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The impact of paid employment on women's empowerment: A case study of female garment workers in Bangladesh

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ABSTRACT

The role of the Ready-made Garment (RMG) sector in transforming the lives of working women in Bangladesh has been controversial. This study examines the impact of paid employment in the RMG sector on the empowerment of its female workers. The fieldwork includes semi-structured interviews with female garment workers to explore their lived experiences and views. The primary qualitative data analysis draws principally on Kabeer's (1999) three inter-related dimensions (resources, agency, and achievements) of empowerment. The main findings of the research are that women with access to employment opportunities in this sector have become economically empowered and independent. The higher economic capacity gives them greater autonomy and makes them confident to make some household and strategic life choices. Increased access to public spaces and consciousness about their right to make life choices have boosted their self-esteem. The study concludes that paid employment in the RMG sector has a significant positive impact on the economic, social, and psychological empowerment of female workers in the readymade garments sector. However, some critical constraints in the sector continue to limit their potential for being further empowered. The findings offer valuable insights for practitioners and policymakers.

1. Introduction

Bangladesh is a patriarchal society where traditionally, women remain within the household, performing household work and taking care of children and elderly persons, while men are assigned the breadwinner status [56,106]. However, since its independence in 1971, the country has experienced significant growth in female participation in economic, farming and industrial activities [32,110,122]. The country's Female Labor Force Participation grew from 4 percent in 1974 to 36 percent in 2019 [22,80]. The readymade garments (RMG) sector, which was responsible for 84.4 percent of Bangladesh's total exports in 2019 (and is also Bangladesh's second-largest source of foreign currency after remittances), employs around 4.2 million workers, 90 percent of whom are women [42,53]. In 2019–20, the industry earned USD 27.9 billion from its exports [18].

In the past, women in Bangladesh were hardly allowed to go outside the homestead and participate in economic activities due to traditional societal norms [27,114]. Even today, women face various structural constraints and challenges in the family and society [32]. Since the 1980s, the boom of this industry has opened a horizon for women for paid em-

ployment [33,68]. The main beneficiaries are primarily poorer women in rural areas in the forms of gaining the power to earn and having a voice in the household and society [104]. Wright [129] notes that this has resulted in significant advancement in gender equality and women empowerment. In this socioeconomic and cultural backdrop, this study attempts to evaluate the changes in the lives of female RMG workers through their employment in the sector.

Theoretical discussions and empirical evidence convey that economic opportunities correlate with women's empowerment [17,20,21,31,75,116]. The underlining hypothesis is that paid employment in various sectors provides scope for women to generate income, gain freedom of movement, develop self-confidence, and improve well-being, which eventually leads to empowerment [111,126]. Critics have opposed these views regarding the impact of paid employment on women's empowerment [51,71,113,130]. Salway et al. [113] argue that all the positive outcomes experienced by women through employment are overshadowed by exploitive circumstances like the wage gap, low wages, irregular payments, job insecurity, gender-based violence, harassment, and hazardous working conditions. Additionally, the concept of women's empowerment means differently

Abbreviations: BGMEA, Bangladesh Garment Manufacturers and Exporters Association; HSC, Higher Secondary School Certificate; KI, Key Informant; RMG, Ready-made Garments; SSC, Secondary School Certificate.

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to different people [92]. For this reason, looking at women's experiences through a conceptual lens can help us gain an accurate and comprehensive view of their lives [23].

The literature on women in the RMG sector has identified and investigated a wide range of issues, including - the impact of globalization [4,64]; the effects on women's status within the family and society [78]; the influence on adolescence, marriage, fertility, and health of female workers [8,94]; the hurdles like sexual exploitation and gendered inequalities [1,102,117]; and the consciousness of the female garment workers [130]. However, qualitative research insights remain scarce regarding the relationship between women's paid employment in the RMG sector and their empowerment in the country. This research investigates this issue in Bangladesh by using Kabeer's [65] definitions and concepts of three inter-related dimensions of empowerment (i.e., Resources, Agency, and Achievements) and a few related concepts. A case study method was chosen to develop a critical perception with a detailed explanation. The organization of this article is as follows: this introduction is followed by the literature review section and the methodology of this study. The subsequent section presents the results and analyses concerning the research objective. The concluding piece summarises the findings, explains the research significance, suggests potential research directions, states the limitations, and illustrates vital implications.

2. Literature review

2.1. Conceptualizations of women's empowerment

The origins of the concept of empowerment can be traced back to the Brazilian humanitarian and educator Freire [36,37] who emphasized education as an instrument to liberate marginalized people through challenging social inequalities in Latin America in the 1970s and 1980s [54,99]. The idea of empowering marginalized people to regain their lost humanity and achieve full humanization was followed by the emergence of the concept of women's empowerment originating from the women's movement of the 1980s [13]. However, the term remains widely contested and has multiple overlapping meanings [41,98].

Kabeer [65], p. 437 defines empowerment as 'the process by which those who have been denied the ability to make choices acquire such an ability'. This definition entails that empowerment is a process of change in which powerless people gain the power to make strategic life choices. Kabeer emphasized the "strategic life choices" (choice of livelihood, marriage, pregnancy, and freedom of movement), which also influences "less consequential choices". The process has a connection with disempowerment; and significantly, to be empowered, one must be disempowered first [63]. Kabeer [65] identifies three inter-related aspects of empowerment: *resources* (preconditions), *agency* (process), and *achievements* (outcomes). Here, resources refer to the medium of exercising agency. These resources (material, human, and social) are distributed through institutions like family, society, and markets, increasing the capacity to exercise choices (agency). Access to resources will determine the capacity to make strategic life choices [63]. This means those with limited access to and control over resources like employment, education, or land will have limited capacity to make choices. Then, the agency refers to the processes of making and realizing the choices [63]. The agency relates to one's self-efficacy, autonomy, and self-esteem, and can take other forms of negotiation, bargaining, resistance, and cognitive process. Mahmud et al. [84] argues that financial autonomy, decision-making power, and freedom of mobility are essential indicators of measuring agency. Agency has two sides to it – positive (empowerment) or negative (disempowerment) [63]. Kabeer [65] demonstrates that achievements can be visible through financial autonomy, freedom of mobility, choice of husbands, stopping early marriage, number of children, preference for daughters, and their education.

