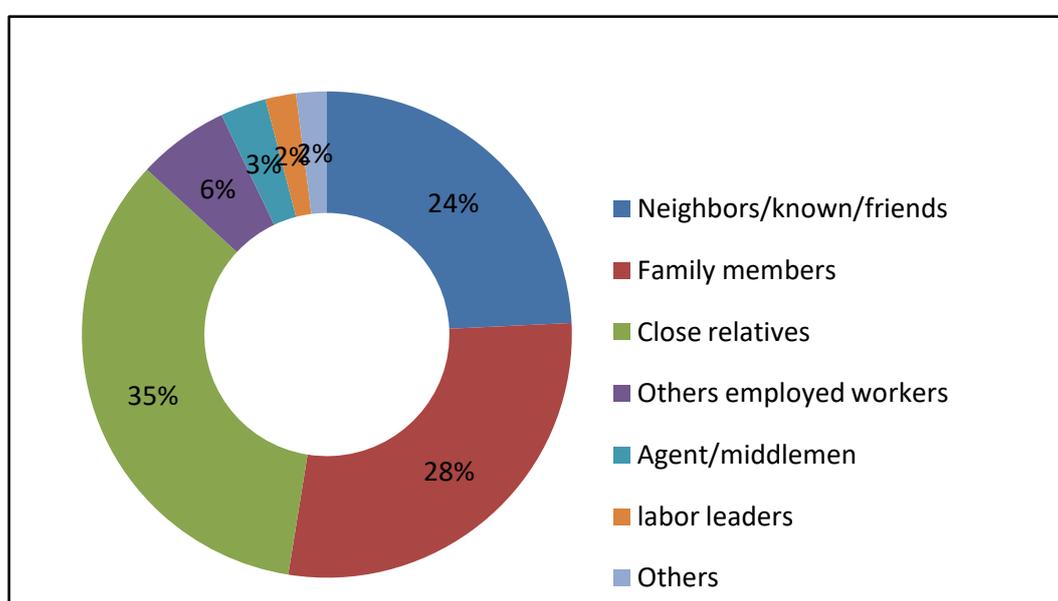


### 2.2.3 The process of taking up job in the factory

It is generally through the kinship network that women find a channel to migrate to the city and then to get a job in the factory. Among the respondents of the survey, 62% shared that it was either their family members (28%) or close relatives (34%) who helped them to take job in the sector.

It was revealed that the male workers or spouses generally take lead to introduce and link a woman worker to a factory – but women who already work in a factory may also facilitate the process. However, in the IDIs many women workers revealed that the men who helped the women to get job in the factory at times took or tried to take ‘the chance’ to sexually exploit or abuse the worker.

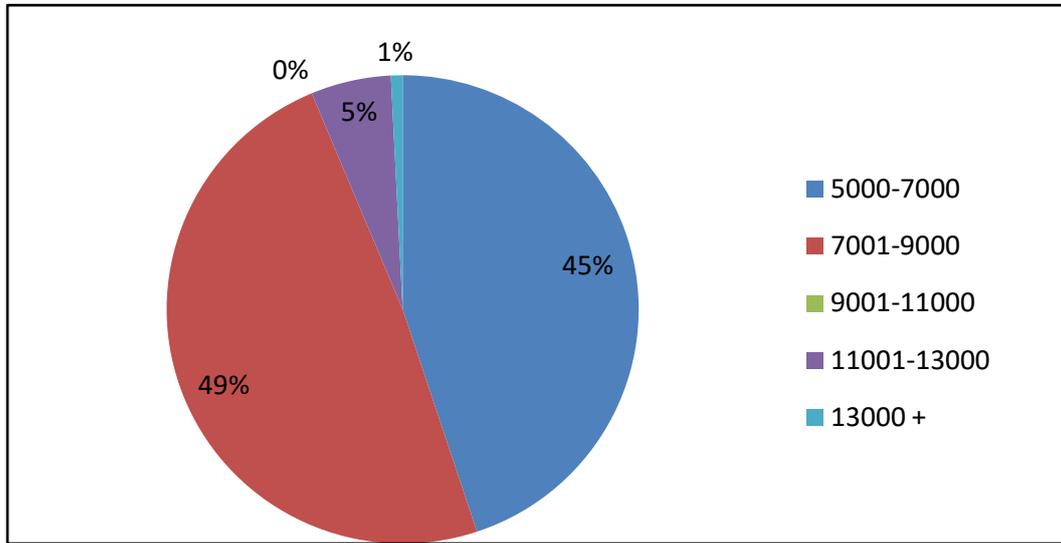
**Figure-2.9: How do they involve in this sector**



## 2.3 MONTHLY INCOME, OTHER BENEFITS AND WORKER ‘TURNOVERS’

As of *monthly salary* of the participants of the survey, 45% of the female respondents’ earning fall in the range of 5000-7000; for 49% this range is 7000-9000 taka. 5.5% earns around 11000-13000taka while only 0.8 respondents’ earning is above 13000 taka. As of the male respondents, 13% earn 5000-7000 taka; 52% respondents’ income falls between 7001-9000 taka; monthly income of 11% of the respondents is 9000 - 11000 taka; another 11% earns 11000-13000 taka while 13% earns above 13000 taka monthly.

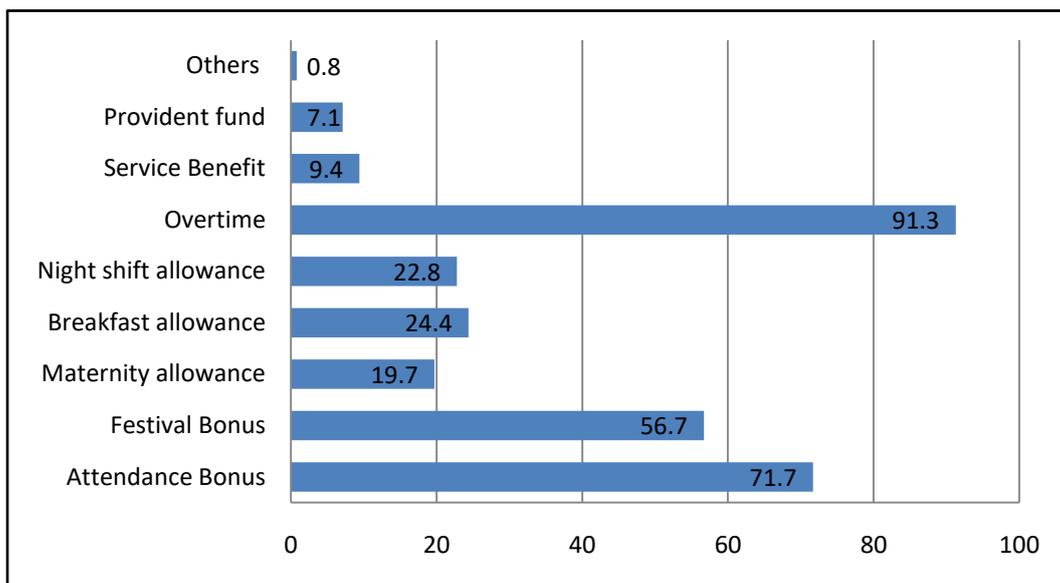
**Figure-2.11: Status of monthly income**



Besides monthly salary, other benefits that they workers get are attendance bonus, festival bonus, maternity allowance, breakfast allowance, nightshift allowance, service benefit, overtime, provident fund and others. But these additional benefits vary from factory to factory and workers of non-EPZ factories are often deprived fully or partially in case of such benefits.

Among the respondents, 31.5% said that they did not face any problem in getting the benefits. 11.8% said that they even did not know about many of such benefits. A small section of the respondents - 3% - said that they had to take the assistance local influential people to get the benefits. Another 11.8% said that in case they raised their voice claiming such benefits, their job would be at risk. 11% said that they had to register complain to the labor court to get these benefits.

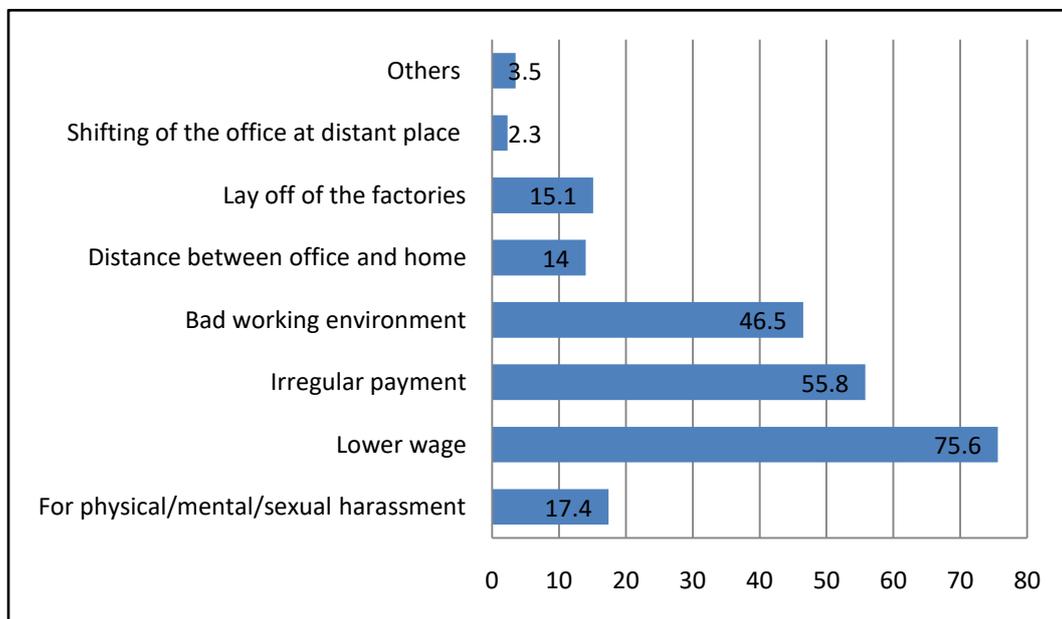
**Figure-2.12: Benefit other than the salary**



In an environment of uncertainty, it was common among workers to leave a factory after a few years and then to go to another factory. This turnover explains a lot about informality and precarity that defines employment in the garment sector as it is integrated into the global supply chain.

Among the 127 female respondents who participated in the survey, 68% have the experience of such turnover: they worked in one or more factories before moving into the factory that they currently work in. While identifying the reasons for such shifts, the respondents cited multiple reasons including physical (including sexual) and mental harassment (17%), poor wage (76%), irregular payment (56%), bad working environment (47%), distance of factories from home (14%), lay off of the factories (15%), shifting of the factory to a distant place (2%) etc.

