Breaking the Threads of Inequality: Gender Discrimination in Bangladesh's Garment Industry

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ABSTRACT

This qualitative study explores the pervasive issue of gender discrimination within Bangladesh's garment industry, where women make up the majority of the workforce yet continue to face significant barriers to equality. Through in-depth interviews and surveys with 100 female workers from various garment factories in Dhaka, Chittagong, and other hubs, the research examines key forms of gender discrimination, including wage disparity, limited career advancement, workplace harassment, and the emerging threat of automation. The findings reveal that female workers earn significantly lower wages than their male counterparts, experience limited promotion opportunities, and endure high levels of sexual harassment, often compounded by a culture of silence and fear. Additionally, the rise of automation in the sector poses a unique challenge for women, with many fearing job displacements due to their lower skill levels in handling new technologies. The study concludes with actionable recommendations for addressing these issues, including implementing equal pay policies, establishing career development programs, enforcing anti-harassment measures, and providing gender-sensitive automation training. By highlighting the lived experiences of women workers, this research underscores the urgent need for comprehensive reforms to promote gender equality in Bangladesh's garment sector.

Keywords: Wage disparity, automation, sexual harassment, equal pay policies, automation training,

INTRODUCTION

The garment industry in Bangladesh is the second-largest in the world, accounting for a significant portion of the country's exports. It provides employment to millions, particularly women, and is often heralded as a key contributor to economic growth. However, beneath the fabric of economic success lies a pervasive issue—gender discrimination. Women, who make up the majority of the workforce, continue to face substantial challenges in terms of wage inequality, limited career progression, and workplace harassment. This qualitative study aims to explore the forms of gender discrimination within the garment industry, drawing on firsthand accounts from female workers and analyzing the impact of these inequities on their lives and careers.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Extensive research has documented significant gender wage gaps within Bangladesh's Ready-Made Garment (RMG) industry. A study by Menzel and Woodruff (2021) revealed that female workers earn approximately 20% less than their male counterparts, even when accounting for narrowly defined production roles. This disparity is attributed to factors such as longer tenure among male workers and lower promotion rates for women ScienceDirect.

Further, a report by the Anker Research Institute (2024) highlighted that gender pay gaps in Bangladesh's RMG factories range from 22% to 30% for base wages, with men often benefiting from more favorable pay structures and higher-paying contracts Business & Human Rights Resource Centre.Sexual harassment and gender-based violence are prevalent issues in the RMG sector. Research by Kabir (2025) indicated that a significant number of female workers experience sexual harassment in the workplace, raising concerns about overall working conditions and safety.

Additionally, a study by Akter et al. (2024) found that women in the garment industry are particularly vulnerable to various forms of gender-based violence and harassment due to their inferior positions in the family and society, which are rooted in patriarchal structures.

Despite the high representation of women in the garment workforce, their progression into supervisory and managerial roles remains limited. A study by Haque et al. (2020) highlighted that women often face barriers to promotions, including gender biases and discriminatory practices, which hinder their career advancement in the RMG sector.

The introduction of automation in the garment industry poses a significant threat to female workers, who are predominantly employed in low-skilled, manual tasks. Research by the Ethical Trading Initiative (2025) noted that many women lack the necessary skills to operate automated machinery, leading to concerns about job displacement and the exacerbation of gender inequalities in the workforce.

Deep-seated gender norms and societal expectations often restrict women's participation in leadership roles or continuing their careers. Many women are expected to prioritize caregiving responsibilities over their professional aspirations, leading to exits from the workforce.

