Gender-Based Violence and Harassment in Bangladesh’s Ready-Made Garments (RMG) Industry: Exploring Workplace Well-Being Issues in Policy and Practice

Rahima Akter *, Julian Teicher and Quamrul Alam

College of Business, School of Business and Law, Central Queensland University, Melbourne, VIC 3000, Australia; j.teicher@cqu.edu.au (J.T.); q.alam@cqu.edu.au (Q.A.)

* Correspondence: r.akter@cqu.edu.au; Tel.: +61-432505723

Abstract: Gender-based violence and harassment (GBVH) in the workplace are major issues that affect the work environment and employee well-being. These issues have received little attention from managers in the ready-made garments (RMG) factories or policymakers more generally in Bangladesh, despite the comprehensive approach to restructuring the industry following two devastating industrial accidents. This research examines the role played by RMG factory managers in eliminating gender-based violence and increasing positive work experiences and well-being in the workplace, and the policy initiatives from the government with the aim to stop workplace violence. The study uses qualitative methods—document analysis and semi-structured interviews. The findings reveal that measures to protect workers from GBVH are absent in employment regulation. Though there are high court directives on workplace harassment, these have not been implemented effectively. The findings show that women workers have faced longstanding GBVH, which has impacted their well-being. The increasing rate of women leaving RMG sector jobs reflects how women workers’ well-being issues have been disregarded within the factories.

Keywords: gender-based violence; sexual harassment; the Bangladesh RMG industry; workplace well-being

1. Introduction

The strong linkage between workplace behaviour and well-being has been critical for productivity and sustainability in the female labour-intensive ready-made garments (RMG) industry in Bangladesh. Workplace behaviours, in simple terms, include attitudes from the managers and supervisors, and treatment which considers the needs of different genders, environments, and conditions in a workplace. Workplace violence in the RMG industry, specifically gender-based violence and harassment (GBVH), is an increasing concern [1–3], though this has been a long-standing problem since the 1980s [4,5]. A growing amount of research demonstrates that workers in this industry face violence and are forced to work in exploitative working conditions, and that women in particular experience sexual harassment for not meeting production targets, work mistakes, absences, and arriving late [6,7]. These workplace behaviours affect workplace well-being resulting in workers’ dissatisfaction, high turnover, absenteeism, and reduced productivity [8]. These factors eventually influence the sustainability of the industry, as well as the impact of business initiatives on its workers [9]. Despite the recent attention paid to improve workers’ health and safety in RMG factories, neither the workplace practices and strategies nor employment regulations address gender-based violence and its impact on workers’ well-being. Both the RMG factory managers and the government remain silent in addressing GBVH in the workplace.

The RMG industry has been undergoing major restructuring processes and reformations since 2013, based on regulatory changes and management strategies due to industrial
accidents. Two industrial disasters (the collapse of the Rana Plaza building in 2013 and the factory fire in the Tajreen Fashions in 2012) compelled the government to amend the labour laws, forcing the RMG factory managers to incorporate management practices based on the regulatory changes [10]. The government revised the labour laws and added new provisions to protect workers’ rights. The international community (international trade unions, human rights organisations, global clothing brands) forced the industry and the government to correct the business mechanisms within the factories. Employers in the RMG industry were under pressure to refurbish workplace strategies and practices aligning with the regulatory changes [11]; however, these initiatives were limited to structural issues, such as the building, fire and electrical security, and workers’ health and safety at the workplace.

The initiatives in identifying problems in workplace behaviours and protecting women against GBVH in RMG factories remained critical and unaddressed during the reformation of employment regulations in 2013. Both the government and the RMG employers concentrated on the structure of factory buildings and fire and electrical security and workers’ safety issues. However, the overall working conditions and the issues for workers’ rights and protection that are linked with workplace well-being are still unaddressed. Although the factory managers were required to adopt and incorporate human resource (HR) policies (e.g., recruitment policy—issuing appointment letters, ID cards) to conduct, there was minimal attention paid to establishing safe and supportive (nonexploitative) work attitudes and work relationships [11–14].

The RMG industry and its recent corrective measures have received considerable research attention, including studies evaluating the implementation of corrective measures [10,11,15,16], the compliance of the RMG factories with the regulatory changes [17–19], and minimum wage and equal rights [20–22]. However, critical discussions on the evaluation of regulatory changes and management practices to ensure women workers’ rights in the factories is limited. The research on workplace behaviours, GBVH in the RMG factories, and the impact of these issues on workplace well-being are under-explored in academic research [23,24]. Against this backdrop, this paper investigates the adherence of factory managers and the government to ensuring workplace well-being in the RMG industry. The study investigates the two following research questions:

i. How are the workplace violence and harassment issues addressed in employment regulations in Bangladesh?

ii. What role have managers played in addressing gender-based violence and harassment and ensuring workplace well-being in the RMG industry?

The paper is organised as follows: Section 2 presents concepts related to GBVH and the theoretical framework to analyse workplace behaviours and management practices. This is followed by a contextual analysis of violence against women in the family and the society of Bangladesh, the RMG industry, and the global framework on workplace violence and harassment in Section 3. Section 4 presents the methodology of this research paper. Section 5 presents the findings of this research, and Section 6 presents the discussion and conclusions of this paper.

2. Concepts and Theory

The research requires unpacking the concepts of workplace violence, GBVH, well-being at work, management practices in the workplace, and the global framework against GBVH in the workplace. This section later discusses diversity management (DM) theories to shape and analyse our research problem.

2.1. Concepts

The definition of workplace violence and harassment includes any physical or emotional act or threat at the workplace that affects workers’ health and well-being [25]. While this definition includes violence in standard employment, the actual scenario in precarious employment is more intense. In precarious work (jobs that are unprotected and insecure
due to the rules and regulations being weak), good management practices are absent and often beyond regular inspection and monitoring, and the occurrences of violence and harassment are frequent and in different forms [26]. Four types of workplace violence are commonly found in a work environment, specifically physical (e.g., bullying, slapping, hitting, pulling hair), sexual (e.g., abusive language, gestures, unwanted sexual advances, sexual remarks, rape), economic (e.g., missing performance bonuses, deduction of wage), and emotional (e.g., shouting, insulting, threats, undermining workers, or swearing), between workers and co-workers, and workers and employers [23]. While the term workplace violence refers to aggression or violence between any gender or sex of workers, gender-based violence refers to “a range of unacceptable behaviours and practices” that “result in physical, psychological, sexual or economic harm”, which is “directed at persons because of their sex or gender”, specifically between men and women [27].

GBVH occurs between women and men, against the will of the victim due to unequal power relations and historical disadvantages. Women, often due to the socio-cultural contexts and gender norms prevailing in society, are victims of different forms of GBVH including physical, sexual, emotional, and economic harm, as well as threats of violence in the workplace [28]. Women are easily exploited and harassed sexually in the workplace because of their inferior positions in the family and society, which is due to patriarchal structures [29]. The perpetrators of this violence are male co-workers, supervisors, managers, or any male persons in the workplace. In female labour-intensive clothing manufacturing jobs, women workers are generally less educated than men, and are less likely to be aware of workplace rules and their rights, and can hence become subject to exploitation by these perpetrators. The absence of management policies and practices addressing these issues makes this situation intense and affects the overall well-being of the workplace.

