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Addressing the silence: A study on the underreporting of sexual violence among female garment workers in Bangladesh

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GLU Working Paper No. 64

UNDERREPORTING OF SEXUAL VIOLENCE AMONG FEMALE GARMENT WORKERS IN BANGLADESH

September 2024

Habiba Lilun Nahar



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Table of Contents

| | |
|--|-----------|
| Abstract | 4 |
| Acronyms | 5 |
| CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND | |
| 1. Introduction | 6 |
| CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK | |
| 2.1 <u>Gender Inequalities and Power Dynamics</u> | 8 |
| 2.2 <u>Patriarchy</u> | 12 |
| 2.3 <u>Structural Violence</u> | 13 |
| 2.4 <u>Sexual Violence within Industry</u> | 14 |
| 2.5 <u>Women in Global Value Chain</u> | 16 |
| CHAPTER THREE: FINDINGS OF THE STUDY | |
| 3.1 <u>Situation of Bangladeshi RMG Industry</u> | 18 |
| 3.2 <u>Sexual Violence in the Workplace</u> | 19 |
| 3.3 <u>Factors of Underreporting Violence</u> | 22 |
| 3.3.1 <u>Fear of Retaliation and Job Insecurity</u> | 22 |
| 3.3.2 <u>Power Imbalances</u> | 23 |
| 3.3.3 <u>Cultural Norms and Stigmatization</u> | 24 |
| 3.3.4 <u>Economic Insecurity</u> | 26 |
| 3.3.5 <u>Institutional Barriers to Reporting Violence</u> | 28 |
| 3.4 <u>Empowerment and Agency</u> | 29 |
| 3.4.1 <u>Defining “empowerment”</u> | 29 |
| 3.4.2 <u>Status of Women’s Empowerment in the RMG Sector</u> | 30 |
| 3.5 <u>Empowering Women Workers: Roles and Strategies of Diverse Actors</u> .. | 32 |
| CHAPTER FOUR: CONCLUSION | |
| 4. Conclusion | 34 |
| References | 36 |
| About the Author | 45 |

Abstract

Sexual violence against female garment workers in Bangladesh is a pervasive problem that often goes unreported due to various factors. This research aims to address the silence surrounding the underreporting of sexual violence among female garment workers in Bangladesh. The study has utilized a case study approach, incorporating semi-structured interviews with female garment workers who have experienced sexual violence and examining the systemic factors within the garment industry that perpetuate such violence. The research is grounded in the feminist political economy framework, which analyses the power dynamics, gender inequalities, and patriarchal norms that contribute to the underreporting of sexual violence. The findings of this study illuminate the extent of sexual violence within the Ready-made Garment (RMG) sector. Fear of retaliation and job instability, power imbalance, cultural norms and stigmatization, economic insecurity and institutional barriers are identified as the main factors of underreporting violence. Furthermore, the research delves into themes of women's empowerment and agency, shedding light on the current status of female empowerment within the RMG industry. Finally, the study concludes that addressing underreported violence and promoting empowerment require comprehensive actions. Vital steps include establishing clear reporting systems, conducting awareness campaigns, implementing training initiatives, and fostering collaboration among stakeholders. These efforts empower female workers, encourage reporting of incidents, and contribute to combating gender-based violence in the workplace.

Acronyms

BNGWEL - Bangladesh National Garments Workers Employees League

EPZs - Export Processing Zones

GVB - Gender-Based Violence

GVC - Global Value Chain

ILO - International Labor Organization

LGBTQ - Lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender

RMG - Readymade Garments

TU - Trade Union

WPV - Workplace violence

CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

1. Introduction

Sexual violence against female workers in Bangladesh is a prevalent issue that often goes unreported in the ready-made garments (RMG) sectors in Bangladesh. These workers are particularly vulnerable to sexual violence due to their low socioeconomic status, lack of job security, and limited legal protection at the workplace (Paul-Majumder, 1996; Fair Wear Foundation, n.d.; Salway et al., 2005; ILO, 2020). A study conducted by the global justice organization in Dhaka, Bangladesh, focused on 200 garment factory workers, where 181 of them were women. According to the findings, a staggering 80% reported that they had either personally experienced or witnessed instances of sexual harassment and abuse at their workplace. Additionally, the survey revealed that 10% of the female respondents stated they were currently enduring sexual harassment, molestation, and assault at their jobs (Action Aid, 2019:2). Despite the prevalence of sexual violence against female garment workers in Bangladesh, there is a significant underreporting of such incidents and there is a lack of research on the underreporting of sexual violence among female garment workers. The reporting mechanisms within the garment industry lack transparency, impartiality, and protection for victims, contributing to the underreporting of sexual violence. Studies indicated that female workers often distrust the existing reporting systems due to concerns about confidentiality, inadequate legislative enforcement, lack of support, and potential adverse consequences (Ahmed, 2004: 38; Chowdhury, 2017: 118).

Workplace violence (WPV) including (sexual and other forms of violence) is extensively documented in the Bangladeshi RMG industry, affecting female workers who either experience or witness it. Furthermore, this WPV is linked to how managers perceive female workers, which can be inferred from their patriarchal and gendered hierarchical attitudes towards them (Gibbs et al., 2019). In the male-dominated garment industry, women often occupy lower-paying and less secure positions compared to their male counterparts, creating a power imbalance that can be exploited by supervisors and male colleagues (ILO, 2020; Islam, 2016; Iqbal, 2020). Studies have shown that gender inequalities and power relations in the garment industry contribute to the underreporting of sexual violence against female garment workers in Bangladesh. For example, a study by Begum et al., (2010) found that male-dominated workplace cultures, combined with a lack of awareness and understanding of sexual harassment, contribute to the normalization of such behaviour in the garment industry. Therefore, in this paper, I will examine the underlying systemic factors within the garment industry in Bangladesh that perpetuate sexual violence against female workers.

In addition, gender inequality poses a prevalent risk observed across various stages of the RMG value chain and is evident in multiple countries where RMG production takes place. Within the RMG value chain, gender inequality manifests in various forms of gender-based risks, including gender-based discrimination, gender-based

violence, and sexual harassment (Bossman et al., 2019:3). In Bangladeshi patriarchal societies, gender inequality can normalize harassment and discrimination against women. This normalization can extend to the workplace, where female workers may face various forms of verbal, physical, or psychological harassment, considering it a "normal" part of their work environment. Therefore, I hypothesize that in the context of the global value chain (GVC), female workers occupying less powerful positions within the RMG industry are more susceptible to experiencing sexual violence. Moreover, female workers from marginalized socioeconomic backgrounds, who economically depend on their jobs, are particularly vulnerable to sexual violence due to the power imbalance inherent in their relationships with supervisors and managers. The systematic role of the GVC exacerbates these gender-based power dynamics within the RMG industry.

Building upon this understanding, feminist political economy will be employed to understand the power dynamics and patriarchy contributing to the underreporting of sexual violence. Intersectionality will also be discussed as it highlights that female workers face not only gender-based discrimination but also class-based discrimination, given their low-income backgrounds within the Bangladeshi garment industry. By focusing on authors who specifically address the Bangladesh case, this analysis seeks to ground the study in the country's cultural context. I have focused specifically on authors who have written about the Bangladesh case to ensure that my analysis is deeply rooted in the cultural context of the country.

Understanding the factors contributing to underreporting is vital for effective interventions. Employing a qualitative research design, I aim to explore the complexities surrounding this phenomenon. As qualitative methods offer a nuanced understanding of participants' experiences and perspectives, I have delved deeply into the underlying factors contributing to this phenomenon. Through in-depth interviews with female garment workers who have experienced sexual violence, I seek to gain insight into their decision-making processes regarding reporting. The sample comprises workers from various sectors of the industry who have experienced sexual violence but refrained from reporting. While acknowledging study constraints, including potential limitations in sample size and representation, I ensure participants' autonomy and well-being is upheld. Informed consent is obtained and measures are in place to protect confidentiality and privacy.

In the upcoming chapters, I will analyse and define key concepts such as gender inequality, patriarchy, and sexual violence through a theoretical lens. I will also explore the patriarchal landscape of Bangladesh and its impact on the RMG sector, supported by empirical evidence. The next chapter, will present the findings on sexual violence in the Bangladeshi RMG industry, citing responses from research participants. I will contextualize their experience and explore how pre-existing patriarchal gender roles contribute to the exploitation of women workers in the RMG sector of Bangladesh. Finally, in the conclusion, I will summarize the key arguments and findings and provide insight into the future of the RMG sector in Bangladesh with the aim of addressing workplace violence within the industry.

CHAPTER TWO: THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK AND LITERATURE REVIEW

This chapter probes into the theoretical framework and literature review surrounding the complex issue of gender inequalities, power dynamics, and sexual violence within the context of Bangladeshi RMG industry. First, I introduce the concept of gender inequalities and power dynamics, emphasizing how disparities intersect with other forms of social stratification, leading to multiple dimensions of disadvantage for women from marginalized backgrounds. Additionally, the section highlights the manifestation of gender asymmetry in the translation of labour efforts into income within global labour markets, resulting from gender inequalities in access to education, productive assets, and economic opportunities. Then I explore the feminist political economy theory as a lens to understand the power dynamics and patriarchy prevailing in the RMG industry. This theory acknowledges the interconnectedness of economic, social, and political factors and their intersection with gender inequalities, particularly in shaping the experience of marginalized female workers. The concept of patriarchy is examined to understand how gender norms and power structures reinforce women's subordination to men in various aspects of life, including the workplace. It sheds light on the gendered division of labour and how men exploit household structures to assert power and violence over women, both within society and the RMG industry. Subsequently, I have explored the concept of structural violence, particularly within the patriarchal system of Bangladesh. It examines how male dominance in decision-making positions limits women's access to education, resources, and opportunities, perpetuating gender inequality in the garment industry. The section also sheds light on the prevalence and various forms of sexual violence within the sector, highlighting verbal, non-verbal, physical, and psychological harassment experienced by female workers. Finally, the last part examines women's role within the GVC of the RMG industry. It underscores how gender exploitation is not confined to the factory floor but extends throughout the entire supply chain. The section emphasizes how women face inequalities and discrimination at various stages, with limited access to equal opportunities, fair wages, and decision-making roles. It discusses the unequal power distribution between multinational corporations and local suppliers, leading to exploitative practices. Thus, chapter two provides a detailed overview of the theoretical perspectives and empirical evidence surrounding gender inequalities, power dynamics, and sexual violence within Bangladesh's RMG industry.