**Figure-2.10: Reason for leaving the old workplace**





## CHAPTER -III

# VIOLENCE, ABUSE AND HARASSMENT AT LIVING PLACE AND IN THE COMMUNITY SETTING

“My husband became too indebted in the village. He tried agricultural work, and then tried to run a petty business. He incurred losses. At one stage he even tried to be day laborer in the agricultural sector. None of his attempts were effective to ensure enough income to keep us free from debt. He failed time and again. He borrowed money from the relatives and neighbors. At one stage he took loan from a *samity*, that is, an NGO that offer micro-finance in the village. He took money from a number of *samities* and in the end he borrowed from local money lenders with high interest rate. At one stage life became impossible for us to bear with in the village. As we did not have any other way out, we decided that we must leave the village and come to Dhaka.

We had some distant relatives here in the outskirts of Dhaka city. It was on one late evening that we left the village with our two children – we didn’t let anyone know about this. Even my parents-in-law didn’t know that we were going to leave the village. We could not let them know. You see, we, in fact, had to flee from the village.

We were in a state of full helplessness that forced us to come here and take factory work. Getting a job in a garment factory was not easy either. Now, do you think we had any other choice? What else could we do? We don’t like to live here in this environment – neither do we like the working condition in the factory. But what else can we do? We have to bear with all these things.”

This is the story narrated by a female garment worker on a Friday evening sitting in her one-room tenement in Ashulia located at the periphery of Dhaka. While she was talking about the unbearable environment, she referred not only to the working environment in the factory floor, she was also alluding to the challenges that she and her family members face as they live in the industrial locality and try to adapt to the spatial and social surrounding.

From an analysis of the newspaper reports and as well as the sharing in IDIs re, it is clear that public transportation is unsafe not only for women during their commute to work, but also when they travel to their homes in villages.

However, the social setting in which the male and female garment workers live – with or without family – is not always hostile or non-supportive. Many of the workers drew our attention to the fact that whereas they don't find factory owners or state agencies at hand to provide them with adequate security or services, it is the neighbors, landlords, people from the place of origin or village kin as well as members of extended family who provide much needed support in their everyday life as well as in cases of emergency.

### **3.1 VIOLENCE AND ABUSE IN THE LIVING PLACES AND IN COMMUNITY**

The trouble, pain or harassment that they face in the community, in living place or at the time of commuting remain quite alarming in many cases which impacts their health and well-being to a significant level. This section sheds light on the sufferings and threats that the women workers face as they live in their place of accommodation – that is, in the community – and during the time of travel to and from the factory.

#### **3.1.1 The garment worker as 'tenant' and their 'land-lords': economic insecurity made into the pretext for sexual and mental violations**

Almost all the respondents said that they either have had their own experience or have heard about the experiences of other women workers with regards to harassment and exploitation in 'tenant-landlord' relationships in which a girl or woman is subjected to verbal and physical abuse because of her failure to pay the house rent on time.

Salaries in many of the factories are not paid at the beginning of the month. In other cases, many factories fail to pay salaries to the workers for several months. This means that a worker-tenant fails to pay the rent of her room within the stipulated date at the beginning of a month. This gives rise to a form of vulnerability that some of the house-owners make use of in their bid to advance to a woman living in one of 'his' rooms with sexually charged intensions.

Unmarried garment workers are particularly vulnerable to being targeted by the house-owner. Among the respondents of the survey ,14% said were of the clear opinion that the house owners try to take advantage on female workers in many ways. They often try to develop intimacy with the female tenant on the pretext of romance or love. The houseowner or his adult son would propose a vulnerable tenant to go for 'hangout' on the holidays where there remains no hiding of the fact that they are trying to take improper advantage of the poor condition of the woman or girl. Coming to the room and entering into it in unsolicited way is one common way of impinging privacy and sanctity of the life of the woman workers. They come into the room without bothering about taking permission and start to gossip.

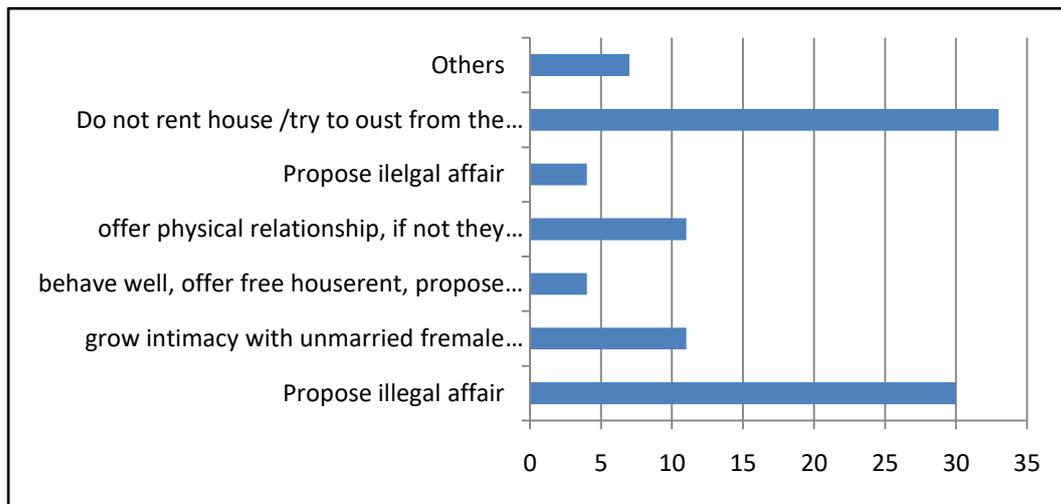
In case a female tenant fails to pay rent for 2-3 months, the possibility of harassment increases. In case a woman does not agree to the illicit advances or proposal of the landlord or his men, they either lock the door of the house in a bid to put pressure on the woman, and sometimes stop them from accessing the kitchen; or they also turn off the main switch to stop electricity supply.

33% of the respondents said that in case a woman shows defiance and resistance to the sexual advances made by the house-owner, they are asked to vacant the house within a very short

period. However, defiance, refusal and resistance was rather common than compliance or condoning.

Although insecurity and threats that are sexual in nature are common in the social environment that the women live, in the interviews and FGDs it became evident that women workers were not comfortable about delving into details of incidents of this kind that they may have experienced. This could be due to the prevailing social and cultural gender norms, as well as stigma and victim-shaming that is common.

**Figure-3.1: House-owners' behavior with the garment workers**



**3.1.2 Harassment caused by the grocery shop-owners and others**

Besides the house-owner, local grocery shop owners, political *mastans* [strongmen, powerful persons], and musclemen are other categories of men who are among potential perpetrators unleashing abuse and harassment that takes place in the neighborhood. Not all the shop-owners are aggressive in their behavior, nor are all petty traders in possession of ill-motives. However, there is a general cultural sanction among the men in the neighborhood that ‘garment girls’ are easy to be approached. The cultural construction of women garment workers as ‘sexual objects’ in the psyche of men from particular backgrounds is an issue that has got its root deeply rooted and this comes be exhibited in everyday life setting. However, it must be acknowledged that as women have come out of the household boundaries in courageous ways over the decades, the attitude and construction have come to be challenged and questioned. The plentiful presence of women in public spaces and their everyday commuting to and from the factories have meant that they keep on posing threat to the patriarchal-misogynist worldviews that have historically been prominent. and going back and forth to factories is becoming more acceptable but a lot of work is still needed to address safety of women in public spaces. Frequency of rape incidents and abusive events highlight the fact that they journey toward a democratic and gender-sensitive social space is far away than becoming complete.

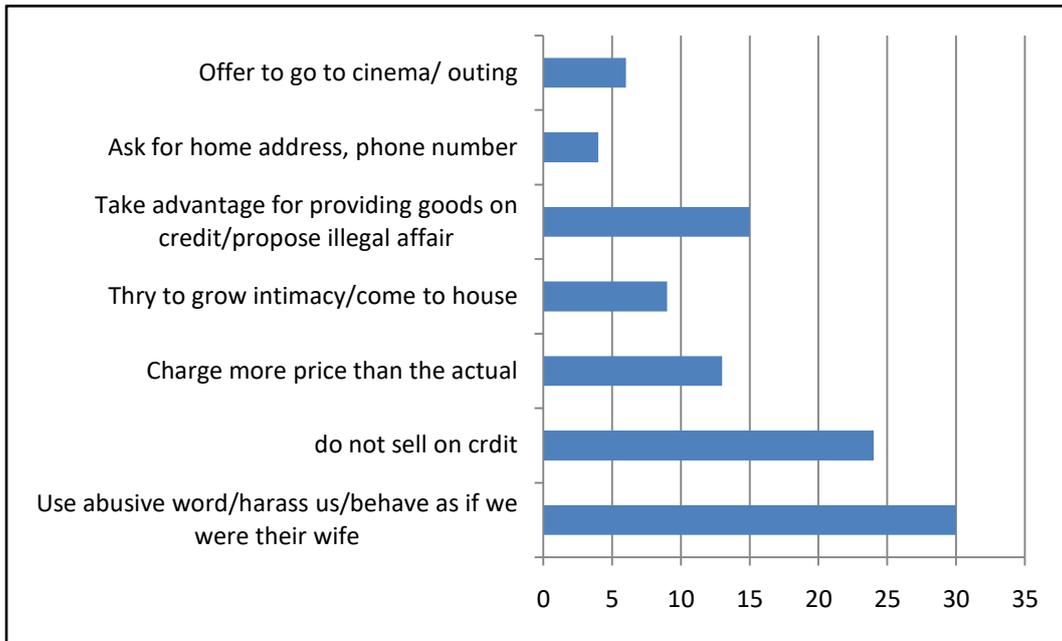
In many cases financially ill-equipped garment workers have to depend on the kindness or generosity of the local grocery shop-owners in that the sellers allow them to buy rice, oil and other necessary items on credit. This dependence in some cases leads to some form of vulnerability of the women workers. As they sell things on credit, the shop-owners think that

they have done some favors to the women. Many of them try to develop intimacy with the women workers with a view to exploit their vulnerability. Among the survey respondents, 39% told that it is rather common for some of the shop-owners to persuade a girl or woman into illicit relationship as they frequently visit the shop and buy groceries and other things on credit.

