

Exploring Indigenous Female Migrant's Experiences of Harassments: A Qualitative Study

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ABSTRACT

A significant number of indigenous women move to the city for their livelihood. During this period, these women might experience double marginalization, both as a woman and as a member of minority group. The case study focuses on indigenous female RMG workers who migrate to Chittagong city. The findings will reveal the harmful treatment these women endure and how it affects their mental health. In order to truly develop as a nation, it is crucial to address the struggles of marginalized groups. In conclusion, this paper aims to contribute to policy development regarding indigenous and women's rights.

Keywords: Double marginalization, indigenous, migration.

INTRODUCTION

Women are being oppressed in this patriarchic social structure for quite a long time. These oppressions refer to systematic and historical marginalization in various aspects of life including social, economic, political and cultural spheres. It can occur in different forms, such as gender-based violence, wage-discrimination, limited access to healthcare and education, discriminative societal norms limiting women's rights, freedoms etc. Such discriminatory actions put women in a vulnerable position in the society and harm not only women themselves but also their families, communities and the entire society. This systematically disadvantageous position of women leads them to negative consequences socially, economically and psychologically.

Already being in a tough position due to their identity as a woman, the difficulties may increase more if they belong from any ethnic communities. Indigenous people represent only 1% of Bangladesh's population. In our society, ethnic groups also face systematic exclusion, discrimination and disadvantages. They are denied of the equal access to resources, opportunities and participation in social, economic and political life. Which is why, life of an indigenous woman becomes more challenging as she faces oppression both as a woman and as a member of the minority group.

A lot of indigenous women in our country, move to major cities every year for better opportunities. In the hill tracts, they suffer from poverty, lack of access to education and have a very poor living standard. Due to all these reasons, many of them choose to migrate to cities and join factories or ready-made garment sectors. This paper is about the indigenous female RMG workers who live in the EPZ areas in Chittagong city. According to the research, around 1 lakh of indigenous migrants live in that particular area, who work in the factories, garments or have small shops in that area.

As women are a vital part of our society and economy, it is crucial to shed light to their difficulties and take necessary steps in order to ensure proper development of our country. There is a very little research to date in Bangladesh highlighting the double marginalization of indigenous women and its effects on them. This researcher has chosen to undertake this particular topic in order to understand the psychological effects that double marginalization have on the life of indigenous female RGB workers who move to the city for a better life.

It is hoped that this research will provide an answer to the following research question:

- What kind of difficulties indigenous female RMG workers face due to their identity both as a women and member of indigenous group?
- How does double marginalization make the life of indigenous female RMG workers more challenging?
- What kind of psychological affect does double marginalization have on these women?

The researcher believes that the study will provide a better understanding about the institutional violence and discrimination these women face in different aspects of their lives and how double marginalization affects their private life, who are a vital part of our society and economy. It is hoped that the study will be used to develop services and policies to ensure a better living condition for marginalized women.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The double marginalization of indigenous women is a global issue. It is true in case of south Asian countries like: India, China, Bangladesh as well as global north like: Canada or in countries of African region. A lot of researchers in many countries have undertaken this issue to be addressed. In this section, the researcher will review the existing studies related to double marginalization of indigenous women and will try to establish the conceptual framework to guide the study.

Double marginalization and definitions

Marginalization refers to the discriminations a person faces due to his identity. When a person's identity puts him on a disadvantageous position in society and faces discriminations based on his identity, it is called marginalization.

Double marginalization is the discriminations that an individual faces due to the intersection of two of his identity. This study is about the double marginalization of indigenous women. The identity of both women and indigeneity put them in a very vulnerable position in our society. Women have been facing systematic and historical oppressions for years which lag them behind in the society and development sectors. The indigenous community are minority in our country representing a very small portion of the population. A lot of times they are denied of their equal rights and comes to a very little attention in terms of development. When the gender-based identity intersects with the indigenous identity, the double marginalization of indigenous women occurs.

Double discrimination that indigenous women face

In different countries all over the world, the women of minority groups are exposed to great vulnerability due to double discrimination regarding various aspects like: economic, political, education and healthcare, cultural etc. Several case studies have been undertaken by researchers as well as many development organizations around world regarding the double discrimination of indigenous women.