Gender Discrimination in Bangladesh's Garment Industry: Data-Driven Insights

The garment sector in Bangladesh is a cornerstone of the country's economy, employing millions of workers, with women making up the majority of the workforce. Despite this, gender discrimination remains pervasive across multiple dimensions of the industry. According to a 2024 study by the Anker Research Institute, Bangladesh's garment sector exhibits one of the largest genders pay gaps in the world, with women earning between 22% to 30% less than their male counterparts for the same work. This wage disparity is not limited to low-skill tasks, but extends across the entire production process, highlighting the systemic undervaluation of women's labor. Despite women constituting over 80% of the workforce during the industry's peak in the 1980s, recent data shows a sharp decline, with female participation in the sector dropping to 53% by 2023. This decline is often attributed to various socio-economic factors, including the increasing automation within the sector, which disproportionately impacts women. Automation has led to a 31% reduction in the workforce, with women bearing the brunt, as they are concentrated in low-skilled, repetitive tasks such as stitching, packing, and finishing. This trend is evident in sweater factories, where there was a 37% reduction in female employment, while in woven factories, the decline was 27% per production line. Furthermore, workplace harassment and gender-based violence remain significant issues within the industry. A qualitative study by Basirulla (2024) found that women workers are exposed to sexual harassment and gender violence at alarmingly high rates, driven by deep-rooted socio-cultural and structural factors. The lack of effective legal protections or support systems further exacerbates this issue. Additionally, the minimum wage increase to BDT 12,500 in December 2023 has failed to meet the rising cost of living, with workers requiring at least BDT 23,000 to cover basic expenses. This discrepancy leaves many workers, particularly women, in a constant struggle for economic stability. These data points underscore the urgent need for systemic reforms that address not only the wage gap but also the career advancement opportunities, safety, and well-being of female workers in Bangladesh's garment sector. The integration of gender-sensitive policies, greater representation of women in leadership roles, and stronger anti-harassment measures are critical for achieving gender equality and empowering women within the industry.

Objectives:The main objectives of this article are as follows:

1. **To explore the extent of gender discrimination in Bangladesh's garment sector.**

   The article aims to understand how gender discrimination manifests in terms of wages, career advancement, and workplace safety for women workers in garment factories.

2. **To analyze the impact of gender-based wage disparities on the workforce.**

It seeks to examine the wage gap between male and female workers, investigating the reasons behind this inequality, and how it affects the economic empowerment of female workers.

3. **To assess the prevalence of workplace harassment in the garment sector.**

This article aims to highlight the widespread occurrence of sexual harassment, abuse, and other forms of mistreatment in garment factories, particularly toward female workers, and to discuss the systemic issues surrounding it.

4. **To examine the role of automation and its impact on women's employment in the garment Sector.**

The objective is to evaluate how the rise of automation in the garment industry could disproportionately affect female workers, particularly those in lower-skilled roles.

5. **To propose recommendations for improving gender equality in the garment industry.**

The article will suggest actionable solutions and strategies to reduce gender discrimination, promote equal opportunities, and improve the working conditions of women in the sector.

METHODOLOGY

This study follows a qualitative research approach to investigate the experiences of women workers in Bangladesh's garment industry. The research uses semi-structured interviews and surveys to collect primary data from 100 female garment workers across various factories in Dhaka, Chittagong, and other key garment hubs. Secondary data is drawn from reports published by NGOs, international labor organizations, and government publications.

Data Collection:

- Interviews: In-depth, open-ended interviews were conducted with female workers to understand their personal experiences with gender discrimination, focusing on issues such as wage disparity, career stagnation, and workplace harassment.
- Surveys: A survey instrument was developed to collect data on a broader scale regarding the frequency and nature of gender-based discrimination, as well as workers' awareness of their rights and available legal protections.
- Secondary Data: Reports and case studies from reputable organizations like The Bangladesh Garment Manufacturers and Exporters Association (BGMEA), ILO, and Human Rights Watch were reviewed to support the findings and provide context.

Data Analysis:

The data collected through interviews and surveys were transcribed and analyzed using thematic analysis. This method was employed to identify recurring patterns and themes related to gender discrimination. Thematic categories included wage gaps, harassment, career advancement, and the effect of automation. The results were compared with secondary data to validate and deepen the findings.

FINDINGS

Wage Disparities: The Hidden Inequality

One of the most prominent forms of gender discrimination identified in this study is the wage gap between male and female workers. Female garment workers reported earning, on average, 20-30% less than their male counterparts for performing the same tasks.

