

Socio-Economic and Health Challenges Among Female Garment Workers: An Investigation of the Kanchpur Region in Narayanganj

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Abstract: This research examines the multifaceted challenges confronting female garment workers in the Kanchpur area of Narayanganj, Bangladesh, encompassing both social and economic dimensions. Drawing from a survey involving 180 female workers across three garment industrial units, the study unveils the adverse living conditions these individuals endure, ensnared in a cycle of impoverishment. Through a comprehensive exploration, the paper workplace hardships, job contentment, societal constraints, and health apprehensions experienced by these workers. It further elucidates the influence of demanding workloads on familial life and delves into the maternal health predicaments encountered. Given the substantial contribution of the Ready Made Garment (RMG) sector to Bangladesh's economy, this inquiry enriches comprehension of the predicaments faced by female workers and offers prospects for ameliorating their labor and living conditions. The outcomes accentuate the urgency for extensive reforms aimed at augmenting the well-being and agency of female garment workers in Kanchpur and beyond, fostering a more equitable and supportive environment.

Key Words: RMG, Work Environment, Gender Inequality, Empowerment, Maternal Health

Introduction

The Ready Made Garment (RMG) industry plays a pivotal role in Bangladesh's economic landscape, having rapidly grown since its inception in 1976. Over the past three and a half decades, it has emerged as a crucial cornerstone of the nation's economy, capturing attention for several compelling reasons. Notably, the RMG sector stands as the foremost contributor to Bangladesh's foreign exchange earnings, accounting for a substantial 77% of the annual influx. Its exponential growth trajectory positions it among the swiftest expanding industries in recent times. Employment figures further underscore its significance, with approximately 3.6 million individuals finding occupation within its folds. The sector's export rate has surged by over 20% in the preceding two decades (BGMEA, Members' Directory 2010-2011). The establishment of the RMG industry in Bangladesh was underpinned by the abundant availability of labor, particularly from the female workforce. It accommodates a significant portion of female workers, with women constituting more than 85% of the production workforce (Islam and Zahid, 2012). These women, primarily from economically disadvantaged backgrounds, have often faced limited alternatives and scarce improved employment prospects. Employers favor female employees not only for their cost-effectiveness and ample availability but also due to their perceived vulnerability, docility, and adaptability compared to their male counterparts. Their willingness to accept flexible employment terms, coupled with a perceived reduced inclination to organize or respond to external "anti-management propaganda," underscores their value in employers' eyes (Khan 2001). Against this backdrop, this research embarks on an

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exploration of the socio-economic conditions experienced by female garment workers within Dhaka City's environs. The prominence of Bangladeshi garments has surged in developed markets, exemplified by the shift from a 9th to a leading 1st supplier position to the USA, European community, and Canada markets (BGMEA Bulletin, June 12, 2013). The sector comprises around 3000 garment factories, providing employment opportunities for about 2.2 million individuals. This research aims to bridge the understanding gap between workers and owners within the readymade garment sector, analyzing current dynamics, prevalent challenges, and potential avenues for enhancement. This research endeavors to contribute to a comprehensive understanding of the socio-economic and historical underpinnings of the RMG sector, paving the way for a more nuanced exploration of the conditions faced by female garment workers in Narayanganj's Kanchpur area.

Objectives of the study: The study on Socio-Economic and Health Challenges Among Female Garment Workers conducted with following the specific objectives:

1. To assess the socio-economic status of female garment workers, focusing on their income, living conditions, and access to basic needs.
2. To investigate the maternal health challenges faced by female garment workers.
3. To explore the impact of heavy workloads on the family dynamics of female garment workers, including their roles within the household and the well-being of their children.

Rationale of the study: In the context of Bangladesh's deeply entrenched male-dominated societal structure, gender inequality permeates from the family unit to sectors like the garment industry, subjecting women to multifaceted challenges. Pervasive gender-based wage disparities, limited access to higher positions, and a challenging work environment persist, exacerbating health risks and underscoring vulnerability. This study focuses on the socio-economic and health dimensions of these challenges within the Kanchpur region, aiming to illuminate experiences and drive improvements. The Ready Made Garment (RMG) industry significantly contributes to Bangladesh's economy, employing over 3.6 million. However, female garment workers confront complex issues stemming from societal norms, economic vulnerabilities, and health risks. This research delves into their experiences, aiming to comprehend and address these challenges comprehensively.