Indigenous women are the most vulnerable among indigenous peoples and face double discrimination on the basis of their gender for being women and for their ethnicity for being indigenous. In some parts of the world, there is triple burden to bear as indigenous women are also poor (Roy, 2004).

In a study conducted by ILO, the experiences of three Bangladeshi indigenous women were portrayed. The challenges that have been addressed are:

As indigenous communities often belong to linguistic minorities, it causes hardship in education, employment and everyday life.

- Indigenous community are often situated in remote, rural areas, where they lack infrastructure and access to larger markets.

- Traditional livelihood in indigenous communities may depend upon parts of fragile ecosystems. Environmental damage therefore often severely impacts their economy.
- Land reform and property laws often made their traditional occupations untenable.
- As minority groups, their interests and needs are often ignored by the decision-makers.
- Years of discrimination have led indigenous people into poverty, farther damaging their chances of empowerment and opportunities to improve their situation (ILO, 2007)

Another study regarding the double burden on indigenous women in the northeastern region of India was conducted by a research consultant at Aide-et-Action Guwahati. In that study, the researcher tried to show how these women are subjected to multiple levels of discrimination, abuse and suffer from poverty, sexual exploitation and lack of access to basic healthcare. By analyzing data from National Crime Records Bureau, she showed that;

- Alarming number of indigenous women in Assam are killed in the name of 'witch hunting'. A high number of women are kidnapped and forced into prostitution.
- Muslim women from Char areas of Assam lack of social, economic, educational and political rights (Barua, 2021).

Another Indian researcher portrayed the difficulties of intersecting identity of indigenous women by comparing indigenous women from global south in 'India' and global north in 'Canada'. The case study revealed experiences of two women -one in Maharashtra, India and another in First Nations of Vancouver, British Columbia, Canada (Banerjee, 2016).

A research work showed over 90% of indigenous women in Africa are illiterate and deprived of right to education, media and information etc. They are unaware of the existence of various rights and laws which are developed for them universally. Thus, they face violence of basic rights in various aspects of their life (Simat, 2012).

Marginalization also effects health care delivery. Joan E. Dodgson and Roxanne Struthers examined experiences of 57 indigenous women and portrayed the detrimental impact of marginalization on health status of individuals (Dodgson and Struthers, 2002).

Several studies have been done regarding the double discrimination and equal rights of indigenous women in Quebec. According to a study conducted by **University of Miami Law Review**, due to the intersection of the identity both as women and as indigenous people, these women are often victims of greater marginalization in society. Such discrimination is interconnected with various forms of human right violations. Indigenous women may face challenges regarding their rights to healthcare and education; might become victim of involuntary displacements etc. which may lead them to prostitution, drug abuse, abusive relationship etc. problems (Duhaime and Riverin, 2011).

Addressing the burden of double migration

Indigenous women all over the world suffer from the discriminations of double marginalization. It is true in case of Bangladesh as well as many other countries around the world. A lot of time indigenous women are not aware of their rights. Policy or decision makers ignore the interest of indigenous women. Ignoring this portion of the population will hinder the proper growth of our country. The challenges of double marginalization need to be addressed so that the policy makers and social organs do not ignore the sufferings of the indigenous women and works to ensure a better life for them.

METHODOLOGY

A qualitative approach was chosen as the research method for this study. It was considered more relevant as it allowed to gain more in dept experiences of the indigenous female RMG workers. Semi-structured interviews

were carried out as it allowed participants to be more flexible and provided more information. A questionnaire tool was provided with open-ended questions, which allowed the participants to share more meaning-based experiences. A snowball sampling method was used to carry out the research. Two of the subjects were acquaintances of the researcher. Other participants were recommended through their social network. Initially, fifteen participants were contacted by the researcher for interview. However, they decided to back out due the sensitive nature of the study.