One of the women workers explained this in the interview:

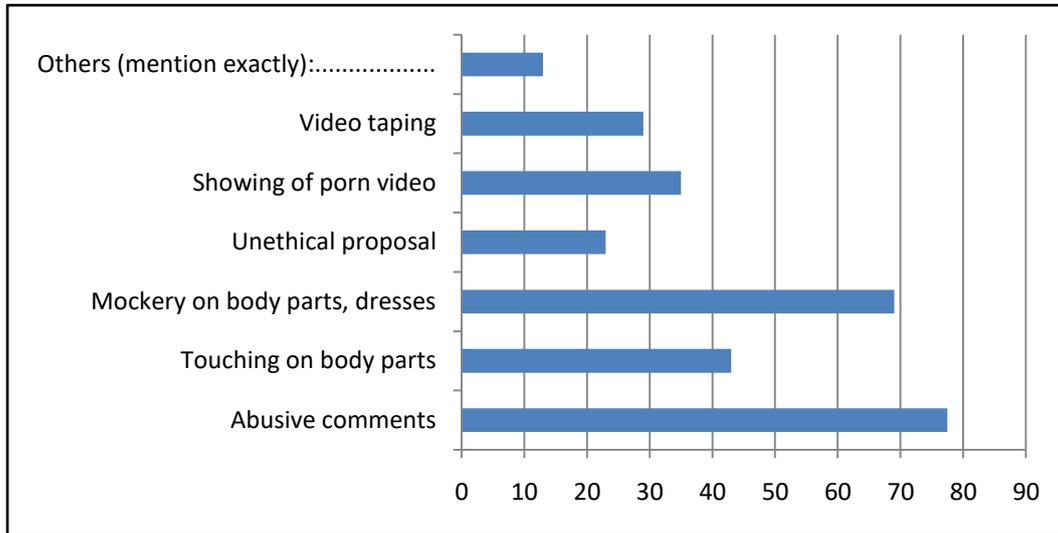
“The shop owners behave in a way as if we were their wives! They ask for ‘love affair’ as they think that we are cheaply available. They would ask for illegal relationship and make pleas for going for ‘outing’ with them. They behave in a romantic way and try to convince the girl to go to cinema with them. It often happens with the girls that the local shop-owner comes and knocks door during the holiday. They sometimes make phone call and tries to initiate talks of erotic nature.”

**Figure-3.2: Grocery Shop owner’s behavior with the garment workers**



The local gangsters, *mastans*, and members of different wings of ruling political party – these are other persons who causes threats and insecurities in the lives of female workers as they live their life in the community. According to 66% of the female workers that we interviewed, in their living places they have experienced harassment and insecurity caused by people belonging to these categories.

**Figure-3.3: Harassment faced by the women workers during travelling**



### 3.2 HARASSMENT AND ABUSE EXPERIENCED AT THE TIME OF COMMUTING TO AND FROM THE FACTORY

Women workers living in Dhaka city or in its suburbs are vulnerable to frequent incidents of harassments, abuse and taunting that might take any time as they walk or commute by the roads, streets and pavements. Why are garment workers more prone to abusive behavior of the male members sharing the public space? One answer could be that the girls and women working in the factory are the most advanced and mobile in terms of their continuous presence in the spaces that many men here conventionally believe to belong to men.

The dress, look, overall bearing of a working woman is different from that of a middle-class woman. In Bangladesh middle class women and girls – particularly those studying in schools or even in universities – have recently been regularly subjected to sexual abuses such as rape. National dailies carry the news in numerous rape incidents almost every day. However, in public spaces garment girls are evidently more frequently subjected to abuse, molestation, and other forms of sexual violence, including rape.

The cultural discourse that subtly views the women workers as ‘invaders’ to men’s realm and the dominant belief that men have the ‘right’ to be aggressive in terms of sexual advances – among others – could be the key reasons that make ground for such abuses. However, although the level and extent of violence varies from areas to areas and based on other factors, the threats and insecurities that women garment workers face in public places in general hold to be quite intimidating in nature that impacts the well-being of the women profoundly. As the fear of being invaded anytime becomes deeply set in their cognition, the women find it quite difficult to claim a life with minimum dignity and self-esteem.

Generally, most of the EPZ factories provide buses for the workers. However, ‘non-EPZ’ and ‘*Bangla factories*’ – a name that the workers give to the smaller and sub-contract ones – usually don’t provide with office buses. The workers of such factories either must walk to the factory, if that is possible or they have to avail the public buses or smaller public transports that have the bigger potential to be the site of tormenting experience.

The nature and extent of abuse in public buses and other public places vary depending on the time of the day as well as the mode of commuting. During the day, offensive, lewd, filthy and sexually suggestive coarse comments (e.g. What's your 'rate'? For how much will be sold? For what amount will she go to bed?) are likely to be hurled. Moreover, pedestrians, rickshaw pullers, or shop-owners may blow a whistle or produce an ugly look along with verbal taunting.

In such a situation, women who walk to work usually do so in groups to ensure safety. This does not preclude the possibility of physical assaults which may take the form of a rickshaw puller or a three-wheeler driver running into a worker or trying to drive her off the road. Physical assaults also include incidents such as a pedestrian kicking or shoving off a woman worker as well as nudging, grabbing or pinching her. A number of respondents talked about the horrible ways in which many of the rickshaw pullers deliberately position themselves in the particular corners of the roads and try to show off their penis to the commuting women workers.

Those who take public buses regularly go through considerable extent of abuse from the bus-conductors and helpers. Whereas the female workers are sometimes charged higher than normal fares, most importantly the conductors often refuse to allow them on board. They will always say that there is no room in the bus for women to be on board. They allege that a woman takes too much of space – and they can put two or more male passengers in place of one female passenger.

While getting on and off the buses, helpers take every opportunity to grab and grope a woman worker. Bus passengers – especially older males – also are seen frequently to shove, squeeze, pinch the bodies of workers; they also make suggestive comments and abrasive gestures. Many of the respondents revealed that it was impossible for them to wait too long for buses because of the imminent harassment to be made by the pedestrians. Inadequate street lighting in the evening in many areas adds up to the risks of the women who work 'overtime' in the factory for long hour and then walk to their home.

Among the FGD respondents, 53% (of which 66% female) said that they walk to their workplace; 13% of the respondents said they use public bus or minibus; 18% use temp or *leguna* (a locally assembled cramped vehicle that carries 10-12 passengers at a time); 6% use auto rickshaw ride through sharing cost. Only 9% said that they use rickshaw to go to workplace.

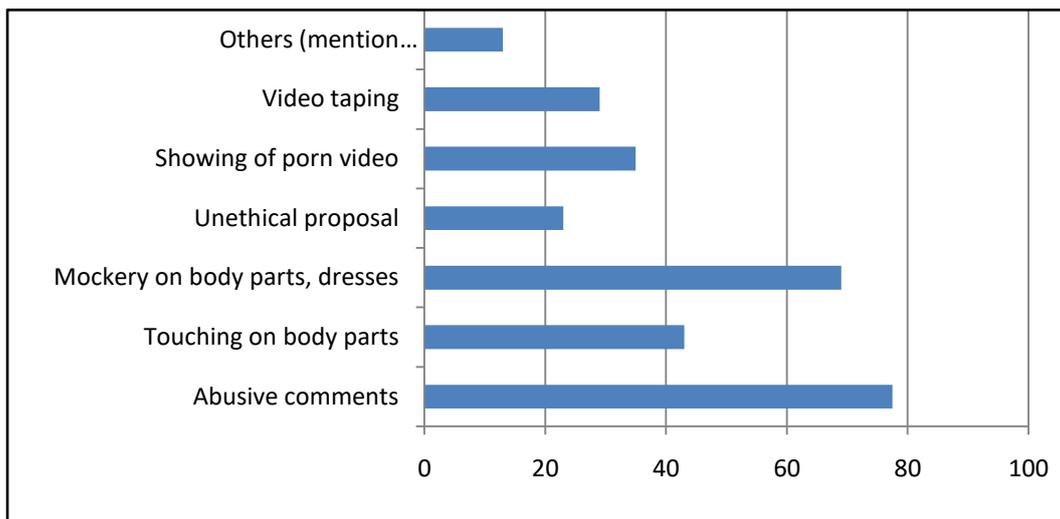
Of the respondents, 66% said that they often face harassment that include physical violation such as touch or groping of body parts, comments alluding sexual organs and acts etc. Local men from various backgrounds – particularly the *mastans* and thugs – make such intrusions as the women workers walk to their office. Local men often follow the female workers, especially young girls, and force them to share name and phone number. They try to have conversation with them forcefully and if denied, they harass them in diverse ways.

Many of the interviewees have talked about their experience of molestation as it took place at the time of their return from the factories in the evening and at night. The men who perpetrate such violence resort to whistling, whizzing etc. and sing song from Hindi movies; at times they blow the horn of their vehicles loudly and try to show sexually explicit video clips from their mobile phone. They also try to take photos and make videos of the women using the devices. According to the respondents, one of the most horrible things is that such aggressive men often term the female workers of garment factories as 'characterless' and behave in a way as if they have got every right to molest the girls since they (the girls) are not of right character.

With regard to their experience as they used transportation, 77% of the respondent said that they are hurled with harsh abusive comments; 43% have the experience of having their body touched by the male co-passengers almost every day. 69% said that mockery on their physical appearance and dress was common thing that they experienced. According to 23% respondents, the helper, conductor and drivers often propose illegal relations such as spend night at their house. 35% respondents talked about their experience of sitting by the side of the passengers who run porn video clips in their mobile phones.

68% of the respondents said that they know about their helplessness and remain silent. They behave in a way as if they did not notice what was happening. Walking away silently and not taking any effort to confront the misdeed is the most common response. 20% of the respondents said that at times they resist and reply boldly. According to them when they protest sexual harassments people usually gather around and enjoy the situation which turns to be another form embarrassment to them. What most of the respondent said is that they try to remain careful so that they can avoid harassment during walking or using the commuter.

**Figure-3.3: Harassment faced by the women workers during travelling**





## CHAPTER-IV

# VIOLENCE AND ABUSE IN WORKPLACE

### 4.1 WOMEN WORKERS IN BANGLADESH RMG AND THEIR EXPERIENCE OF ABUSE AND VIOLENCE

As already noted, Bangladesh RMG is the sector where the highest numbers of women laborer are employed. The sector is often portrayed as the pathway to women's economic empowerment. However, it is not women's empowerment or human rights that motivate employers but their social and cultural construction as being docile, disciplined, hardworking and the fact that women can be paid lower wages than men. The view that women are easy to be controlled and manipulated is central to their decision. In other words, garment industry in Bangladesh – in line with what the sector does globally – is more in the business of using the vulnerability of women in the society for the purpose of extracting maximum profit. In response to the question as to why there are more female workers in garment industry than male, one respondent provided this explanation:

'We, women, are afraid to say anything when they force us to do unpaid 'overtime' or in case our supervisor verbally or sexually abuses us... They think that women are generally cold headed – we don't lose our temper like the men. The factory owners also know that women workers are hardly active in taking part in protest, procession or factory strikes. Also, women do not get involved in labor organization or union. ... There are practical reasons for which the owners and manager prefer women laborer than male.'