2.1. Gender Inequalities and Power Dynamics

Gender inequality encompasses a wide range of disparities in various aspects of life (Bosman et al., 2019). These inequalities intersect with other forms of horizontal disparities, such as race and caste. Consequently, women and girls from the most disadvantaged caste, ethnic, and racial groups often experience poorer health, nutrition, education, and higher levels of violence compared to women from similar socioeconomic backgrounds (Kabeer, 2010). One significant manifestation of gender

asymmetry is observed in the translation of labour efforts into income in the market. These disparities arise from gender inequalities in access to education and productive assets, as well as the organization of economic opportunities along gendered lines. In global labour markets, hierarchies are formed, reflecting the intersection between income-based and group-based inequalities. As a result, women from socially marginalized groups, such as lower castes or minority ethnicities, tend to be concentrated in lower-paying and less desirable activities, often characterized by risks, stigma, and exploitative working conditions (Kabeer, 2015).

Feminist political economy theory provides a useful framework for understanding the power dynamics and patriarchy that contribute to the underreporting of sexual violence among female garment workers in Bangladesh. A crucial element of the feminist political economy perspective involves acknowledging power dynamics and inequalities present within capitalist systems, such as the global garment industry (Harcourt, 2017). These power dynamics manifest in various ways, including gendered hierarchies within the workplace, with women often occupying the lowest paid and least secure positions (Chen et al., 1999). This can leave female garment workers particularly vulnerable to sexual violence, as their economic position may be seen as an invitation for abuse (Harcourt, 2017). Harcourt (2017) argued that women's bodies become a commodity in the garment industry, with female workers often subjected to unwanted sexual advances in exchange for job security. This perspective recognizes the interconnectedness of economic, social, and political factors and how these dynamics intersect with gender inequalities to shape the experiences of marginalized populations. Such an analysis highlights the ways in which multinational corporations, factory owners, and local government officials hold significant power over female workers in the industry. This power imbalance creates an environment where women are vulnerable to sexual harassment and assault, and where perpetrators often enjoy impunity due to their position of authority (Kabir et al., 2018).

In the context of addressing the underreporting of sexual violence among female garment workers in Bangladesh, Naila Kabeer's empowerment framework offers a valuable theoretical lens. Defined by Kabeer (1999) as the ability of individuals to access resources, exercise agency, and achieve desired outcomes, this framework offers a comprehensive understanding of power dynamics and agency, which are pivotal in analysing the factors contributing to underreporting. Comprising three core components - resources, agency, and achievements (Kabeer, 1999), her framework allows for a holistic examination of the complexities surrounding underreporting sexual violence. Resources encompass the material, social, and human assets essential for individuals to exert agency, while agency signifies the capacity to make choices and take action to influence circumstances. Achievements represent the tangible outcomes resulting from the exercise of agency. In the context of female garment workers in Bangladesh, Kabeer's framework facilitates an analysis of the barriers inhibiting the reporting of sexual violence incidents. For example, exploring the distribution of resources such as access to legal support and counselling services illuminates the challenges victims face in reporting instances of sexual violence. Additionally, evaluating the level of agency among female garment workers in asserting their rights and seeking redress for sexual violence is crucial for understanding the dynamics of underreporting.

Kabeer's framework provides a nuanced understanding of power relations by emphasizing the multidimensional nature of power. According to Kabeer (1994), power is not solely concentrated in institutional structures or formal authority but is also embedded in social norms, cultural practices, and individual agency. This perspective enables an analysis of how power operates at various levels, shaping access to resources, opportunities, and decision-making processes. By considering power as both structural and relational, Kabeer's framework elucidates the complex interplay between gender, class, and other intersecting identities in shaping individuals' experiences of empowerment and disempowerment (Kabeer, 1999). Kabeer's empowerment framework underscores the transformative potential of agency in challenging and reshaping existing structures of inequality. Agency, as conceptualized by Kabeer, refers to individuals' capacity to make choices and act upon them to influence their circumstances (Kabeer, 1999). By foregrounding agency as a key component of empowerment, Kabeer highlights the active role of marginalized groups, particularly women, in challenging oppressive norms and advocating for social change. Through agency, individuals can challenge gender-based violence, demand accountability from institutions, and mobilize collective action to address systemic inequalities within their communities (Kabeer, 1994). Kabeer's empowerment framework incorporates an intersectional perspective, recognizing the overlapping forms of oppression that shape individuals' experiences of empowerment and disempowerment. Intersectionality, as articulated by Kabeer, acknowledges that individuals occupy multiple social positions simultaneously, such as gender, class, ethnicity, and sexuality, which criss-cross to shape their access to resources and opportunities (Kabeer, 1994). This intersectional lens enables a more nuanced analysis of empowerment processes, taking into account the unique challenges faced by marginalized groups, including women of colour, LGBTQ+ individuals, and those from low-income backgrounds. By centering intersectionality within the empowerment framework, Kabeer highlights the importance of addressing overlapping forms of oppression to achieve meaningful social change and gender equality (Kabeer, 1999). The integration of Kabeer's empowerment framework enriches the existing body of literature concerning sexual violence and empowerment among female garment workers in Bangladesh, aligning with studies that investigate the intersection of various factors influencing women's experiences of violence and empowerment within the garment industry. By complementing other theoretical perspectives such as intersectionality and feminist theories, Kabeer's outline enhances our understanding of the complex factors contributing to the silence surrounding sexual violence among female garment workers. Numerous studies have delved into the prevalence and repercussions of sexual harassment and violence against female garment workers in Bangladesh, emphasizing the necessity for a thorough understanding of the structural dynamics shaping these phenomena (Habib, 2014; Naved et al., 2018; Faruque, 2023).

The aspects of gender inequality are influenced by social norms. This ranges from the dominance of "male partners" who exercise patriarchal control over women's bodies in their private lives (Absar, 2003) to the mistreatment of women in the workplace, where sexual harassment and workplace violence are not uncommon (Begum et al., 2010). Such norms also impact the jobs of female workers in the Bangladeshi RMG

industry, with tasks being assigned based on gender, and women being exploited due to their perceived roles as "naive, docile, and traditional" (Akhter, 2014). Moreover, higher-skilled jobs are predominantly held by men (Islam, 2016). These patriarchal norms and power structures extend to the factory settings (Naved et al., 2018) and the functioning of unions (Dannecker, 2000). This is evident in the lack of respect male supervisors show female workers (Islam, 2016), the implementation of sexualized disciplinary measures (Siddiqi, 2009), and the employers' lack of belief in women's abilities and skills (Islam and Jantan, 2017). Islam also links capitalist interests to patriarchal norms, resulting in the exploitation of women as cheap and compliant labour (Islam, 2016). These deeply ingrained gender norms and power dynamics perpetuate gender inequality within the RMG industry in Bangladesh.

In Bangladesh, gender identities pose significant challenges in exacerbating multiple gender disparities within the framework of a patriarchal power structure (Feldman, 2001). Kabeer and Mahmud (2004) contends that Bangladesh ranks among the world's most patriarchal societies, Kabeer, Mahmud and Tasneem (2011) argues that women's participation in the labour market is often not a result of their own decision-making, as patriarchal dominance in Bangladeshi society usually leads male family members to dictate or influence such decisions. Society's attitudes and established norms further impose constraints on women's choices (Rahman and Islam, 2013:4). Despite the absence of legal provisions restricting women's participation in the labour market in Bangladesh (The World Bank, 2016), deeply ingrained beliefs and attitudes rooted in Bengali sociocultural values perpetuate multiple gender discriminations, thus upholding the status quo (Cain et al., 1979; Rozario, 2006; Kabeer, 2011). Additionally, women face immense pressure to conform to religious, cultural, and social values that serve as identity markers, influencing unequal gender participation and representation in the Bangladeshi labour market (Cain et al., 1979; Chowdhury, 2010). Moreover, gender identity adversely impacts national policies, marginalizing women's equal participation and rights in the labour market. Rahman and Islam (2013) noted that gender inequalities are not only rooted in social and cultural norms but are deeply entrenched in the policy focus and institutional environment as well.

The power dynamics within the garment industry play a pivotal role in perpetuating sexual violence against female workers. Numerous studies reveal that male-dominated hierarchies in factories often grant supervisors and management significant control over female workers (Mawa, 2016; Sultana, 2021; Shewly et al., 2024). This power imbalance creates an environment where sexual harassment can occur with impunity, as perpetrators exploit their authority and economic influence to silence victims (Akter et al., 2024). Moreover, several researches highlights how gender inequalities in Bangladesh society reinforce patriarchal norms that undermine the agency and voice of female workers, further contributing to underreporting (Siddiqi, 2003; Kabeer et al., 2004; Hossain, 2012; Akter et al., 2024).