Workplace well-being refers to wellness in the workplace by ensuring a safe and healthy work environment [30]. To this end, managers should design and implement all necessary activities, programs, and policies to support healthy behaviour in the workplace [31]. Well-being at work is influenced by workplace behaviours, supervisor–worker relations, work engagement, work–life balance, and wages [32]. Managers need to make efforts to ensure well-being at the workplace by prioritising physical and mental health issues in the work environment [33]. Workplace well-being encompasses objective and subjective aspects. Objective aspects at the workplace include workplace behaviours, employee–employer relations, the work environment, wages, and benefits; and subjective aspects comprise how workers feel about their work and job satisfaction [34,35]. This paper focuses on the objective aspects of workplace well-being, discussing management practices on these issues.

Human resources management (HRM) policies and practices define workplace attitudes, behaviours, and the treatment of workers that are acceptable in a work environment [31]. Contemporary HRM policies need to accommodate different categories of workers based on their demographic index, skills, and experiences. HRM should adopt policies of inclusion which consider the diverse needs of employees, identify mechanisms to minimise workplace conflicts, and guarantee a safe and sound working environment to ensure employee well-being [36,37]. HR managers are required to address the different needs/demands of the workers, reduce workplace violence, and adopt leadership to establish a work environment where employees feel valued and productive at work [23,38]. Managers are essentially required to incorporate the precepts of diversity management into HRM policies, and implement those policies into practice in order to maintain productivity and sustainability in business [39]. HR managers ought to be aware and knowledgeable about workplace behaviours, potential risks from the mismanagement of work cultures, and managing workers from diverse backgrounds.

2.2. Theory

This study adopts diversity management (DM) theories as the theoretical lens to analyse the research problem. Diversity management in the workplace has been used
interchangeably with the terms ‘managing diversity’ or ‘workplace diversity’. Traditional DM deals with managing differences in a workplace in order to be more productive and sustainable. Prasad, Mills, Elmes, and Prasad (1997, p. 4) [40] stated that “the term managing diversity refers to the systematic and planned commitment on the part of organizations to recruit and retain employees from diverse demographic backgrounds”. Workplace diversity refers to the development and implementation of organisational initiatives to increase the diverse workforce and include all employees in every aspect of organisational life [39]. Diversity management is the combination of philosophies/values, policies, and practices related to managing diversity in an organization [41]. These definitions highlight that, irrespective of organisational values, DM theories focus on the differences that have systematically given rise to discrimination. These types of differences comprise demographics (e.g., gender, race, ethnicity, religion) or groups that are historically disadvantaged and systemically face discrimination and oppression at work [42,43]. These historically disadvantaged groups include women, religious and ethnic minorities, and disabled or older employees who require equal attention in inclusion [44,45].

Scholars have identified different approaches to managing diversity, and reviewed various HRM responses to diversity management [45,46]. They presented four paradigms. First, the Discrimination-and-fairness paradigm is based on equal opportunity and fair treatment in workplace management practices, and compliance with the law. Managers adopting this paradigm in their workplace policies tend to focus on equal opportunity and fair treatment, maintaining compliance with regulations [45]. Second, the Access-and-legitimacy paradigm entails that managing diversity should consider the existence of diverse consumers. This paradigm confirms that gaining access to and obtaining legitimacy from these various customers is possible through incorporating diverse employees into organisational practice. Third, the Learning-and-effectiveness paradigm enables companies to acknowledge and recognise the value of cultural differences, and allows them to incorporate employees’ perspectives into their strategies. A fourth paradigm, Resistance, asserts that the majority of the workforce may consider diversity as a threat and therefore create resistance or barriers against diversity management [46]. In dealing with this resistance of the workforce and implementing diversity management, Dass and Parker (1999) described that management should focus on shifting the resistance into a learning process, as well as how strategic responses in workplace practices should turn from reactive to proactive.

Theorists emphasise the influence of socio-cultural contexts among managers or diversity leaders in an organisation—how managers identify and address the cultural differences in their workforce [43,47]. Dietz and Petersen (2006) constitute the micro and macro-level approaches to managing diversity in the workplace. In the micro-level approach, they consider that prejudice and stereotypes prevailing in the workplace are the precursors of discrimination. Social psychological processes, such as the social construction of identities, self-categorisation, and experience in social dominance orientation, are less important in creating discrimination than, for example, stereotypes and prejudices [47]. The macro-level approach relates to organisational or business unit-level analysis, and is about the relationship between workforce diversity and performance. These scholars urge that organisational researchers should understand the impact of stereotypes and prejudice on diversity management, and aim to eliminate or reduce these in order to decrease discrimination. They conclude their ideas that organisations should follow colour-conscious rather than “colour-blind” diversity management practices, as the latter may create comparatively high risks.

The main focus of DM theories is how the differences among workers in a workplace are understood and responded to by managers. The differences in individual or group identity in society can have an impact on creating a workplace identity that triggers management policies and practices. The Social Identity variant of DM theories asserts that people identify themselves into different social categories in order to build their own social identity. Social identity theory originated in the field of psychology, and was later used in the explanation of workplace diversity management approaches. Social identity theory
specifies that it is the structure and function of the identity of peoples’ membership in a group that shapes the workplace identity [48]. This theory explains that human beings classify themselves and others into groups. Categorising workers both from the managers’ and workers’ groups can create in-group biases and out-group discrimination. Therefore, the social identity theory explains that discriminatory behaviour results from this group identification [49].

The DM paradigms, the micro- and macro-level approaches, and the social identity theory will be used as theoretical lenses to explain and analyse the research problem of this paper. Based on the contextual analysis of this research topic and a detailed presentation of the findings, these theoretical propositions will be used to understand this specific research context and findings within the discussion section.

3. Contexts

Our study requires a contextual discussion of violence against women in the family and in society in Bangladesh, the recent initiatives to restructure the RMG industry, women workers’ identities in RMG employment, and the management of work structure in the RMG factories. This section also provides an overview of the global framework—the ILO Conventions and the UN’s initiatives to deal with violence and harassment in the workplace.

3.1. Violence against Women in the Family and in Society in Bangladesh

Violence against women in the family and in society is frequent in Bangladesh’s patriarchal socio-cultural context. The socially constructed idea of masculinity enshrines the high status of men, the superior position of male members in the family, and society with an associated perceived right to control women, which precludes women from ever being under the supervision of other women [50]. It is customary that husbands have the authority and right to beat their wives. Domestic violence is also common if women are unwilling to perform any duties that the male members of the family (i.e., father, husband, son, brother) command them to complete. It is reported that more than half of the women who have been married (56 per cent) experienced one or more forms of violence from their husbands at least once in their lifetime ([51], p. 143). Inequality and discrimination are prominent during marriage life, with women compelled to fulfil their reproductive and household responsibilities. Violence against women in the family and in society is currently dealt with under various laws, including the Women and Children Repression Prevention Act 2000, the Domestic Violence Act 2010, and the Criminal Procedure Code 1898 (CrPC) in Bangladesh [52]. The scope and applications of these laws are discussed below.