Ethical Consideration: Ethical considerations are an integral and indispensable component of any research endeavor. As Baker (1999) aptly acknowledges, researchers are bound to navigate the intricate landscape of ethical concerns when conducting studies. In alignment with these principles, the present study meticulously upholds ethical standards throughout its various phases. A paramount priority was extended to establishing a welcoming and respectful rapport with the participants. All participants were assured that any information provided would be treated with the utmost confidentiality, safeguarding their privacy and identity. To this end, respondents were approached with utmost warmth, and a cordial invitation was extended to partake in the study.

Literature Review

Numerous studies have explored various facets of the lives, work environments, and empowerment of female garment workers, highlighting both achievements and persisting disparities. Md. Mehedi Hasan Shikder's study (2014) underscored the substantial contribution of the Ready-Made Garment (RMG) sector to the nation's economy. A staggering 85% of the workforce within this sector are women, leading to enhanced life and status improvements for many. The changing livelihood patterns of women garment workers transitioning from rural to urban areas, specifically Dhaka city, were investigated by R.N Ali, F. Begum, M.M Salehin, and K.S Farid (2008). Their study illuminated the multifaceted factors influencing women's entry into the garment industry. Notably, financial support for family emerged as a prime motive for 71.1% of participants. Urbanization and its effects on

marginalized women in the workforce were examined by Hurley (2009), emphasizing the intersection of gender, economic opportunities, and labor roles. Poor urban women were found to possess limited control over capital and skills. Kabeer (1997, 2005) explored the intricate power dynamics and conditions faced by female garment workers in urban Bangladesh. Her work highlighted how male control over household income impacted women's wages and the broader power dynamics within households. Kibria's study (1998) provided insights into the motivations driving women's involvement in the garment sector. Absar's investigations (2001, 2002) drew attention to critical aspects of female garment workers' experiences. Absar's findings highlighted the lack of job contract papers during recruitment, challenges in securing suitable housing, insufficient earnings, and gender-based wage and opportunity disparities within factories. Paul-Majumder and Begum (2000) assessed the working conditions in garment factories using data from the Bangladesh Institute of Development Studies' surveys.

Theoretical Explanation

The theoretical framework of this study is anchored in Karl Marx's theory of alienation, which provides a comprehensive lens to examine the socio-economic and health challenges faced by female garment workers in the Kanchpur region of Narayanganj. Karl Marx articulated a profound understanding of how capitalist modes of production engender various forms of alienation among workers. This framework is particularly pertinent for investigating the multi-dimensional aspects of the lives of female garment workers, including their income, health, and familial roles. This theory, which unveils the intricate layers of estrangement that the capitalist system can impose upon workers, encompassing disconnection from their labor, produced commodities, self-identity, and fellow workers, offers a profound lens to dissect the multifaceted dimensions of these workers' lives. By harnessing Marx's theoretical paradigm, the study aspires to unveil the profound impact of various factors ranging from meager wages and adverse working conditions to limited healthcare accessibility on shaping the sense of alienation experienced by female garment workers. This overarching framework facilitates a comprehensive understanding of how the tenets of capitalism intertwine with the socio-economic fabric and well-being of these workers, contributing to a nuanced comprehension of the intricate interplay between labor, society, and health within this specific context.

Research Methodology

The study's focus on Kachpur in Narayanganj, a sub-city with a concentration of garment industries, was strategic due to its potential for capturing evolving urban dynamics. The purposive sampling method, a form of non-probability sampling, was employed to select 180 female garment workers as participants, ensuring a relevant and representative sample. Utilizing a quantitative survey method, an interview schedule containing a mix of open-ended and close-ended questions was administered to collect data. Both primary and secondary data sources were harnessed, with primary data collected through surveys and keen observations, and secondary data drawn from journals, books, research publications, reports, and documents. The interview sessions aimed to foster an open and candid atmosphere, facilitating in-depth exploration of respondents' perspectives on the impact of workload on health and family dynamics. In summation, the research methodology is a comprehensive roadmap that underpins the study's pursuit to uncover multifaceted socio-economic and health challenges among female garment workers in the Kanchpur region.

