Current Socio-Economic Conditions and Mental Health of Female RMG Workers: A Narrative Review

Tasdidaa Shamsi

Independent Public Health Researcher Apartment 3A House 38 Road 7 Block E Mirpur 12

BACKGROUND

With an estimated 4 million workers, garment manufacturers in Bangladesh contribute to the country's economic prosperity. Most of the female employees in this industry come from rural regions. These workers frequently do repetitive, continuous, and lengthy tasks including stitching, ironing, packaging, and lifting large objects. The presence of toxic factors in the workplace can have detrimental effects on an employee's physical and mental well-being as well as the organization's general health. This study aimed to investigate the mental health and socioeconomic situation of female RMG workers.

Materials and Methods: The search approach that was used was a thorough electronic search of PubMed, CINAHL, Scopus, Science Direct, and the Cochrane Library. This review includes all publicly available research that had a full-text article in the database and a thorough methodology.

Results: Eleven studies were included in this review. The studies revealed that the majority of the readymade garment workers are female around 80-90%. They are from rural areas and not highly educated. The mental health issues are due to result of working at uncomfortable positions at the factory and simultaneously fulfilling family demands at home. According to the experts, female employees' health is impacted by their physical work environment, poor employment position, and the type of their profession. The female employees shared their own accounts of experiencing physical and verbal abuse, ongoing pressure, various personal limitations, and wage withholding in the workplace.

Conclusions: Review of socio-economic status and mental health issues among the lowly educated young garment factory workers revealed that the uncooperativeness of various stakeholders were the biggest reasons for mental health issues. Women participated in the majority of the research projects. As a result, it's essential to set up targeted initiatives to improve the mental health of garment workers.

INTRODUCTION

Bangladesh is an emerging economy with a population of 169 million (BBS, 2023). It has garnered attention as a preferred destination for both foreign and local investors, primarily due to its abundant manual labour workforce. A key driver of its economic growth is the ready-made garment (RMG) segment of the textile and apparel industry. As of 2021, data from the Export Promotion Bureau of Bangladesh indicate that the RMG sector contributed USD 15.54 billion to the country's export earnings. This sector alone accounts for 11.2% of the nation's Gross Domestic Product and made up approximately 83.49% of the total exports amounting to USD 36.66 billion in 2018 (Ovi, 2018a).

In January 2021, it was the first time $4 billion export was exceeded in a single month in the RMG sector of Bangladesh. The knitwear and woven industries both continued to increase by more than 40% annually. Thus, during the last few months, the RMG export performance as a whole has demonstrated incredible resiliency in Bangladesh.

The workforce in the RMG sector is overwhelmingly female (comprising of 60-70% of total RMG workforce) (Masud, 2022), with a total estimated 4 million workers largely hailing from rural areas of Bangladesh (Ovi, 2018a). This workforce profile is attributed to the availability of low-cost labour, with over 80% of the industry's workers being lowly educated women from rural regions (Nasrullah & Rahim, 2014). According to

World Bank research, in 1980 there were 50,000 women working in Bangladesh's RMG business, the most of them were from rural regions. There are about 4 million of them as of 2018; the majority are rural women (Ovi, 2018a). The data indicates that the number of women employed in Bangladesh's RMG sector has increased significantly, rising over 800 times between 1980 and 2018.

The RMG industry of Bangladesh is very successful because of this available female workforce, low labour cost and the female workers becoming skilled in operating machines over the years (UZBangla, 2019) The growth of the sector has increased employment opportunities for women, elevating Bangladesh's female labour force participation to 36.4% in 2017 (ILO, 2020). While this has significantly contributed to the economic empowerment of these women, it also raises pertinent questions and concerns about their health and safety, specifically in relation to work-induced psychological and psychosocial stressors.

The female readymade garment workers belong to a low socio-economic status and most of them do not have high school education (Das & Das, 2017).). They are also not aware about their wage status compared to other jobs (Rubya, 2014). As per ILO research from 2020, the majority of women workers polled were either involved in family activities (42.1%), unemployed (29.8%), or students (23.2%) prior to working in the RMG sector. This could mean that for 95% of the women surveyed, their first paid job opportunity in the official sector was in the RMG sector (ILO, 2020). The RMG industry provides a better opportunity of livelihood for the female workers. The movement from unpaid and unacknowledged labour in the family as a sister, mother, or wife to economic earners, providing a percentage or full income towards the family. These workers are not only equivalent to those who take out microcredit loans in the villages; in most situations, the salary of female RMG workers is nearly twice that of loan-taking women (Rahman & Islam, 2013).