2.2 Patriarchy

In the context of Bangladesh, deeply ingrained gender norms have historically relegated women to subordinate roles, reinforcing notions of male dominance. These norms are the bedrock of a patriarchal society, evident in practices such as the inheritance of property by sons and daughters moving to their husbands' homes post marriage. The concept of "patriarchal risk" underscores women's dependence on men, impacting their social status and material circumstances (Kabeer et al., 2011). These gender norms create a structural constraint on women's opportunities, culminating in a pervasive "structure of constraint" (Iqbal, 2020).

Conversely, within the construct of a "classic patriarchy," women experience subordination to men. However, in the context of patrilocally extended households, they have avenues to negotiate and accumulate power as mothers of sons and as mothers-in-law, exerting influence over daughters-in-law. Additionally, women hold significant sway within their kinship networks (Runyan & Marchand, 2000). Traditionally, rural women in Bangladesh, particularly those from impoverished backgrounds, have been excluded from spheres of social, political, and economic engagement, reinforced by practices such as the purdah (veil). Nonetheless, the advent of the ready-made garments industry in the 1970s has opened doors for rural women to venture beyond their homes, gain employment, and earn wages. However, the employment landscape for both women and men within this industry is marked by the manipulation of gender norms and relations, thereby perpetuating patriarchal constructs within the workplace.

Joan Acker's analysis underscores the inherent gendered nature of organizations, where norms, values, and the archetype of the 'ideal worker' often remain obscured beneath a facade of objectivity. This disregard for underlying gendered subtexts results in organizational structures that inadvertently perpetuate gender disparities (Acker, 1990). Acker outlines five key manifestations of gendering within organizations. These range from gender-based divisions evident in various aspects of work dynamics, physical arrangements, power hierarchies, and labour market structures, to the reinforcement of gender divisions through symbols and interactions between men and women. These processes contribute to the formation of distinct gender identities while concealing a "gendered substructure" that permeates organizational activities. A vivid example lies in job evaluation, a tool aimed at ranking jobs based on various criteria. Though designed to be impartial, job evaluations often carry implicit assumptions, associating certain roles with gender-based responsibilities. This perpetuates gender stereotypes, resulting in unequal power distribution and opportunities within the workplace (Acker, 1990; Khosla, 2009).

Feminist scholars have diverse perspectives on the relationship between patriarchy and capitalism. Some argue that these systems are fused into a single entity known as 'capitalist patriarchy,' while others maintain that they are analytically distinct but empirically interact to perpetuate gender inequality within the labour market (Eisenstein, 1979). Despite these differences, they all agree that dual systems contribute significantly to gender-based disparities in the workforce. Capitalism

sustains the material basis of gender inequality through unequal economic relations between men and women. Patriarchal ideology, on the other hand, operates through unconscious beliefs and norms that reinforce the distinctions between sexes. In the context of the garment sector, it is common to observe that men receive faster promotions and assume supervisory positions within a short period, even when some women have been employed at the factory for an extended duration. This highlights the impact of both capitalist economic relations and patriarchal ideology in perpetuating gender disparities within the workplace. In the RMG sector, workplace patriarchy is upheld through what is described as the 'prosthetic body of supervision'. In this setup, the worker is viewed as merely the arms, legs, and body that execute tasks directed by the supervisor, who represents the mind. The worker's skills, training, and authority are only recognized and acknowledged when she performs her work under the guidance and control of the supervisor (Wright, 2006).

This concept exemplifies how the power dynamics within the workplace are structured in a way that subordinates the worker, particularly female workers, to the authority and direction of their male supervisors. The 'prosthetic body of supervision' perpetuates gender inequality by limiting the recognition and autonomy of female workers and reinforcing the dominance and authority of male supervisors in the RMG sector.

2.3 Structural violence

In the context of Bangladesh, a structuralist perspective proves insightful in comprehending the gendered division of labour and how men exploit household structures to assert power and violence over women. Structural violence is evident within the country's patriarchal system, where men predominantly hold economic, religious, and cultural decision-making authority (Ahmed, 2004). Throughout history, men have exercised control over women by limiting their access to education, public spaces, social interactions, financial resources, and property ownership. This structural violence, characterized by male decision-making on behalf of women, also extends to the garment industry.

Within the garment industry, male factory owners often operate under the assumption that a woman's income is supplementary and that she is financially supported by a male breadwinner, adhering to traditional gender roles (Paul-Majumder and Begum, 2000). Consequently, women are frequently denied essential rights, such as maternity leave and proper contract papers, and may become victims of physical, sexual, or verbal harassment. Once again, patriarchal ideologies constrain women, undermining any potential benefits they might derive from employment. By depicting them as diligent but essentially untrainable, this narrative justifies paying women lower wages and treating them as disposable (Acker, 1990). These gender-based constraints perpetuate the exploitation and marginalization of women within the labour market and reinforce the cycle of gender inequality.

2.4 Sexual Violence within Industry

The term "sexual violence" as a concept has been discussed and addressed within various contexts for a long time, including discussions related to labour and workplace environments. Reports of sexual harassment and violence within the RMG industry in Bangladesh began to surface more prominently in the early 2000s. Since then, various national legislatures and international organizations have formulated general definitions of sexual harassment in the workplace. There is no such universally accepted definition of sexual violence. However, World Health Organization defines,

...Any sexual act, attempt to obtain a sexual act, unwanted sexual comments or advances, or acts to traffic or otherwise directed against a person's sexuality using coercion, by any person regardless of their relationship to the victim, in any setting, including but not limited to home and work (World Health Organization, 2012:2).

Various forms of sexual harassment exist in the RMG industry, encompassing verbal, non-verbal, physical, and psychological behaviours. Verbal harassment involves sexual insinuations, suggestive comments, jokes of a sexual nature, propositions, or threats (Britz, 2007:29). Non-verbal harassment includes displaying suggestive sexual gestures, objects, pictures, making graphic commentaries, leering eye contact, licking lips, whistling, and using obscene gestures. Visual or environmental harassment creates a hostile atmosphere for female workers. Physical harassment entails inappropriate touching, pinching, or touching private parts during problem-solving and supervision. Psychological harassment comprises verbal abuse to humiliate someone in front of co-workers, unwanted invitations, and proposals for dates or physical intimacy (Haque et al., 2019: 936).

Sexual violence in the Bangladeshi RMG industry is deeply rooted in the gendered hierarchy that exists within the sector. This hierarchical structure perpetuates unequal power dynamics, with women occupying lower positions in the workforce and facing higher vulnerability to sexual violence. For example, Begum and Islam discuss sexual harassment in the garment industry in Bangladesh, where they find that women workers are disproportionately affected. They attribute this to the gendered hierarchy within the workplace, where women are often in lower positions with less power compared to their male counterparts. This power imbalance makes them more vulnerable to harassment and abuse (Begum and Islam, 2010). In addition, Akhter, (2014) focuses on sexual violence against women workers in the garment industry. She highlights how gendered hierarchy and women's subordination in the industry contribute to their victimization. Women's lower status and lack of decision-making power make them more susceptible to exploitation and violence (Akhter, 2014: 139-141). However, Numerous studies examines gender inequality and sexual harassment in the garment industry of Bangladesh (Khosla, 2009; Haque et al., 2019; Rahman, 2020; Schneider, 2023). For example, Uddin et al., (2023) underscore how the hierarchical power structure within the workplace perpetuates a culture of abuse. Al Mamun and Hoque (2022) noted women's lower positions and limited agency in decision-making expose them to various forms of harassment. Iqbal (2020) emphasize the role of gender relations in the global garment industry, particularly in

Bangladesh, in shaping sexual harassment and abuse of female workers. She argues that the gendered hierarchy within the industry places women in vulnerable positions, enabling perpetrators to exploit their power over them (Iqbal, 2020; Akter et al., 2024). Moreover, Siddiqi's research on women workers in the Bangladesh garment sector touches upon the gendered hierarchy present in the industry. She observes how the hierarchical structure influences women's working conditions and experiences, making them more susceptible to various forms of abuse, including sexual harassment. The power dynamics inherent in the hierarchical structure often leave women in vulnerable positions, making them susceptible to exploitation and mistreatment by individuals in positions of authority. This is particularly evident in cases of sexual harassment, where the power imbalance reinforces a culture of impunity for perpetrators and fear among victims. By examining the nuances of this power hierarchy, Siddiqi highlights how women workers' agency and voice are often curtailed within the industry. The hierarchical structure fosters an environment where reporting abuse becomes complex due to the fear of repercussions, job insecurity, and the lack of mechanisms to address such issues effectively (Siddiqi, 2009).

Nonetheless, research has specifically examined the issue of workplace violence against women. On a global scale, workplaces are known to be locations where sexual and physical violence occurs, although the prevalence varies by country and workplace (Fair Wear Foundation, 2013; Tijdens et al., 2015). In the context of Bangladesh, studies have highlighted the alarming rates of violence, with research conducted by the Fair Labour Foundation on garment factories indicating that Bangladesh has higher violence rates compared to China and other Asian countries (Fair Labour Foundation, 2005). Furthermore, evidence from a small-scale mixed methods study involving 81 female workers suggests that factories located outside of export processing zones (EPZs) in Bangladesh may experience higher levels of violence compared to those within EPZs, which benefit from better regulation and monitoring (Siddiqi, 2003). These studies report that female garment workers endure various forms of violence in the workplace, including verbal abuse and physical and sexual violence, with verbal abuse from managers being particularly widespread (Fair Wear Foundation, 2013; Siddiqi, 2003).