Data Presentation and Analysis

Section A: Socio-Demographic information

This section focuses upon the demographic characteristics of the respondents. The demographic characteristics refers to a group of people that has a particular set of quality such as age, gender, religion education, types of family, monthly family income and so on. However, following are the data presentation and analysis of the socio-demographic information of the respondents.

Table-1: Age and religion

Age	Frequency	Percent	Religion	Frequency	Percent
15-25	57	31.67%	Islam	162	90%
26-35	72	40%	Hindu	18	10%
36-45	42	23.33%	Christian	0	0%
45-above	9	5%	Others	0	0%
Total	180	100%	Total	180	100%

Source: Field Survey-2019

The table-1 illustrates that the largest proportion of respondents falls within the 26-35 age bracket, representing 40% of the total sample, indicating a significant presence of mid-career workers. The 15-25 age group constitutes 31.67%, revealing a substantial representation of younger employees. Respondents aged 36-45 comprise 23.33%, suggesting a noteworthy presence of more experienced individuals in mid-career stages. Those aged 45 and above constitute the smallest subset at 5%. The table also depicts the proportional breakdown of respondents' religious affiliations. A significant majority of participants (90%) identify as followers of Islam, while a minority (10%) adhere to Hinduism. Notably, no respondents in the study identify with Christianity or Buddhism.

Table-2: Educational qualifications and marital status

Educational qualification	Frequency	Percent	Marital status	Frequency	Percent
Primary	51	28.33%	Married	102	56.67%
Secondary	42	23.33%	Unmarried	57	31.67%
Higher secondary	12	6.67%	Divorcee	21	11.67%
Illiterate	75	41.67%	Total	180	100%
Total	180	100%			

Source: Field Survey-2019

The data presented in table-2, encompasses the educational qualifications and marital statuses where the majority of participants (41.67%) are categorized as illiterate, signaling a significant proportion with limited formal education. Furthermore, 28.33% have completed primary education, 23.33% possess a secondary education, and a smaller subset (6.67%) have attained a higher secondary level. Turning to marital status, the analysis reveals a diverse range: a substantial portion (56.67%) are married, followed by 31.67% who are unmarried, and 11.67% who identify as divorcees.

Figure-1: This data can be shown following by the figure.

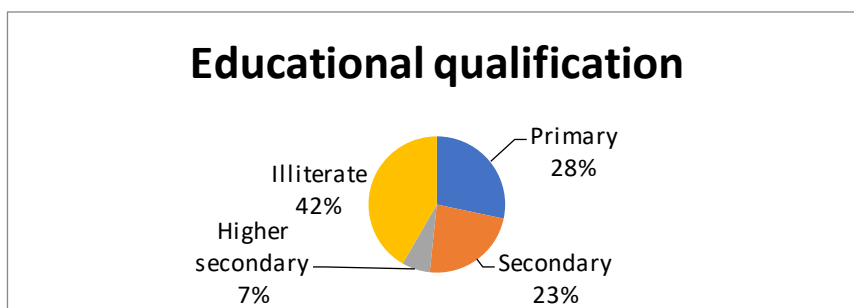


Table-3: Household owners' occupation and types of resident

Occupation	Frequency	Percent	Types of resident	Frequency	Percent
Day labor	69	38.33%	Slum	66	36.67%
Garments worker	84	46.67%	Tenement	81	45%
Unemployed	27	15%	Own house	12	6.67%
Businessman	0	0%	Other	21	11.67%
Total	180	100%	Total	180	100%

Source: Field Survey-2019

The data in table-3 reveals that among the household owners' occupations of the respondents, garments workers constitute the largest group at 46.67%, highlighting the industry's prominence. Day laborers follow closely, accounting for 38.33%, underscoring their significant presence in the workforce. Additionally, 15% are unemployed, reflecting prevailing challenges in securing consistent employment. Notably, no respondents are classified as businessmen in this sample. Shifting to residential types, 36.67% of respondents inhabit slum areas, indicating socio-economic challenges. Tenement housing accommodates 45% of respondents, illustrating prevalent urban living arrangements. In contrast, only 6.67% own their own houses, while 11.67% reside in other types of residences.

