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Behind the Seams: An Insight into Work-Life Balance of Garments Workers in Bangladesh

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Abstract

Background and Problem Statements: Bangladesh's ready-made garment industry, employing 4.22 million people, has experienced significant growth in job creation, foreign revenue, and GDP contribution. However, garment workers often face high stress levels, making it difficult to balance work and personal life.

Objectives: The study aims to explore the multifaceted challenges garment workers in Bangladesh face, which hinder their ability to balance their personal and professional lives.

Methods: This study used a cross-sectional qualitative research approach, conducting 20 in-depth interviews with 10 male and 10 female garment workers, using purposive sampling to ensure balanced gender representation, and conducted a thematic analysis on the collected data.

Summary of Key Findings: Economic constraints and lack of political rights push the workers further into social isolation and marginalization. Workplace-specific challenges like job insecurity and unsanitary working environments compromise their overall well-being, resulting in worker burnout. The factors relating to workers' distress, including inadequate remuneration, extended working hours, and subpar working conditions also lead to intensified stress, feelings of inferiority, and deteriorated family ties.

Contributions and Implications: This study emphasizes the need for reforms to promote work-life balance and enhance workers' well-being, ultimately leading to an ethical, equitable, and prosperous garment industry in Bangladesh.

Keywords: Garment Workers, Work-Life balance, Dhaka City

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Introduction

The ready-made garment (RMG) industry is one of the most prospective industries in Bangladesh (Hossan et al. 2012). According to estimates, the garment sector in Bangladesh employs around 4.22 million people, with 2.50 million of them being female (Haque et al., 2023). This sector has grown in terms of job creation, foreign revenue, and GDP contribution (Ahamed, 2014). However, the industry's main stakeholders—garment workers—continue to lag behind. Due to the huge work-load at garments, unfavorable workplace environment, insufficient family and personal time, unaffordability to arrange and attend social events due to lower income and lack of time, and the huge stress as well as associated health issues, the workers struggle to balance their work life and personal life (Soomro et al., 2018; Feldman et al, 2002; Perreault & Power, 2021).

The ILO Convention, SDGs, and other international agreements address worker rights and workplace health and safety (Rantanen et al., 2020). Most nations have labor laws, labor dispute courts, and employee rights in their constitutions. However, emerging economies like Bangladesh do not follow these practices (Chowdhury, 2017). In developing nations, a large workforce is exploited for profit and their socio-political existence is hindered (Liu et al., 2019). Bangladesh is not an exception. Bangladesh has different labor practices than developed nations like the US and Europe. Bangladeshi workers face discrimination, work long and irregular hours, and often work without breaks (Afrin, 2014).

There have been many labor movements, demonstrations, civil unrest of garment workers in Dhaka City (Hossan et al., 2012). In particular, after the Rana Plaza accident, there started a new thinking in Bangladesh about garment workers and there are two organizations called 'Alliance' and 'Accords' who are working for the garment sector and for tackling relevant issues (Donaghey & Reinecke, 2018). However, garment workers are still discriminated against, and their long work hours limit their social lives. Upbringing their children, leading happy conjugal life, caring for the elderly, doing their social activities, etc., are being much more difficult (Farhana et al., 2015).

Therefore, it is crucial to identify the main factors that affect garment workers' work-life balance in Dhaka, causing imbalances and affecting their professional and personal well-being. This research aims to examine the current state of work-life balance among garment workers in Bangladesh and attempts to explore the underline factors that influence it.

Literature Review

Work-life balance is about balancing professional and personal responsibilities for parents and non-parents (Uddin et al., 2013). Garment workers struggle to achieve work-life balance due to low income. Smith and McBride (2021) reported that the main professional

challenges are long work hours, commuting, and extra responsibilities. These challenges impact a worker's political, economic, familial, social, and personal life (Ross & Vasantha, 2014; Kanchana & Hamsaveni, 2020). Due to the busy schedule with work and housework, the workers lack time to connect with family and society and cannot engage in political activities or build social capital (Saleem & Abbasi, 2015). They will fall behind politically as they focus solely on earnings. As a result, they have no influence to ensure their rights as well (Beauregard & Henry, 2009).

The family members of the garment workers especially who need special care such as the children and the elderly people get deprived of support and their conjugal life gets hampered due to the severe work pressure (Soomro et al., 2018). Because, if they work all day long, there will be no scope to keep connection with family members. In Bangladesh, balancing professional and personal life is a more challenging task for female garment workers than for male employees (Chowdhury et al., 2015) since they face numerous challenges while maintaining both their jobs and their families. They frequently fail to place adequate and required emphasis on their own health and well-being (Pathak & Gupte, 2016). As a result, they can become mentally depressed and later be addicted to different drugs (Hyman et al., 2017).