Job in the garment factories is preferred by women from low-income group compared to other informal urban works as this work provide them with means to take recourse from the chronic impoverishment and perennial uncertainties. On the other hand, women workers are preferred by the factory management because of their naivety and vulnerability:

'New workers, particularly female, are preferred more over the male or experienced one, as they don't argue. ...The supervisors use abusive words, sometimes it becomes extremely difficult to tolerate and we seniors argue with him at that time but the new or juniors keeps their head down and work.'

## 4.2 WOMEN WORKERS' VIEW ABOUT WORKPLACE VIOLENCE AND ABUSE

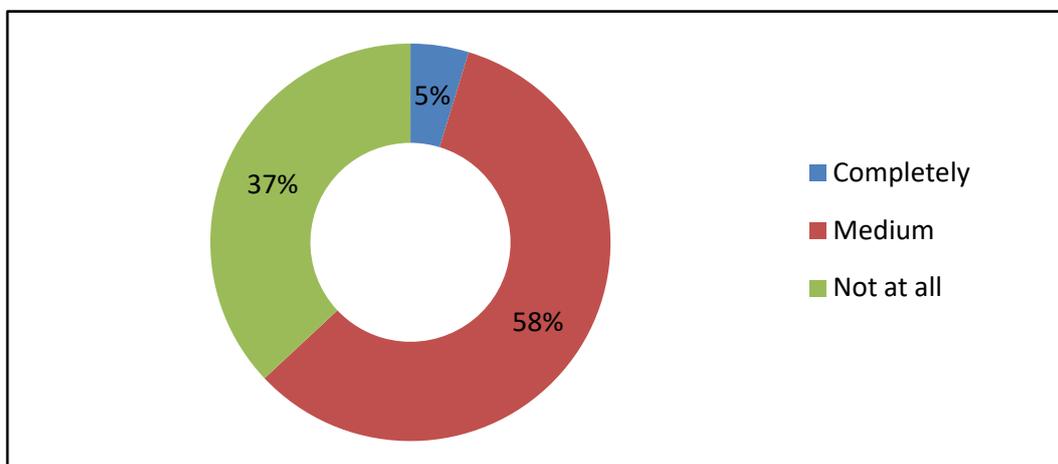
According to the FGD respondents, women in Bangladesh, irrespective of their class and religious identity, have to go through various layers of violence throughout their life, in both private and public spaces. They have accepted and started to believe that discrimination, disrespect and violence towards them is inseparable from their life. Thus, to a woman working in a factory, verbal, physical, sexual harassment (direct or indirect) have become quite 'unavoidable' and they themselves perceive it as 'inseparable part' of their life they are being forced to live in the given time. Women workers in the garment sector are not an exception rather due to the economic and social strata, exploitation and violence is more evident and from their perspective it has been normalized they think that it has rather to be accepted.

During the interviews, the women workers said about different types of abuses in their workplace, home and while traveling. They are not aware about the definition, perception of sexual violence. However, they said that along with verbal and physical abuse almost all of them experienced sexual abuse of different types. They have categorized slapping, pulling by hair, pushing, pinching as physical violence while harsh rebuke, shouting, mockery, call by bad name (*gali*), threat of firing, bullying etc. as mental abuse. Some of them refer to *gali* (calling names or use of slang) as a form of sexual abuse. However, regarding grave sexual violence like rape or molesting, they mostly talked about 'hearing things from colleagues or workers of other factories', however they did not report about their own direct experience of violence. They were clearly hesitant and scared to talk elaborately about personal experiences particularly considering the social stigma and job insecurity that such sharing could lead to.

## 4.3 WORKERS' VIEW ABOUT WORKPLACE HAZARD AND SAFETY

As we asked the respondents about their thought about workplace safety, 37% of them said that they do not feel safe in their working environment. 58% of the respondent said that their satisfaction to workplace safety is intermediary while only 5% said that they are happy with the working environment. Besides, physical, mental and sexual abuses, the workers are often remained afraid of factory collapse through fire or poor structures of the buildings.

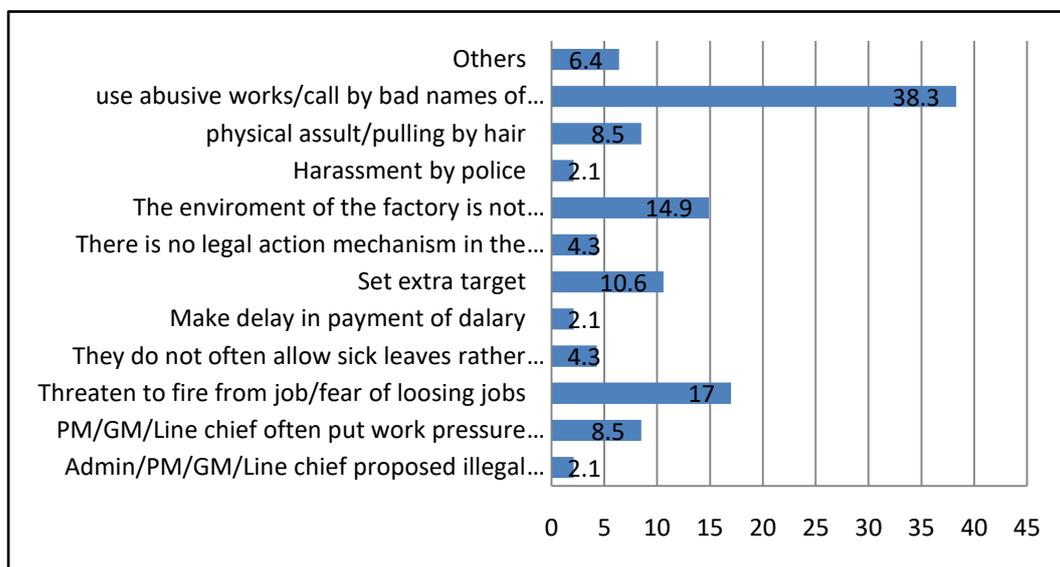
Figure-4.1: Satisfaction regarding workplace safety



#### 4.4 FEMALE WORKERS VIEW ON SEXUAL VIOLENCE AND ABUSE IN THE WORKPLACE

The major reasons for feeling unsafe is mental and physical abuse coupled with sexual harassments. During the interview most of the respondent said that there is row of harassment by all level of higher staff like administration, management, line chief, line/floor supervisors even by the male co-workers also. The female workers often targeted and receive unethical proposal from them. In most cases the perpetrator takes the advantage of vulnerable job security of female workers. When female workers do not comply with their bosses then they must go through various types of harassment.

Figure-4.2: Reason for dissatisfaction about workplace safety



13% of the respondent shared that if a female worker doesn't obey the superiors, they receive threat of being fired from the job. 16% of the respondent shared that Production Manager, General Manager or Line Chief put extra workload when they defy their proposal. The targeted women have to do extra work and sometimes they do not know when their working hours will end. Besides, they have to work in the nightshift against their will. Workers are deprived of due payment for their overtime work, even they have to face delay in getting their monthly salary. The respondents said that when a female worker defy the will of the superiors, verbal abuses as well as pushing, pulling by hair, slapping become very common to them along with *gali-galaj* or strong verbal abuse (said by 31% of the respondent).

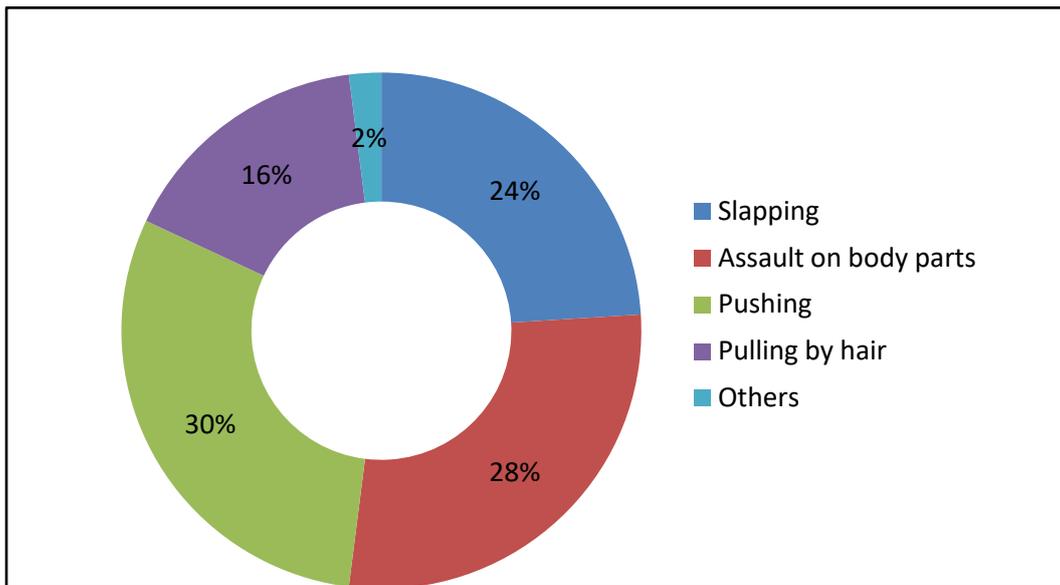
#### 4.5 FORMS OF SEXUAL VIOLENCE AND ABUSE

Almost all the respondents said that sexual harassments like patting on the back and cheek, resting a hand on the shoulder and head while having a conversation are very common by the supervisors, floor in charge. Many of the male co-workers also want to take such 'advantages'. The respondents also talked about forced and tempted sexual relation but in most cases such incidents remain hidden or not-talked-about. According to the female workers, the female workers who thus become 'targeted' have either to co-operate with the perpetrators or leave the factory with having some strong stigma inflicted.

According to them verbal abuse by the supervisors like shouting, bullying, threaten of firing from jobs is the most common. During the time of heavy workload, the supervisor often uses abusive words referring particularly to their physical appearance and look, their body-parts, or their parents. The girls and women feel much disgraced as they face such insulting words, but they silently continue to work. The respondents' marked mental harassment (90%) as a major problem whereas physical (51%) and sexual harassment (43%) were also reported by significant number of respondents.

Physical violence includes slapping (24%), beating (28%), pushing (30%) and pulling by hair (16%). Mental abuse includes harsh rebuke, verbal abuse (gali), threatening of firing from jobs, insulting referring physical appearance etc. Among the sexual violence the respondent mention about patting on any part of the body or unwelcoming touching by the supervisors and male colleagues, aggressive body language indicating temptation, passing comments about their physical appearance, disregard, verbal conduct of sexual nature, jostling, mockery, uttering jokes etc. Filming by mobile phone is another important harassment reported by the women workers. Though none of them said that they have been severe sexually exploited in their workplace, but they shared they knew their colleges experienced such types of behavior.