Mosedale [92] also identifies four aspects of empowerment – (i) to be empowered, one must be disempowered, (ii) those who have been empowered must claim that power, (iii) the empowerment process in-

volves a sense of people making choices important in their lives, and (iv) this process is continuous. Mosedale also unpacks some forms of power: "power within" refers to self-esteem and self-confidence; "power to" refers to increasing the limits of possible things; and "power with" refers to collective action. Mosedale contends that women's empowerment is a process of transforming gender power relations. Women acquire power and authority, become aware of their state of dependence and subordination, and build the capacity to challenge existing gender norms. Kabeer [63] also believes that empowerment requires transforming gender-biased institutions through challenging societal gender norms.

According to Rowlands [109], empowerment is about gaining the capability to make choices and to be conscious about the right to make choices to ensure personal progress. Rowlands believes that empowerment is about increasing self-esteem, self-confidence, a sense of self-worth, and the self in a broader context which reflects the individual's thoughts [65]. Rowlands mainly emphasized the cognitive and perceptual changes at the individual level. While Batliwala [14], empowerment is a multidimensional process that occurs at an individual as well as at an interpersonal level through collective action, and women's empowerment is a process and an outcome by which women interrogate the prevailing gender power relations and gain access to and "control over the material assets, intellectual resources, and ideology".

2.2. Relations between paid employment and women's empowerment: a mixed picture

Women's participation in paid work and its impact on the different dimensions of their positions in the family and society has drawn the interest of researchers from varied theoretical perspectives and been a longstanding debate [62,113]. Several notable authors previously argued that paid work would empower women [35,59,97,112,131]. A substantive body of contemporary theoretical and empirical works shows that women's workforce participation in developing country contexts strengthens their bargaining power within the household [2,9,103]. Luttrell and Quiroz [83] emphasized women's economic empowerment as it can increase women's access to economic activities, resources and the labor market. The economic position of women obtained from such employments ultimately leads to better treatment from family members [3,115]. Jose [60] argued that working women in India were likely to have higher control over income and other resources, a greater voice in household decisions, and higher mobility than those who were not working. In Bangladesh, Bridges et al. [22] revealed that formal work outside their homes strengthened the bargaining position of women both at the workplace and in the family. However, they were to bear the double household and professional work burden.

Evidence from similar contexts also suggests that women's workforce participation reduces early marriage and childbearing responsibilities and increases investment in their children's health and well-being [58,82,119]. Furthermore, non-agriculture wage work being associated with migration from villages to cities keeps women away from the control of kinship [63]. However, according to [132], the extent of empowerment through employment is related to the type, level, pay of work, and other factors. For instance, Malhotra and Mather [85] found that in Mexican households where women's income is vital for survival, women can negotiate more respect in the family. Hence, economic growth and women's participation in economic activities have contributed to transforming societal norms and the role and position of women ([133]).

In contrast, some empirical analyses and theoretical perspectives have sceptical views about the relationship between paid work and women's empowerment [15,38,79,88]. Several studies show that paid work is insufficient to transform women's roles and positions within the household and society. Instead, it may expose women to further dimensions of exploitation in the household and workplace [113]. The discussion above sheds light on various dimensions of women taking

up paid work- their confinement to certain types of low-paid work, the double burden of outside paid work and unpaid household responsibilities, prolonged working hours, and increased precarity [10,70,90]. The double burden of work results in a lack of sleep, rest, and health care, leading to time poverty [26,39]. Despite these criticisms, international donors, corporations, and non-government organizations cite the argument that paid employment contributes to women's empowerment, and consider it an essential factor for achieving such empowerment [70]. However, contemporary scholars commonly agree that the roles of economic, social, and cultural meanings attached to paid work are crucial to understanding and analyzing women's empowerment [28,70,87,108]. This agreement has stimulated the analysis carried out in this study.

2.3. Changes in gender power relations in Bangladesh

Deep-rooted cultural norms, traditions, and religious customs have shaped the patriarchal nature of society in Bangladesh [25,81,95]. Many elements of "classic patriarchy", as described by Kandiyoti [73], are common in the family and kinship systems that play a dominant role in framing gender-power relations in Bangladesh [49,78]. A few examples of this are - the household head is usually the senior male member of the family; lineage and property are primarily transferred through the male line; and there exists patrilocal marital practices and women become part of their husband's patrilineal group [61]. The country is also characterized by a culture of strong son preference by parents [7,27]. Then, the customs of *Purdah*¹ restrict women from free mobility and opportunities in public spaces [81]. Women's subordinate position in the family is also visible in the practice of *dowry*² which makes the daughters an economic burden to their parents, resulting in a high number of early marriages and violence against women [45,61,72,105]. Cain et al. [25] argued that such patriarchal practices demanded women's dependence on men throughout their lives. This dependency leaves women particularly vulnerable to sudden deteriorations in their economic and social status if they face the loss of male income earners of the family through desertion, divorce or widowhood. Hence, due to all these interconnected patriarchal constraints, women in Bangladesh have historically had minimal access to all kinds of resources and used to remain dependent for economic needs and social protections on male members of the family - on their fathers in their youth, on their husbands in their middle age, and on their sons in their old age [61]. The patriarchal nature of society in Bangladesh means that men are expected to be breadwinners and women as housewives, and even now, about 85.8 percent of households are headed by men [40,123]. Despite considerable social development gains, many Bangladeshis stick to age-old views regarding women's empowerment [95]. It portrays a gloomy picture of women's position in the social hierarchy in Bangladesh.