The lack of mobility and job advancement frustrates garment workers (Meenakshisundaram & Panchanatham, 2012). The work environment in the garments industry of Bangladesh is vulnerable, unhealthy, unsafe, and risky, which threatens the workers' health (Kabir et al., 2019). The tragedies at Rana Plaza, Tazreen Fashions, and Tampaco Foils Limited have horrified the country (Hasan, et al., 2017). Bangladeshi garment workers get low salaries and inadequate safety procedures (Akter & Banik, 2018). They face health issues like respiratory problems, low back and joint pain, and urinary tract infections due to inadequate hygienic facilities. Women face sexual harassment and danger while commuting to and from factories (Ng et al, 2007). Absar (2001) found that Bangladesh has the lowest labor costs per worker in South Asia. Shirt production costs: Bangladesh - 11 cents, Sri Lanka - 79 cents, India - 26 cents. Lowest unit labor cost is a big benefit for Bangladesh. Workers in Bangladeshi garment manufacturers are expected to work for a whole month without any days off (Perreault and Power, 2021). Absar (2001) argues that low wages and poor living conditions contribute to labor unrest in Bangladesh's RMG industry.

The average income of each RMG worker per month is found to be Tk. 11,402 (BGMEA, 2020), the money earned is spent rapidly in diverse ways such as house rent, transport fees, medical and other essential expenses. Thus, their savings will not grow, and they will not get the opportunity for cultural development, vacation celebration, and recreation. Which ultimately

hampers their economic development due to medical expenses for illness and depression. The work environment of the garments in Bangladesh is so nasty, chaotic, and noisy. The adverse impacts of the worst work environment, and machine noise etc. and can cause labor unrest eventually. (Choudhury & Rahman, 2017) Lastly, the current policy of the garments in Bangladesh is going against the main theme of the legal mandate of ensuring safe and healthy work environment and protecting the rights of the garment workers by the various international conventions on labor rights (Rubya, 2014).

According to the literature review, there are several pieces of work on the work-life balance and related issues on female garment workers in garment industries in Bangladesh. But there is a gap in research that no work has yet been conducted on overall garment workers in the context of Bangladesh. This study would address that research gap by focusing on the garment workers of Dhaka city.

Conceptual Framework

Previous research has backed up aspects that influence work-life balance. The following approach separates the factors that affect workers' ability to strike a well work-life balance into four distinct categories:

Table 1: Variables of Work-life balance of the garment workers

Variables	Indicators
Personal Variables	Low income, unaffordability, poverty, health problems, depression (Dohrenwend 1981; Phelan et al. 1991; Perreault & Power, 2021).
Familial Variables	Child upbringing, elder care, leading the family, preserving conjugal life, (Balaji, 2014; Macchioni & Prandini, 2019) family role conflict, and stresses of maintenance (Soomro et al., 2018).
Workplace Variables	Very long hours, high workload, unhealthy workplace, and lack of flexibility in the workplace (Akter, & Banik, 2018; Eastman, 1998; Feldman et al, 2002; Ng et al, 2007; Moen & Yu, 2000; Doherty, 2004).
Socio-political Variables	Lack of proper socialization, absence in the political movement, lack of social capital political associations and lack of political influence (Kuchařová, 2009)

Utilizing the findings of previous studies, a conceptual framework has been created to illustrate the critical factors influencing the work-life balance of garment workers, which can be depicted as:

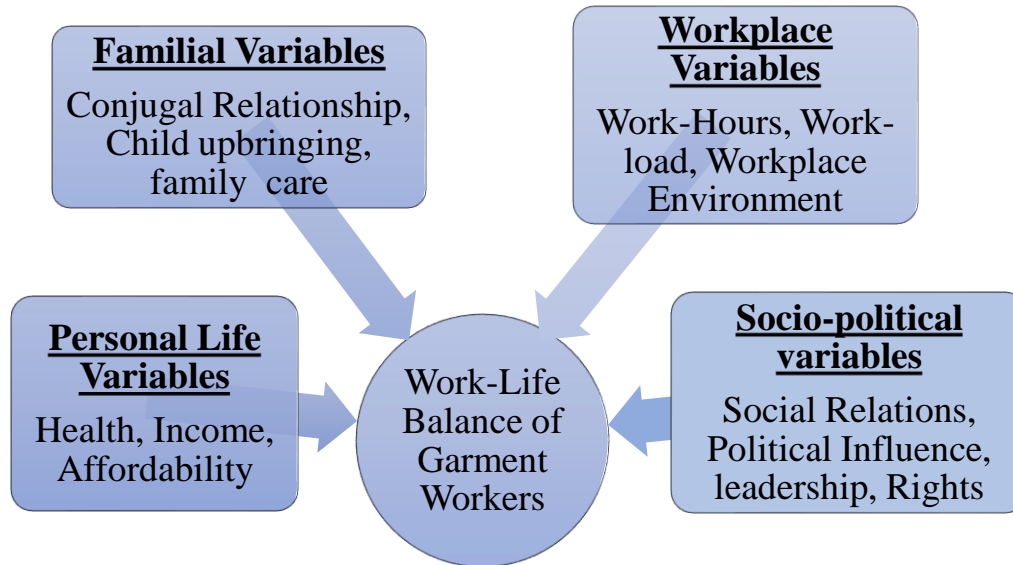


Figure 1: Conceptual framework of the influencing factors of the work-life balance status of the garment workers in Dhaka City.

All the above depicted variables and their indicators collectively

impact on the work-life balance of the garment workers. Such as: Human tendencies and economic situational factors like low income, unaffordability, poverty, etc. are considered in the Vulnerability model's framework for identifying stressors that cause health problems like depression (Dohrenwend 1981; Phelan et al. 1991; Perreault & Power, 2021) and have impact on one's ability to perform professionally and effectively in a managerial capacity. Family responsibilities, such as child upbringing, elder care, leading the family, preserving conjugal life etc. impede their advancement and force them to make career compromises which is more prevalent in the context of women garment workers (Balaji, 2014; Macchioni & Prandini, 2019). Such Family duties after excessive workload in the garment industry, role conflict, stresses of maintenance put a strain on garment workers' work-life balance. (Soomro et al., 2018) In garment industries, the workers stay in huge work pressure with daylong work hours. Thus, they do not have enough time for socialization and political movement. They cannot gather social capital and cannot have political influence to ensure their rights. They cannot lead political associations to raise their vocal which begets deprivation in their professional life and hampers soundness of their personal life (Kuchařová, 2009).

Methodology

A cross-sectional qualitative research methodology has been used in this study for exploring the status of the work-life balance among the garment workers in Dhaka city (Sedgwick, 2014; Mohajan, 2018). This study obtained data from both primary and secondary sources. The study population included the workers of several garments from Dhamrai,

Dakhinkhan, Savar and Ashulia of Dhaka city. The garments are Snowtex Outwear Ltd., Nipa Sportswear Ltd, AlMuslim Garments Ltd., and Ananta Garments Ltd. The study has adopted a purposive sampling technique to select 20 garment workers (10 males and 10 female) for in depth interviews (IDIs) (Rai & Thapa, 2015). Hence, the primary data was collected from 20 garment workers. Furthermore, the secondary data was collected from various key international journals, published books, authorized government and Nongovernment reports, National and international newspapers and authentic documents focusing garments industry of Bangladesh ((Ajayi, 2017).

For analyzing and classifying collected data in this study context, thematic analysis was used to decipher the meaning of the qualitative data (Vaismoradi et al., 2013). Using this method, the researchers were able to condense and summarize the accumulated data, which ultimately helped to determine the factors relating to the work-life balance of the garment workers of Dhaka city.

Ethical Considerations

The ethical concerns have been addressed by obtaining both written and verbal consent from all participants in the study. They have been reassured that the information they submitted would be kept confidential and that it would not be used for any other purpose than the research (Arifin, 2018).

Result and Findings

In this study, the research went through a thorough investigation for finding out the empirical evidence of the factors which have direct influences on the work-life balance status of the garment workers in Dhaka city. Such as:

Personal Factors

The income earned by the garment workers is exceptionally low, which is in average income per RMG worker per month is found to be Tk. 11,402 (BGMEA, 2020). With this little amount, leading a decent life is like daydreaming in an expensive city like Dhaka. Due to the incapability to purchase necessary utensils of daily life, they lead an extremely poor life and stay with an inferiority complex. In this regard a garment worker said,

“We struggle to afford basic necessities with the very low wages. We can hardly consume the standard foods and decent clothes which create inferiority among us to stand with other people of our neighborhoods.” (IDI 02, September 02, 2022)