Participant no.	Age	Ethnic identity	Place of work	Job title	Year of migration
1.	23	Marma	YOUNGONE	QC	2018
2.	24	Marma	YOUNGONE	Operator	2019
3.	22	Marma	M&J	Operator	2018
4.	26	Chakma	Nassa Group	Operator	2019
5.	23	Chakma	Nassa Group	Operator	2019
6.	25	Chakma	M&J	Operator	2019
7.	22	Tripura	YOUNGONE	Operator	2018

Data collection took place in 15 December, 2024 and 24 January, 2025. Interviews were recorded with the personal device of the researcher. Two participants, who were acquaintances of the researcher were contacted through telephone first. Their interviews were carried out in their homes as they felt more comfortable there. Other participants were recommended by those two. Their interviews were carried out as focus group study as they were unwilling to provide one on one interview. A semi-structured interview with open-ended questions were carried out. Each participant was presented similar set of questionnaire tool to share their experiences. With mostly open-ended questions, a small number of close- ended questions were used like: name, age, ethnic identity, place of work etc.

A pilot interview was also carried out before the actual research. It allowed the researcher to understand the thoughts and feelings of the interviewee regarding the topic of the study and the structure of the questionnaire tool while identifying if any question might make the subject feel uncomfortable. After the collection of data, it was transcribed first and then analyzed, interpreted and verified. Transcribing the interviews, helped the researcher to gain more understanding of the subject. Then the data was analyzed and interpreted highlighting similarities and differences of data. Final stage, the data verification process, where transcripts were rechecked to verify or modify hypothesis arrived previously.

Ethical consideration

The researcher made it clear to the participants that their participation was on a voluntary basis and they were free to withdraw the study any time. They were under no obligation to answer any question which made them feel uncomfortable with. Participants were given advance notice prior to the interview. They were also provided with an outline about the subject to be discussed, reason of the study and how the study will be used. Sufficient time before and after the interview was provided to the participants to ask any questions relating to the research topic.

Limitations of the study

While undertaking the study, the researcher encountered some limitations. Small number of participants is the most notable one which meant that one has to be cautious in generalizing from the findings. However, the semi-structured questionnaire tool method was proved very useful in gaining more in dept and meaningful

information from individuals in an open and honest way. This provided a valuable insight to the researcher into the participants personal experiences of double marginalization and its effect on their mental health.

Findings

Participants

1. Participant no. one is a 23 years old female belonging from Marma community. She works in the “YOUNGONE” company and her job tile is QC. She has migrated to the Chittagong city back in 2018. She is staying in the EPZ area since then.
2. Participant no. 2 is a 24 years old female who also belongs from Marma community. She also works in the “YOUNGONE” company as an operator. She has migrated back in 2019, since then she is staying here at the EPZ area.
3. Participant no. 3 is a 22 years old female and she is also from Marma community. She works in the “M&J group” as an operator and has migrated to EPZ area in 2018.
4. Participant no. 4 is a 26 years old female belonging from Chakma community. She works in the “Nassa Group” as an operator and migrated to EPZ area in 2019.
5. The fifth participant is also from Chakma community, a 23 years old female working in the “Nassa Group” as an operator. She has also migrated to EPZ area back in 2019.
6. The sixth participant is a 25 years old female from Chakma community, working as an operator in the “M&J” Group. She has also migrated to Chittagong back in 2019.
7. The last participant is a 22 years old female from the Tripura community. She works in the “YOUNGONE” Group as an operator and has migrated to EPZ area back in 2018.

Difficulties faced by indigenous women

All of the participants had shared the discriminations they have to suffer as an indigenous woman. Most of them had migrated to the city hoping for a better life. But reality was more tough for them. In the city, they were treated like as if they were some exotic creatures. Some even faced discrimination in workplace based on their ethnic identity.

Being women, we always have to endure catcalling on streets. But in my home land I didn't have to go through these kinds of catcalling. Harassers use words like “Ching-Chang-Chung” or phares like- snake eaters etc. to tease us.

(Participant: 4)

The life in the hill tracts were full of poverty and lack of opportunities to turn their life better. In order to escape that vulnerable situation these women migrated to the cities hoping there would be better opportunities. But even at the workplace they had to suffer from discriminations. In some of the garment companies there is a wage difference between male and female workers. Besides, they had to endure some additional difficulties due to their ethnic identity.

There was a time when companies wouldn't take any indigenous people at work saying- we won't take any “Chakmas” (indicating indigenous people) to work.

(Participant: 6)

In the factory, a lot of times mikes are installed where Islamic speeches by preachers are played. Sometimes those speeches contain hatred against our religion. Those really hurt our religious sentiment.