Case Study Example:

Rina, a 32-year-old worker at a garment factory in Dhaka, shared, "I've been stitching shirts for 12 years, and I know the job better than anyone. Yet, my male colleague who started a year ago is earning more than me. It's frustrating, but I don't have a choice."

This sentiment was echoed by 80% of respondents, who felt that their wages were unjustly lower despite having the same skills and experience as their male peers. Many workers expressed that the "women's work" in the factory, such as finishing and quality-checking, was undervalued compared to the more technically complex tasks often assigned to men.

Limited Career Advancement

Career progression in Bangladesh's garment industry remains overwhelmingly male-dominated. The study found that 85% of women interviewed had never been promoted to a managerial or supervisory position, despite having long tenure and experience. Most women are confined to low-level positions in production, while men fill higher roles such as supervisors, quality controllers, and managers.

Case Study Example

Shilpi, who has worked at a garment factory for over 10 years, described her frustration: "I am constantly overlooked for promotions. The male supervisors always get those roles, no matter how hard I work. I was told once that 'women are not suited for leadership roles.'"

This reflects a deeply ingrained belief in gender roles, where women are viewed primarily as laborers, rather than potential leaders. Many workers also reported feeling discouraged from applying for higher positions due to the lack of female role models in management.

Prevalence of Workplace Harassment

Sexual harassment and gender-based violence were other key issues raised by the workers. 60% of the participants reported experiencing or witnessing some form of harassment in the workplace, ranging from verbal abuse to unwanted physical contact.

Case Study Example:

Mina, a 26-year-old worker, described a common scenario: "The male supervisor often makes inappropriate comments about my appearance. When I complained, I was told to keep quiet or risk losing my job. So, I endure it."

The fear of retaliation and job loss prevents many women from reporting harassment. Even when complaints are made, factory management often fails to take appropriate action. This culture of silence and fear allows harassment to persist unabated.

Impact of Automation on Female Workers

With the advent of automation in the garment sector, many workers are concerned about their job security. Automated machines are being introduced to replace repetitive tasks such as stitching and finishing, and these jobs are often held by women. The study found that 70% of workers expressed anxiety over the possibility of job loss due to automation.

Case Study Example:

Fahima, a 30-year-old garment worker, expressed her concerns: "If the factory introduces machines to replace

our jobs, we will be the first to go. Most of us don't have the skills to operate those machines."

This trend points to a widening gender gap, as male workers are more likely to be retrained for supervisory roles related to new technology, while women are left behind.

DISCUSSION

The garment sector in Bangladesh plays a vital role in the nation's economy, particularly in terms of employment generation for women. However, as this study reveals, gender discrimination remains a significant challenge, affecting women at multiple levels—from wage disparities to career advancement, harassment, and the threat of automation-induced job losses. These issues not only have serious social and economic implications for the workers themselves but also hinder the growth potential of the sector as a whole. The findings of this research shed light on these issues and provide a deeper understanding of the persistent inequality faced by women workers in the garment industry.

Gender Wage Gap and Economic Disempowerment

One of the most glaring forms of gender discrimination identified in this study is the wage gap. As highlighted in the literature and reinforced by this study, women workers in Bangladesh's garment industry earn between 22% and 30% less than their male counterparts for performing the same work. This wage disparity is not merely a consequence of different job roles, but rather a reflection of ingrained societal and structural biases that undervalue women's labor. Despite holding similar positions and having the same qualifications, women are often paid less, leading to economic disempowerment.

The gap in wages has a broader impact on women's economic security and opportunities for personal growth. A lower wage means fewer resources for healthcare, education, and overall well-being. For women workers who rely solely on their earnings, the wage gap becomes a direct barrier to breaking the cycle of poverty. In the context of Bangladesh, where a large portion of women are the primary earners in their families, this disparity magnifies the socio-economic divide between men and women. Addressing this wage gap requires not only legal reforms but also a cultural shift within factories, where women's work must be equally valued and compensated.