**Figure-4.3: Reason for dissatisfaction about workplace safety**



The respondents shared that age is not a matter for being victim of sexual abuse; however, lower-level staff such as young-aged helpers are more likely to become subjected to abuses. When female workers do any mistake or are delayed in completing a particular job, the supervisors use very abusive and bad-sounding words that include scolding and threat of battering. However, some of the respondents said that scolding or shouting by the floor supervisor is necessary to make sure the work is done in timely manner, however, they also agree that bad words mentioning their body parts or their parents' character affect them mentally, which diminish productivity.

Verbal abuse has been normalized in the garment factory according to a male worker of a non-compliance factory at Rampura area of Dhaka city, Bangladesh. He said:

“Abusive words used with the workers without reason is the part of garment factory ‘culture’. Supervisor and line manager always uses such word disregard of sex. Sometime the things they say to women make them so embarrassed that they cry in the bathroom. Many have resigned and many have been fired due to arguing with the officers’ resort to verbal abuse.’

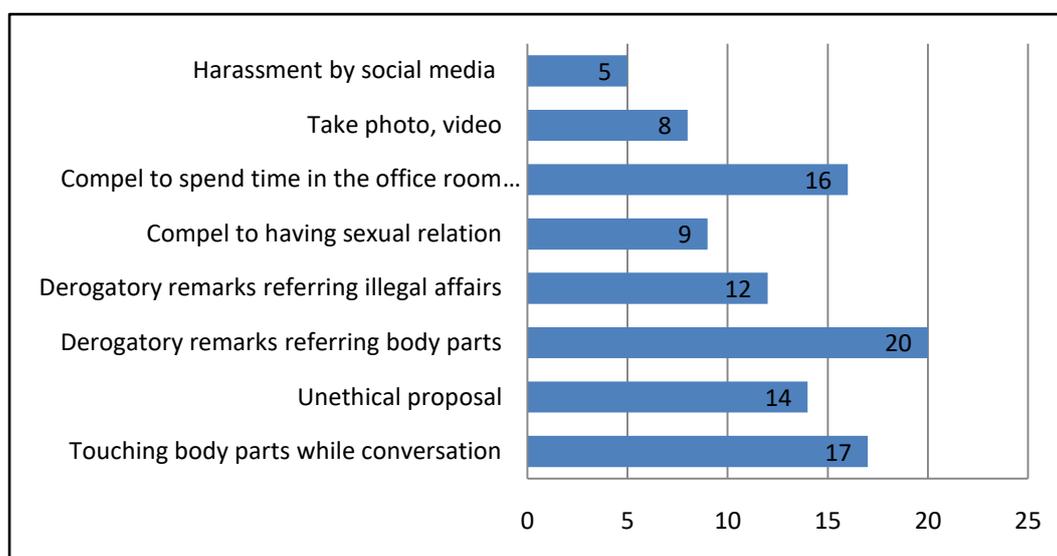
However, some female workers working in the ‘compliance factories’ shared that there are factories which has firm regulation about the code of conduct and workers of these factories are satisfied with their workplace environment. A female worker said, ‘I work in one of such factories where there is no verbal abuse or any sort of disrespect to the workers. As our employer respects us, we are also dedicated to our job and don’t want to move from this factory.’

However, as the studies have already shown, the impacts of factories becoming ‘compliant’ is not straightforward. Not all the factories that claim to maintain ‘compliance’ are fully sincere in addressing the rights and entitlements of the workers. Some of the factories just do the ‘paperwork’ and comply the workers to say things positive way while inspection etc. take place. Therefore, there needs to be more frequent and stringent measures in place to make sure that compliant factories are rally devoted to ensure their claims and commitments. Moreover, the practice of continuing production in ‘non-compliant’ factories must be addressed by the government, industry bodies and brands that purchase from these supplier companies. If working conditions are to improve and violence at the workplace has to be addressed, the starting point has to be that all factories be brought into the compliant category in a time-bound manner, and compliance does not remain only a ‘mechanical’ or ‘paper-only’ practice.

#### **4.6 WOMEN WORKERS’ EXPERIENCE OF SEXUAL VIOLENCE AND ABUSE**

According to the respondents, the violence and harassment against women is a very common phenomenon and, in most cases, they are hesitant to open up about their private lives. A female worker described, ‘it is very shameful for a woman to disclose physical or sexual violence on her. Our family and society have taught us to be silent about these matters in public, as it brings disgrace to the family.’ Patriarchal culture still justifies violence or harassment against women and blames them for such occurrences, victim-shaming in other words. Majority of the women who participated FGDs have experienced violence at home, during their commute and at the workplace, however, very few agreed to open up about their own life.

In regard to their practical experience of violence at workplace, 88% of the respondent shared that they have seen or heard of their female co-workers became victim of violence while 12% denied having such experience during their working with the garment factories.

**Figure-4.4: Types of harassment faced by the garment workers**

Among the respondents, 17% said that line supervisors, floor supervisors and other official staff go to touch their body parts while having some conversations; this include patting on their back, cheek and head. 14% of the respondents said that they were recipient of unethical proposal from the management staff. 20% of the respondent were subjected to mean/sexual comments referring body parts, 9% of the respondents said that as the workers get trapped by the officials, they have to go for physical relation. 16% of the respondent shared that officers often call them alone to their office room and pass time, 8% shared about taking photos and videos through mobile phone, and 5% said that female workers had to face harassment through social media.

According to a FGD respondents from Ashulia EPZ, the majority of factories are compliance factories in this area owned by local and foreign owners. In their experience, foreign owners are more abusive and violent than local ones. A female worker shared, 'while I was working in a Chinese factory, they wanted us to work like machines. If we stopped working for a little while, they would come and kick us on the knees or kick the chair under us, if we sat.' Many workers in the compliance factories in Savar have shared the same experience. They feel that foreigners are more violent with the workers, as they come here just to accumulate profit.

Another female worker in Savar added that the foreign owners do not consider us as human. According to them, there are significant elements of 'dehumanization' in the behavior of the foreign buyers and owners as they are more prompt to use physical violence to keep the workers engaged like machines. Besides, there are many sexual temptations and provocations that these foreign staff put before the poor female workers. They get into sexual relation with a female worker assuring to marry them and later they move back to their country, leaving the female worker behind.

The female workers continue to experience other forms of harassments while they try to raise their voice against verbal abuses of their line chief or supervisor. Signing on blank paper has become a common practice inside the factories so that it's easier for the company to dismiss a worker for any unexpected occurrence. Terminating a worker needs valid reason, whereas resigning from the job involves less paperwork and granting of statutory benefits. Thus, whenever a worker is arguing or any sort of disagreement takes place with the management, the

management asks or sometimes forces the worker to sign a blank paper and leave. This has been a common phenomenon both in compliance and non-compliance factories, majority of the respondent have experienced such incidents with themselves or their colleagues. A male worker, in the FGD has described, 'blank paper signing happens everywhere, particularly when they want to sack a worker. Women face this more than men, since they are unaware of its consequences.'

According to the respondents, many of the factories try to sack the senior and older women to avoid salary raise. Each year salary increases, but when it goes to a certain point the management tries to terminate the worker by forcing the workers to sign on blank paper to demonstrate that the workers resigned voluntarily. This is the practice inside majority of the garment factories, irrespective of compliance or non-compliance. Since there is no powerful trade unions, such practices mostly go unchecked.

#### **4.7 GENDER DISCRIMINATION IN TERMS OF SALARY AND OTHER BENEFITS**

According to the respondents, there is no wage discrimination among male and female at the same level, however, they have seen male are preferred when it comes to promotion. In garment factories where large numbers of women are working, the number of female supervisors or mid-level employees are insignificant in numbers. The largest portions of the female workers are helpers and operators which are entry level jobs, and despite of the long employment year, they are not very likely to get promoted as line chief or supervisor. A female garment worker, worked in a garment factory in Mirpur shared:

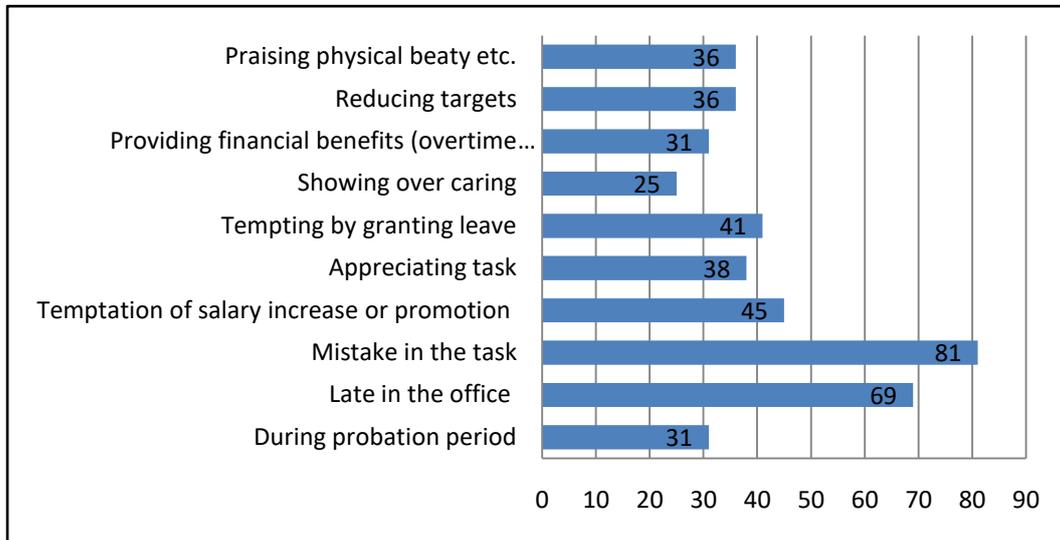
I have been working in the same factory for more than 6 years. I was promoted from helper to operator but then it stopped there. Male workers, who have joined after me have been promoted as line chief and supervisor, but no promotion has happened in my case.

On the other side, when the respondents were asked whether they prefer female line chief or supervisor to male, majority of the female responded in negative way. According to the female respondents, since women supervisors are under much pressure to prove their capacity to perform at that level, they become stricter and more abusive. However, a few of the respondents were prompt to indicate that, whereas the whole environment is male dominated, the female supervisors also find them under pressure to show some 'masculine' qualities. If increased number of women become supervisors and managers, then the scenario might change, and positive feminine qualities might then be imbued in the workplace.