Women in Bangladesh society also face various forms of violence—teasing, hitting, and sexual harassment on the streets, in marketplaces, and on public transport. This is because of women’s entrenched subordinate position beginning in the family, while men’s superiority is manifest in every sphere of life. It is common in village societies for women to encounter threats of harassment from perpetrators if they venture outside their homes during the evening or nighttime [53]. Women are also attacked or threatened whenever the masculine society thinks that women are trying to cross their boundaries. Men’s identity in Bangladesh society is distinguished by a higher gender status and the exercise of power [54]. Women’s entry into waged employment is seen as a challenge and a threat to their husbands’ social status and authority [24]. The disproportionate responsibilities for unpaid work in the home create men’s perception of disrespect, inequality, and discrimination, which then spills over into paid employment [55].

3.2. The RMG Industry

The RMG industry is the largest employer for the bottom-level female labour force in Bangladesh. The industry emerged during the late 1970s, and there are now around four thousand factories [56,57]. The industry generates employment for four million workers, and more than 80 per cent of all garment workers are women [51].
By virtue of male dominance in social life, it is not surprising that factory management in the RMG industry is male-dominated. Most of the personnel in the production and non-production segments of the factories are men. The managers in the HRM department and the production unit (comprised mainly of some basic sections like cutting, sewing, and finishing) are mostly men, as are the work supervisors. Studies suggest that women workers’ participation in managerial and supervisory positions is below 10 per cent, with very low participation (below 5 per cent) as managers in the factories ([6], p. 16 [58], p. 122). Women workers are mostly engaged in the bottom-level positions. These women are the first generation of the female workforce who entered formal manufacturing employment, leaving their typical rural informal agricultural work [4,59]. These women workers are typically ‘helpers’ (entry-level), operators (responsible for sewing), or cleaners in the non-production units [4,60]. Most of these women are widows, separated from their husbands, extremely poor, and landless. Employers prefer women in these positions, as they can be easily exploited because of their low education levels, and they are more submissive due to the hierarchical and patriarchal societal context.

The industry has been criticised for operating in unsafe and exploitative working conditions, as well as engaging in unethical practices—underpayment, forcing workers to work long hours, excessive work pressure, violation of labour rights, and welfare issues, alongside physical and mental health problems and the absence of freedom of association [61]. The industry came under active monitoring and supervision after two industrial disasters—the collapse of Rana Plaza in 2013, killing 1129 workers, and fire incidents in Tazreen Fashions in 2012, where 112 workers died ([11], p. 600, [10], p. 720). Unified interventions from the transnational agencies, namely Accord (the Bangladesh Accord on Fire and Building Safety) and Alliance (the Alliance of Worker Safety), created by international trade unions and global brands, along with the Bangladesh government, which includes the International Labour Organisation (ILO), were adopted to address the issues in this industry [11]. As noted above, these interventions were limited to regulatory changes, designed to improve safety and building security. The government made necessary arrangements to amend labour laws to protect workers’ health and safety in employment. For example, under the amended labour law (2013), managers are required to form a safety committee among workers (Section 78a); they have to maintain a record book detailing the mandatory use of personal safety equipment (Section 78a), and managers need to organise training on safety issues for workers (Section 90a) [62]. Both the government and the transnational agencies inspected fire, electrical, and structural safety issues in all of the factories, and provided corrective actions plans (CAPs) to make the factory safe [63]. The transnational agencies worked for five years (from 2013 to 2018) to inspect factories and provide CAPs; however, the CAPs set standards and guidelines that are followed and carried out by the national bodies (e.g., public inspectorates) for the inspection of RMG factories. The major initiatives included in the CAPs (excluding technical assessments of factory fire, electrical, and building security) are safety training programs, forming occupational health and safety committees with worker representatives, and establishing safety and health complaint procedures [15,64,65].

Factory management (including factory owners, managers, production supervisors, compliance officers, human resource officers, and other support staff) was responsible for implementing the corrective action plans (CAPs) on fire, electrical, and structural safety issues. It was incontrovertibly proven that the industrial accidents were caused by a combination of the negligence of workers’ management by factory managers, and a lack of legal protection from the regulators [61]. During the restructuring process, factory managers were under pressure to make necessary corrections in management practices to comply with the regulatory provisions and with buyers’ requirements, e.g., safety training, safety committees, and safety complaint procedures [18].
3.3. Global Framework on Workplace Violence and Harassment

GBVH in the world of work is not confined to Bangladesh, and has been a feature of the development of pre-industrial and industrial societies, yet the issue was not addressed in the global arena until 2019. There were no binding international instruments to guide countries to formulate national laws and effectively address workplace violence. The ILO adopted the Violence and Harassment Convention, 2019 (C190) in June 2019 as an instrument for its member states to identify and prohibit workplace violence and harassment [66]. C190 calls on all ILO members to adopt appropriate laws and regulations, so that employers will be bound to take measures to prevent violence and harassment, protecting workers (Article 9). This convention requires member states to adopt “an inclusive, integrated and gender-responsive approach for the prevention and elimination of violence and harassment” with consultation with employers and workers’ organisations (Article 4). The convention also ensures the right to equality and non-discrimination in employment, including for women workers and workers belonging to vulnerable groups, by asking its member states to adopt appropriate regulations and policies (Article 6) (pp. 6–8). Like all ILO conventions, its efficacy is defined by whether member states adopt it, and whether they implement it through national legislation.

The Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), 1979, is the landmark guideline that highlighted the equality of women with men by seeking the elimination of all forms of discrimination against women. This convention was adopted by the United Nations (UN) General Assembly in 1979, and came into force as an international treaty in 1981 [67]. In the economic domain, CEDAW includes principles based on the equal rights of men and women in employment [67]. This convention does not include explicit provisions on GBV and sexual harassment in the workplace. However, CEDAW General Recommendation No. 19 recognises that “equality in employment can be seriously impaired when women are subjected to gender-specific violence, such as sexual harassment in the workplace”. This recommendation also includes a clear definition of sexual harassment [68].

Both these frameworks (the ILO Convention C190 and the UN CEDAW) require member countries to initially ratify both conventions, and then incorporate provisions into existing national laws or adopt new legislation to meet the requirements of these global frameworks. Bangladesh has not ratified the ILO C190, and there have been no initiatives to include provisions into existing employment regulations or new legislation to address workplace violence or GBVH at the workplace. Bangladesh ratified the UN CEDAW in 1984; however, this convention itself lacks provisions on workplace GBVH, which limits the guidance provided to nations in developing laws to protect women from workplace violence and harassment.

4. Methods

4.1. Data Collection Techniques

This study used a qualitative research method for data collection. Data were collected through document analysis and interviews with participants. Document analysis includes examining all types of regulation (acts, rules, policies, codes, statutory orders, strategies) and research papers on GBVH. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with research participants (factory managers, public officials, NGO activists, researchers, and academics) online from March to June (2021), due to travel restrictions during COVID-19 in 2020–2021. Female workers from the RMG factories were not included in this study, considering the mode of research and the fact that these workers had limited access to technology, such as online meetings via Zoom.