Section B: Working environment and challenges of the female garment workers

Table-4: Name of the garments and types of work

Garment's name	Frequency	Percent	Type of work	Frequency	Percent
Ananto garments	75	41.67%	Quality	45	25%
Sinha garments	54	30%	Operator	51	28.33%
Squaire garments	51	28.33%	Helper	84	46.67%
Total	180	100	Total	180	100%

Source: Field Survey-2019

This scholarly paper's table-4 represents that, Ananto garments engage 41.67% of respondents, followed by Sinha garments at 30%, and Squaire garments contributing 28.33%. TWithin this framework, respondents undertake roles as quality inspectors (25%), operators (28.33%), and prominently, helpers (46.67%). The prevalence of helper roles may stem from limited educational and skill attainments, underlining the intricate interplay of factors shaping role allocation within the garment sector, including skill diversity, gender-based dynamics, and educational limitations.

Table-5: Reason behind joining as a garment worker

Reason of work	Frequency	Percent
Illness of husband	48	26.67%
Death of husband	15	8.33%
Inability of husband	24	13.33%
Economic solvency	81	45%
Other	12	6.67%
Total	180	100%

Source: Field Survey-2019

The table-5 unveils the pursuit of economic solvency emerges as the most prominent factor, with 45% of respondents identifying it as their primary reason for work. Moreover, the data reveals the impact of familial circumstances on work decisions, with 26.67% of respondents citing the illness of their

husbands as a motivating factor, and 8.33% attributing their work engagement to the unfortunate death of their husbands. Additionally, 13.33% of respondents state the inability of their husbands to work as a driving factor. The presence of 6.67% identifying other reasons underscores the complexity of individual motivations.

Figure-2: This data can be shown following by the figure.

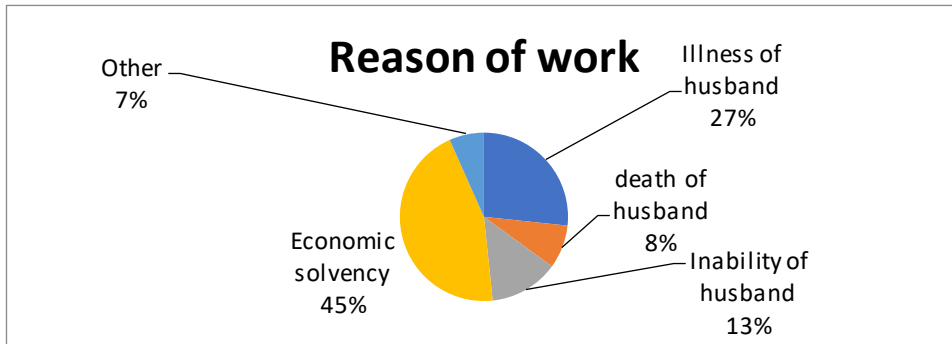


Table 6: Duration of work and Monthly income

Duration of work	Frequency	Percent	Monthly income	Frequency	Percent
8-10 hours	36	20%	3500-4500	15	8.33%
10-12 hours	78	43.33%	41800-5500	126	70%
12-above hours	66	36.67%	51800-above	39	21.67%
Total	180	100%	Total	180	100%

Source: Field Survey-2019

The table-6 provides a comprehensive analysis of the duration of work and corresponding monthly income among the surveyed respondents. Regarding the duration of work, the data indicates a distribution where 20% of respondents work 8-10 hours, 43.33% work 10-12 hours, and 36.67% work 12 hours or more per day. Moving to monthly income, the majority of respondents (70%) fall within the 41800-5500 range, while 21.67% earn 51800 and above. A smaller proportion (8.33%) earns between 3500-4500.