However, evidence indicates that significant changes have occurred in gender relations in the last few decades [49,51,61,121]. Apart from a massive increase in women's employment, particularly in the RMG sector, interventions like microfinance, stipend program for girls' education, a legal framework to address gender-based violence, and the introduction of quotas for ensuring female participation across all sectors have contributed substantially to the advancement of women empowerment and gender equality in Bangladesh [52,100,124]. According to Global Gender Gap Report 2017, Bangladesh ranked 47th among 144 countries in gender equality, closing the gender gap by 72 percent and gaining the top position in South Asia [128]. Kotikula et al. [80] argue that with the large-scale job creation in the urban manufacturing sectors, female employment remains central to the narrative of Bangladesh's

steady economic growth.³ Akhter and Cheng [6] revealed that financial credits could enhance the living standard and sustainability of empowerment of rural women in Bangladesh. In this socio-cultural context, it is assumed that the female labor-intensive export-oriented ready-made garments sector has been contributing to closing the gender gap and empowering women in Bangladesh.

2.4. RMG sector and women's empowerment in Bangladesh

Various push and pull factors in the 1980s and 1990s motivated women to challenge rural societal norms and migrate to urban areas to work in the RMG sector. The push factors were mainly extreme poverty, household shocks like illness, disability or sudden loss of male income earners, and unemployment, while paid employment, freedom, and improved living standards were the major pull factors [8,77]. Widespread opportunities for unskilled employment in the RMG sector boosted the independent migration of women and girls from villages to cities [30,101]. These factors resulted in the formal mass employment of women at the entry level across the industry [11].

Employers also preferred female employees for their obedience and low cost productivity [32]. Whether paid employment in this sector is empowering women in Bangladesh remains hotly debated among feminist activists and scholars [49]. Various discourses of women's empowerment have evolved even in the national sphere of the country [96]. Heath and Mobarak [43] found that it improved the welfare of young women and provided them with greater autonomy in delaying marriage and childbirth. Rashid [107] revealed that girls, women, and their children had better health as they had access to a balanced diet and nutrition. Women workers were found to have the ability to question the dowry system, participate in family planning, open a bank account, send their children to schools, buy health care services, afford basic purchases, and provide their parents with regular monetary aid [33,69,76,91]. Souplet-Wilson [120] also argues that it enhanced women's capacity to formulate choices and act upon them. Karim [74] revealed that despite gender-based wage disparities and unfavorable working conditions, female garment workers gained a greater level of empowerment than the women who engaged themselves in other sectors such as microfinance. Paid employment in the RMG sector has challenged existing cultural norms (e.g., gender-based social exclusion of women). Some evidence points out that female garment workers gained greater social consciousness and the ability to resist or avoid harassment and exploitation at the workplace and in the community [44,76,130]. Chowdhury's [29] empirical study suggests that it has strengthened women's value and bargaining power within the household because of their increased contribution. Similarly, based on a quantitative study conducted among female garment workers in Bangladesh, Billah and Manik [19] conclude that the sector has significantly contributed to women's societal empowerment.

However, several scholars have highlighted the adverse outcomes and impediments that continue to be prevalent in this regard. The female RMG workers still work in a vulnerable environment due to the absence of trade unions, gender-based wage disparities, informal recruitment, irregular salaries, long working hours, lack of health, safeguard and childcare facilities, sexual harassment, and violence [4,94,104]. Fatema [32] highlights that to the RMG working women in Bangladesh, empowerment basically means social and economic empowerment and argues that lack of aptitude to raise voice in the family and at the workplace against exploitation and discrimination seriously hinders women's actual levels of empowerment. In households, male management of income and expenditure gives them control over women's wages [66]. Prevailing cultural norms also keep challenging this development. As

¹ "Purdah", a type of dress code to cover the faces and bodies of women. It is used "figuratively to mean the veiled seclusion of women" ([27], p. 217).

² Dowry refers to property, cash, or goods provided by the groom's family to the bride's family as a consideration of marriage [16].

³ Bangladesh has an impressive economic growth and poverty reduction record, and remains one of the fastest growing economies, supported by demographic dividend, exports, and economic stability [47,127].

Heintz et al. [44], p. 285] argue, highly geographically concentrated garment workers are ‘considered less socially acceptable (“people say bad things”)’. Lack of organizational protection inside the factories often encourages exploitative attitudes from males toward working women [117]. Based on emerging evidence, Hossain [49] argues that women in this sector are exposed to new sources of discrimination and structural violence. This line of argument frequently concludes that although paid employment in the RMG sector has delivered empowerment opportunities, this change is far from being positively transformative for women in Bangladesh. Understanding this issue requires carefully examining how employment changed their lives at various levels – individual, family, household, community and beyond. Moreover, it needs an evaluation of changes in women’s agency and negotiation capacity.

3. Methodology

3.1. Concepts and approach

Among all the approaches to define, identify, and understand women’s empowerment (discussed in Section 2.1), this research intends to look mainly through Kabeer’s [63,65] lenses of resources, agency, and achievements. Considering the context (see Sections 2.2 and 2.3), these three components are assumed to be instrumental in assessing the empowerment of female garment workers through their paid employment. Then, Kabeer’s [65] argument about powerlessness has relevance in this study as the female garment workers are often disempowered in the first place due to poverty, traditional patriarchal norms, and lack of education and economic opportunities. They can assumably challenge the existing barriers and inequalities at individual, household and community levels. They mostly come from the poorer classes of rural areas [32,57]. In addition to Kabeer’s framework, the conceptual components considered in this study and analysis are – self-esteem [92,109], cognitive and perceptual changes [109], collective action [13,92], and challenging gender power relations [14,63,92].