Various studies have attempted to assess the prevalence of physical violence in Bangladesh's garment factories, leading to widely varying estimates ranging from 9% to 67% (Chowdhury & Ullah, 2010; Sohani et al., 2011). The perpetration of physical violence has been consistently attributed to male managers and supervisors targeting female workers. Research indicates that physical violence and emotional abuse are often a consequence of garment workers' inability to meet production targets, punctuality requirements, or their need to request leave. Many managers hold the belief that workers are inherently lazy and undisciplined, leading them to resort to violence and abuse as a means to maintain production levels (Siddiqi, 2003). Similarly, acceptance of rape myths can lead to victim-blaming, discouraging female workers from reporting sexual violence due to fear of judgment and societal non-conformity (Burt, 1980). Sexual violence within the factories includes sexualized verbal abuse and various physical acts such as touching, patting, pinching, slapping, coerced sex, and even rape (Siddiqi, 2003; Alam et al., 2011; Fair Wear Foundation, 2013). In small factories, typically located outside of EPZs where irregular payments

and limited benefits are common, sexual harassment can take on a transactional nature (Siddiqi, 2003), highlighting the structural aspects of these forms of violence and their intersection with EPZ and non-EPZ factories and regulations. Individuals involved in perpetrating sexual violence can include the factory owner, close male relatives of the owner, production managers, supervisory staff, and buyers, with young and attractive workers being particularly vulnerable (Siddiqi, 2003). Estimates of sexual violence range from 7% to 60% (Fair Wear Foundation, 2013; Sohani et al., 2011).

2.5 Women in Global Value Chain

Gender plays a vital role in shaping the dynamics of the GVC in Bangladesh's RMG industry. For instance, Sproll's study highlights the need to recognize and understand gender's significance within GVCs. Examining gender inequalities is crucial to comprehending the socio-economic and cultural factors that influence GVC operations (Sproll, 2022), particularly in Bangladesh's RMG industry, which has a predominantly female workforce. Understanding the gendered dimensions of this sector is essential due to its profound impact on workforce experiences, vulnerabilities, and opportunities (ILO, 2020). Gender considerations in Bangladesh's RMG industry are pivotal not only for social justice but also for profit maximization within the GVC. The use of women in RMG sector is inexpensive, adaptable, and compliant labour contributes to achieving maximum profits at minimal costs (Kabeer and Mahmud, 2004:145; Islam, 2016). Despite the pursuit of utmost profitability, factory owners continue to prefer employing women due to their perception as cost-effective (Morshed, 2007:34; Hossain et al., 2013:203), cooperative, and efficient workers, driven by prevailing gender norms (Kibria, 1998). Moreover, Sproll discussed the power relations that underlie GVCs, shedding light on the hierarchical structures that can perpetuate or challenge gender inequalities. These power dynamics impact the agency and decision-making capacities of women at different stages of the value chain (Sproll, 2022). In the context of the RMG industry in Bangladesh, understanding power relations is vital to address the structural challenges that hinder gender equity, such as unequal pay, limited upward mobility, and inadequate workplace conditions.

Within the GVC landscape, various actors play pivotal roles and Sproll (2022) highlights the intricate network of relationships among them. From suppliers to manufacturers, retailers, and consumers, each actor influences the gender dynamics within the value chain. Khaled and Ansar (2023) emphasize the RMG sector's global supply chain features an imbalanced power distribution. This results in multinational corporations and large buyers wielding substantial control over local suppliers and manufacturers in Bangladesh. This asymmetry often fosters exploitative practices and unequal bargaining, particularly affecting female workers who dominate the industry. Gender dynamics worsen the scenario, concentrating women in low-paying, low-skilled roles. This creates gender-based wage disparities and limited opportunities for career advancement (Bosman et al., 2019). Consequently, women's economic vulnerability increases, rendering them susceptible to labour exploitation

and insecurity. Khaled and Ansar (2023) contend that the existing power dynamics devalue female labour and compromise their rights. Multinational corporations' emphasis on cost reduction pressurizes local suppliers, potentially leading to lower wages, extended hours, and compromised safety.

It becomes evident that Bangladeshi women experience significant inequalities and gender exploitation throughout the GVC of the RMG industry (Bosman et al., 2019). At various stages of the GVC, from production to distribution, Bangladeshi women encounter gender-based disparities and discrimination. In the production phase, women are often confined to lower-paying and less skilled roles, such as sewing and stitching, while men tend to dominate higher-paid positions, including management and supervision. This segregation cause the gender wage gap and limits women's economic opportunities within the industry (Begum and Sharmin, 2016). Gender exploitation is also evident in the power dynamics within the GVC. Women often find themselves in vulnerable positions, facing exploitation by male managers and supervisors who exert control over their work and decisions. This gendered hierarchy create an environment where women's voices and agency are suppressed, leading to limited bargaining power and further marginalization (Absar, 2001). Throughout the supply chain, women are more likely to be subjected to workplace violence and sexual harassment. Verbal abuse, physical violence, and sexual misconduct by male supervisors contribute to a hostile work environment for female workers (Akter, 2016). The race to the bottom in terms of production costs places immense pressure on female workers, pushing them into precarious and unsafe working conditions. Bosman et al., (2019) highlights that the gendered exploitation experienced by Bangladeshi women in the RMG sector is not limited to the factory floor. It resonates along the entire supply chain, extending from the sourcing of raw materials to the final stages of retail. Regardless of the stage, women confront hurdles to accessing equitable opportunities, fair wages, and decision-making roles. The authors highlight that gender norms and entrenched power imbalances sustain this systemic exploitation, rendering women alarmingly susceptible to various forms of violence, including the pervasive spectre of sexual harassment and abuse (Bosman et al., 2019).

CHAPTER THREE: FINDINGS OF THE STUDY - SEXUAL VIOLENCE IN THE BANGLADESHI RMG INDUSTRY

3.1 Situation of Bangladeshi RMG Industry

The RMG industry's role in the GVC extends beyond its domestic significance. The RMG sector acts as a critical link between global brands and the labour-intensive production processes in Bangladesh. The industry's role in Bangladesh's export-oriented economy is undeniable, contributing substantially to the country's foreign exchange earnings and economic growth (Gu, Nayyar, & Sharma, 2021). However, the value chain's structure also reflects the uneven power dynamics between multinational corporations, local suppliers, and workers (Lang, Ponte & Vilakazi, 2022). This position has provided the country with economic opportunities but also exposed it to various challenges related to labour rights, gender inequalities, and power dynamics within the RMG sector (Anner, 2020; Sproll, 2022). In Bangladesh, the workforce's visibility, particularly women's, has risen notably, including within the ready-made garment sector (Uddin, 2008; Heath & Mobarak, 2015). However, this growth has transformed the nation's economic and social landscape, often to the detriment of women's labour (Sobhan, 2012; Ahmed et al., 2014; Chowdhury, 2010; Kabeer & Mahmud, 2004). While increased employment is seen as potentially empowering (Chowdhury, 2010), patriarchal ideologies persist, leading to disparities in perceptions of female employment (Banks, 2013:97). The industry's rapid growth is attributed to employers seeking docile female workers (Paul-Majumder & Begum, 2000) and impoverished households needing income (Feldman, 2001). Simultaneously, the capitalist endeavour has provided opportunities for unskilled female labourers, intersecting with patriarchal interests (Kabeer & Mahmud, 2004). This convergence benefits both employers and male partners, who can pay lower wages to female labourers, and gain greater control over their female counterparts (Hartmann, 1981 cited in Walby, 1990).

Within the RMG industry, predominantly occupied by women in lower-paid and lower-power roles, workplace abuse is pervasive. This widespread occurrence of violence and harassment in the garment industry can be attributed to the gendered power imbalances within factories, where women are underrepresented in supervisory roles and largely concentrated in subordinate positions. As women are concentrated in vulnerable positions, poverty and gender inequality increase their susceptibility to abuse (Bangladesh Centre for Workers Solidarity [BCWS] & FEMNET, 2020). Workforce segmentation exacerbates this, as move down the supply chain, with a higher proportion of women in precarious, lower-paying roles (Anner, 2019). In addition, Sohani et al., (2011) found that female garment workers faced various forms of violence, including monetary penalties, psychological harassment, physical assault, and sexual harassment and the perpetrators included supervisors, male co-workers, and helpers. Respondents aged 18 to 25 years reported higher levels of unfair discrimination at the workplace. Moreover, Osmani and Hossen (2018) noted

challenges like salary discrimination and lack of leave, sexual harassment, verbal abuse and mocking, lack of pregnancy and sickness leave, and insufficient access to medical facilities in the RMG industry while Akter et al., (2019) documented violence and harassment, often unreported due to job fears. Thus, while women's visibility has increased, gendered power imbalances and abusive behaviour persist in the Bangladeshi RMG industry.

3.2 Sexual Violence in the Workplace

In conversations with both workers and experts, the discussions revealed four primary categories of violence manifested within factory settings: economic, psychological, physical, and sexual. While economic and psychological forms of violence were nearly pervasive, instances of physical violence were comparatively less frequent. The majority of sexual violence instances remained concealed, and reporting occurred in an indirect manner. Scrutiny of the interview content pinpointed three key factors contributing to the occurrence of violence in factories. First, the hierarchical structure of factories, wherein gender-specific roles were designated, played a role. Second, there existed notions that violence could enhance production, leading to its utilization. Last, the presence of female garment workers challenging conventional gender norms by engaging in wage-earning work was noted. Furthermore, many women refrained from reporting such violence in order to preserve their social reputation and maintain approval from their husbands or families for employment. Nonetheless, a small number opted to depart from factory employment after experiencing such mistreatment.

The prevalence of psychological abuse and physical violence within factories stemmed from the internal hierarchical and gender-based setup inherent to these workplaces. Within this framework, male managers and supervisors often employed psychological abuse and physical violence as tactics to heighten productivity and to impart 'motivation' to workers. While some female workers shared accounts of physical abuse within their work environment, this was less frequent compared to verbal abuse. The most reported forms of physical abuse included slapping, pinching, pushing, and even throwing garments at their faces. The managerial roles were predominantly occupied by men, with male supervisors observed to be more severe than their female counterparts, as recounted by Rehana, (age 19) a sewing machine operator:

“When there was a lot of work pressure, or we need achieve production target, our supervisors and managers would sometimes throw things like cloths or scissors or whatever they had in their hand at us. My boss slapped, pulled my hair and used sexually explicit language like ‘slut’, ‘prostitute’, ‘motherfucker’, or ‘daughter of a bitch’ to me. But the lady supervisors didn’t use those bad words”.