Table-7: Salary satisfaction, Workplace condition and its harmfulness

Satisfaction	Percent	Workplace	Percent	Harmfulness	Percent
Yes	11.67%	Good	25%	Yes	180%
No	88.33%	Very good	6.67%	No	21.67%
Average	0%	Fairly	68.33%	No idea	18.33%
Total	100%	Total	100%	Total	100%

Source: Field Survey-2019

Table-7 shows that, most of the respondents seem the workplace is fairly for their work, here fairly means not so good. 25% think the workplace as good and 6.67% think the workplace as very good. Furthermore, the table shows the respondents opinion about the work is or isn't harmful for health. Most of the respondents think that the workplace is harmful for their health but they work in search of food. A significant number 180% think that the workplace is very harmful for their health and 18.33% have no idea where 21.67% respondent seem the workplace is not harmful for them.

Table-8: Social restriction faced by the respondents

Types of social restriction	Frequency	Percent
Socially neglected	69	38.33%
Insecure for women	54	30%
Problem during marriage	48	26.67%
Other	9	5%
Total	180	100%

Source: Field Survey-2019

The table shows that 76.67% respondent seem, they are socially neglected as they work in garment factories but they think they work for their survival so they don't worry about the comment of society. The table-9 presents a succinct analysis of the various types of social restrictions encountered by the surveyed respondents. The data highlights prevalent societal challenges, indicating that 38.33% of respondents' experience social neglect, revealing the complexities of their social interactions. Moreover, 30% perceive feelings of insecurity as women, reflecting the broader gender dynamics shaping their lives. A significant portion (26.67%) identifies problems during marriage, suggesting the multifaceted nature of marital dynamics within their social context. An additional 5% mention other types of restrictions.

Figure-3: This data can be shown following by the figure.

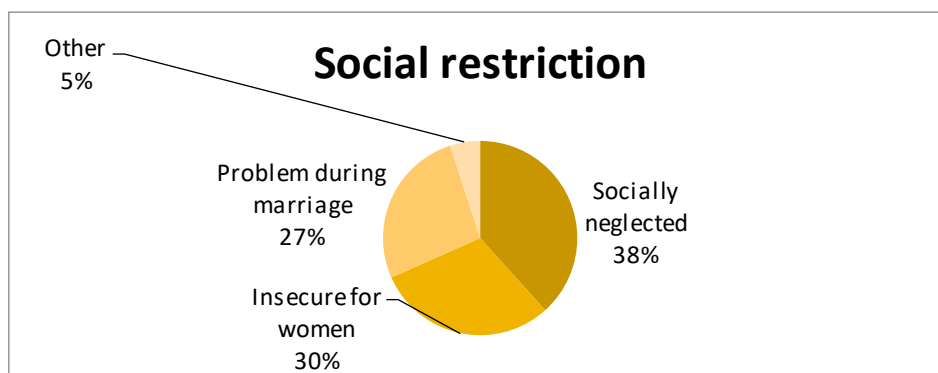


Table-9: Harassment of the respondent in workplace

Harassed	Frequency	Percent
Yes	54	30%
No	126	70%
Total	180	100%
Types of harassment	Frequency	Percent
Eve teasing	63	35%
Sexual	18	10%
Physical	30	16.67%
Economic	69	38.33%
Total	180	100%

Harasser	Frequency	Percent
Boss	6	3.33%
Manager	54	30%
Supervisor	24	13.33%
Colleague	96	53.33%
Total	180	100%

Source: Field Survey-2019

Table-9 shows that the garment workers who are women are not secure in their workplace. 70% respondent responses that they are harassed during work in their workplace. The diverse challenges they face encompass eve-teasing, sexual, physical, and economic forms of harassment. The data reveals that respondents report instances of eve-teasing at a rate of 35%, sexual harassment at 10%, physical harassment at 16.67%, and the most prevalent form, economic harassment, at 38.33%. These female garment workers contend with diverse forms of workplace harassment, attributing these challenges to various individuals within their professional environment, including bosses, managers, supervisors, and colleagues. The data indicates that 3.33% of respondent's report harassment from bosses, 30% from managers, 13.33% from supervisors, and the largest proportion, accounting for 53.33%, identify colleagues as the source of their harassment.