This research used the qualitative method to investigate the impact of paid employment on the empowerment of female garment workers in Bangladesh. Qualitative inquiry is usually well suited for exploring the life stories of a society or the daily lives (whether within the household, workplace or other public and private domains) of individuals [118]. This research strategy intends to examine, understand, and interpret the behavior of individuals and groups in respect of their real-life culture and values [24,46]. Kabeer [66] underscores that evaluation of empowerment must be subjective, while Malhotra et al. [86] argue that women themselves should judge their empowerment. For this reason, qualitative methods, including individual interviews (particularly with the female garment workers) were critical to realize this research’s objectives and to give them voices. It allowed this study to explore and capture the stories of changes in the lives of female RMG workers and to generate deep insights and critical knowledge.

3.2. Data collection methods

Two semi-structured interview guides directed the data collection for this research. Interviews were conducted with 17 female⁴ workers employed in the RMG sector. These key informants (KIs) were purposively chosen from three medium-sized⁵ factories – one from the capital Dhaka and the other two from Gazipur (see Fig. 1). These factories produce goods for both national and international markets. In addition, three interviews were conducted with three other stakeholders. These additional interviews, conducted with a factory Manager, an owner of

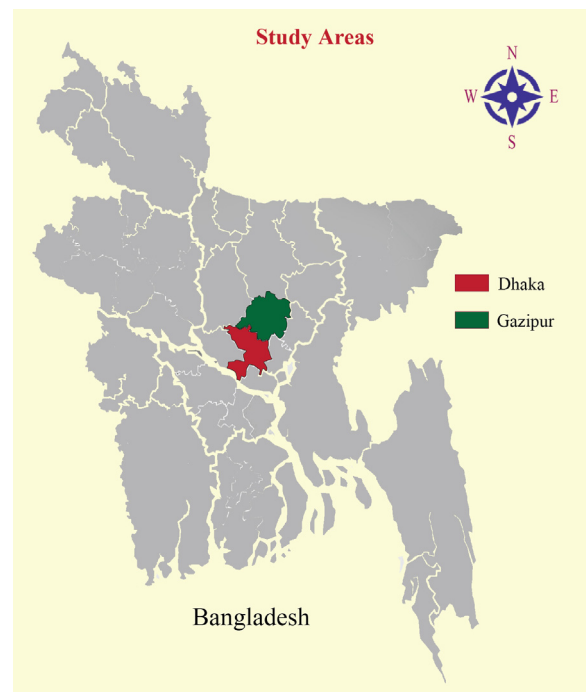


Fig. 1. Study Areas (Illustration: Authors’).

one of the factories, and the president⁶ of the garment factory owners’ association (Bangladesh Garment Manufacturers and Exporters Association, i.e., BGMEA), provided the study with additional on-ground views and perspectives.

The access to the factories was obtained through an official of BGMEA. The interviews were conducted with self-selected participants from the three factories. The fieldwork lasted for a period of four weeks from July to August 2020. The purpose of the interviews and research was explained to the participants before obtaining their written consent. Each interview was conducted individually and privately on production sites in a conversational manner.⁷ Each interview lasted for about an hour.

As Table 1 shows, the age of the KIs ranged from 18 to 36 years. Among the 17 KIs, nine were married; four were unmarried; one was divorced; one was a widow; and two were abandoned⁸ (left by their husbands). The KIs represent different levels of educational backgrounds. Two KIs were primary school dropouts; seven were high school dropouts; five completed secondary level; and three completed higher secondary level⁹ of education. Though the KIs also represented differences in their type of work, their salaries and living conditions were almost the same. Their monthly salaries ranged from BDT 8420 to 10,200 (~ USD 100 – 125). For the majority of the KIs, their current job at the time was their first paid employment. Most of them migrated from the villages to Dhaka’s urban areas in search of a living. The interview guide was designed to cover issues like their experiences at home, workplace, and in the community before and after taking up RMG sector work. The guide was piloted with a few participants prior to recording for final collection. The study used the KIs’ direct speech in the analysis of findings

⁶ This was the only interview conducted through email communication. The interviewee responded to the questions in writing via email.

⁷ Researchers and respondents spoke the same native language (i.e., Bangla).

⁸ An *abandoned* woman (also termed as *deserted*) refers to one who has been left by her husband without a formal divorce or separation. See [5].

⁹ In Bangladesh, the education system is divided into three stages: i) Primary (Grade I to V), ii) Secondary (Junior secondary: Grade VI to VIII; Secondary: Grade IX to X; Higher Secondary: XI to XII), and iii) Tertiary or Higher Education level [12,55].

⁴ All of them identified themselves as females.

⁵ Typically, factories hiring around six hundred workers are medium-sized units in Bangladesh [89]. The names of the three selected factories are - Well-touch Apparels Limited (Dhaka), Fashion Point Limited (Gazipur), and Fashion Summit Limited (Gazipur).

Table 1
Socio-economic characteristics of key informants.

Number	Codes	Age (years)	Marital Status	Education	Monthly Salary (BDT ¹)
17	A01 – A17	18–36	Married – 9 Unmarried – 4 Divorced – 1 Widow – 1 Abandoned (left by husband) - 2	Primary dropouts – 2 High School dropouts – 7 SSC – 5 HSC – 3	8420 – 10,200 (~ \$ 100 –125)

¹ BDT stands for Bangladeshi Taka. At the time of data collection, one US dollar was equal to approximately BDT 85.

so that women's experiences, perceptions, and emotions can be reflected to portray the real scenario. Then, the fieldwork data were analyzed using the empowerment concepts outlined in the previous sections. Moreover, findings from the primary qualitative data were compared with the secondary literature and additional observations.