4.2. Research Settings, Participants, and Recruitment

Interviews were conducted with factory employers/managers/supervisors in the RMG industry, policymakers from the government, and experts (researchers, academics, NGO activists, and experts from the ILO) in Bangladesh. The identification and selection
of the RMG factories, and the public and private organisations for this research followed purposive sampling. The garment factories were selected randomly based on workforce size and the production capacity from the databases maintained by the two garment industry employer associations (Bangladesh Garments Manufacturers Exporters Association and Bangladesh Knitwear Manufacturers Exporters Association). A total of ten RMG factories were selected as the research sites for this study. The policymakers were government officials who were responsible for formulating laws and policies regarding workers’ rights in employment, especially women in employment. Government officials from the Department of Inspection for Factories and Establishments (DIFE), the Ministry of Labour and Employment (MoLE), and the Department of Women Affairs (DWA) were specifically selected to get relevant factual information. Researchers who have expertise on the research into RMG workers’ and labour rights’ issues, and academics who have knowledge in law and gender disciplines, including research experiences in the RMG industry, were also interviewed to get a comprehensive picture of the issues pertinent to the topic. The notion of engaging a wide range of participants was especially important, as it was not possible to include the voices of women workers due to the onset of the pandemic.

Thirty-eight semi-structured interviews were conducted with the RMG/managers/supervisors/employers (two participants from each of nine factories and one employer from one factory), government officials (five labour inspectors from the DIFE, one regulator from the MoLE, and two officials from the DWA), and experts (three NGO activists, four academics and researchers, and two representatives from the ILO, Dhaka). The number of participants according to the category is specified in Table 1.

Table 1. Category-wise research participants.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>No</th>
<th>Participants by Type</th>
<th>No of Participants</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Interview Stage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Male</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Government officials</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Factory Managers (HRM Head/HRM Managers/Employers/Welfare Officers)</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Representatives from Trade Associations</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>NGO Activists (Local and International)</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>ILO</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>Researchers and Academics</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Total</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Interviews were conducted in the two following stages: firstly, key informant interviews (KII) were conducted with nine participants who are NGO activists, researchers, academics, and experts from the ILO, Dhaka office. Second-stage interviews were in-depth interviews (IDI) with the managers/supervisors from the RMG industry, public officials, and representatives from the trade associations. All interviews were video-recorded with the consent of the participants. Participants were divided into two groups for the two types of interviews.

In total, 19 managers/supervisors/employers were recruited for the interview. All factories are categorised as large, medium, or small factories, based on their number of total workers. The size of the factories was decided based on the total number of workers working in that particular factory. For example, a factory with a maximum of a total of one thousand workers was considered a small factory. Half of the factories (five factories) in this research were small factories, while three factories were medium-sized (total workers range from 1001 to 5000), and two were big factories (total workers range from 5001 to above). Table 2 presents the number of factories and participants recruited for interviews for this research.
Table 2. Data on the RMG factories and participants.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Size</th>
<th>No. of Factories</th>
<th>Participants</th>
<th>Portfolio and Gender of the Participants</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>HR Manager</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Male</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Small</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Medium</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Large</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

4.3. Data Collection, Management, and Analysis

Data collection started via document analysis—examining the employment regulations and other national regulations (e.g., laws, acts, policies) related to women and employment. Then, semi-structured interviews were conducted online one-on-one, through Zoom software, (version: 5.16.10 (26186)), where the researchers were in Australia and the participants were in Bangladesh. Interviews were conducted in the above-mentioned ways, with two forms of interviews taking place.

Two separate open-ended interview guides (see Appendix A.2) were designed to elicit the conversations with research participants. The topics were the same for both the KII and IDI participants. All interviews with the KII and IDI lasted from sixty to ninety minutes. All discussions were conducted in Bengali (the local language) and transcribed by the researcher (the first author, who was fluent in both Bengali and English). These de-identified transcripts were then translated into Australian English by qualified translators. While the KII participants provided a general overview of the problem based on their research and work experience, the IDI participants provided more detailed and practical information on the issue with which they were directly involved.

The interview data were coded, classified under themes, and analysed using the latest version of NVivo software (release 1.4.1 (851)) [69]. Themes were identified based on background analysis, examining the regulations and raw interview transcripts. After reading and memoing the transcripts, the researchers categorised and coded them according to the themes and concepts of the study. The interview transcripts were re-read and annotated, and a draft code list was prepared. This process helped to gradually develop a codebook. NVivo was organised to annotate interview transcripts and maintain reflections as memos on individual transcripts, using pre-defined codes and themes based on the document analysis. A systematic thematic categorisation was conducted again during the annotation and analysis of the interview data. New themes were also developed and added to the existing list of themes, based on the frequency of the texts in the interview narratives. The annotation and interpretation of the data also helped to derive a set of sub-themes that assisted in generating a summary of the findings of this research.

5. Findings

This study investigates the role of factory managers in addressing gender-based violence and harassment to ensure workplace well-being in the RMG industry. The study also examines how workplace violence and harassment were addressed during the re-drafting of labour laws and the adoption of labour rules since 2013.

5.1. Workplace Violence and Harassment

5.1.1. Employment Regulation of Gender-Based Violence and Harassments

The document analysis and semi-structured interviews revealed that there are no legal provisions directly addressing gender-based violence and sexual harassment in the workplace. The Bangladesh Labour Act (BLA) 2006 was amended in 2013, and the Bangladesh Labour Rules (BLR) were adopted in 2015. However, neither the BLA 2006 nor the BLR 2015 provide any safeguards for women regarding gender-based workplace violence and harassment. The general laws, other than the employment regulations, provide
provisions on violence against women in the family and in society. One participant, an academic researcher on GBVH at the workplace, explained the following:

And when a pedestrian is teasing or harassing me, it is a crime. But when someone is harassing me where I work, the nature of this crime is completely different. Because I am afraid of losing my job. That is why sexual harassment in the workplace is being addressed globally separately. Maybe in general law (in Bangladesh), this issue is addressed separately... Workplace sexual harassment laws discuss what the responsibilities of the employers would be... This full area is totally missing from our legal framework.

The BLA provides only one provision (Section 332) about how to behave with women workers, which states that

“Conduct towards women—Where any woman is employed in any work of any establish-
ment, whatever her rank or status may be, no person of that establishment shall behave
with her which may seem to be indecent or unmannerly or which is repugnant to the
modesty or honour of that woman” ([70], p. 8043).

However, the definition of indecent behaviour or how the workers can seek protection against indecent behaviour or if they face violence is absent in the laws. The participants during semi-structured interviews identified the limitations of this provision, as well as the absence of adequate laws to stop GBVH at the workplace. A labour inspector responsible for regular factory inspections stated the following:

The weakest aspect of Section 332, the problem with our labour law, is that it is not permissible to behave indecently, but there is no definition of indecent behaviour. Therefore, when the labour law is amended, we have requested to define indecent behaviour there.