Female RMG workers are better paid compared to other similar level jobs, still they experience higher mental health issues, due to the work, work environment and being away from the family. As these women contribute to Bangladesh's industrial growth and GDP, it is important for us to understand the challenges they face and the potential impact on their mental health. The combination of demanding work conditions, low wages, and limited social support within the RMG factories creates a complex psychosocial landscape for female workers. The workers continue to play the role as wife, mothers, and care givers. The recent COVID-19 pandemic has further highlighted the importance of their mental health.

MATERIAL AND METHODS

The research pertaining to the mental health and socioeconomic circumstances of female garment manufacturing workers underwent a thorough review of the literature. The review looked into the papers that were published between January 2018 and January 2023. A thorough electronic search of the Cochrane Library, Science Direct, CINAHL, PubMed, and Scopus was done. The article's cross-references were examined for pertinent publications, and the study's duplicates were removed and evaluated. The researcher examined the papers that satisfied the inclusion criteria in further detail in order to finish the article. The keywords for finding relevant literature that were employed are listed below (Table 1).

Table 1: Keywords used for literature search strategy

Sl. No	Concept	Keywords
1	Employers' company	Garment industry, textiles industry Garment manufacturing company Apparel industry, clothing industries
2	Socio-economic	Age, education, marital status, number of children, number of family members staying

	factors	with respondent, number of earning family members, social support
3	Mental Health	Depression, anxiety and stress
4	Employee	Garment workers, tailoring, ironing, sewing machine operators

The review included the whole article, which was easily accessible through an online search. Articles with research designs that addressed the health issues faced by garment workers including cross-sectional studies, randomized controlled trials (RCTs, 1), cohort studies, case studies, surveys, descriptive studies, and empirical investigations. The bulk of the participants in the research, who were done around the globe, were from Bangladesh. Eleven studies were assessed based on the selection criteria. Upon examination of the research, it was discovered that every study was carried out on workers in the clothing industry who performed tasks such as operating sewing machines, cutting, ironing, packaging, tailoring, and providing assistance. The abstracts and papers that failed to appropriately credit methodology was excluded.
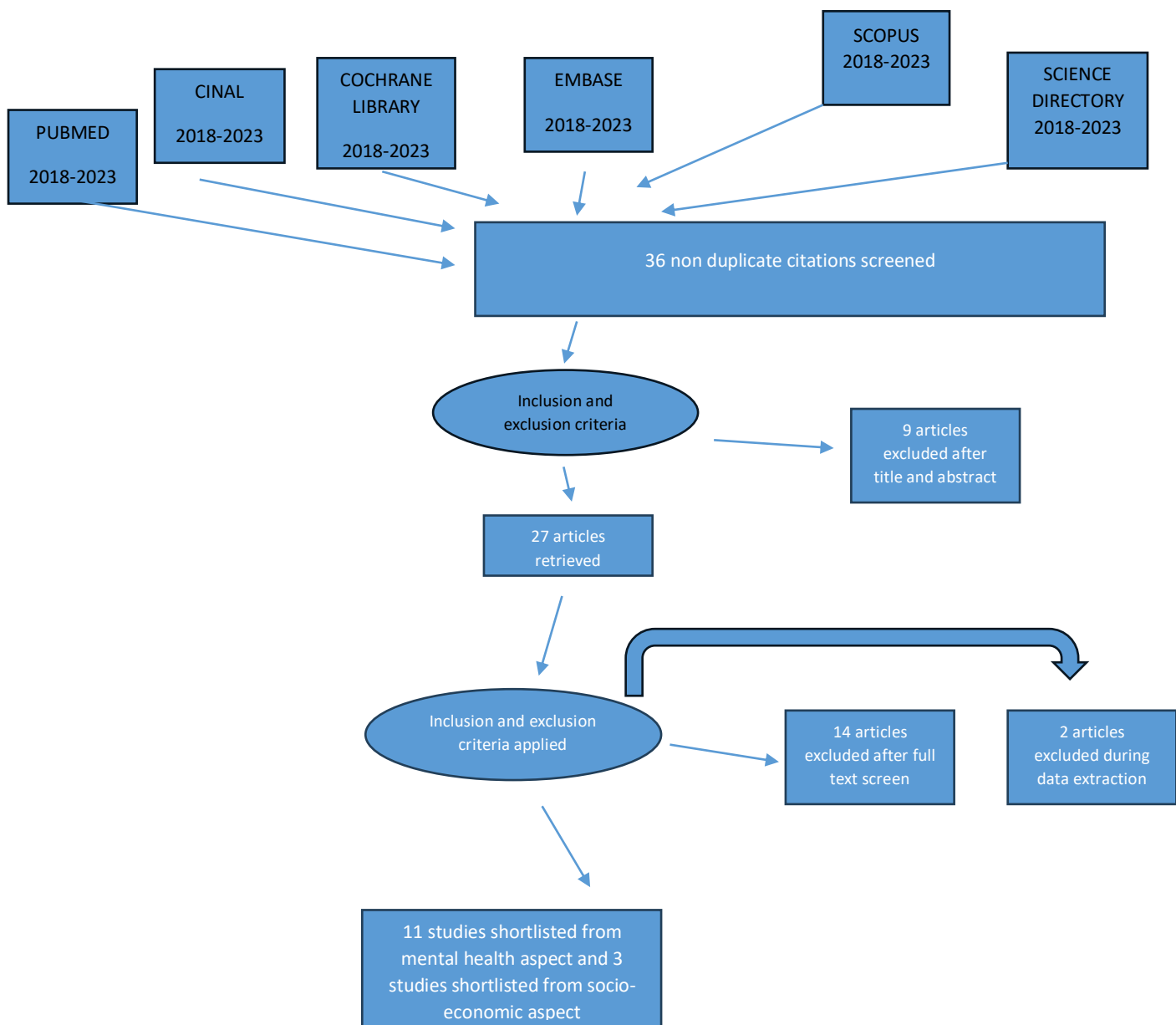