All female participants in this study conveyed that their supervisors frequently engage in shouting, using insulting language, offering harsh criticisms, and showing no empathy towards them while at work. Shouting emerged as the prevalent form of

mistreatment, leaving women feeling emotionally unsupported by their supervisors. They also revealed instances where supervisors publicly humiliated them. Several women expressed that supervisors demean them, treating them as if they are not human, or treating them as a servant. Parvin (helper) stated that:

“I faced a harsh reality. As I was still learning, and I did something in a wrong way, my supervisor responded with extreme violence. He beat me to the point of falling on the floor, grabbed me violently, and even pulled my hair as punishment. Witnessing this abuse, my fellow workers remained silent out of fear for their own jobs. Verbal and physical abuse soon became routine for me in the workplace”.

Garment workers also experienced and witnessed sexual violence within factories. Sexual violence in factories was perpetrated by a range of men, including managers, supervisors and other male workers. The female workers expressed a sense of helplessness and anxiety, explaining that the supervisors' physical strength and authority to terminate their employment render them powerless. These women find themselves unable to defend against such situations and instead remain silent. They fear that any display of emotion, such as crying or protesting, could potentially result in even more severe treatment by the supervisors. This power imbalance leaves them in a vulnerable position, amplifying their reluctance to take action against abusive behaviours. Hena shared her story, “the line chief had a reputation for favouring good-looking girls in his line, showing them special treatment and granting them leaves easily. After a few months of working in the factory, Hena also became the target of his advances”. Despite feeling uncomfortable and powerless, Hena did not know how to protest against the line chief's harassment. She felt trapped and miserable in her position. She also added that:

“The line chief said things like ‘why are you working so hard, you're such a pretty girl? I care about you, and I really like you’. He would complement my looks, question me and my family, and inappropriately touched me physically under the guise of teaching me work”. “One day, I was working and he started saying these things, and he suddenly touched my chests, I froze up and couldn't shout”.

One day, after Hena finished working, she had to go to line chief's office. He started touching her in a way that made her uncomfortable, and when she wanted to leave, he held onto her and raped her. Her coworkers from work noticed that she hadn't come back for a long time and it was getting late. They got worried and started searching for her. Eventually, they found her in a very bad situation.

The explicit threats and physical abuse that women encountered from their male supervisors were directly linked to dominant representation about female garment workers in Bangladesh. These stereotypes portray them as either sexually promiscuous or even sex workers due to their defiance of established gender norms. The male supervisors' use of sexualized language and threats derived from, and perpetuated, the broader gender norms prevalent in Bangladesh. These tactics exploited this gender-based power dynamic to exert control over women's efficiency in the workplace. Accounts of sexual abuse shared by female garment workers underscored the correlation between such abuse and either the fear of losing their jobs or the promise of receiving easier tasks, leaves, and other benefits. This interconnection between sexual violence and employment illustrated how managers

manipulated sexual threats to exert influence on the women in the workplace. Laila (worker in Knitting section) told, “I really needed two days off from work”. And she asked the Admin officer for permission. Unfortunately, he said she couldn’t have the time off and told her to come to his office the next day. On the next day when she was in the office:

“He told me he liked me and suggested we meet after work. Even though he was married, I said ‘no’ strongly to his flirting. I was glad that a female coworker was there too. But something strange happened; the woman was trying to convince me by saying that our Admin Officer is a good person, and even promising me days off and other benefits, she also said, ‘why don’t you listen to him? He would give you everything that you need’. I got scared and quickly left the office”.

On certain occasions, male supervisors and the managerial staff openly expressed their reasons for feeling empowered to engage in sexual abuse and intimidation of female garment workers. They shifted the blame onto the women, asserting that they were somehow inviting such abusive behaviour. An expert’s observation during a meeting with male supervisors and managers revealed that these managers held the female garment workers responsible for the sexual violence they faced:

“During a training session, I noticed that many men, including supervisors and workers, believed it was acceptable to mistreat women. They felt entitled to control, dominate, and even touch female workers. However, women often felt compelled to comply with these expectations and be submissive because that’s what society demands. They believe that reporting incidents would disrupt factory harmony and create issues, so they choose to keep silent, even when they have been victims of violence”.

Through the lens of feminist political economy, the findings underscore the complex interplay between gender, power dynamics, and violence within the RMG industry in Bangladesh. The prevalence of various forms of violence, including economic, psychological, physical, and sexual, can be understood as a manifestation of the unequal power relations embedded in the hierarchical structure of the factories. This structure designates gender-specific roles, favouring male supervisors and managers who exploit their authority to exert control over female workers. The gendered division of labour, where male supervisors often employ psychological abuse and physical violence to increase productivity and maintain control, exemplifies the reinforcement of patriarchal norms. The male-dominated managerial positions perpetuate the notion of male superiority and female subordination, as evident in the experiences shared by the female workers. The verbal and physical abuse they endured served as tools to maintain a gendered power hierarchy, aligning with the feminist political economy’s focus on understanding how economic systems intersect with gender relations. The link between sexual violence and the broader gender norms prevailing in Bangladesh highlights the interconnectedness between economic and social structures. The male supervisors’ utilization of sexualized threats and language underscores the way gender-based violence is deployed as a mechanism to perpetuate traditional gender roles and norms. This practice serves to control women’s productivity and reinforces the societal view of women as either promiscuous or submissive.

The findings consistent with previous studies such as those by Kabeer (2005), Naved et al., (2018), Akhter et al., (2019), Islam (2016) highlight the resonance of hierarchical power dynamics, gender norms, women's subordinate position within the industry shaping the violence that they experience in the RMG industry in Bangladesh.

3.3 Factors of Underreporting Violence

Systematic factors contributing to the underreporting of violence within Bangladesh's RMG industry involve a complex interplay of social, economic, and institutional dynamics. Gendered power imbalances within the industry, where women primarily occupy lower-paid and lower-power positions, can deter them from reporting violence due to fear of reprisal or job loss (Chowdhury, 2010; Akhter, 2014; Anner, 2019). Economic dependency on these jobs further leaves female workers vulnerable to exploitation, making them hesitant to report incidents of violence as it could jeopardize their livelihoods (Kabbeer & Mahmud, 2004; Ahmed et al., 2014). In addition, cultural stigmas surrounding discussions of sexual harassment or abuse can also perpetuate a culture of silence (Osmani & Hossen, 2018). Ineffective grievance mechanisms within factories, limited legal protections, and fears of retaliation from supervisors, colleagues, or employers further contribute to underreporting (Sohani et al., 2011; Akhter et al., 2019; BCWS & FEMNET, 2020).

3.3.1 Fear of Retaliation and Job Insecurity

Fear of retaliation is a significant deterrent to reporting sexual violence in the RMG industry in Bangladesh. Female workers often worry about potential consequences, such as loss of employment or further harassment (Choudhury & Rahman, 2017; Datta, 2023; Basirulla & Tasnim, 2023; Islam, 2023). This fear is intensified by the prevalence of precarious work arrangements and lack of job security, as documented by Kabbeer (2017), Khaled & Ansar (2023) and Fariha and colleagues (2024). These studies demonstrate that female garment workers are vulnerable to exploitation, and their economic dependence on their jobs further restricts their ability to report abuse. The study by Dahl and Knepper (2021) investigates the underreporting of workplace sexual harassment and emphasizes the role of external alternatives in the face of potential retaliation. By analysing the value of outside options, the authors shed light on the factors contributing to the reluctance to report incidents of harassment in the workplace (Dahl & Knepper, 2021).

Respondents reported facing the constant risk of job loss, revenge, and losing their employment would render them financially precarious. Consequently, they consistently seek to find middle ground with their supervisors to avert this situation. Feminist political economy provides a framework to understand how gender-based power dynamics intersect with economic structures, resulting in the vulnerability of women in the workforce (Kabbeer, 1994). Rehana Said:

“I had to keep the job to help my family because I was the only one earning money. I was really scared of losing the job and I felt like I had to take care of everyone, so I didn’t say anything about the problems I was going through”.

The fear of retaliation for reporting incidents of violence or harassment can be attributed to the broader patriarchal norms and power imbalances prevalent in the industry, where women occupy predominantly lower-paid and lower-power positions (Siddiqi, 2003; Akter et al., 2019). These power imbalances hinder women’s ability to voice concerns and demand accountability, as they risk losing their economic livelihood and further exacerbating their job insecurity. Laila recalled, “The admin officer used his position of authority to exploit her, making inappropriate promises of more money and benefits in exchange for sexual favors. He went so far as to manipulate her workload and deny her rightful leave as a form of retaliation when she refused his advances”. Soon after that she got her feedback. She added:

“I was asked to come to a meeting with the admin officer and some coworkers. To my surprise, they tried to make me sign a blank paper during the meeting. The next day, I wasn’t allowed to go inside the factory and they told me I had lost my job. It was then clear to me that this happened because I didn’t agree and refused him. I felt really hopeless and upset, so I decided not to say anything anymore”.

The picture is different for Parvin’s case, because she had no way but to work continuously to support her family financially. Parvin stated:

“Even though I experienced harassment and injustice, I still kept working at the same factory with the same supervisor. What else could I do?”

The fear of retaliation in the Bangladeshi RMG industry discourages reporting of sexual violence due to potential job loss and harassment. This fear is exacerbated by precarious work condition and power imbalances, highlighting the need to address these systemic issues.