3.3. Ethics and limitations

Fieldwork was performed following the existing COVID-19 related guidelines set by the government and hosting organizations. Relevant travel guidelines were maintained, and safety measures (e.g., wearing a mask and maintaining social distancing) were followed properly by both parties for the purpose of the interviews. Each of the KIs was assigned a unique code (A01 to A17) during the research for ensuring their privacy and confidentiality. Moreover, the respondents were assured that all data (interview notes and recordings) would be kept confidential and stored securely and would only be used for academic purposes (i.e., writing and publishing). Due attention and care were invested while transcribing the recordings. However, the data and the analyses have a few limitations. One is the social desirability of the respondents. As Mahmud et al. [84], p. 12] note, in a patriarchy like Bangladesh, women may often 'give responses that represent lower empowerment than is actually the case'. The participants could also be biased towards the perceived benefits of their positions and employment. Another limitation is that this study is based on hasty fieldwork and involve a limited number of interviews within a specific urban area (see Fig. 1). Therefore, generalized application of the findings of this study with other or wider contexts may not be prudent or relatable.

4. Impact of paid employment on women's empowerment

The literature review conveys that women's empowerment is a complex and multi-dimensional concept. The subjective views, beliefs, perceptions, and experiences shared by the interviewees and the observations shared by the additional respondents provided this study with considerable data and information. The following sub-sections present the results and analyses.

4.1. Economic capacity

More than half of the key informants (KIs) reported that they had some bank savings and assets. A09, a married woman, said, 'I save a fixed amount every month in my savings account with a bank, have some cows in the village, and my gold ornaments'. A11 shared, 'I have some savings in my bank account. A few months ago, I bought a piece of land in the village in my name'. These statements suggest that RMG employment itself as a resource gave these women access to and control over other resources (income, savings, and land). These resources are preconditions for gaining agency and having positive achievements [66,93].

All nine married KIs provided almost an equal portion of the total household expenditure (housing, food, clothes, health, children's education, and so forth) from their salary. Unmarried women spent a portion of their monthly salary to support their families. From the rest, they tend to build on their savings after keeping their pocket money. Other

women (i.e., widow, divorced, and abandoned) reported that they ran their families independently as the heads of the households. Overall, 10 out of the 17 KIs stated that they spent around 50 percent of their monetary income (i.e., salaries and overtime pays) on household expenditure; four KIs did 100 percent, while three KIs spent below 50 percent on family expenditure. Kabeer [65] demonstrated that achievements could be visible through financial capacity and autonomy, which was apparent from the economic contribution of these women to their families. These working women negotiate their role in the family and society, challenging the male breadwinning myth. According to Kabeer [65], an agency can take the form of negotiation.

All KIs felt happy and proud of their financial contribution to their families. A01 said, 'I feel proud to help my parents and reduce their economic hardship'. They also believe that their living standard has improved after they started working. A15 stated, 'the economic condition of my family has changed. My parents were not able to bear our household expenses when we used to live in village. Now, they live here with me and we have a better life altogether.' This rising economic capacity to contribute to their families transforms them from dependents to economic agents.

Box 1: Economic empowerment of A08.

A08 is a high school dropout who married out of her own volition. Her husband's family did not accept their marriage. She started living separately with her husband. After the birth of their two daughters, her husband married another woman of his parents' choice and started living with his second wife, abandoning her. At that point in her life, A08, with her young daughters, had nowhere to go. She and her two daughters migrated to the city to work in an RMG factory. She runs her household and sends her daughters to school with her income. Her older daughter studies at the HSC (high school) level, and the youngest one is in grade eight. She dreams of her daughters being highly educated. Two months ago, her husband tried to pursue her to return to him, which she refused to do. She said, 'in the beginning, my parents used to be tense about my daughters and me. Now they feel relaxed, thinking I am earning well, educating my daughters, and living a better life. My relatives from my village also often appreciate my life course.'

The president of BGMEA commented, 'RMG has created a platform for these women to engage in productive roles, which contributes directly to alleviating poverty and uplifting livelihoods.' A08's story (see Box 1) of gaining economic capacity, escaping poverty, and improving life status through RMG work is an example of economic empowerment.

4.2. Decision-making power

The fieldwork suggests that because of their economic capacity through RMG work, these women have gained the confidence to make many household decisions and some strategic life choices about marriage, family planning, and children's education and well-being. Garment workers can spend independently for their well-being. All nine married women reported that they could spend on their parents' well-being. They could buy gifts for them during festivals and send them money occasionally, depending on their needs. The unmarried girls, widows, divorced, and deserted spend on their parents too. A12, a married woman, shared, 'my parents' family members are well-off. Even

then, when any of them gets sick, I send them money through bKash¹⁰ for buying medicine or their favourite foods. I also give festival gifts. I bought identical dresses for my parents and parents-in-law during the last Eid.' Six KIs with children also reported that they could spend on their children's education and well-being. The women who lived with their husbands or/and other family members could buy, cook and have foods of their choice. A16 said, 'when we live here, I can cook whatever I like, and when we visit our village, my mother-in-law asks me what I like to eat.' Hence, it is apparent that these women could exercise agency across a range of decisions concerning their income and expenditure.