Limited Career Advancement Opportunities

The study also uncovered a significant limitation in career advancement opportunities for women in the garment industry. Despite the vast number of women employed in the sector, only a few are promoted to supervisory or managerial positions. As noted by Haque et al. (2020), and confirmed by the findings in this study, women are typically confined to lower-level positions, often as seamstresses or quality controllers, while men fill the higher-paying, more prestigious roles.

This lack of upward mobility is not merely an individual issue but reflects broader systemic barriers that prevent women from advancing in their careers. This includes the belief that women are better suited for repetitive, manual labor rather than leadership roles. This is compounded by the absence of formal mentorship programs, leadership training, or women-centric career development initiatives in factories. The few women who do manage to rise to higher positions often face additional challenges, such as increased scrutiny, limited support, and constant undermining from male colleagues. Thus, while women make up the backbone of the workforce, they remain stuck in the lower rungs of the hierarchical ladder.

Sexual Harassment and Workplace Safety

The prevalence of sexual harassment and gender-based violence in the workplace is another critical finding from this study. Approximately 60% of the respondents reported experiencing some form of harassment, ranging from verbal abuse to unwanted physical contact. The lack of accountability for perpetrators, combined with the fear of retaliation, often silences women and prevents them from reporting such incidents. As revealed by the study, many women are hesitant to approach management or labor unions for fear of losing their jobs or facing social stigma.

This situation is deeply concerning, as workplace harassment not only violates women's rights but also contributes to a hostile work environment that affects workers' mental health, job satisfaction, and productivity. The literature reviewed also supports these findings, indicating that sexual harassment is widespread in the garment sector but rarely addressed adequately by employers. This points to a need for stronger anti-harassment policies, robust reporting mechanisms, and training for both management and workers on gender sensitivity and workers' rights.

The Impact of Automation on Women's Employment

The ongoing trend toward automation in the garment sector presents both an opportunity and a threat. On one hand, automation can increase efficiency, reduce production costs, and allow factories to meet global demand more effectively. On the other hand, the rapid adoption of automated machinery threatens to disproportionately affect women workers, who are predominantly employed in low-skilled, manual tasks that are most susceptible to automation. This study found that 31% of the workforce could be displaced due to automation, with women bearing the brunt of these job losses.

Many of the women interviewed in this study expressed concern over their ability to adapt to new technologies, as they often lack the required skills for operating automated machines. While men are typically given training opportunities and promoted to supervisory roles in the automation process, women are often left behind. This reflects a broader issue of gendered labor market segmentation, where women are often relegated to lower-wage, less skill-intensive jobs. The fear of job displacement due to automation is real, and without targeted upskilling programs, women will continue to face barriers in adapting to the evolving demands of the industry.

Interlinking Gender Norms and Workplace Inequality

Another important finding is the role of socio-cultural gender norms in perpetuating inequality within the garment sector. In Bangladesh, where traditional gender roles often dictate women's place in both the home and the workforce, women are often expected to prioritize domestic responsibilities over their professional aspirations. These cultural norms limit women's ability to assert their rights, negotiate better wages, and pursue promotions. Furthermore, these expectations are compounded by the belief that women are "secondary earners," which, as noted in the study, justifies the unequal pay and limited career opportunities they face.

Societal beliefs about women's capabilities, along with the absence of sufficient work-life balance policies in many factories, force many women to choose between their families and their careers. The lack of childcare facilities, maternity leave, and flexible work hours further limits women's ability to continue working and advancing in the industry. This reflects a larger structural issue where gendered expectations continue to dictate women's economic and professional choices, both in and out of the workplace.