Though the BLA was amended in 2013 and 2018, there were no provisions adopted against GBVH at the workplace. There were also no initiatives to define or clarify Section 332 on the nature of decent behaviours.

In response to the outcry from NGOs and Human Rights activists seeking to prevent GBVH in the workplace and educational institutions, the government has adopted directives suggested by the High Court Division (HCD) of the Supreme Court in Bangladesh. Directives are the guidelines to take necessary actions to stop sexual harassment at work (these are voluntary guidelines and a part of informal regulatory frameworks, but are not statutes, as they are not passed through parliament; therefore, they do not have any legal power to penalise). The directives prohibit a wide range of behaviours, including workplace sexual harassment, which is defined in terms of indecent gestures, abusive language, attempts to establish physical relations, and having sexual implications via the abuse of administrative, authoritative, or professional powers [71].

The directives provide a recommendation that employers should form complaint committees to receive complaints of sexual harassment, conduct investigations, and make recommendations. The committee should consist of a minimum of five members with a majority of women, and should have at least two external members, preferably from organisations working on gender issues and sexual abuse. Employers are also expected to create awareness in the workplace against sexual harassment and gender discrimination [71] The main weakness of this HCD is that these are only recommendations, and the term ‘directive’ is a misnomer as compliance is optional. Key features of the BLA and the HCD on workplace violence and harassment can be seen in Appendix A.3.

5.1.2. Laws on Violence and Harassment against Women in Society and Family

There are, however, other regulations proscribing violence against women in the family, society, and public places, and these could be applied to workplace violence. The government enacted the Women and Children Repression Prevention Act (WCRPA) in 2000 (amended in 2003, 2012, 2020), which introduced punishments for various forms of violence against women (trafficking, kidnapping, rape, sexual assault, and violence for dowry). This act required the establishment of special tribunals at the district level to make remedial
procedures easily available for women (Section 26). Punishment for contravening this law ranges from three years of imprisonment for dowry (bodily injury) to life imprisonment or the death penalty for rape [72]. The Domestic Violence (Prevention and Protection) Act (DVPPA) 2010 focuses on preventing domestic violence, such as physical, psychological, sexual, or economic abuse against a woman or a child in a family relationship [73].

The WCRPA 2000 and the DVPPA 2010 are two important enactments intended to protect women and children from violence and sexual harassment in the family and society more broadly. However, these two laws are not sufficiently focused to prevent GBVH in the workplace. One participant, a legal academic, explained that

*Your boss is behaving with you in a way that the law does not even recognise. Suppose my boss is texting me every day; “You have to come to dinner, you have to come to dinner”. For seven days, you did not accept his proposal; on the eighth day, you saw that those who were in a lower grade than you were being given bonuses or promotions. This is not a crime in law... It is not defined in any of our laws, nor is there any general law in the Women and Child Repression Act, nor in the penal code.*

Though these laws include a wide range of definitions of violence against women, there is little application of these laws to prevent workplace gender-based violence and sexual harassment. Therefore, some participants argued for new laws to prevent workplace violence and sexual harassment based on the ILO convention. An NGO participant working on women workers’ rights stated the following:

*You know about the new ILO convention, if a specific law is made based on the Convention 190 to prevent gender-based violence and sexual harassment at workplaces, that would protect our workers.*...


The findings of this section include a discussion of workplace policies on protecting women workers from gender-based violence and harassment, the role of managers in mitigating such behaviours, and existing working conditions inside the garment factories.

5.2.1. Workplace Policies and Strategies on Workplace Violence—A Neglected Issue

The interview narratives revealed that the RMG factories covered in this study lack policies to prevent gender-based violence and sexual harassment in the workplace. This absence is all the more remarkable as women constitute the majority of the relevant workforce. The interviews revealed that the factory managers failed to understand the implications of gender differences among their workers. One participant, an NGO activist working directly with garment factories who also had experience as a garment worker, commented the following:

*One option was, to prevent sexual harassment, and gender-based violence at workplaces, the High Court Directives of 2009. If I want to enforce that verdict in the factory, then they (factories) are supposed to have gender rights policies. But pretty much all of them do not have these policies. Even if they have, it is just for showoff; there are very few who have a complaint committee or an active anti-harassment committee.*

That the employment laws do not provide any clear provision on how to deal with workplace violence seemed to suit the HR managers in this study. The absence of laws also enabled them to make excuses for not having proper procedures to address gender-based violence and sexual harassment in the factories. Factories have, however, adopted a range of HRM policies to manage their workforce because these were needed to meet the Corrective Actions Plans, or to secure the audit certificates from organisations recruited by the buyers for monitoring and inspection. However, very few (among the participant factories) were found with effective policies and practices to deal with workplace violence. For example, almost all small-sized factories in this research do not have any policies on workplace violence or women’s rights issues. It was found from the interview narratives
from the expert group that they considered that the RMG industry is still in the early stage of implementing regulations (though the industry is almost 45 years old), and is therefore not able to incorporate policies, like workplace violence protection or women’s rights policy. One researcher from the expert group stated the following:

*the garments sector has not yet corporatised to that level. What happens when there is a corporate structure, the overall activities are very institutionalized and are directed through a type of legal structure. Our RMG industry is far from these structures.*

This narrative depicts the insights that workplace policies and practices on GBVH are not considered essential in the absence of a rigorous legal framework. It also portrays that even an expert in the industry believes the RMG industry needs to be more formalised to have a basic policy on workplace violence. The statement also highlights how underdeveloped the industry is concerning management policies even after forty-five years.

5.2.2. Implementation of the High Court Directives (HCD)—An Imposition, Rather a Proactiveness

Management policies on preventive measures and awareness programs for GBVH were found in four of the participant factories. In each case, managerial initiatives to implement the guidelines of the High Court Directives on sexual harassment were only limited to the formation of an Anti-Harassment Committee. Factory managers in the remaining factories were neither aware of these directives, nor proactive in preventing GBV and sexual harassment incidents in the workplace. The findings revealed that the RMG factories were approached by a ‘Gender Platform’ (created by six organisations—five NGOs and one trade union; two research participants were from two of these five NGOs) to implement these directives at their factories. Insights gained from the interview narratives indicate that factory managers were reluctant to implement these directives and considered these an unwanted intervention from the NGOs. Participants from the expert group also explained that there are very few initiatives to implement the HCD in garment factories. One participant from the expert group (the ILO) expressed that

*.... one measure that is being called the High Court directives, as long as no new law. How much of it is being reflected or implemented—there are enough reasons to think about it. There are some organizations (NGOs), and some factories, who are trying to implement it. But we are saying the implementation is not to that level as we expected.*

The findings revealed that a public agency (i.e., DIFE as a public inspectorate,) took the initiative to introduce the guidelines of the HCD. However, these steps are accompanied by labour inspectors indicating that DIFE has implemented a training program on women’s rights and harassment issues to increase awareness among the RMG workers. One labour inspector explained the following:

*we have conducted programmes in over 200 factories, including workers and owners. We are informing them about what is said in the laws/rules or in other regulations, what reproductive health is, if there is any problem (gender-based) in their factories, how can they get remedies and what are the mechanisms of the government along with the helplines.*

However, when compared to a large number of factories (approx. 4000), these programs in 200 factories seemed to be very low and less focused. The programmes had a broader view of women’s rights, rather than focusing on the mechanisms of GBVH at the workplace.