For working in garments industry, the garment workers face several diseases. From the investigation, it is seen that employees frequently face headaches, hypertension, blood pressure, insomnia, etc. Some other problems include psychological disorder, mental instability, and suicidal tendency among the garment workers. One of the respondents said,

“I frequently suffer from severe headaches, hypertension, and high blood pressure. Sometimes, I want to give up my life due to the constant stress and miseries.” (IDI 07, September 07, 2022)

Garments is a busy industry from the viewpoint of the employee. Based on this study, it is seen that the workers always stay busy to meet their targets. Because if the employees fail to meet the predetermined target, then it will hamper the productivity of the organization and beget the risk for the employment of the workers. For that reason, they are always busy with their target meeting up and never have enough time to get refreshment. According to a respondent,

“We barely get time to even breathe, let alone the recreation and the refreshment. Our main focus is meeting deadlines, which leaves us strictly attached to our work schedule and stressful assignments.” (IDI 09, September 09, 2022)

Familial Factors

Through this investigation, it is seen that most of the employees said they miss the quality family time always. So, from this statement we can say that the worker does not get enough time to spend quality time with their family or friends. It is also a severely negative side of the garment industry.

“I lack time for my family, which is disheartening. I am unsatisfied with my job because it takes up all my time, leaving me unable to spend quality time with my family.” (IDI 18; October 28, 2022)

The garment workers lead a very industrious life on a daily basis. They have not enough scope to care for their spouse adequately. They can hardly meet the demands of their spouses in efficient ways. Sometimes, being instigated by low mental stability due to huge work-pressure, they use harsh or rude language or intonation towards their partners which is most dangerous for the relationship. For this reason, they are not that happy in their conjugal life too. One of the respondents said,

“I cannot afford to buy things my spouse wants; My partner is upset because I do not provide enough care or money for necessary goods. My unintentionally rude voice makes her quarrelsome, affecting our conjugal happiness.” (IDI 19, October 29, 2022)

The garment workers cannot spend much time with their children due to the over excess pressure of their job. Most of the employees said that they spend only 2-3 hours with their children and only 5 employees spend more than 4 hours with their children. For that reason, their children are nurtured by their servant or parent. In this regard it can be said that it has a great negative impact on the garment industry. In this context, one of the garment workers explained as,

“We cannot give our children enough time. The elderly in our family must take care of themselves and our children because we are unable to help. Hence, our family members suffer the most due to our complex job issues.” (IDI 13, October 13, 2022)

Socio-political Factors

It has been identified that most of the garment workers are reluctant to arrange social or cultural functions. They cannot manage time for socialization as well as the social interaction maintenance. One of the respondents said,

“Arranging or attending social functions is burdensome as I cannot afford it with my low income and limited time. Consequently, I am becoming unsocial for not maintaining good relationships with my relatives and neighbors.” (IDI 01; September 01, 2022)

Garment workers are deprived of their political rights in terms of leading their own political parties which will speak on behalf of them. They cannot afford this leadership quality as they do not have capital, both material and social capital due to the incapability to manage these things being instigated by the low income, inadequate time to invest and lack of sound social relations. According to a respondent,

“We lack the funds to invest in running a political party and organizing events such as assemblies, conferences, and associations. Poverty affects us in every way. We cannot even voice our political rights.” (IDI 03, September 03, 2022)

Professional Life Related Factors

It is seen that most of the respondents of this study blame the extensive time consumption as the main villain in their day-to-day life. According to the collected data, they are stressed with these much longer work hours and the traveling time daily. One of the respondents said,

“Long work hours and continuous workload kill our time and energy, causing boredom and stress. We lack energy to do household chores after work, which affects our personal life.” (IDI 17; October 27, 2022)

The extensive long traveling time due to traffic jams and inadequate vehicles in Dhaka city affects the low-income people in a tremendous way. They are the crucial victims of the worst traffic system of the almost unlivable city Dhaka. The garment workers stay so remote from the area of their workplace, so they have to journey a lot which costs huge time. One of the respondents opined,

“We need to spend a lot of time travelling to work. It is frustrating when there's heavy traffic on the highway and the bus stops moving. Traffic jams waste a lot of our time and leave us with no free time.” (IDI 14; October 15, 2022)

The heavy workload with extensive work hours makes the garment workers mentally wounded on a regular basis. They cannot get rid of this vicious circle of torture of work pressure.