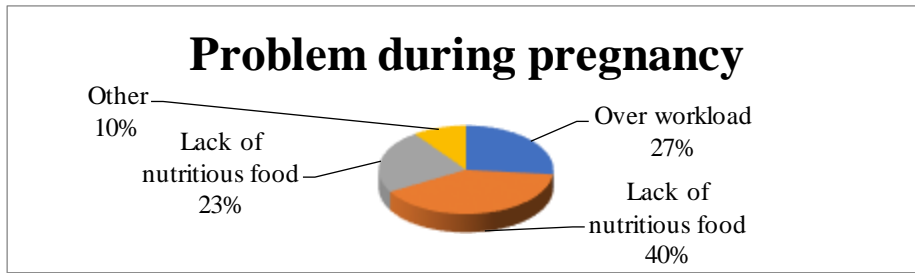
Section C: Pregnancy and health problem of the female garment's worker

Table-10: Harmful aspects of garments and problems during pregnancy

Harmful aspect	Frequency	Percent	Problem during pregnancy	Frequency	Percent
Unhygienic environment	63	35%	Over workload	48	26.67%
Duty during night shift	42	23.33%	Lack of treatment	42	23.33%
Extended periods of standing/sitting	75	41.67%	Lack of nutritious food	72	40%
Others	0	0%	Others	18	10%
Total	180	100%	Total	180	100%

Source: Field Survey-2019

The table-10 underscores that 35% of women perceive the garment factory environment as potentially harmful to their health during pregnancy. Additionally, 23.33% attribute risk to working night shifts while pregnant. A significant majority, accounting for 41.67% of respondents, share the belief that extended periods of standing or sitting in the workplace have adverse effects on pregnant women's health. The data indicates that 40% of workers face the issue of inadequate nutritious food, 26.67% experience overwork, and 23.33% lack proper medical treatment during pregnancy. An additional 10% mention other problems.

Figure-4: This data can be shown following by the figure.**Table-11: Bearing the expenses of treatment if any accident occurs.**

Treatment	Frequency	Percent
Own self	96	53.33%
Relatives	75	41.67%
Garment authority	9	5%
Total	180	100%

Source: Field Survey-2019

The table displays the proportional breakdown of the responsibility for covering treatment expenses in the event of an accident. With previous data indicating that a significant portion of respondents perceive their workplace as detrimental to their health, the table reveals that 53.33% of respondents personally bear the costs of treatment if accidents happen. For 41.67% of respondents, treatment expenses are covered by their relatives. A mere 5% report that the garment authority assumes the responsibility of treatment costs.

Section D: Effects of heavy workload on family life of the respondents

Naturally women are physically weak than male. So they cannot bear heavy workload as men can do. So their inability to bear workload and their illness during their pregnancy is responsible behind the instability of the certainties of their job in garment.

Table-12: Duration of work of the respondents.

Duration of work	Frequency	Percent
8-10	48	26.67%
10-12	63	35%
12-above	69	38.33%
Total	180	100%

Source: Field Survey-2019

The table-12 reveals distinct patterns in work hours, with 26.67% of respondents working between 8 to 10 hours per day, 35% engaged in work for 10 to 12 hours, and a notable 38.33% working 12 hours or more daily. About 78.33% respondents are not conscious about their children's education. 76.67% respondent think that the long time absent of themselves has a badly impact on the life of their children. Above table mentioned those 85% respondents have no scope to get time to their children and family for recreation as they remain busy with their work.