3.3.2 Power Imbalances

Systematic factors that contribute to the underreporting of violence in the Bangladeshi RMG industry are closely linked to power imbalances. In this context, power imbalances refer to the unequal distribution of authority, decision-making, and control over subordinate workers within the industry. Female workers predominantly occupy lower-paid and lower-power positions, while male supervisors and managers hold higher positions of authority. This gendered hierarchy creates an environment where women are often fearful of repercussions if they report incidents of violence or harassment. Additionally, the economic dependency on these jobs further amplifies the power dynamics, as women are reluctant to jeopardize their livelihoods by challenging those in authority. As a result, these power imbalances perpetuate a culture of silence and underreporting, as women lack the agency and resources to effectively address instances of violence within the industry.

To understand gendered power relations, I posed explorative questions to respondents, inquiring about decision-making influences, prominent individuals in power, gender-based treatment, discriminatory policies, and impacts on workplace gender dynamics. Rehana answered:

“We started as helpers, and in five months, we all became sewing operators. But after a year, some male became a supervisor and a line chief, while women stayed as sewing operators. Even though we work in the same section, the boys have better status, pay, and more freedom because of their superior positions. This unfairness looks like it's because we're girls, even though we're just as skilled and experienced”.

In this regard, expert added the information:

“In our culture, people think sewing is something girls do, and that's why the garment industry sees it that way too. Higher positions demand education, but limited education among women restricts their eligibility. Our culture usually thinks men should be in charge, and that makes things unfair. Because of this, female workers might feel like they are voiceless and powerless, especially in cases of harassment or violence”.

In the context of the garment industry in Bangladesh, the power dynamics between global brands, factory owners, and female workers are heavily skewed in favour of the former two, perpetuating a culture of silence and impunity around sexual violence. In addition, the gendered division of labour within the industry reinforces patriarchal norms and contributes to the marginalization of women in positions of power. Laila contended:

“I found out that they had tricked me and turned my signature into a resignation letter. The supervisors and management of the factory worked together to make sure I couldn't speak up or do anything about the unfair things that happened to me. They have a lot more power than I do!”

Laila said they were strong and have much power and she didn't have much power as a worker. Power imbalances in the Bangladeshi RMG industry deter violence reporting, driven by fear of repercussions and economic dependency. This hierarchy, reinforced by cultural norms, sustains silence, exemplified by Laila's case.

3.3.3 Cultural Norms and Stigmatization

Cultural norms and social stigmatization pose significant barriers to reporting sexual violence in the RMG industry. Studies by Ahmed and Hossain (2018) and Rahman and Hasan (2020) point out that Bangladeshi society tends to blame and shame survivors of sexual violence, rather than holding perpetrators accountable. This victim-blaming culture discourages female workers from reporting incidents, as they fear isolation, rejection, and damaged reputation. Furthermore, Naved and Huque (2016) highlight that the prevailing notion of preserving family honour can discourage victims from coming forward, as the act of reporting may bring shame to their families.

In order to understand the reasons behind the underreporting of violence in the RMG industry, I inquired about the influence of workplace behaviours and societal norms on reporting decisions. For instance, I asked about the impact of attitudes towards survivors of sexual violence on the willingness to report. One participant responded:

“I tried talking to the people in charge of production, but the manager told me, ‘You’re a women. Why are you talking about this? Don’t you care about our society; it will defame you in society. It’s better if you just take your salary and leave this place’. After that, I decided not to officially complain against the line manager. The hardest thing to remember is how the manager treated me, saying, ‘it was your fault for being raped, you slut women’” (Hena).

Women working in garment factories were worried about crossing traditional gender boundaries, as they were closely watched by their families for any behaviour that went against cultural norms. They didn’t want to be seen as behaving inappropriately or unfaithfully, so they often didn’t talk about or report instances of sexual violence at work. They were afraid of being blamed for somehow inviting those advances. Parvin states:

“I didn’t even talk to my family about what happened, because I felt really embarrassed and thought that this kind of bad treatment was just how things were in the factory. I had to put up with being hurt, both in my body and in my feelings, because I felt like I had no choice. And I couldn’t tell anyone about the sexual remarks they said to me, not even my uncle, because it made me feel too uncomfortable to talk about it.”

Additionally, feminist political economy highlights the role of patriarchy in perpetuating gender inequalities in the workplace. Patriarchal norms and values are deeply ingrained in Bangladeshi society, and are reinforced through cultural, economic, and political institutions (Rahman et al., 2021). These norms contribute to a culture of victim blaming and stigmatization of survivors, making it difficult for women to come forward and report incidents of sexual violence (Hossain, 2018). In this regard, the president of BNGWEL mentioned:

“Unfortunately, in Bangladesh, people often have a negative and judgmental view of those who have been victim by sexual violence. Victim-blaming and shaming are common responses when incidents of sexual violence are disclosed. This further discourages female workers from speaking out about the incident, as they may fear being labelled as bad women, impure, to their family and society. This fear of people judging them and being isolate can stop them from getting help or talking to someone about what they’re going through”.

Examined through the lens of feminist political economy, the incident involving Rehana exemplifies the intersection of cultural norms and stigmatization in the Bangladeshi RMG industry. Upon her return to the factory after a short break, Rehana was questioned by her supervisor about her absence. Sharing her experience, Rehana told about the sexual harassment she had experienced in the office of the Admin Officer:

Rehana: Then an informal meeting was held with manager and welfare officer and me, they called in both the Admin Officer and the female coworker for a talk.

Shockingly, the Admin Officer denied everything and blamed me, while the female colleague sided with her boss and labelled me as a spoilt and slut woman.

Interviewer: Then, what did you do?

Rehana: I did not report to anti-harassment committee, because I knew I will not get any justice.

Therefore, the study found the impact of cultural norms on reporting decisions. The finding also underlines how patriarchal norms perpetuate gender inequalities and victim-blaming in the Bangladeshi society.

3.3.4 Economic Insecurity

Economic insecurity stands as a significant systematic factor contributing to the underreporting of violence in the Bangladeshi RMG industry. This pertains to the precarious financial situation and dependency on the job for livelihood that many female workers find themselves in. As a result of their lower-paid and lower-power positions within the industry reinforces traditional patriarchal norms, relegating them to positions of economic vulnerability (Kabeer, 2005), also female workers often lack the economic agency to confront harassment or violence they face at the workplace. This vulnerability is exacerbated by the gendered segmentation of work in the industry, where women are concentrated in lower-skilled, lower-paying roles (Anner, 2019). To know the economic conditions and vulnerability of the women, I asked several questions including have you observed any differences in how male and female workers are treated or perceived in the factory? Are there any practices, policies, or rules in the factory that you feel disproportionately affect male or female workers? How do you perceive the impact of such practices on gender relations within the workplace? Do you feel that all workers, regardless of gender, are treated fairly in terms of wages, payment, bonuses, leave, etc.? One respondent answered:

“Although the majority of RMG sector workers are women, they are often assigned less technological tasks (woven wear section), and I think this is just because we are women and we can’t do that. Also, our male supervisor sometimes makes us stay overnight and work overtime, but this pressure are not given to our male colleagues” (Parvin).

Therefore, the gender-based perceptions of women’s suitability for specific roles persist, creating a division of labour. This division is evident in knitwear and woven wear sections, with male dominance in the knitwear and female works mostly in the woven wear section due to perceived technological differences as Parvin stated. This gender-based segregation is fuelled by workload disparities; given our gender, women are inherently subjected to male dominance within the industry. Furthermore, this economic vulnerability is exacerbated by the capitalist pursuit of maintaining a cheap labour force. The intersection of patriarchal norms and capitalist interests results in women’s economic dependency being exploited by employers who wield power over their job security. Women’s economic dependency on their jobs is exploited by employers who may manipulate their vulnerability, perpetuating an environment where women are discouraged from reporting harassment or violence

due to fears of losing their source of income (Kabeer & Mahmud, 2004). Regarding representation, wage disparities and vulnerabilities, Laila said:

“It is common in our industry that male worker earn more than female, even though there are more women working. Our chances to promotion in our jobs are limited. We start as helpers and maybe become sewing operators. The sewing section, mainly staffed by females, is crucial for production but our hard work is undervalued, resulting in lower wages for us compared to our male counterparts. In this condition, how we open our mouth regarding violence? If we do so, we will lose our job for sure”.

Such economic vulnerability becomes a formidable barrier for women to report violence. The fear of losing their already precarious employment keeps women silent, as the potential consequences of speaking out against harassment or abuse weigh heavily on their financial stability (Ahmed & Hossain, 2018). Additionally, the scarcity of robust social safety nets amplifies their hesitation to risk job loss (Rahman & Hasan, 2020). For example, in Rehana’s case, she had to ask for an apology to not to throw her out of job. She recalled:

“I had to ask forgiveness to the person who assaulted me. I had no other way but to apologize because I had no money at that time. I desperately need that job to earn some money. I came from village to work and support me and my family”.

The patriarchal nature of Bangladeshi society, embedded in cultural norms and values, compounds this economic insecurity. The prevailing belief that women are dependent on male breadwinners further undermines women’s bargaining power, leaving them with limited agency to challenge abuse (Hossain, 2018). This intertwining of economic and gender-based vulnerabilities creates a complex environment where reporting violence jeopardizes economic well-being, further entrenching the silence surrounding these incidents. Hence, about economic insecurity, the expert opinion of the president of the trade union was:

“It’s a fact that women often earn less than men in our garment industry, even when they’ve been working longer. In our culture, women are typically expected to take care of household duties and be subservient to men. Given this situation, if a woman reports sexual violence, she faces a higher risk of losing her job in the industry, and her husband may not allow her to work again. So, in many cases, women choose to stay silent and not tell anyone to protect themselves in both places”.