#### **4.8 THE 'REASONS' FOR VIOLENCE AND ABUSE**

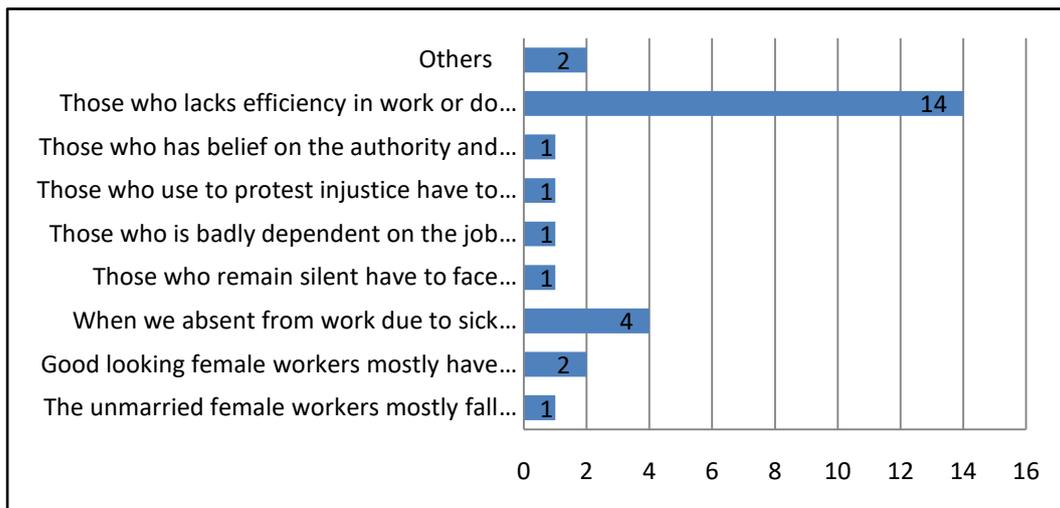
According to the respondent, due to women workers' poor economic status, long entrenched disrespect and lack of dignity they face regularly provoked sexual assault and other maltreatment. A woman who has migrated to urban setting desperately needs a job for the survival. When an employee is badly or paid irregularly, they become the victim of sexual abuse by the colleagues and superiors of the factory. There are rumors among the employees that many women take the advantage (like job security, promotion etc.) of abuse from the superiors.

**Figure-4.5: Reason for fall victims to violence of women workers**



31% of the respondent said that during probation period, female workers mostly became victim of physical, verbal and sexual harassment. 69% of the respondent said that if they become late in the office hour, they have to face such types of violence. 81% said that if they make any minor mistake in their work the line supervisor uses abusive word, touch them, pull by hair etc. On the other hand, 45% shared that they face sexual harassment being tempted by the line manager, general manager and other officers. They propose illegal relation in the name of increase of salary, granting leave, financial benefits such as providing overtime allowance without work, reducing targets. Besides, 38% of the respondent shared that the officers try to tempt them by praising their work, their beauty etc.

**Figure-4.6: Who usually fall victim to violence**



Regarding the question of who are vulnerable to violence, 14% of the respondent said that those who lacks efficiency in work or do mistakes often have to face violence and harassment. Fair looking female workers mostly have to face harassment in the workplace. Some have shared that

when a worker remains absent from work due to sick (they usually do not permit sick leave) or other reason they harassed the workers and exploit sexually taking the advantage. Besides, those who are cool in nature and remain silent against minor harassment are in the risk of grave violence.

The respondent also shared that those who is badly dependent on the job have to face violence or harassment. The female workers who are vocal and protest abuse or irregularity also face violence/harassment by the authority even by the co-workers. 'New workers, particularly women are preferred more over the senior one, as they don't argue' said a female garment worker in Savar; she also added, 'the supervisors use abusive words, sometimes it becomes extremely difficult to tolerate and we seniors argue with him at that time but the new or juniors keeps their head down and work.'

#### **4.9 SOCIAL PROCESSES AND CULTURAL DISCOURSES ENABLING VIOLENCE AND ABUSE**

Detailed examination of the lives and narratives draw attention to diverse issues that are in operation not only in factory floors but also in the social life. The practices remain in action through the support from the cultural discourses.

##### *Docile body and the cultural politics of making 'compliant' femininity*

The cultural discourses are always at play to make sure that women feel vulnerable in different ways. Examination of the ways in which women's susceptibility in constituted in social settings provide grounded explanations as to how continuous exploitation and abuse of women workers is possible. Many of our respondents indicated that whereas girls and women in both rural and urban settings are frequently subjected to violence, rape and harassment, it becomes rather probable that women workers on the factory floors would be humiliated and subordinated through sexually equipped mechanisms.

##### *The persistence of the metaphor of 'nimble finger'*

The conventional metaphors that link women to be biologically more suitable to deal with sewing machine are still evoked routinely in the assembly lines. This explains what are the values and norms that are at work to keep the women active behind the sewing machines. Also notable are the diverse ways in which the metaphor of 'nimble finger' come to be intersected with the sexualized identity politics. In fact, there occurs significant 'mutual reinforcement' between patriarchy and capitalism. It was clear from women's life narratives that dowry, domestic abuse and men's irresponsible behavior within marriage are among the reasons that force women workers to put up with the exploitative and abusive production regime that are integral to contemporary capitalism.

##### *Women or work-machine*

The view of the owners' and managers about the workers and their responsibilities and skills indicate that they expect the women workers to play role more a work-machine than a human being. When women have to continue with diverse reproductive duties as wife and mother, the production regime does not provide them any time, support or space to make any 'balance' or judicious allocation of time and effort. This means that women are doubly or triply burdened with their factory work and household work. What happens is that women's quest for

‘empowerment’ and liberty from patriarchal exploitation are appropriated by capitalist production regime.

*Contradictions in the way liberalism expects to achieve ‘freedom’ for women*

There is significant difference in the ways in which male and female workers explain and experience ‘freedom’, aspiration and fulfillment of life. Even though the economic leverage that wage earning enable them cannot be undermined; it is important to recognize and talk about the ‘new’ forms of distresses and sufferings that the female workers experience. The remaking of the social and economic setting means that there unfold many affective and emotional crises that were not seen before.

*Work environment, dust, mask etc. and public health hazard*

There are many serious health and safety issues that are generally normalized. The silent ways in which workers go through hazardous and harmful work environment means that they find themselves alienated from the whole production process.

*Blurred line of consent and refusal*

There is a thin line between workers’ consent and refusal regarding romantic relations etc. This line gives way for the abuses and exploitations to go uncontested and condoned by society. Flirting, romance and abuse are mixed up in a way that distresses are overlooked.

*Image and Self*

Both male and female workers have been found to talk bad about their own women colleagues. This common practice reveals a transitional crisis about self-esteem and also indicates a gap in formation of class cohesion. However, it remains to be seen if the trope of ‘false consciousness’ is an adequate framework.

*Cultural Politics and the making of women’s diverse exclusion*

Among other practices, there are many recent examples in which naming and shaming has been adopted by factories as a mechanism for disciplining. Viewing women garment workers as fortunate not to be pushed by poverty into prostitution (e.g., thoughts like this are commonly circulated: “What else could they do if they were not taken on as garment workers? How many of them would turn to be sex worker?) is a part of cultural politics that creates context for management of surplus population. Female body on the garment floor can be seen as an embodiment of modesty and rebellion together.

*The attitude and behavior of line in-charge or floor in-charge and making of ‘masculinity’*

The ideas of disciplining and use of sexualized ways – to understand how it came into being and kept going, we may need to the making of masculinity in contemporary Bangladesh society.

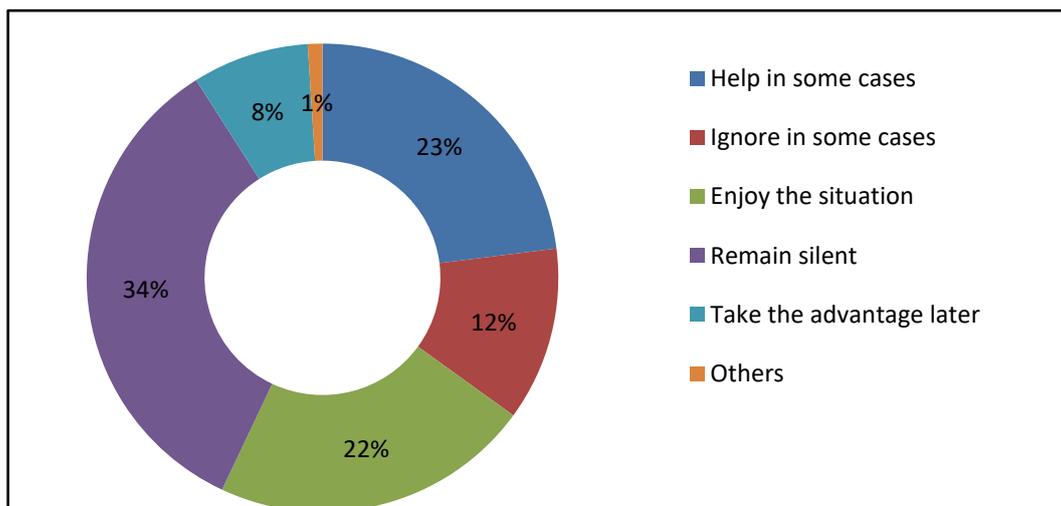
*Going beyond wage-centric narrow narratives*

There has to be more focus on issues relating to human development so that childcare, health and education may draw more policy focus. Viewing the workers’ lives by going beyond ‘labor’ or ‘wage’ framework is important; however, this should not mean undermining of wage related issues.

#### 4.10 RESPONSE OF MALE CO-WORKERS

Male respondents understand and acknowledge that women are in more vulnerable position than them and are more exploited. However, the in-built culture of patriarchy makes them entirely or partially blames the women, particularly for sexual harassments at workplace. There is prominent aspect of ‘victim blaming’ in the ways male workers talk about abuse of the female workers. As quoted from a male participant, ‘... not all girls/women are experiencing sexual abuse in the floor. The person who behaves such targets the girls/women, who has so called character problem. If a girl/woman allows or talks nicely to those men, then why won’t men take advantage of that?’ The view about the violence against female garment workers is that the women must know how to save herself through following religious and traditional norms on the street and workplaces. The male workers have also used the phrase in Bengali: ‘*Ek haate talibaje na*’ (‘it takes two hands to clap’) which imply that a man cannot do anything wrong unless the woman in question does not allow him to do it. However, some participants have admitted that female workers are more exposed to different layers of violence in garment factories than male workers.