Several KIs were able to make some significant decisions, such as choosing their life partners, creating their social networks and deciding on the number of children. Four women reported that they could marry out of their own choices after working in this sector. The marriages were dowry-free. A04 said, 'I married after taking up the garments work. I chose my partner and my family arranged the marriage ceremony.' The statement reveals her ability to make "strategic life choices", which is a significant component of Kabeer's [65] definition of empowerment. Married KIs also reported that they had a say about matters relating to pregnancy. None of the married KIs had more than two children. The other stakeholders also agreed that these women were exercising greater decision-making power. Further, 15 of the 17 KIs reported that their decision-making power has increased because of this employment. A13 commented about her increased decision-making power, 'if I were not self-reliant, my opinions would not be given so much importance.' The story of A01 is a reliable example of gaining decision-making power in the family (see Box 2).

Box 2: A01's decision-making power.

A01, a woman who dropped school at the lower-secondary level, took up this job to tackle her family's financial crisis. Her father used to work as a daily laborer, and their household income was minimal. With the hope of earning for her family, she moved to Dhaka city and found this job. Her parents live in a remote village. She sends money to her parents every month. They had a soil-based house, but they have built a brick-based house recently. Her father takes her opinion on all the essential household decisions. In her words, 'my father makes phone calls to consult my opinions on spending money for any purpose. For instance, a few days ago, he asked me about buying a piece of land in the village. After having a conversation, we agreed to buy it in my mother's name.'

The president of BGMEA commented, 'apart from being able to financially contribute to the family, working in the RMG sector significantly enhances their ability to take part in decision-making.' Some evidence also echo these findings that paid RMG work positively contributes to increasing women's decision-making power ([19,63,134,135]).

4.3. Migration for economic opportunities

The fieldwork reveals that most female garment workers have migrated from rural areas. Among the 17 respondents of this research, 15 migrated from the villages to the cities in search of a living. While poverty was the primary driver of this migration, employment opportunities had been the main pull factor. Two KIs had lived in the city from their childhood since their parents migrated to the cities when they were minors. This finding relates to Kabeer's [65] concept of powerlessness. It suggests that these women were disempowered before joining the RMG job due to poverty and limited economic opportunities in the villages. Four KIs started working in informal sectors before joining RMG. However, they are more satisfied with their current job. For the other 13 KIs, garment work was the first job, which indicates that women and girls who migrated from rural villages prefer RMG work to other informal work opportunities. Kabeer and Mahmud [69] also support this finding of female migrants' preference for RMG employment. The interviewed

Manager of the factory opined that these women prefer this sector because of a few factors - there is no formal educational requirement for the job; the job offer fixed working hours and salary, and the payment is regular. A07 and her sister's story of gaining better life opportunities through their migration to the city to take up RMG work highlights that survival needs primarily drive destitute women to leave villages. Greater access to resources in the urban RMG industry can empower them in this regard (see Box 3).

Box 3: A07's urban migration.

A07, a single woman who is a high school dropout, worked in RMG for nine years. Due to economic hardship, her whole family migrated from a village in Mymensingh district to Gazipur. She started as a helper in a garment factory and was subsequently promoted to an operator position. She acquired the necessary skills and experience to be recruited for a supervisory position. She was happy with her progress. Due to her additional income, the living standard of their household also improved. They renovated their village house and recently bought a piece of land. She believed migrating to the city helped bring these positive changes. She explained, 'after completing her SSC exam, my older sister came to this area to visit one of our garment worker cousins. She [older sister] noticed that our cousin was earning enough to lead a good life. She got motivated and moved here with a job in a (garment) factory. After one year, I followed her path.'

Moreover, among 17 KIs, three migrated from villages to cities alone, three came jointly with their sisters, and a male family member accompanied the other 11. It suggests that many women had started moving to cities on their own in search of RMG employment (resources). This scenario contradicts the traditional image of Bangladeshi women [34]. Agency (i.e., the capacity to determine one's goal) is evident in these women travelling alone (and with a companion) to the cities for better life opportunities. These female garment workers broke the traditional gender norms (i.e., being confined within the house, being secluded), which is an essential component of empowerment. Hence, urban migration keeps these women away from the patriarchal kinship system and gives them access to resources (labor market), which is regarded as a catalyst for women's empowerment by Kabeer [65]. In this case, women workers could use this empowerment to negotiate within and outside their families regarding using their resources.

4.4. Freedom of mobility

Working in the RMG sector has positively influenced female workers' freedom of mobility. Apart from internal migration, these women often challenge prevailing societal norms, traditions, and stigma that restrict women's mobility. All KIs reported that they enjoyed greater freedom of mobility. They travelled to and from the office alone. After overtime duty, they often had to travel at night. They never faced any qualms or objections from anyone about it. In this regard, A12 highlighted, 'my husband understands that I sometimes need to return late in the night.' This statement indicates that these women, because of their paid employment, have gained increased freedom of mobility which Kabeer [65] stipulates as a significant indicator of women's empowerment. However, a few respondents cited their family's concerns regarding their overtime work and safety while travelling at night. A04 shared, 'the days I have overtime work, my husband usually (phone)calls me to know my office closing time.' The women said that they usually walked in a group during going to and returning from their workplaces. Walking in a group to avoid or resist harassment suggests their agency in the form of resistance [65]. It is a sign of their collective action.

Two-thirds KIs claimed that they could visit their friends, go shopping, and enjoy outings or picnics with friends. The other 4 KIs said they usually informed their husbands or other family members when they went outside their workplaces. Fifteen women felt that their freedom of mobility increased because of their employment. A05's story of gaining increased freedom of mobility explains the significant impact of the RMG work in playing a part in instigating this social change (see Box 4).

¹⁰ "bKash" is a mobile phone-based financial service in Bangladesh. See <https://www.bkash.com/>.

Box 4: A05's freedom of mobility.