(Participant: 3)

If we try to protest against any injustice at our workplace, we have to go through a lot of hardships; they deliberately point out mistakes to make work tough for us, sometimes they transfer us. There is even record of dismissing from work.

(Participant: 7)

There are even some incidents where local goons under the name of politicians, used to threaten indigenous women to ruin their reputation and demand money. Fearing the damage of their dignity, they used to give money.

If any male guest comes to our home, local goons used to lock our doors and would threaten us saying we are doing illegal works and demand money from us. Fearing they would ruin our reputation, we used to give them money.

(Participant: 1)

More challenging life

The oppression based on the ethnic identity puts the indigenous women on an extra vulnerable situation in our society. Women in our society are already deprived of equal rights and opportunities. The additional challenges that they face as ethnic minority are: less opportunity for education, poverty, poor living standard in the hill tracts, fewer scopes and helps from the government for development.

One or two schools that we had in our area were very far from our home. So, attending schools or educational institutes was very tough.

(Participant: 2)

The internet service or network service in general was very weak in our area. So, connecting to the world outside or self-learning was very difficult.

(Participant: 5)

Due to land reform acts, we had lost our lands. We had to live in poverty which is why I decided to join the Ready-Made Garment sector for a better life.

(Participant: 7)

Psychological effect of double marginalization

According to the participants these discriminations are hampering their mental well-being in many ways.

I cannot get out of my house in a carefree mood. I always have to think if I am dressed properly or walking properly. I mostly avoid going out alone. I always try to take a company whenever I go outside.

(Participant: 3)

I have to think twice before wearing my traditional clothes. People give very weird looks and call out by different name. It is a very uncomfortable situation.

(Participant: 6)

Sometimes heart becomes very heavy thinking what possibly could I have done wrong to endure all these hateful words and actions.

(Participant: 2)

DISCUSSION

The objective of this research was to understand the psychological impact that double marginalization has on

indigenous female RMG workers. By analyzing the data obtained from the findings it is clear that double marginalization has a very negative impact on their mental health. All participants reported that the constant objectification from the society always keeps them paranoid and are unable to feel completely secure in this societal structure.

Mental well-being is one of the most significant aspects for the development of an individual. If a person is always on distress, one can never fully commit oneself in any other spheres of life. Indigenous women in this patriarchic societal structure, remain at a vulnerable position and need constant help and support from the society.

Policies regarding Indigenous RMG workers

There are no specific policies for indigenous RMG workers, let alone female RMG workers. The policy issue regarding them is covered by the same broad labor laws and safety standards as all other workers in the sector. That is why indigenous female workers face various challenges regarding their rights and poor working conditions for which they require targeted support from existing framework.

Implications of the findings

From the findings it is understood that the indigenous female RGM workers who are staying in the EPZ area, feel the lack of support from the society and government. If there were enough social services and attention from the government, their hardships would have reduced a lot.

Instead of general labor laws, government should create policies regarding indigenous female workers. This will help to address issues like wages, working hours, safety and security etc. Besides Organizations and NGOs which are working for female RMG workers, indigenous workers or females in general should step up to create broad programs to ensure women's rights in RMG sector which can be applied to indigenous RMG female workers as well.

The findings from this study could be implemented as a guide to provide required help to them and could be used while policy making decisions in order to understand what kind of policies would help to secure a better life for them.

Comparison with other research works

The findings of this research study mirror the findings of other research carried out on the double marginalization of indigenous women in different places all over the world. The constant challenges from the family and society make their life very difficult and fight against the world makes their mental well-being tough to be secured. No matter if it is an indigenous woman from the Quebec, India, the African region or in Bangladesh, they are in a vulnerable position in all over the world.

CONCLUSION

The study of this research explained the vulnerability of the indigenous female RMG workers who have migrated in the EPZ area of Chittagong and the negative effect of this vulnerable position in their mental health. As they are a significant part of our population and play a vital role in the economic growth, it is essential to recognize their sufferings and take necessary steps to make their life better. If the government and the development organizations work together to provide them required help and support, their empowerment is possible. Although it is a very challenging work as they are in a marginalized position for such a long time but it is not impossible to be achieved.

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