**Figure-4.7: Response from the male co-workers regarding violence against woman**



The interview respondent (23%) shared that male co-workers try to help the abused female workers while 12% shared that they ignore any violence happened to female co-workers. 34% of the respondent shared that when a female worker fall victim to harassment by the high officials, the male co-workers remain silent. 22% respondent shared that their male co-workers enjoy the situation of harassment or violence against women. 8% respondent shared that later of the incidence the male colleagues try to take the advantage on the female victim.

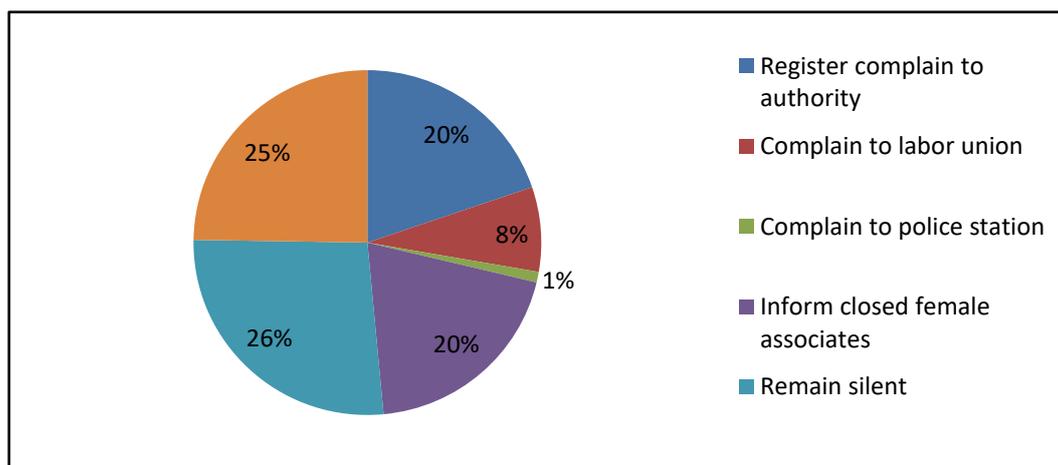
The respondent shared those women as workers are more preferred by the management since it is easier to control them, whereas male workers argue with their authority. According to a male worker, ‘our female colleagues don’t have the courage to argue when they are made to do extra hours, but we will go straight and argue’. The male workers doubted that their number has been significantly reducing for the last couple of years. For this reason, male workers might not be interested to support their female colleagues while they are abused in the workplace. According to them, it is gradually becoming difficult to find a new job in the garment sector and we have to be very careful if we have to save the job. A contradictory scenario has been observed for male

workers, in one hand as they are not afraid when they have to fight for their own rights; whereas, on the other hand, they think about saving their job when it comes to defend their female colleagues. Thus, during defending a female worker, male workers are threatened to their job security.

#### 4.11 RESPONSE OF THE WOVEN WORKERS

The FGD participants were asked about how they address harassment or violence at workplace towards them, a woman garment worker said, 'it is very normal that the supervisors will misbehave with the workers, if we do any mistakes in our work.' Majority of the behavior. 'Sometimes they use some words that I cannot say you. Uttering the word itself would make me ashamed. But we cannot do anything. We silently try to ignore what they say – our respondents have somewhat similar statement as her and one female garment worker added that abusive words is 'a part of culture' in the garment sector. Some respondent tried to justify such authoritarian behavior, saying that there are workers who don't work properly if they get chance. However, all the workers have tried to express their vulnerability and helplessness against their superiors' abusive attempts are meant to avoid further violence', says a female garment worker of Mirpur Area.

Figure-4.8: How a victim addressed the issue



According to the respondent when a woman being victim of violence, at first, she try to hide the incident unless others disclose it through gossiping. However, some finally remain silent about the violence (shared by 27%). 20% of the respondent shared that they go for register complain to the authority when they fall victim to violence. 8% shared that they go to labor union for remedy. 20% said that they share the incident with their close female colleagues while 27% shared that women usually remain silent to the incident. 25% shared the victim silently change the workplace.

The respondents shared that the family of a victim becomes stigmatized in the society – this in turn makes other members of the family as well as the co-workers to blame the victim. If the victim is unmarried, it brings about the potential to badly impact her future life. Thus the 'practical' need to set priority in a given condition means that women have to think about keeping the life going; thus, a situation is made in which a woman worker is forced to keep the incidence undisclosed – let alone seeking justice or making protest.



## CHAPTER - V

# LEGAL AND INSTITUTIONAL SETTINGS TO DEAL WITH VIOLENCE AND ABUSE

### 5.1 TWO CASE STUDIES: WHEN WORKERS RESIST AND SEEK REMEDY

Maimuna had left work in one factory and then she was fired from another. She now works as a domestic aide in a house and does not hold any plan to go back to factory work soon. In the first factory she was subjected to severe maltreatment in the form of name-calling, swearing and hurling of abusive words. She was also being deprived of her over-time wages. The factory management kept account of over-time hours in a way that they could manipulate the final calculation. Most of the workers in the factory would be deprived of the remuneration that they could get based on their real over-time hour. She had left job in the first factory and moved to the second factory where also she was sexually abused by the supervisor. He would try to seduce her and touch her body improperly. Sometimes he would ask her to pass time with him after office hours. Maimuna thought on numerous occasions about making a complaint to the managers but her co-workers told her that she was not going to get any notable remedy to this. Going against the advices of the co-workers she made verbal complaint to the floor manager. The floor manager warned the supervisor that he needed to be careful. However, they did not take any formal measure against his – so, after a few days he started to behave in sexually intimidating ways again. In the meantime, the floor manager left job and there was a new manager. This manager didn't give heed to Maimuna's complaints – but Maimuna tried to resist and tried her best to make it an issue among other workers on her floor. She then went to the Production Manager (PM) and detailed her situation. However, the PM was well-known for the notorious treatment of the workers. He not only showed disrespect to Maimuna's complaints, rather he depicted her as a troublemaker. The consequence was that the factory people soon told that her job in the factory was terminated.

In case of Bilkis, the experience is mixed. So far, she has worked in three factories. In two of the factories she had had many bitter encounters with the officials and co-workers but factory management didn't provide her with any recourse or remedy. To remain silent and comply with the whims of the staffs and managers was the norm there. In the third factory she found that the administrative hierarchy was willing and equipped to deal with the misbehavior of the staffs. Regular training sessions would take place in the factory in which they would reiterate time and again that violent and abusive behavior was not acceptable. She was badly treated by the male line-supervisor about which she made complaint to the PM. The supervisor would always try to demoralize her in different ways; his use of word and body language was much disturbing in nature. After receiving complaint from Bilkis, the PM took the issue seriously and censored the

accused. He then transferred the supervisor to another line and kept eye on him to make sure that his behavior was corrected.

These two cases illustrate how the attitude and action of the management staffs differ from factory to factory. In absence of organized trade unions or other active forums for representation of the workers, it is difficult for the workers to have a platform from where they can raise their voice against abuses and harassments. The labor law of the country requires the factories to have ways to mitigate such abuses; the focus of 'compliance' also means that factories are officially mandated to ensure minimum welfare of the workers.

## **5.2 FACTORY MECHANISMS TO REDRESS ABUSE AND HARASSMENT**

When we asked workers plainly as to whether there were adequate measures or mechanisms available in their respective factories to restrain and stop such abuses, or to provide remedy and redress when things 'unwanted' or 'unapproved' happen, most of the workers-respondents answered in the positive. However, further probing and detailed discussion in the group sessions and in-depth interviews made it clear that whereas factories were apt in 'showing' that they care about workers' wellbeing, in practice effective measures were not adequately in place to combat or make an end to violence, abuse and harassment that are pervasive in the factory floors.

70% of the respondent said that there is some mechanism or 'institutional setting' to redress violence and harassment in their office or factories that they work in; however, almost all of them said that implementation status was not satisfactory. 19% of the respondents said that there is a 'complaint receiving point' in their factories while 73% of the respondent said that in theirs' there are 'compliant dropping box'. In response to the question as to whether the managements take any action when an incident of violence or harassment of a worker takes place and a complaint is made, 56% said that they have 'heard' that actions are taken by the management, on the other hand, 44% answered that no measures are taken by the factory managers. When taken, what is the form of the measures? 71% of the respondents said that 'warning the accused' is the step that the authorities generally adopt.

## **5.3 REASONS FOR FACTORY 'INACTION'**

In response to the question as to why action is not taken by the authority in order to address abusive behavior of the staffs, 9% of the respondents said that the problem is basically with the way the people in the 'factory management' think about the issues of abuse and harassment. Many of the workers identified it clearly that the managers and owners are not willing to accept the credibility of the complaints that the workers make. They suspect that workers willfully make the stories up in relation to these issues. To the workers, it is not clear whether the managers and owners do it intentionally or not, but they find the ways of denial and suspicion to be painful.

21% of the respondents said that management did not have any respect for the workers, and their behavior sometimes shows that they don't view the workers as human beings. Consequently, they do not take the issue of violence against workers as anything requiring serious attention. 22% of the respondents were of the opinion that management did not take the harassment and violence issue seriously particularly for the reason that they thought giving too much attention to such issues would hamper the production of the factory as well as making it impossible to keep discipline in the floor.

4% of the respondents said that in their experience they saw that management blamed the complainants for the violence and were not willing to take any action or even arrange a hearing. 8% said that management did not pay heed to the complaint and 9% said that no action was taken because the management thought such attempts to resolve the complaint would be time consuming. 4% of the respondents shared the view that the mentality of the people in management was that violence on women was not a problem – one line of their (factory authority people) argument was: “where there is work, there would always occur some problems”.

#### **5.4 THE NATURE OF THE ACTIONS TAKEN**

When we asked the workers to recollect if they had any memory of incidents in which factory authorities took action against the perpetrators of sexual abuse and violence in the factory, 60% of the respondents could not think of any such event or incident of remedial action even though almost all of them were of the opinion that such abuse was ubiquitous. 8% of the respondents said that they knew of the incidents in which the accused person was terminated from the job; 3% could recall about the incidents in which the accused was given ‘show cause’ notice and then was given warning.

The respondents also said that they are not happy with their experience of actions taken by the authority with regard to harassment of women workers. 58% of the respondents said that their satisfaction regarding action was medium whereas 40% of them said that they did not find the things satisfactory at all.

#### **5.5 WHETHER TO MAKE A COMPLAINT OR NOT: WORKERS’ CONSIDERATIONS**

The issues relating to violence and abuse are talked about in a way that there runs a rationale: since violence against women is prevalent everywhere in the society, there is no point in expecting the workplace to be free from it. Women workers don’t find them to have enough social and economic footing to risk their job security by reporting against the perpetrators.