Figure 1: Flow diagram of literature review

All detected studies' titles were kept in Mendeley Reference Manager's updated database as of 02.06.24. After the duplicate references were eliminated, a bibliography containing the abstract, title, and keywords for each

discovered reference was produced. There were two processes involved in choosing the study. The author initially skimmed each found reference's abstract, title, and keywords. There were two processes involved in choosing the study. To find out if the paper fit the inclusion requirements, the author first skimmed the titles, keywords, and abstracts of every reference that the literature search had turned up. For this reason, a standardized digital form with inclusion criteria was created. The author obtained the entire step article in the second step. When the screening failed to identify a study's inclusion or exclusion, the author proceeded to acquire the full text article. Following a thorough assessment, they were evaluated for inclusion with the socio-economic factors and mental health factors (Lillypet, Jain, & Joseph, 2017).

RESULT

Socio-economic conditions

The following is the situation of socio-economic factors among female garment workers as identified in the review.

Socioeconomic conditions: Most of the evaluated research showed that women make up 60% of the garment workers and that 90% of them are from Bangladesh's rural areas (Afroz, Moloy & Hossain, 2018). Furthermore, according to Afroz et al. (2018), they are young, with 59% of them being under 24 years old, and poorly educated, with 46% having just completed primary school.

Among the female garment workers, women who have access to jobs in this industry have grown economically powerful and self-sufficient. Their increased economic capability allows them to live more independently and gives them the confidence to make some important decisions about their homes and lives. Their self-esteem has increased as a result of more access to public areas and awareness of their freedom to make life decisions (Al Mamun, & Hoque, 2022).

Female workers typically make the most money for their families. The degree of worker satisfaction is a personal assessment. The housing situation for female employees in Dhaka is appalling. Most garment workers, according to their poll, reside in Dhaka's rural and congested areas. Examples of these workers include those who work at the Panthapath factory and those who live in Hazaribag and Kamrangirchor. Employees in the RMG sectors perform direct physical labor on a daily basis. The Bangladesh Labor Act of 2006 states that the most hours that garment workers can work is eight hours. They must, however, put in more than eight hours a day at work. But the majority of women employed must work.

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Table 2: Socio-economic conditions of female RMG Workers from different studies

Socio-economic conditions of female RMG Workers	
Women RMG workers in industry	60%
Women RMG workers from Bangladesh's rural area	90%
Women RMG workers under 24 years old	59%
Women RMG workers having just completed primary school	46%

Mental Health

The ready-made clothes business is Bangladesh's largest source of export revenue. 80% of the 4.5 million workers in the industry at this time are women. Due to the harsh working conditions and demanding nature of the job, women in this field are vulnerable to a number of dangers to their bodily and mental health. Mahmud, Mahmud, and Jahan (2018) report that the study, which involved 360 women, revealed that 69% of the participants had depression and that 88%, 75%, and 55% of the participants, respectively, had headache, hand pain, and respiratory complications as a result of their work, posture, dust, and chemicals. Uncomfortable seating positions (79%) and noise (75%), on the other hand, were shown to be the sources of physical health dangers, while fear of accidents (75%) was found to be the main reason for psychological troubles (Mahmud, Mahmud, & Jahan, 2018).