5.2.3. Anti-Harassment Committee: A Paper-Based Initiative

The HCD proposes that factories in the RMG industry form an anti-harassment committee and take the necessary actions to protect workers. The labour inspector informed us that it is a challenge for the factories to include two members (with a developed knowledge of gender issues and sexual abuse) from outside the factory, as there is a shortage of such
members outside Dhaka City. However, external members were required by the directive to ensure the transparency of the complaint mechanism system and the mediation from the victim’s side.

Most factories visited were found to have established an Anti-Harassment Committee, but the chair is usually a manager and almost invariably a male. Participants from the factory manager group explained that they had to have a male chair because women workers were not willing to step up in leadership roles. The interview provides insights and prior knowledge regarding the social hierarchical structure which indicate that males are strongly inclined to impose their control and authority over women in most situations. This is exactly the reason why the HCD recommends selecting women chairs. The data also revealed the ignorance of the factory managers (managers/employers and welfare officers) regarding the requirements of such a committee. Some managers (and welfare officers) were unable to state the required composition and number of members on the committees. One participant even stated the following:

*No, since it is an internal matter of the factory, external members are not involved.*

The anti-harassment committee in most of the factories surveyed exists on paper only, with most factories establishing committees to demonstrate compliance with the directive during inspection. The insights from interviews suggest that factory managers consider the HCD as peripheral to their exclusive focus on production targets, as well as being an imposition from NGOs and trade unions. The factories also want to show the buyers that they have met all criteria set by the brands, especially those from developed countries. As one NGO activist explains,

*But the sad thing is, many government or non-government organizations say that the anti-harassment committees are not functional; ... the guideline also said that there should be specific laws in this regard as soon as possible. I mean, even though we don’t have a sexual harassment prevention law, as much as there is (like HCD), there is no application for it ... Factories have a committee just in papers.*

5.2.4. Grievance Mechanisms—Mainly Compliance

Most of the factories had grievance mechanisms systems as required by the BLA 2006. Findings revealed the complaints of gender-based violence, workplace behaviours, and especially sexual harassment issues were negligible in the RMG factories. One of the labour inspectors reported that, on reviewing three years of data maintained in DIFE (labour inspectorate), not one complaint of sexual harassment had been made from the RMG women workers. The narratives from the factory managers suggest that large factories maintain proper grievance and complaint management systems; however, medium and small factories do not have proper grievance management systems. Even though the large factories have proper complaint systems, findings disclosed that they receive few complaints of gender-based violence and sexual harassment. However, one of the HR heads from a large factory explained the following:

*We received sixteen such cases (gender-based violence and harassment) in the entire garment division last year. There were no cases of sexual harassment, but there were two cases of physical harassment and fourteen were verbal abuse.*

The data collection included data in relation to the complaint mechanism system in the RMG factories. It was found that most of the factories had several methods available, such as written or verbal complaints through line supervisors, floor leaders, or welfare officers. Workers can also complain by putting their written complaints into a complaint box secretly, through phone calls and text messages to the hotline number of the HR heads, or through a face-to-face appointment with senior managers. However, participants from the factory managers group informed us that workers mostly complain verbally. One welfare officer explained that
They (women workers) actually like to complain directly. Because they may explain the complaints in a couple of sentences verbally, rather than sending a letter through the complaints box. Writing a complaint does not fully explain what is on their mind. They are also not using a phone or hotline as they are not used to these technologies. So they come directly to us.

Though the participants (from the managers group) explained that they have several types of complaint mechanisms, it is evident from the minimal complaints that women workers were not using those systems. In view of their inferior and powerless positions in society and the workplaces, it is unlikely that many women would make verbal complaints to their bosses. It seems that the factory managers were unable or unwilling to set up effective and confidential complaint mechanisms for women workers to lodge their complaints.

5.2.5. Avoiding Tendency, despite Issue Prevalence

Findings from the semi-structured interviews with the factory managers/employers revealed that they have very little knowledge about the definitions and types of violence and harassment. They consider only serious types of harassment, such as rape or physical torture, as constituting violence and harassment, overlooking physical abuse, bullying, slang language, and emotional and psychological violence. One manager from a small factory explained that

*I have received more complaints of verbal abuse, what is called slang language, I have got it in many cases before. Then, we made the management very aware of it. So I got verbal abuse, but I did not get anything like sexual harassment or physical harassment.*

Managers tended not to acknowledge the existence of GBVH in their factories. The interview narratives indicated that most managers are aware of the existence of workplace violence and sexual harassment in the RMG industry, but considered that no such practices or incidents occurred in their own workplace. One manager from a small factory said the following:

*Actually, sexual harassment happened from the supervisor to co-workers (women workers). Because they always work together, so whenever supervisors get a chance, they touch different sensitive body parts of the women workers and do different kinds of gestures. But I have not received any such complaint to date, I have heard that these kinds of things are there in other factories.*

Though the factory managers described how women workers are not affected by violence and sexual harassment in their factories, similar incidents were reported by the KII participants, especially by NGO activists and researchers. They explained that it is easier to humiliate women workers than men in the workplace because of their submissive position in society, and their lack of education, skills, and knowledge on workplace rights. One of the NGO activists, who had work experience on a garment’s sewing floor, explained that

*A male worker is called as ‘brother please do this’. But a woman worker is not called like this, similarly, the behaviour with her is not the same as they do with the male worker. They try to take advantage by calling her sister-in-law so that they can say bad stuff (e.g., slang) to her. You know according to our country’s culture, sister-in-laws, co-relatives, you can have all forms of discussions. “Do your job” by saying this, the supervisor often puts his hands on her back with a bad intention. This is absolutely sexual harassment. Such actions or words are very common for our women.*

The managers and welfare officers explained that it might have happened twenty years ago, when supervisors used to be harsh with workers, but now the situation has changed; however, this change is perhaps not in the way that the managers and welfare officers expected. The narratives suggest that the nature and types of GBVH have changed from physical to verbal abuse and emotional exploitation. The participants from the expert group also indicated that the severity of aggression might have changed from strong to
mild, but the state of GBVH inside the RMG factories has not been reduced. One of the NGO activists explained that abusive workplace behaviour still exists in the RMG factories as follows:

But bullying is still there; they think it is impossible to get the job done without bullying. The use of slapping or slapping on the body has decreased, but the bullying has not gone away yet.

From the interview narratives it was revealed that large factories were able to identify (not to protect women workers or stop those) violent behaviours and harassment from supervisors to women workers; however, the small factories and, in some cases, medium-level factories are not able or willing to restrain supervisors from mistreating women workers. One of the managers from a medium-level factory explained how

Previously it was like, not only did they hurl, abuses, but they used to hit too. I know that hurling and abusing still take place in the factory. But in front of us, they are quiet, but we know that they have yelled for sure.