The social and cultural ‘sanctions’ that thus come to be enforced make the victims more vulnerable and reluctant with regards to resistance or remedy seeking.

The outcome is that the incidents of reporting about harassment/violence are relatively very low. Many of the respondents shared this view that while the factory management authorizes the supervisory level staffs to get the production target fulfilled ‘by any means’, there remains no ‘reason’ or ‘ground’ left for the higher authorities to take punitive actions against the perpetrators of abuses and harassments.

Many of the workers have witnessed their co-workers to be further victimized just for the reason that they had raised their voices against abuses and harassment. Thus, as effort to seek remedy involves multiple risks that include the prospect of losing jobs, to have further indictment on accuser’s character that might tarnish the image of herself and her family in the neighborhood and community.

73% of the respondents have said that in their experience they have seen that in response to the complaints that are lodged formally to the factory authorities, the factory administration either

take no action or at best take delayed nominal action. 24.7% of the respondents have said that they knew of incidents in which staffs found guilty of violence against women were dismissed from the job. 15.4% said that they saw incidents in which the authority only warned the accused.

23.2% of the respondents talked about the practice that the authority took time to settle the issue but did not go for any action taken later. On the other hand, many of the workers have witnessed incidents in which allegations were made against the high-level officials and the victim did not get any justice and was maligned further.

When we asked the workers to recollect at least one incident in which factory authorities took action against a perpetrator, the majority of the respondents (60%) failed to remember any such proactive role on the part of factory authorities.

31% of the respondents were of the opinion that the victim of violence did not register a complaint on the apprehension that they would be stigmatized further. 10% of the respondents said that female workers did not go for making such incidents public as they thought that such disclosure would mar their married life. 33% of the respondents said that main reason for not making a complaint was the fear or apprehension that raising voice about issues of violence would make them lose their jobs; 26% of the female workers thought that such complaint-making was likely to put a stain in their character.

## **5.6 PRACTICAL (NON)EXISTENCE OF ‘INSTITUTIONAL SET-UP’ IN FACTORIES TO COMBAT VIOLENCE AND HARASSMENT**

Most of the workers are not aware about the ‘institutional setting’ that the factory authorities are ‘expected’ to put in place considering relevant provisions of the labor law of Bangladesh and in accordance with buyers’ ‘compliance’ requirement.

60% of the respondents could not show that they knew about any specific policy or official set-up that was in action in their respective work-place to prevent, combat or address the issues of work-place violence (sexual or not) against women workers. However, 16% of the respondents were aware about the existence of ‘Participation Committee’ in their respective factories.

2% of the respondents said that they knew about the provision that workers are to be paid money equivalent to three months salary at the time of dismissal from job.

3% of the respondent said they knew that their factory had a policy that prohibits unethical behavior toward female workers. Another 3% said that in their factory this provision was in action that a staff accused of harassing a woman worker would be fired from the job.

Workers reflections made it clear that by setting a heavy production target and then by trying to get it achieved through pressurizing the workers, it is the production regime itself that give rise to a tensed and charged environment that many of the incidents of aggressive and sexualized behavior of the management staffs.

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tensed and charged environment that many of the incidents of aggressive and sexualized behavior of the management staffs. One worker made it clear:

When the factory management gives power to the floor-in-charge or supervisor to achieve a set target at any cost, they actually give approval to that staff to use forces that might range from physical or sexual to mental torture. I know particularly about the sub-contracting factories – there the management staffs do not hesitate to engage in acts of torture and harassment of the female workers. In many factories even the male helpers and operators are also forced to go through harassment of various types. The situation is so that when a female worker becomes victim of sexual or physical harassment on the 4<sup>th</sup> floor, the management people do not allow workers from other floors to come to know about it or to interfere in it. They keep on saying that one should not show interest about the incidents of other floors. I know of an incident – this happened in a factory where I used to work. A worker fell sick because of physical and mental torture but no workers of the factory could attend or take care of her. In the end the worker died because of such negligence.

Many of the workers said that they have heard about many factories that have got formal policies to check and address incidents of sexual harassment; however, they believe that these provisions are only for the sake of formalities needed to be in line with ‘compliance’, practical application of the policies is rare.

Though 30% of the respondents said that they have heard about trade unions, none of them could confirm that they knew about active existence of trade unions in the factories that they have worked in or are currently working. Moreover, many of the workers expressed this perception: in the factories where there were workers’ forums or units which are similar to trade union, the priority of the leaders of such bodies was to bargain about the wages only – they never focus on issues related to gender discrimination or sexual harassment.

The respondents said that PC (Participation Committee) is formed to act as a negotiating agency between workers and owners. There is option to select the representatives of the committee by voting. However, usually the owners select the representatives from the staff and force others to vote for the selected persons. The members of the committee always work to look after the interest of the owners. If they speak for the interest of the workers, at first the owners oust them from the committee then fire from the job showing various reasons.

Almost all the respondents said that they have heard about the labor laws and policies of the government; however, they were not aware about any of provisions or mechanisms and could not say what right or entitlement they were supposed to enjoy in light of those laws or policies.

All the respondents agreed that government measures were inadequate to address harassment and violence at workplace. They have heard that labor inspectors visit the factories to monitor the compliance; however, none of the respondents ever have had the experience of talking to the labor inspectors during such inspection.

The respondent said that during the audit of the buyers, the owners warn the female workers that if they share anything about the physical or sexual harassment as well as other discrimination, the factory will be closed, and they will lose their job. As a result, the sufferers have to keep their mouth shut during the events of buyers’ visit or external monitoring.

The respondents agreed to the point that due to strong monitoring of Accord (a compliance mentoring agency from European Union, direct physical torture and discrimination has reduced in the factories in comparison to previous situation. However, the supervisors nowadays render various 'innovative' methods which include making a female worker to remain standing for hours, forcing them to work in a newer section – such as, sending a cutting expert worker to sewing section, or to make them to pass time without work etc. Thus, they try to prove the point that the worker is unskilled and thus make ground for her to sign a blank paper that they may use as her willful resignation letter.

The respondents said that due to the awareness about their rights many of the workers these days try to be part of labor organizations that work outside the factories. However, the management staffs of their respective factories often monitor whether they have any communication with the labor organizations and threaten to fire them from factory in case they are found to have any such connection.

## **5.7 MEASURES TO BE TAKEN TO PREVENT WORKPLACE VIOLENCE**

17% of the respondents said that there should be 'participation committee' in every garment factory, and it should also be ensured that the committees function effectively. They also felt that women workers must be taken in as active members of the PCs. Other measures that they suggested included: full guarantee of job security even if one raises voice as regards such abusive behavior and harassment; proper existence and functioning of trade unions; increased awareness among women workers including training on violence against women; more effective monitoring by the government agencies; regular monthly meeting of the active PCs; proper implementation of labor laws and relevant government policies.

Some of the respondents said that lack of formal trade unions in the factories is the prime cause of sexual, physical, mental torture as well as of low wage, lack of leave provisions, over-time non-payment and other discrimination. However, some of them have expressed their doubt about effectiveness of such trade union as they think that such unions is likely to act to protect the interest of the owners. Many of the workers believe that at least female members of the trade union would speak for the interest of the female workers.

## **5.8 GAPS IN LAWS AND POLICIES**

There is a provision in the High Court guidelines that each employer should set up a Sexual Harassment Complaints Committee where victims can lodge complaints. But as we see in many other cases, factories have such committees only on paper. The challenge is to make sure that these committees function properly in a transparent manner. We need to ensure that women workers feel confident that if they file complaints to the committees, they will not have to face any consequences, the cases will be dealt with in a confidential manner, and they will get justice. They will have to have the sense of security that it's their right to lodge complaints.

Women's labor rights are protected by law. Through the revision of the Labor Act, 2006 in 2013 and formulation of Labor Rule in 2015 the rights of workers were addressed and initiatives taken to ensure a decent work environment. This included workers' right to trade unions, introduction of an insurance scheme, setting up of a central fund to improve the workers' living standards, and requiring 5 percent of annual profit to be deposited in employee welfare funds. The recent

Labor Rules also have introduced detailed specifications for provisions such as childcare and compensations. The National Industrial Health and Safety Council has drafted an Occupational Safety and Health Policy which remains at the final stage of approval. The implementation of this policy would benefit women more than men as they are more affected by its absence.

The Labor Code, 2006 and its revision in 2013 recognized the issue of sexual harassment in the work place. The High Court judgment on sexual harassment also provides guidelines to employers and educational institutions on how to address sexual harassment issues.



## **CHAPTER- VI**

# **RECOMMENDATIONS**

### **RECOMMENDATIONS**

- State and non-state actors should take initiative to challenge existing social and individual attitudes that accept violence against women as ‘normal’. All sections of the family, community, and society should be made aware and mobilized to act to prevent violence against women.
- Women should be brought under awareness program to make them understand notion of violence at workplace and increase their voice against harassment. Factory owners, management staff and other relevant officials also should be brought under awareness on preventing harassment at workplace.
- Along with demand for wage and financial benefit, Trade union, labor organization as well as workers should also concentrate on preventing violence at workplace. Representation of women in trade unions should be strengthened to address upward mobility, maternity benefits, sexual harassment and violence on them.
- Owners should be pressurized to create better working environment for women. They Should initiate strict administrative rules as well as exemplary punishments to the perpetrators.
- The ILO code of conduct at workplaces and the provision of ‘decent work environment’ should be integrated at every working sector by the workplace authorities.
- Effective implementation of legislative framework to mitigate Violence against Women (VAW) in Bangladesh including ‘Penal Code 1860’, and ‘Nari O Shishu Nirjatan Daman Ain, 2000 (Amendment 2003)’ (Act No. 8 of 2000)
- The ‘National Women Development Policy 2011’ must be renewed with inclusion of violence against women remedial with special focus on sexual harassment at workplace.
- Global brand buyers, local employers should be brought under strict accountability. The respective countries of global brand buyers also should impose accountability and monitoring on them.
- Sub-contracting factory should be brought under strict monitoring of relevant government directorate.

- International, regional forum on labors, European Union and other relevant agencies should create pressure for sustaining congenial environment for workplace safety and free from sexual violence.
- Beyond workplace safety and security, other crucial factors relating to workers' life, such as ke health, accommodation, childcare, social safety net support or protection etc. are rarely addressed. So necessary social security measures should be taken for the workers.
- Large number of women's involvement in the garment sector could be a catalyst for significant social transformation. So far, the state and society have not been able to make use of this. Workers are social beings and they wellbeing is not dependent only on wage. A more supportive social space and cultural discourse would enable greater positive changes.



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