A05 is a married woman who accompanied her husband to this city to take up RMG work as her husband's income was insufficient to run the family of five members and educate their two children. Since then, many things have changed. Apart from the increased economic capacity and household decision-making power, she also gained freedom of mobility through this work. She could travel to her village alone. In her words, 'when I was living in the village, I rarely travelled outside. As a working woman, I have gained more freedom to go anywhere I want.' She further added that her mother and grandmother did not have such freedom.

4.5. Knowledge, skills, and awareness

Paid employment in the RMG sector has a significant impact in terms of the levels of social awareness in women's lives. Sixteen of the 17 respondents reported that they were aware of the labor union and the positive implications of having a union in a factory. A05 confidently said, 'I am aware of the labor union of our factory. The union leaders represent us. They talk to the owners if we face any problems. The union members always try to protect our rights as workers.' The collective action through the union shows their awareness and empowerment. The workers were also aware of the working environment of the factory.

Some KIs reported that the working condition had been improving gradually over the last several years, especially after the collapse of Rana Plaza.¹¹ A04 said, 'I usually feel safe here. If the working environment was not satisfactory, I would have left this factory.' This finding contradicts the studies carried out by Paul-Majumder and Begum [102], Absar [1], and Siddiqi [117]. According to these studies, female workers face critical issues regarding unsafe and risky working conditions in the factories. However, a few recent studies, including Kabeer et al. [67] and Hossain [50] identified gradually improving working conditions in the garment factories of Bangladesh after the Rana Plaza tragedy.

Further, 15 KIs reported that they felt more comfortable and confident while raising voices within the household and in public. All but one KIs said, when they faced any issue regarding the factory (inside or outside), they shared it with their close colleagues first. It refers to their community engagement skills and beliefs in collective action – the source of their confidence in their skills, knowledge, experience, and network. The story of A13 is a good example (see Box 5). Due to their extended networks inside and outside their workplace, they felt confident in finding same or similar jobs. Altogether, it indicates that they have achieved empowering social development.

Box 5: A13's confidence in her skills and experience.

A13 is a married woman who studied until HSC (12th grade). She was working as a quality inspector. Due to financial hardship in her parents' family, she migrated to look for a job. She had to wait two months to find a job in the RMG sector. She found one when a relative eventually referred her. She worked hard to acquire skills that she believes will now enable her to find a similar job in any other factory. In her words, 'the skills and experience I have gathered over the years will surely get me a job if I choose to leave this company.'

4.6. Greater sense of self-esteem

Eight of the Nine married KIs informed that their husbands helped them with household chores. Only one woman said she was doing all household work alone and got no help from family members. A12 said, 'in my village, if a husband gives a hand in household work, people defame him. But here, my husband helps me with doing all kinds of domestic work.' In the case of the four unmarried women, only one woman said that she does almost all household work on her own as her parents, both

¹¹ On 24 April 2013, the collapse of the Rana Plaza in Bangladesh resulted in the deaths and injuries of more than 2,000 workers working in the five garment factories housed in the building [67]. For more details, visit https://www.ilo.org/global/topics/geip/WCMS_614394/lang-en/index.htm.

of whom live with her, are sick. The divorced woman, the widow and the abandoned women were reportedly doing their household work alone. However, all KIs thought that husbands should contribute to household activities when the wives work. These findings illustrate the women's self-confidence and sense of self-esteem. The story of A10 is an excellent example of gaining a sense of self-esteem through RMG sector work (see Box 6).

Box 6: A10 gains self-esteem.

A10 is a widow (a primary school dropout) living with her five-year-old son. Both of her parents passed away well before her husband's death. She had to find a job to survive. She started working as a domestic helper in a house where she experienced abuse. She also found the work very laborious and low-paid. She left the job and migrated to the city to take up a garment job. She believes that her employment in RMG has given her dignity and respect. In her words, 'now, I proudly introduce myself as a garment employee. I am confident, and I am aware of my worth. My hard days are gone.'

Fifteen KIs said that their value in the family has increased, and society's attitudes towards them were also changing for the better. A15 said, 'they [family members] can see my contribution and I can see my value. The people outside my family in the wider community also appreciate my job. Referring to our hard times, they say that we are now living a better life.' Moreover, 13 KIs said they experienced less violence against them after their employment. All the married KIs reported that they face minimal violence in their households. All KIs believed that women should raise their voices against any violence they face. The employment has given these women a sense of worth and motivation to protest the odds.

4.7. Perceptual changes

Fifteen KIs shared their life plans. Women with children aspire to ensure the well-being of their children, irrespective of whether the children are sons or daughters. A05, a mother of a daughter and a boy, said, 'my priority is to ensure higher education for my children.' Some women dreamed of building brick houses in their villages, while some wanted to buy some land. One woman said, she was hoping to start her own business and farm. KI A02's vision for the future is worth mentioning here (see Box 7).

Box 7: A02's vision for the future.

A02, a young woman who studied until passing her SSC exams (10th grade), was working in this sector to support her parents. She and her elder sister were the only earning members of their four-member family. Her parents were sick and unable to go to work. Although she had a busy and hard-working life, she kept her dream of becoming a nurse alive. She confidently uttered, 'I want to be a nurse. I am studying at a local college here. They [the college] also offer training. I hope my dream will become a reality soon.'

All KIs opined that early marriage should be stopped as it is harmful to girls' physical and mental well-being. A11 added, 'it [early marriage] causes many issues including physical hurdles which I experienced.' The KIs also expressed their opinion against the practice of dowry. They thought this practice put pressure on the bride's parents and was a significant reason for domestic violence in many households. A05 said, 'I have come to realize that it is illegal, and I will not be engaged in such practices.' Fifteen KIs believed women should raise their voices against violence within their households and have the right to leave an abusive marriage to start a new life. However, two participants thought women should be more patient regarding these household issues.