In sum, through the lens of feminist political economy, economic insecurity in the Bangladeshi RMG industry is not just an outcome of structural inequalities but also a tool used to perpetuate gender-based disparities. The exploitation of women’s economic vulnerability, coupled with the reinforcement of patriarchal norms, fuels a cycle of not reporting sexual violence.

3.3.5 Institutional Barriers to Reporting Violence

In the context of the Bangladeshi RMG industry, the underreporting of sexual violence is also influenced by barriers in the reporting process and the lack of institutional support. These barriers, often deeply rooted in patriarchal structures, limit the ability of female workers to report incidents of violence without fearing negative consequences. The intertwining of gender norms, unequal power dynamics, and economic dependency within these institutions creates a complex web that discourages reporting. Research by Hossain and colleagues (2020) highlights the absence of clear reporting mechanisms in the garment industry, leaving workers uncertain about how and where to report incidents. Additionally, a study by Sultana and Chowdhury (2019) reveals that many female workers lack awareness of their rights and the available support services, contributing to their reluctance to come forward.

Therefore, participants were asked about the reasons for not reporting incidents of sexual violence? Were there any specific factors that deterred you from seeking help or justice? Hena replied:

“I was worried that if I tell anybody, they would accuse me for what I was saying. And I did not know to whom and where to complain about it. I was embarrassed and worried that if I told anyone about the experience, they would judge me negatively”.

Feminist political economy sheds light on how these institutional barriers perpetuate gender inequalities. The gendered division of labour in the RMG industry relegates women to lower status, while men predominantly occupy supervisory and management roles (Shewly et al., 2024). This division reinforces traditional notions of male authority and female subordination, creating an environment where women's voices are marginalized and their complaints are dismissed (Chowdhury, 2010). One respondent stated:

“I had no idea that boss couldn't hit me. It happens so often in factories that it felt like it was okay for me and everyone else. To my knowledge, there is no clear reporting mechanisms where we can access or report incidents of violence. Also, I don't know if my privacy and identity will be revealed or not and the legal systems of industry are inefficient so where should we seek for justice” (Parvin).

Moreover, the lack of effective mechanisms to address workplace violence and harassment further amplifies these institutional barriers. Formal avenues for reporting often lack transparency, are difficult to access, and may even result in retaliation against the victims (BCWS & FEMNET, 2020). This, in turn, perpetuates a culture of silence, where women perceive reporting as futile and potentially damaging to their image. While taking the interview, expert states:

“While there are some support systems (for example, anti-harassment committee) in place for survivors of sexual violence in the RMG industry, but they often face resource constraints and may not be adequate. Also, most of the women are not aware about this committee. Lack of access to counselling services, legal aid, and medical assistance making it difficult for survivors to seek help and support”.

Hence, in the RMG industry in Bangladesh, institutional barriers stemming from patriarchal norms, lack of clear reporting mechanisms, and limited awareness of support services significantly contribute to the underreporting of sexual violence. This perpetuates a culture of silence, leaving female workers vulnerable and impeding their access to justice and assistance.

3.4 Empowerment and Agency

The word 'empowerment' is hard to explain clearly. When we talk about empowering women or giving them more control, we need to understand and fix the reasons they don't have enough power. Even though we often use the term 'women's empowerment' in development discussions, it's a fairly new idea and we're still figuring out exactly what it means.

3.4.1 Defining "Empowerment"

Feminist viewpoints on power make the concept of empowerment even wider. They don't just focus on official types of power, but also consider how personal lives are connected to politics. From a feminist stance, looking at "power over" means recognizing how women might be oppressed and how they might even believe in that oppression themselves. So, empowerment isn't just about being part of decisions; it's also about helping people see themselves as capable and deserving of making choices. The feminist idea of empowerment involves both having the ability to do things and having a strong sense of self-worth. It's about letting people use all their skills and possibilities (Rowlands, 1997).

Kabeer's conceptualization of empowerment transcends mere rhetoric, presenting both theoretical depth and practical applicability. Her approach involves a deconstruction of the conventional understanding of power, culminating in a nuanced comprehension of empowerment. Kabeer contends that strategies aimed at women's empowerment necessitate a foundation in "the power within", which is imperative not only for enhanced resource management and decision-making capacities but also for shaping agendas. This internalized potency requires experiential introspection and analysis of women's subjugation dynamics and their perpetuation. This intrinsic empowerment cannot be bestowed; instead, it must be self-generated (Kabeer, 1994). Kabeer's scholarship accentuates the significance of self-dignity, agency, and conscious processes in the empowerment trajectory, bolstered by leadership development, network enhancement, and organizational capacity building. Her analysis delineates empowerment into a triad of interconnected constituents: resources, agency, and achievements, each contributing substantively to the multifaceted phenomenon of choice and empowerment (Kabeer, 1999).

Mosedale (2005) outlines a comprehensive framework for empowerment that encompasses four distinct dimensions. Primarily, the notion of empowerment

presupposes a prior experience of disempowerment. Subsequently, individuals who have attained empowerment must actively assert and wield that acquired power. Moreover, the process of empowerment is intrinsically tied to the exercise of personal agency in making significant life choices. Lastly, it is essential to recognize that empowerment is not a static state but an ongoing and evolving process. Within this conceptualization, Mosedale further elucidates various manifestations of power. The concept of "power within" pertains to the cultivation of self-esteem and self-confidence. "Power to" refers to the expansion of possibilities and opportunities, thereby extending the boundaries of achievable endeavors. Additionally, "power with" signifies collaborative and collective action, emphasizing the strength derived from united efforts. According to Mosedale, the crux of women's empowerment resides in the transformation of entrenched gender power dynamics. Women, in this context, not only attain a degree of authority and autonomy but also develop an acute awareness of their historically subjugated position, which in turn fosters the capacity to challenge prevailing gender norms (Mosedale, 2005). In alignment with this perspective, Kabeer (2005) underscores the imperative of overhauling gender-biased institutional frameworks through a deliberate confrontation with deeply ingrained societal gender norms.

3.4.2 Status of Women's Empowerment in the RMG Sector

The engagement of women in paid employment and its implications for their roles within the family and society have captured the attention of scholars representing diverse theoretical viewpoints, sparking an enduring discourse (Salway et al., 2005; Kabeer, 2008). Certain empirical analyses and theoretical perspectives adopt a skeptical stance towards the relationship between paid work and the empowerment of women (Fuentes and Ehrenreich, 1983; Kopinak, 1995; Beechey, 2013). Multiple studies reveal that involvement in paid labour exposes women to additional layers of exploitation, both in their domestic spheres and workplace (Salway et al., 2005). The aforementioned discourse elucidates various aspects of women's integration into paid employment, encompassing their relegation to specific categories of low salary jobs, the dual burden arising from juggling external paid work and unpaid household duties, the long duration of working hours, and the heightened state of insecurity (Kabeer et al., 2018; Ashraf and Prentice, 2019; Mamun and Hoque, 2022).

Employers in this sector also exhibited a preference for female workers due to their perceived obedience and cost-effectiveness (Fatema, 2019). The question of whether paid employment in this industry actually empowers women in Bangladesh is a subject of intense debate among both feminist activists and scholars (Mamun and Hoque, 2022). Despite this, female workers within the RMG sector continue to operate within a vulnerable environment characterized by various challenges such as the absence of trade unions, disparities in gender-based wages, informal recruitment practices, irregular compensation, lengthy work hours, inadequate healthcare provisions, instances of sexual harassment, and violence (Rahman, 2011; Naved et al., 2018; Bosman et al., 2019). Fatema (2019) underscores that empowerment for female

RMG workers in Bangladesh largely entails achieving both social and economic empowerment. She contends that the inability to voice concerns within families and workplaces against exploitation and discrimination significantly impedes the actual levels of empowerment experienced by women. The management of income and expenditures predominantly by males within households grants them control over women's earnings, a dynamic also influenced by cultural norms (Kabeer, 1997). This study found that when women earn money from their work, they do not have the ultimate say about how that money is used due to this gendered control over financial decisions within households. One respondent said:

“I work a lot for a whole month and make money, but I don't have control over my own money. I have to give it to my husband, and he decides how it will be used” (Parvin).

This progress faces ongoing resistance from entrenched cultural norms. As noted by Heintz et al. (2018), the high geographical concentration of garment workers renders them “less socially acceptable”. The lack of organizational safeguards within factories often fosters exploitative attitudes toward working women among their male counterparts (Siddiqui, 2003). Drawing from emerging evidence, Hossain (2021) argues that women in this sector confront new forms of discrimination and structural violence. Laila said:

“We (women) not only get paid less than the males, but we also don't get chances to promotion because we don't have as much education, plus some of the male co-workers we work with inappropriate comments and gestures that make us uncomfortable. They make fun of us and treat us badly while we're working. But we usually don't say anything about it”.

Regarding this, during the interview with expert, I asked what are the main challenges in addressing the underreporting of sexual violence in the garment industry, what measures can be taken to enhance female workers' agency in the workplace and give them a voice to speak up against harassment? He replied:

“In many factories, we often see a lack of proper facilities for addressing sexual violence, such as safe spaces or training programs. Unfortunately, some factory authorities ignore or even perpetuate these problems. There's a lack of collaboration between NGOs and factories, weakening their efforts. Existing harassment policies are not consistently enforced, and monitoring is weak. Additionally, many female workers are unaware of their rights, making it hard for them to address incidents of violence.

This line of argument concludes that the discourse on empowerment and agency in the Bangladeshi RMG sector highlights challenges stemming from inadequate infrastructure, cultural norms, and coordination gaps among key actors.