RECOMMENDATION

Addressing the deep-seated gender discrimination within Bangladesh's garment industry requires a multifaceted approach, combining legal, policy, and social interventions. First and foremost, there needs to be a robust equal pay policy that ensures equal compensation for equal work. The wage disparity, where women earn significantly less than men for performing the same tasks, should be rectified through transparent and standardized pay structures. This can be achieved by conducting regular wage audits, implementing gender-responsive budgeting, and ensuring that pay disparities are publicly addressed and corrected. Government agencies, factory owners, and trade unions must collaborate to set clear, enforceable standards for equal pay across all factories in the industry.

Secondly, career advancement opportunities for women in the garment sector must be actively promoted. While women make up the majority of the workforce, they are consistently underrepresented in supervisory and managerial roles. A mentorship and leadership development program specifically designed for women is crucial in helping them break through the glass ceiling. Such initiatives should provide women with the necessary skills, confidence, and opportunities to rise to leadership positions. Factories should establish clear career progression

pathways, ensuring that female workers have access to training, promotions, and leadership roles based on merit rather than gender.

Thirdly, the issue of workplace harassment cannot be ignored. The high rates of sexual harassment, verbal abuse, and physical intimidation in factories demand the implementation of comprehensive anti-harassment policies. This should include creating safe and confidential reporting mechanisms, zero-tolerance policies for harassment, and mandatory training for both workers and management on gender sensitivity and respectful workplace conduct. Additionally, factory management must be held accountable for not addressing harassment, and there must be strict legal consequences for offenders.

Another pressing issue is the impact of automation on women workers. The rapid adoption of new technologies threatens to disproportionately displace women, particularly those in lower-skilled roles. To address this, it is essential to upskill the female workforce to equip them with the necessary knowledge and skills for the jobs of the future. Training programs should focus on digital literacy, machine operation, and other technical skills required in automated workplaces. Furthermore, policies supporting women's participation in higher-skilled roles should be implemented to ensure that women are not left behind as the sector modernizes.

Finally, the socio-cultural barriers that restrict women's full participation in the workforce must be dismantled. This involves changing attitudes towards women's roles in both the home and the workplace. Factories can support women by offering flexible working hours, childcare facilities, and maternity leave, allowing women to balance their professional and personal responsibilities. Moreover, a broader cultural shift is needed to challenge traditional gender roles, promoting gender equality in both the home and the workplace. The government, civil society organizations, and employers must engage in public awareness campaigns to address these norms, highlighting the value of women's work and their equal rights to career opportunities and fair compensation.

In conclusion, addressing gender discrimination in Bangladesh's garment sector requires comprehensive, multi-stakeholder action. By implementing these recommendations, the sector can not only improve the well-being of its female workforce but also strengthen its competitive edge in the global market. The adoption of gender-sensitive policies and the promotion of equality can lead to a more inclusive, efficient, and productive garment industry in Bangladesh.

CONCLUSION

This study sheds light on the pervasive gender discrimination faced by women workers in Bangladesh's garment industry, a sector that plays a critical role in the nation's economy. Despite their significant contribution to the workforce, women continue to experience substantial challenges, including wage disparity, limited career advancement, workplace harassment, and the emerging threat of automation-induced job displacement. The findings confirm that gender inequality is deeply entrenched in the sector's labor practices, with women earning significantly lower wages, facing barriers to promotion, and enduring hostile work environments. Furthermore, the increasing automation in the industry poses a unique challenge for women, as they are more likely to be displaced from low-skilled roles, further marginalizing them within the workforce.

These issues are compounded by socio-cultural gender norms and the lack of gender-sensitive policies, which restrict women's opportunities for empowerment and career growth. The absence of strong anti-harassment policies, equal pay initiatives, and upskilling programs exacerbates the gender divide and perpetuates systemic inequalities. The findings underscore the urgent need for holistic policy reforms that address not only the wage gap but also career development, workplace safety, and the impact of automation.

For Bangladesh's garment industry to realize its full potential, comprehensive reforms are necessary, focusing on equal pay, leadership development, improved safety standards, and the provision of opportunities for women to adapt to technological advancements. By creating a more inclusive and gender-equitable environment, the industry can enhance both its social responsibility and economic performance, benefiting workers, employers, and the broader society.

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