6. Discussion and Conclusions

This study investigates gender-based violence and harassment in the RMG industry in the context of policy and practices in Bangladesh. Findings reveal that the government failed to specifically address GBV and sexual harassment in the workplace in the regulatory framework. The interviewed HR managers were neither willing to adopt policies to address these issues in their factory workplace nor introduce good practices to prevent exploitative working cultures. Managers often disregard the existence of GBVH at their factories, despite a prevalence issue that affects workplace well-being. This section highlights how workplace well-being has been impacted by the GBVH in the RMG factories, how the proposed theoretical lenses can be applied to analyse the research problem, and how well-being can influence the sustainability of the RMG industry. The concluding part discusses the implications and significance of this study.

This study found that factory managers are reluctant to deal with GBVH and even unwilling to recognise the incidents of sexual violence that occur in their factories. In discussing this finding, we examine how these managerial attitudes impact the objective well-being in the workplace (we are aware that subjective well-being is also an important issue; however, this study focuses on the objective aspects of well-being—workplace behaviours and management practices). Studies suggest that workplace well-being has been impacted in the RMG industry because of exploitative workplace conditions [24,74]. Managers described that they have an anti-harassment policy, but it was evident that these policies are primarily developed to secure audit certificates and to continue their contracts with international brands. The RMG factories are equipped with proper HR policies (e.g., recruitment policy, equal pay structure, grievance policy, employee voice arrangement) to comply with laws and buyers’ conditions [61]. However, most of the factories lacked a policy of safeguards against GBVH and an effective internal complaint mechanism, both of which are necessary to ensure a supportive and healthy work environment [52].

It is evident from the findings that neither the government nor the managers were inclined to address workplace well-being issues comprehensively. While the government’s attention was solely focused on equal pay, they missed the opportunity to adopt special rights for women or safeguards to protect female workers from discrimination in the regulatory changes [75–77]. Gender-based needs and expectations were not addressed in employment regulations. In their present form, the labour laws are incapable of addressing workplace violence and harassment issues, as they lack a proper definition of violence, types of harassment in the workplace, and remedies for women workers [8,52]. The HCD in 2009 was intended as a guideline to precede the enactment of laws to address GBVH in the workplace. The incidence of GBVH in the factories, often due to a lack of policies and good management practices, affects workplace culture and behaviour, and increases the
exploitative work environment. Therefore, GBVH impacts the objective well-being of the RMG factories.

Managers’ disinclination to recognise the gender-based needs of their workers can be examined through the DM theories and propositions. The diversity paradigms—Discrimination-and-fairness and Learning-and-effectiveness and Social Identity—can be used to analyse managerial attitudes in dealing with workplace violence and harassment. Our research findings strongly suggest that managers in the RMG industry intended to be compliant with laws, but that they ignore justice and fairness, i.e., they avoid acknowledging special treatment to the diverse needs of workers, especially the needs and demands of women workers. Though women workers are the majority, the managerial focus does not address the maltreatment and harassment of these workers, similarly to DM propositions—in-group biases and out-group discrimination. Managers identify male workers as part of their group with intrinsic and extrinsic commonalities (in-group), and consider women workers out of their cohort (out-group) in the RMG factories. For example, studies proved that both men and women face workplace violence in the RMG factories; however, women face more GBV and confront severe sexual harassment [6,8,78,79].

Managers also failed to identify the differences in skills, knowledge, and culture between male and female workers as suggested by the Learning-and-effectiveness paradigm of DM theories. In this paradigm, managers are required to address the different cultural needs of their workers and incorporate the strategies suitable to meet workers’ needs and expectations for practising diversity management effectively. While work supervisors use shouting, scolding, insulting, and harassment as instruments to achieve production targets, HR managers remain silent and support supervisors as they need the production work completed. This managerial attitude is also showcased through the ineffective grievance and complaints management systems for the workers that are practised in the factories.

Social Identity Theory confirms that managers identify women workers based on women’s societal and familial identity and their relationships within a family and society. As discussed in the context section, women in Bangladesh’s rural society are often marginalised and oppressed because of lower education levels and a patriarchal structure. Attitudes towards women in the family and in society influence factory managers’ perceptions on shaping the identity of women workers. Women face violence in the family and in society if they are unable to obey the commands of men or fulfil their reproductive and household responsibilities. Similar scenarios are found in the RMG factories, where managers consider workplace violence (e.g., shouting, scolding, using abusive language) a weapon to compel women workers to complete highly demanding sewing jobs [3,80]. These factory managers are mostly production-focused, and therefore highly concentrate on achieving production targets within the time limit, regardless of how much women workers are affected by the exploitative workplace behaviours.

Our findings demonstrate that HR managers in the RMG factories focused on compliance with the labour laws and the buyers’ requirements, rather than introducing and implementing management strategies and practices to eliminate gender-based violence and harassment. Management practices in these industries are unaware or careless about workplace well-being issues—how a cohesive and respectful workplace impacts the work experience and increases productivity. Studies also suggest that, despite the acute presence of gender-based violence and sexual harassment in the factories, managers and owners tend to hide these incidents rather than acknowledge them and proactively solve them [1]. Managers’ perceptions are that abusive behaviours, shouting, and insulting are necessary to achieve work targets [23,58]. They fail to understand the significance of the strong link between workplace well-being and productivity—if workers are safe, happy, and satisfied, then they can be easily motivated and can contribute more to achieve production targets. These will increase and impact the sustainability of the industry.

The implications of a lack of managerial strategies and practices and policy initiatives from the government to prevent GBVH at the RMG factories are significant. The unsafe working conditions increase absenteeism, and reduce performance and employee
The hegemonic relationship between managers and workers affects the working environment and negatively impacts well-being [58]. The increasing rate of women leaving the industry and the reduced rate of female labour force participating in this manufacturing sector raise questions about the effectiveness of the current human resource management practices in this industry [75, 81]. While women workers composed 80 per cent of the total workforce during the early years (the 1980s) of this industry, it decreased to 61.18 per cent in 2017 ([58] p. 121). The role of leadership—managerial attitudes both from the managers and work supervisors—have a great influence on the gradual disappearance of the women workforce from this industry. The industry is highly dependent on the cheap and easily available female labour force. The industry also provides the largest employment for rural women workers. The sustainability of this industry is threatened when the managers fail to ensure a supportive, safe, friendly, and happy workplace for the bottom-level women workforce of the country.

Author Contributions: Writing—original draft, R.A.; Writing—review & editing, J.T. and Q.A. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

Funding: This research received no external funding.

Institutional Review Board Statement: The study was conducted in accordance with the Declaration of Helsinki, and approved by the Institutional Review Board (or Ethics Committee) of Central Queensland University (Approval No. 22016, 17 February 2021) for studies involving humans.

Informed Consent Statement: Informed consent was obtained from all subjects involved in the study.

Data Availability Statement: The data presented in this study are available on request from the corresponding author. The data are not publicly available due to ethical restrictions.

Conflicts of Interest: The authors declare no conflict of interest.