As a result, they feel very frustrated with their job status and reinforcement of every critical aspect of the complicated job. One of the respondents illustrates,

“I often feel helpless due to extensive job pressure. I think leaving this job will make me feel freer. Life is too stressful; I want freedom and security.” (IDI 04, September 04, 2022)

Miscellaneous Factors

According to the findings from the interviews, there are so many miscellaneous challenges have been identified such as- improper appraisal & environment, complex extent of supervision & increment, uncooperative Supervisor’s behavior, Inefficient administration, over excessive enforced extended enforced working schedule, etc. one of the respondents said,

“My garment appraisal system is discouraging. It has a heavy workload, and we must work overtime for meeting these, but the management never recognize our achievements when we meet outstanding targets.” (IDI 03, September 03, 2022)

While another respondent opined about the work environment as,

“Our garment's internal environment is chaotic and unhygienic. The people are also unclean. The lack of cleanliness in garment factories negatively affects our health, leading to frequent skin and respiratory diseases.” (IDI 04, September 04, 2022)

Another respondent indicated the challenges related to the inefficient administration and complex supervision in the following manner,

“Garment control and regulation are not thorough here. Poor management causes unnecessary procrastination which demotivates us. The excessive uncooperative supervision of our deeds leads to complicated and irritating irregularities, trapping us in offensive accountability issues.” (IDI 05, September 05, 2022)

Discussion

This study provides insight into factors influencing the work-life balance of garment workers in Bangladesh. The results show various challenges faced by workers, including personal, familial, socio-political, professional, and miscellaneous factors. Thulasimani et al., (2010) claims that working hours, work-environment, workload, and job security impact the work-life balance of garment workers. Saleem & Abbasi (2015) found that work schedule, supervisory, coworker and social support, role expectations, numbers of kids, work-hours influence work-life balance of garment workers.

The low income of garment workers is a major obstacle to a decent life as financial constraints affect living standards and cause feelings of inferiority and stress. Morandi (2020) found that garment workers are vulnerable due to low bargaining power, interchangeable work, lack of legal protection, and power abuse by authorities. Workplace stress causes health issues for garment workers, worsening their well-being. Kabir et al. (2022) and Ramos-Galarza & Acosta-Rodas (2019) found that poor working conditions, including inadequate facilities, a negative work environment, and harassment, negatively affect the health and wellbeing of garment workers, especially during night shifts. Pressure to meet targets limits relaxation time and intensifies stress. Ashwin et al., (2020) and Wickramasingha & De Neve (2022) suggest that lowering daily targets for garment workers can reduce stress and enhance mental wellbeing.

Workers struggle to balance work and family life. Gragnano et al. (2020) found that work-family balance influences job satisfaction and promotes a healthy work-life balance. Financial instability and lack of time affect marital relationships and family dynamics. Godinić & Obrenovic (2020) found that economic uncertainty negatively affects workers' psychological well-being and family life through job uncertainty and identity disturbance. Gheaus (2013) claimed that children suffer when parents have demanding jobs and are unable to spend time with them, leading to them being cared for by others.

Socio-political factors like social isolation and limited time and money contribute to workers feeling disconnected. Limited resources hinder their political participation, preventing effective advocacy for their rights. Kuchařová, (2009) argues that Lack of proper socialization, absence in the political movement, lack of social capital political associations and lack of political influence impact the political empowerment of the workers and their right awareness within the society.

Work-related challenges, like appraisal systems, work environments, supervisors, administration, and working schedules, contribute to workers' job dissatisfaction. Challenges demotivate workers, create a hostile work environment, and hinder work-life balance. Garment workers face chronic stress and depression from long hours, commutes, heavy workloads, and time-consuming traveling which impacts mental well-being, causing feelings of helplessness. Akter & Banik (2018) stated that long hours, high workload, unhealthy workplace, and lack of flexibility lead to job dissatisfaction, stress, and affect work-life balance.

Conclusion

The work-life balance status of garment workers in Dhaka city is currently very depressing due to numerous challenges. Low wages, demanding schedules, and unhealthy conditions negatively affect their work-life balance as family relationships suffer, social connections strain, and mental well-being is compromised. These issues require urgent attention from policymakers, industry stakeholders, and labor advocates. Strategies should focus on fair wages, better working environment, and comprehensive support systems to address the impact on workers. Flexible work arrangements and social engagement initiatives can restore work-life balance for garment workers. Addressing these challenges improves worker well-being and contributes to a more humane and equitable garment industry in Dhaka City.

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