According to Akter, the primary psychological problem that 69% of female garment worker respondents experienced in the study is depression, which manifests as stress, trouble sleeping, and a sense of worthlessness. Mood disorders affected 59% of female workers, and the symptoms can be both emotional and physical. This can lead to significant and abrupt changes in mood. Occupation safety hazards cause phobia in 50% of the workforce. 48% of female workers experience anxiety as a result of being overworked, experiencing mistreatment, and experiencing sexual assault (Akter, 2019).

In a study by Akhter, Rutherford, & Chu, (2019), the female employees stated that their burden has increased as a result of working at the plant and fulfilling family demands at home. According to the experts, female employees' health is impacted by their physical work environment, poor employment position, and the type of their profession. The female employees shared their own accounts of experiencing physical and verbal abuse, ongoing pressure, various personal limitations, and wage withholding in the workplace. They refrained from complaining out of concern for their employment (Akhter, Rutherford, & Chu, 2019).

Results from a 2020 study showed male coworkers do not treat women with the appropriate respect at work, male coworkers verbally abuse women often, supervisors, managers, and owners have nefarious intentions of sating their need for female employees sexually. Male managers frequently have their female employees work extra till late at night. Alao female workers do not receive fair treatment when it comes to receiving promotions based on their abilities and competences, timely compensation increases, and preferred job postings despite performing the same work, female employees (Haque, Sarker, Rahman, & Rakibuddin, 2020).

The most common psychological health issues, according to the results of a relatively recent 2023 research involving both male and female workers, were stress (69.1%), anxiety (66.2%), and boredom (64.5%), followed by insomnia (51.3%), sadness (48.2%), and fear (34.3%). Compared to those employed in industries in Dhaka, the capital city of Bangladesh, RMG workers from Chattogram, a peripheral district, reported worse physical and psychological health results. Overall, female RMG workers were more likely to be at risk for negative consequences to their physical and mental health than their male counterparts (Kabir, Bhullar, Islam, Usher, Haque, & Maple, 2023).

DISCUSSION

Among 11 studies reviewed, 30% of total number of studies found, majority of the studies have documented that the female readymade garment workers come from rural areas and are poorly educated.

Socio-economic status

According to a 2014 study, it is seen that then also, the readymade garment (RMG) factory workforce was 85% women workers. This study found that women were doing work on an average 11.12 hours/day in the garment factory/industry but they received an average salary of less than Tk. 7000 per month (Sikdar, Sarkar, & Sadeka, 2014). Compared to the more recent studies reviewed in this paper, the percentage of female workers in the workforce is still similar, but they have become a bit more empowered with the raise in salaries.

A 2012 study indicated that housing, water and sanitation conditions, medical facilities and first aid treatment, wages, social status, adaptation of cultural values and norms, attachment with labor unions, ownership arrangement, leave with pay and overtime are significantly related to the socio-economic status of the garment's workers of Bangladesh (Islam, & Chowdhuri, 2012). This has also come up in the recent studies of this narrative review as well (Akhter, Rutherford, & Chu, 2019).

Mental Health

Previous studies to the studies reviewed in this paper show that though female RMG workers earnings support their family, they are also separated from their children, with impacts on their mental health and well-being, the different job roles also have a repetitive nature inducing stress (Akhter, Rutherford, Akhter Kumkum, Bromwich, Anwar, Rahman, & Chu, 2017). This aspect is more towards the family aspect of the female readymade garment workers.

According to a 2010 study, the majority of female RMG employees work in lower-paying positions like operator and finishing assistant. These are incredibly repetitious and monotonous professions. Owing to the nature of their occupations, female employees can experience depression and lose interest in their work. A significant portion of female employees were dissatisfied with their jobs because they were paid poorly and inconsistently. Male coworkers at the factory, police, and thugs on the street abuse female RMG workers sexually. One of the biggest issues facing the majority of female garment workers is communication. Long-distance travel is emotionally taxing in addition to physically taxing (Begum, Ali, Hossain, & Shahid, 2010).

CONCLUSION

It is evident from the literature review that the factory workers are exposed to various health problems. The studies revealed that the majority of the readymade garment workers are female around 80-90%. They are from rural areas are at most educated to primary level. The mental health issues of female readymade garment workers is due to poor positions at the workplace, physical work environments, and the nature of the profession all have an influence on the health of female employees. The female workers related their own experiences of verbal and physical abuse, continuous pressure, different personal restrictions, and salary withholding at work. Being away from the family is also an issue related to stress. If colleagues and other stakeholders are cooperative, these issues can be addressed and problems can be minimized.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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