Appendix A

Appendix A.1. Violence and Harassment Convention (No. 190), 2019

Main Features

- Definition (Article 1):
  - the term: “violence and harassment” in the world of work refers to a range of unacceptable behaviours and practices, or threats thereof, whether a single occurrence or repeated, that aim at, result in, or are likely to result in physical, psychological, sexual, or economic harm, and includes gender-based violence and harassment;
  - the term “gender-based violence and harassment” means violence and harassment directed at persons because of their sex or gender, or affecting persons of a particular sex or gender disproportionately, and includes sexual harassment.

- Respect, promote and realize the right of everyone to a world of work free from violence and harassment (Article 4(1)).
- Adopt, in accordance with national law and circumstances and in consultation with representative employers’ and workers’ organizations, an inclusive, integrated and gender-responsive approach for the prevention and elimination of violence and harassment in the world of work (Article 4(2)).
- Respect, promote and realize the fundamental principles and rights at work, namely freedom of association and the effective recognition of the right to collective bargaining, the elimination of all forms of forced or compulsory labour, the effective abolition of child labour and the elimination of discrimination in respect of employment and occupation, as well as promote decent work (Article 5).
- adopt laws, regulations and policies ensuring the right to equality and non-discrimination in employment and occupation, including for women workers, as well as for workers and other persons belonging to one or more vulnerable groups (Article 6).
- Adopt laws and regulations to define and prohibit violence and harassment in the world of work, including gender-based violence and harassment (Article 7).
- adopt laws and regulations requiring employers to take appropriate steps commensurate with their degree of control to prevent violence and harassment in the world of work, including gender-based violence and harassment (Article 9).
- Monitor and enforce national laws and regulations regarding violence and harassment in the world of work (Article 10a)
- Protect the privacy of those individuals involved and confidentiality, to the extent possible and as appropriate, and ensure that requirements for privacy and confidentiality are not misused (Article 10c)
Appendix A.2. Interview Guides (for Both KII and IDI Participants)

Discussion points for KII (Key-Informant Interviews) Participants (NGO activists, Academics, Researchers and Representatives from the ILO)
1. Questions to gather a brief idea about the roles and responsibilities of the KII participants, their connection to the RMG industry, and the role of their organisation in this industry.
2. What are the Employment Regulations (ER) to protect women workers from gender-based violence and sexual harassment in the workplace in Bangladesh?
3. From your work experience, please share your opinion on whether the regulations on gender-based violence available in Bangladesh, are well-equipped to protect women workers from violence in the workplace. (please include an example?)
4. Please share about the workplace policies (HRM Policy, Gender Policy/Women’s Rights Policy, Compliance Policy) available in the RMG industries. Do you find that employment regulations are properly adopted in these policies? Are there any special policies beyond the requirements of the national regulations available and practised in this industry?
5. How had the HCD 2009 been implemented in the RMG factories?
6. Please share the status of the Anti-harassment committee at the RMG factories.
7. How did you find the GBVH issues in the RMG factories through your work experience?
8. What are the grievance management systems in the RMG industry?
9. Do you think the GBVH impacts the workplace well-being at the RMG factories? How?

Discussion points for IDI (In-Depth Interviews) Participants (Government officials, RMG Employers/Managers/Officers, Representatives from the Trade Associations)
1. Questions to gather a brief idea about the roles and responsibilities of the IDI participants, their connection to the RMG industry, and the role of their organisation in this industry.
2. The total number of factory workers, the number of women workers, product ranges, production capacity, skill levels of the workers, the establishment of the year, and the role of factory managers. (for RMG factory personnel only)
3. What are the workplace policies/standards/strategies (HRM Policy, Gender Policy/Women’s Rights Policy, Compliance Policy) based on national regulations available in the RMG industry? Are there any special policies beyond the requirements of the national regulations available and practised in this industry?
4. How do you explain the working environment at the/your factory (e.g., workplace attitude and behaviour, treatment from supervisor to workers) at your factory/the RMG industry? Do you/the RMG industry follow any workplace diversity management policy?
5. What are the initiatives/measures taken by the factory managers to implement the HCD 2009 in the RMG factories?
6. Do you have any Anti-harassment committee at your factory/the RMG factories? How many members? Who are the president/secretary/members of this factory?
7. How did you find the GBVH issues in the RMG factories through your regular inspection/work experience? (for public officials/other IDI participants)
8. What are the grievance management systems in the RMG industry? What are the complaint mechanisms? How do they work?
9. How do you explain workplace well-being in your factory? How do you think you can contribute to the sustainability of your business (For factory managers, however, differently asked other IDI participants)

Appendix A.3. Key Regulations on GBVH in Workplace in Bangladesh

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name of Regulation</th>
<th>Key Features</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| Bangladesh Labour Act 2006 | → Section 332: Women working in an establishment, irrespective of their rank or status, will not be subjected to any indecent or disrespectful behaviour or any attitude that is against their honour and decency from any other person in that establishment.  
→ No penalty for contravening the provision, however, Section 307 provides that if no other penalty is provided for violating any provision of the Act, the punishment with imprisonment for a term which may extend to 3 months or with a fine which may extend to 25,000 taka, or with both can be applied. |
Directives on Sexual Harassment (by High Court Division)

| Scope: offers detailed guidelines for all workplaces and mandates that these directives must be followed until adequate and effective legislation is passed. |
| Definition of SH: indecent gesture, teasing through abusive language, stalking, jokes having sexual implication to attempts or efforts to establish or demand or request for physical relations. It also includes sexually based unwelcome behaviour or verbal representation, making love proposals and posing a threat in case of refusal, showing pornography, and taking video photographs to blackmail. |

Guidelines:

- Factory management need to maintain an effective mechanism to prevent or deter the commission of offences of sexual abuse and harassment,
- Factory management need to provide effective measures for the prosecution of the offences of sexual harassment resorting to all available legal and possible institutional steps.
- The factory management are obliged to form Complaint Committees to receive and investigate complaints of sexual harassment.
- Detailed provisions on the formation and other procedures to be followed by the Committee, having at least two external members, preferably from “organisations working on gender issues and sexual abuse”.
- Preventive measures against workplace sexual harassment, e.g., arranging regular training on gender equality, publishing booklets, etc.

References

9. Thorsisottir, T.S.; Johannsdottir, L. Corporate social responsibility influencing sustainability within the fashion industry: A systematic review. *Sustainability* 2020, 12, 9167. [CrossRef]
12. Alamgir, F.; Alakavuklar, O.N. Compliance codes and women workers’ (Mis) representation and (Non) recognition in the apparel industry of Bangladesh. *J. Bus. Ethics* 2020, 165, 295–310. [CrossRef]


34. Budd, J.W.; Spencer, D.A. Worker well-being and the importance of work: Bridging the gap. Eur. J. Ind. Relat. 2015, 21, 181–196. [CrossRef]


77. Yasmin, T. Laws against Sexual Harassment: Analyzing the legal framework of Bangladesh. Dhaka Univ. Law J. 2021, 32, 103–118. [CrossRef]


Disclaimer/Publisher’s Note: The statements, opinions and data contained in all publications are solely those of the individual author(s) and contributor(s) and not of MDPI and/or the editor(s). MDPI and/or the editor(s) disclaim responsibility for any injury to people or property resulting from any ideas, methods, instructions or products referred to in the content.