3.5 Empowering Women Workers: Roles and Strategies of Diverse Actors

Empowering female garment workers in Bangladesh necessitates the coordinated efforts of various stakeholders, including trade unions, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), the government, and dedicated organizations focused on female workers (Huq, 2019). While each of these actors plays a crucial role in addressing the challenges faced by women in the industry and promoting their empowerment, an analysis of their strategies reveals both strengths and limitations.

Trade unions are crucial actors in advocating for workers' rights, including issues related to gender equality and workplace safety. However, their effectiveness in addressing sexual violence is influenced by various factors, including their power dynamics, internal structures, and societal norms. In Bangladesh, trade unions have historically been male-dominated, reflecting broader societal gender inequalities. This imbalance in leadership positions not only limits the representation of female workers' perspectives but also perpetuates a patriarchal organizational culture within trade unions. Research indicates that the patriarchal nature of trade unions may undermine their ability to prioritize and effectively address issues such as sexual harassment, as male-dominated leadership may not fully understand or prioritize the concerns of female workers (Shajahan et al., 2021; Ullah, Dhar & Khatun, 2024). Furthermore, trade unions in Bangladesh face structural barriers and challenges in addressing sexual violence within the garment industry. Factors such as limited legal protections, fear of employer retaliation, and cultural stigmatization of victims may discourage female workers from reporting incidents of harassment (Uz-Zaman & Khan, 2021). Additionally, trade unions themselves may lack the capacity or resources to effectively address gender-based violence, particularly if they prioritize traditional labour organizing over issues related to gender equality (Kabeer, 2005). To address these challenges and empower female garment workers, trade unions must undergo significant reforms to challenge their patriarchal structures and promote gender diversity in leadership positions (Ullah, Dhar & Khatun, 2024). This requires proactive measures to increase the representation of women in decision-making roles within trade unions through initiatives such as mentorship programs, leadership training, and affirmative action policies additionally, trade unions must adopt more inclusive and intersectional approaches to gender equality that recognize and address the unique challenges faced by female workers, including sexual violence in the workplace.

NGOs play a crucial role in addressing sexual harassment and empowering female garment workers in Bangladesh by providing essential services, advocacy, and support at the grassroots level. They raise awareness about sexual harassment, promote women's rights, and offer training programs to enhance women's skills and confidence (Khan & Arefeen, 2013). However, Das argues that interventions influenced by Western donors often depict Bangladeshi women as passive victims, overlooking their complex realities and diverse identities, thus failing to genuinely empower those (Das, 2023). Akter et al., (2024) also criticize NGOs for inadequate

engagement with the socio-cultural realities, highlighting a significant gap between policy advocacy and implementation, which leaves many women vulnerable. Despite these criticisms, NGOs provide critical support services, including counselling, legal assistance, and referrals to medical and social services, creating a safe environment for victims to seek help and encouraging reporting (Remington, 2020). By doing so, NGOs play a vital role in breaking the silence surrounding sexual harassment and advocating for systemic change in the garment industry.

However, NGOs face several challenges and constraints in their efforts to address sexual harassment within the garment industry. One key challenge is resource constraints, as many NGOs operate with limited funding and personnel, which restrict their ability to reach and support all affected women. Additionally, NGOs often have clashed or encounter resistance from garment factory owners or management who may perceive their activities as disruptive or threatening to their interests. This resistance may manifest in various forms, including harassment, intimidation, or legal challenges (Khan, 2011). Moreover, the patriarchal nature of Bangladeshi society and the garment industry may present additional obstacles to NGOs' efforts to address sexual harassment. Additionally, power imbalances within NGOs, as well as between NGOs and other stakeholders, affect their ability to effectively advocate for women's rights and influence policy decisions (World Economic Forum, 2020). To tackle these challenges and amplify their efficacy, non-governmental organizations (NGOs) need to embrace a multidimensional approach. This approach entails addressing both the immediate needs of female garment workers impacted by sexual harassment and the underlying structural factors perpetuating gender-based violence and inequality within the garment industry. This necessitates an analysis of power dynamics and structural inequalities within the garment industry, as advocated by Kabeer (2005). This approach may include strengthening partnerships with other stakeholders, building alliances with grassroots movements and community organizations, and advocating for policy reforms that promote women's rights and gender equality (Islam, 2020). By leveraging their expertise, networks, and resources, NGOs can contribute significantly towards creating a safer and more equitable work environment for female garment workers in Bangladesh.

The Bangladeshi government plays a crucial role in regulating and addressing sexual harassment in the garment industry through labour laws. Despite these legal frameworks, enforcement is a significant challenge, leaving female workers vulnerable due to ineffective implementation and lack of comprehensive legal protection (Gibbs et al., 2019; Alamgir & Banerjee, 2019). Government action's effectiveness depends on political will, institutional capacity, and societal norms. Following international pressure after incidents like the Rana Plaza collapse in 2013 (Svarer, Meiers, & Rothmeier, 2017), the government has enacted laws and regulations to improve labour rights and safety standards, including measures against sexual harassment. The Bangladesh Labour Act of 2006, for example, prohibits sexual harassment in the workplace and requires employers to prevent and address such incidents. However, challenges persist in effectively regulating and addressing sexual harassment. Enforcement agencies often lack resources, capacity, or political will to investigate and prosecute cases (Asian Development Bank, 2009). Corruption and collusion between officials and factory owners undermine efforts to hold perpetrators

accountable (Huq, 2019). Additionally, poor regulatory oversight and the influence of powerful industry stakeholders contribute to a gap between policy and practice, leaving many women without adequate protection (Akter et al., 2024; Bosman et al., 2019). Cultural and social norms also perpetuate gender-based violence and harassment, highlighting the need for the government to adopt more robust and culturally sensitive approaches (Rahman, 2020).

Moreover, societal norms and cultural attitudes towards gender and sexuality may hinder government action on sexual harassment. Bangladesh, like many societies, has deeply entrenched patriarchal norms that normalize and perpetuate gender-based violence and discrimination. These cultural attitudes may influence the government's response to sexual harassment, leading to underreporting, victim-blaming, and a lack of meaningful support and protection for victims (Khan & Rahman, 2017). To address these challenges and effectively regulate sexual harassment within the garment industry, the Bangladeshi government must prioritize the issue and allocate sufficient resources and political support to enforcement agencies. To further empower women, it is essential for the government to prioritize and enforce gender-sensitive policies (Svarer, Meiers, & Rothmeier, 2017). Additionally, the government should collaborate with civil society organizations, trade unions, and international stakeholders to raise awareness about sexual harassment, promote reporting mechanisms, and provide support services for victims.

4. CONCLUSION

The Bangladeshi RMG industry plays a crucial role in the GVC, yet it faces significant challenges like labour rights, gender inequality, and power imbalances. While more women have joined the workforce, they still face serious issues, including widespread workplace abuse due to unequal power dynamics and limited opportunities for advancement. These deep-rooted gender inequalities persist despite the industry's growth driven by both economic and patriarchal factors. Women often find themselves in lower-status jobs, leaving them vulnerable to mistreatment and poverty. The factory's hierarchical structure enables economic and psychological mistreatment, with male supervisors using their authority to exert control. Sexual violence often goes unreported due to these power imbalances, with some supervisors using inappropriate language and threats to maintain dominance, reinforcing harmful gender stereotypes. These findings align with feminist economic theories, showing how economic systems and gender dynamics are intertwined.

The findings highlight how gendered power imbalances, fear of retaliation, cultural norms, and economic insecurity contribute to the pervasive culture of silence surrounding violence incidents. In the garment industry's hierarchical structure, these power imbalances deter female workers from reporting violence due to potential repercussions. Fear of job loss, especially in precarious employment, exacerbates this reluctance. Economic dependency on these jobs leaves workers vulnerable to exploitation, compelling them to endure abuse silently to protect their livelihoods. Cultural norms and stigmatization further inhibit reporting, as victim-blaming

attitudes and fear of social isolation discourage survivors from coming forward. Economic insecurity worsens the situation, as lower-paid and lower-power positions occupied by women, along with gender-based wage disparities, make reporting violence a risk to their economic stability. This intersection of patriarchal norms and capitalist interests exploits women's economic vulnerability, making them hesitant to report abuse for fear of losing income.

In the context of feminist political economy, gendered power dynamics intersect with economic structures to perpetuate underreporting of violence. Addressing these issues requires a comprehensive approach that tackles systemic inequalities and cultural norms, while providing robust support systems for women to report incidents safely. The underreporting of violence within the Bangladeshi RMG industry is influenced by a complex interplay of institutional barriers that intersect with patriarchal norms, lack of clear reporting mechanisms, and limited awareness of support services. These barriers create an environment where female workers hesitate to come forward and report incidents of violence, perpetuating a culture of silence around violence reporting. Moreover, understanding empowerment's multifaceted nature, as highlighted by Kabeer and scholars like Mosedale, underscores the importance of internalized empowerment and self-generated agency. Despite progress, challenges such as lack of trade unions, gender-based wage disparities, and cultural norms persist, hindering female workers' agency and efforts to combat underreporting of sexual violence.

Addressing the challenges faced by women in the Bangladeshi RMG industry requires prioritizing their empowerment and agency. Enhancing women's agency involves providing resources and support while challenging structural inequalities and power imbalances that perpetuate gender-based violence and exploitation. Trade unions and NGOs must amplify female workers' voices, advocate for their rights, and promote gender equality in leadership positions. Collaboration between stakeholders, including government agencies, NGOs, and international organizations, is essential to address the root causes of gender-based violence and inequality. Implementing policies that promote gender equality, raising awareness, and providing training programs can create a safer work environment. Policymakers must prioritize women's rights, enforce legislative reforms, and ensure greater transparency and accountability within the industry.

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