Further, the KIs' response regarding family planning is worth noting. All of them believed that the decisions of the wife and husband are important regarding family planning issues such as pregnancy. They believed in keeping the size of the family small. A02 said, 'society has changed a lot, and women have their say in family planning. My grandparents had eight children. Now, people are conscious. Even if I have

three daughters, I believe in smaller families.' These perceptual changes denote positive achievements through access to and control over resources and agency at both the household level and public space.

5. Constraints limiting the empowerment

The fieldwork data revealed some constraints that can limit the empowerment process of female RMG workers. As for income control, three married women said they kept their salaries in common family funds, and the surplus was saved after spending the family expenditure on it. Among these three women, two have bank saving accounts. However, some women had to inform their husbands before giving money to their (the woman's) parents. It indicates the struggle for greater economic autonomy. One of the nine married KIs stated that she did all the household work alone. She stated, 'I do all household chores alone without any assistance from my husband.' She clearly had the double burden of household and factory duties. Though some women reported that they received assistance from their husbands with some household work, the cooking and cleaning tasks were still assigned to the women. This shows that societal norms about household work remain a crucial challenge.

As mentioned earlier, KIs reported some satisfaction with the working environment inside the factories. However, three responding mothers kept their children in the villages with other family members or close relatives. It illustrates their time constraints. Since they work six days a week for nine hours a day (excluding occasional overtimes), and both husband and wife go to work, there is hardly anyone left to look after their children. A10 (the widow) said, 'my five-year-old son lives in the village with one of my relatives, and I always worry about him.'

Moreover, four KIs commented that some people in their villages were still defaming garment workers and showing disrespect due to the social stigma about women working outside. However, they also believed those opposing views were incorrect. They thought these people were unaware of the recent developments in the working environment in Bangladeshi RMG factories. A01 said, 'garment sector work is often portrayed very negatively. For example, when any marriage proposal for a female garment worker arrives, the groom's family sees her employment as a negative aspect. They are not right. We have stood on our feet and continue to support ourselves and our families.' Though negative attitudes toward women in the RMG sector have recently reduced ([136]), the negative portrayal remained a barrier to women's empowerment in the sector [44,48,102].

Half of the KIs had a minimum of five years of working experience in the RMG sector, but everyone was still working at the same level they first started. Most of them did not pass secondary school. It shows that women with low levels of education have little scope for promotion to senior positions and are confined to labor-intensive jobs. When asked about this issue, the factory owner commented that the lack of required educational qualifications was the main obstacle to their promotion to senior levels. Furthermore, the story of A14 explains the struggles these women often endure to receive the empowering benefits of their paid employment (see Box 8). Despite her increased economic capacity (through access to labor market opportunities) and subsequently acquired agency in personal decision-making, she believed her struggles overshadowed her achievements.

Box 8: Struggle of A14.

A14, a woman who finished her studies up until HSC (12th grade), migrated alone to the city in search of better life opportunities despite her parents' disapproval, and started working in the RMG sector. Subsequently, she got involved in a relationship with a man and married him without consulting with her parents who were still constantly telling her to go back to her village. A few months later, the man abandoned her. Later, she discovered that the man already had another wife and children, which he kept a secret to her. She did not take any legal actions, and instead she sees it as her misfortune. Her parents still do not know about this incident. Her frustration is evident from her statement, 'in economic terms, I live a better life now but from another perspective, my life has some other problems.'

Emerging evidence suggests that many working women in Bangladesh faced various challenges during the COVID-19 pandemic to maintain work-family commitments in the patriarchal context [125]. From the discussions and findings mentioned above, one can say that existing socio-cultural and socioeconomic constraints continue to limit the full potential of women's empowerment through paid work in the RMG sector.

6. Conclusion

The above analysis shows that paid RMG employment in Bangladesh has significant positive impacts on female workers' economic, social, and psychological empowerment. The findings suggest that female RMG workers have gained economic capacity, along with some autonomy, freedom of mobility, increased decision-making power, a greater sense of self-esteem, job skills and experience, and consciousness about their rights to make choices. Data, firstly, show that the KIs are proud to contribute to their families. Their living standard has improved, and many have savings and other material resources. Secondly, they enjoy agency in income and expenditure-related household decision-making. They frequently make strategic life choices, including choosing life partners, and deciding on the number of children and their welfare. Their capacity for negotiation both inside and outside the family has enhanced. Thirdly, many female RMG workers voluntarily migrate to cities to take up RMG jobs and acquire access to more significant economic opportunities. Fourthly, they have a greater degree of freedom of mobility in public spaces. They can travel alone or in groups with friends or colleagues. Fifthly, they have acquired valuable skills, knowledge, and experience and are more aware of the benefits and rights which can be claimed through their labor unions. Increased self-esteem inspires them to chase their dreams and plans. They also receive more respect and dignity within the household and community. Finally, they are aware of the adverse effects of early marriage and dowry and more conscious of women's rights in the household and society.

However, some constraints question the sustainability of women's empowerment in this sector. The double burden of work at home and workplace, time constraints for care work, negative community attitudes among rural people, prevailing norms relating to women's household responsibilities, and working in the same position for an extended period without promotion are some of the critical impediments to women empowerment in Bangladesh's RMG sector.

Overall, the findings drawn from the female RMG workers' views and lived experiences unpack that paid employment substantially impacts women's economic, social, and psychological empowerment in the context of Bangladesh. This study highlights that women's empowerment through paid employment can be a promising model for change if a women-friendly working environment is ensured. The study's outcome can complement quantitative research findings on women's empowerment in Bangladesh and leave opportunities for further inquiries in a broader context. The findings offer valuable insights for practitioners and policymakers who aim to empower women worldwide. However, the authors acknowledge the limitations of this study, including the short research time, social desirability bias, and methodological shortcomings.

Declaration of Competing Interest

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