Table-13: Aspect of workplace that negatively effect on family and children of the respondents

Aspect	Frequency	Percent	Types of effect	Frequency	Percent
Instability of job	18	10%	Effect on child's education	63	35%
Risk of accident	87	48.33%	Effects on child's food	42	23.33%
Deprivation by owner	45	25%	Effects on child's security	54	30%
Physical and mental harass	30	16.67%	Other	21	11.67%
Total	180	100%	Total	180	100%

Source: Field Survey-2019

The table-13 presents that (48.33%) respondents perceive the risk of accidents as a prominent threat. Moreover, 25% of respondents indicate experiencing deprivation at the hands of owners. Emotional well-being is also at stake, with 16.67% citing physical and mental harassment as a distressing factor that resonates in their family lives. Surprisingly, job instability appears to exert a comparatively lower influence, affecting only 10% of respondents. The table also reveals that the most prominent type of effect reported is on the child's education, accounting for 35% of responses. Additionally, 23.33% of respondents note effects on their child's food, highlighting the vulnerability of children's nutritional well-being in the face of these circumstances. Notably, 30% express concerns about their child's security, indicating the multifaceted challenges these households face in ensuring their children's safety. A smaller proportion (11.67%) mentions other types of effects.

Result and Discussion

The analysis of socio-demographic variables revealed that the age group with the highest representation among the respondents was 26-35 years, in line with the pattern observed in similar studies. The religious distribution of the respondents reflected a dominant Muslim majority, consistent with the demographic composition of the region. Marital status indicated that a considerable proportion of respondents were married, a common characteristic among female garment workers. The respondents' living conditions were found to vary, with a substantial portion residing in tenements and slums, which could be attributed to economic constraints and familial circumstances. Educational levels among the respondents ranged from illiteracy to varying degrees of formal education, reflecting the diverse educational background of female garment workers. The husbands of female garment workers often shared a connection with the garment sector, either through direct employment or as day laborers, highlighting the interconnectedness of livelihoods within families. The prevalence of nuclear families with limited members is consistent with the challenges posed by long working hours and the need for both spouses to contribute to the family income. The distribution of respondents across different garment factories, along with their job roles, aligns with the heterogeneous nature of the industry's workforce. The reasons cited for entering the workforce, such as economic solvency, health concerns of the husband, and others, underscore the complex interplay of socio-economic factors that influence women's decision to join the workforce. Income levels reported by the respondents reflect the existing wage disparities within the garment sector, where many workers feel their compensation is insufficient relative to their efforts.

Perceptions of working environments, health risks, and expenses shed light on the challenging conditions prevalent in the RMG sector. Instances of harassment and the reported sources resonate with broader concerns about workplace dynamics and gender-related issues. Social restrictions and workplace insecurities reflect the gendered nature of employment and societal expectations placed upon female workers. The investigation into pregnancy-related concerns resonates with earlier studies,

highlighting the vulnerabilities faced by female garment workers during this period. Dissatisfaction with maternity leave and its implications for job security aligns with broader discussions on work-family balance and maternity protection. The perception of work instability and its impact on family life speaks to the intricate relationship between employment conditions and overall well-being. The lack of awareness about children's education echoes the challenges faced by working mothers in managing their family responsibilities. Overall, the findings of this study contribute to a deeper understanding of the complex socio-economic and health challenges experienced by female garment workers in the Kanchpur region, emphasizing the need for comprehensive reforms to improve their working and living conditions.

Conclusion

This study explored the socio-demographics of garment workers, capturing key details like age, religion, education, marital status, and workplace conditions. These insights provided a comprehensive understanding of workers' situations. The research highlighted prevalent income inequality between male and female workers in the garment industry, often linked to differing job roles. Female workers, seen as more vulnerable, frequently faced job loss due to pregnancy-related matters. The study revealed a significant gap in labor rights awareness among workers and regulatory authorities, resulting in poorly understood and enforced regulations. Additionally, the research emphasized the limited economic prospects within garment factory employment, with many workers expressing a strong desire for financial independence beyond their factory roles. Given these findings, it's clear that addressing gender-based income disparity and empowering female workers are paramount. Educating both workers and authorities about labor rights is crucial for fostering a fair work environment. Providing avenues for economic independence, as desired by many workers, can contribute not only to their well-being but also to broader societal and economic development goals.

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