IN OUR OWN WORDS:
Workers Address Gender-Based Violence and Harassment in Garment Factories in Bangladesh

The boss touches me while talking, threatens to sack me, and calls me names if I say anything.

[He] throws thread reels at me, hits me on the head, pulls my scarf, and sends vulgar text messages.
INTRODUCTION

Gender-based violence and harassment (GBVH) in the world of work\(^1\) is a global problem affecting tens of millions of workers, especially women, across all jobs and industries. GBVH causes emotional and physical harm and undermines economic security. Women workers in Bangladesh’s ready-made garment (RMG) sector experience high rates of gender-based violence, and the government, employers and trade union federations lack appropriate policies, resources and awareness to appropriately address these abuses.

In response to this challenge, 21 activists from grassroots workers’ and community organizations conducted participatory action research with 120 workers across 103 factories to gain insight into workers’ lived experiences with GBVH and to collaboratively construct solutions. This report offers worker-driven recommendations for eliminating violence and harassment in the garment sector.

BACKGROUND

The garment sector is one industry among many where GBVH is widespread and current legal frameworks fail to address the issue. Bangladesh has no national law to address gender-based violence and harassment, and the High Court order that does exist is not effectively implemented. In the garment industry, employers and buyers lack effective policies and programs for combating GBVH that are negotiated, binding and implemented with direct involvement of workers and their unions. Meanwhile, workers’ organizations struggle to identify incidents of GBVH and to develop strategies to prevent and address them.

In Bangladesh, 80 percent of women garment workers surveyed in 2019 reported they had experienced or witnessed sexual harassment, molestation or assault, endured extreme verbal abuse or witnessed a factory manager or supervisor abuse and harass other women in the factory.\(^2\) To better understand the experiences of women in the garment industry with GBVH and elevate their voices in advocacy campaigns, the Solidarity Center, six trade union federations—Akota Garments Workers Federation (AGWF), Bangladesh Garment and Industrial Workers Federation (BGIWF), Bangladesh Independent Garment Workers Union Federation (BIGUF), Bangladesh Revolutionary Garments Workers Federation (BRGWF), Garments Workers Solidarity Federation (GWSF) and Sommilito Garments Sramik Federation (SGSF)—and three civil society organizations—Awaj Foundation, Bangladesh Center for Workers Solidarity (BCWS) and the Welfare Association for the Rights of Bangladeshi Emigrants Development Foundation (WARBE-DF)—partnered to conduct participatory action research.

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1. "World of Work," as defined by ILO C190, includes the workplace, including public and private spaces where they are a place of work; places where the worker is paid, takes a rest break or a meal, or uses sanitary, washing and changing facilities; work-related trips, travel, training, events or social activities; work-related communications, including those enabled by information and communication technologies; employer-provided accommodation; and the commute to and from work.

The research findings cover a range of topics related to GBVH, including workers’ understanding of the meaning of GBVH, the types of violence that occur most frequently, the actors most likely to perpetuate GBVH and the impacts reported by workers. The research highlighted several key findings that exemplify the context in which GBVH in the garment sector takes place. First, interviewees initially only referred to extreme sexual assault and violence as GBVH. This signifies that other forms of harassment and violence, such as teasing or inappropriate touching, have been normalized and workers do not recognize these actions as GBVH. Second, interviewees initially were reluctant to admit that they had experienced GBVH personally at work. Some interviewees would tell researchers that they knew a colleague had experienced GBVH and later, after developing a rapport, would eventually concede that they had experienced an incident of violence or harassment at work. Interviewees frequently expressed thanks and a feeling of catharsis for having a safe space to discuss their experience; it is the research team’s hope that, in addition to this feeling of relief, the interviewees’ participation will translate to concrete change through the implementation of the report’s recommendations.

Workers Talking with Workers about Gender-Based Violence and Harassment

The goal of participatory action research is for workers and trade unionists to collect data on the experiences and perceptions of other workers regarding GBVH and collectively develop recommendations for policymakers. This approach acknowledges that workers are most impacted by GBVH at work and are therefore best positioned to offer strategies for mitigating this issue.

Ahead of conducting research, 21 worker leaders and CSO representatives assembled to develop a questionnaire and discuss key features of participatory research, including confidentiality, anonymity and autonomy of survivors of GBVH, and the application of ethical guidelines and “Do No Harm” principles. Researchers collectively acknowledged the potential for vicarious trauma and the need to prioritize their own emotional maintenance. Worker researchers structured the research design, execution strategy, information storage plans, presentation and research tools to abide by these ethical guidelines.

[I] just joined, and a mechanic there began harassing me. Though he had a wife and children, he insisted on marrying me and kept grabbing my hands on the streets. At one point, he abducted me in a car and confined me in a friend’s house for several days. My husband did not take me back then. Chaos came down and began tearing my family apart.

The Line Chief told me, “I like you. Meet me outside.” As I declined, he began harassing me, like showing me vulgar photos on his mobile phone, using abusive language, and putting production (work) stress on me. When I complained to the management, he denied everything as lies. Then the management shifted me to another floor. The line chief of the new floor said, “Did you complain to the management against one of us? Let’s see how you work here.” The same types of harassment continued there with me. I got shifted to three different floors like this. But at last, I had to quit my job for this reason.
Although women experience the highest rates of GBVH, these abuses also impact men and people of other gender identities. Therefore, the research team included four male researchers to learn about men’s experience with GBVH. Researchers found men were more reluctant to share their experiences, highlighting the stigma faced by male survivors.

The selected 21 peer researchers conducted multiple in-depth interviews across 103 factories in Bangladesh with 120 garment workers (female-102, male-18) from October to mid-December 2022.

**CHALLENGES**

Conducting in-depth interviews with the survivors was challenging due to the extreme stigma around talking about GBVH. The researchers had to invest time in trust building before the survivors opened up about their personal experiences. Interviewed workers later explained that they had been afraid they would lose their jobs, family, children and self-dignity if they spoke up about the violations they had suffered. Workers shared that they had seen other survivors who had to leave their community due to backlash and victim-blaming after reporting the GBVH incidents. They also shared that reporting GBVH had increased their security risks. Researchers also reported experiencing vicarious trauma while conducting the interviews because of their own lived experiences. They had to take breaks between sessions to process the trauma. Furthermore, since the researchers have full-time jobs as workers or organizers in garment factories or communities, they faced some time constraints in conducting intensive interviews.

The supervisor used to touch me during work. He asked me out, offered to have physical relations, and made obscene gestures whenever he met me. As I complained to the factory management, he threatened me. He started assigning me tasks that I did not know... He kept figuring out my faults, hurling abusive words at small matters, and said, “What I want, I take it. If you want to work here, listen to me. Agree to my proposals.”
WORKERS TALKING WITH WORKERS ABOUT GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE AND HARASSMENT

Although GBVH is a familiar term among workers, its examples and daily life manifestations are still unclear to them. Usually, workers only refer to extreme sexual assault and violence as GBVH, which shows the extensive normalization of GBVH in the workplace. In fact, most survivors thought the GBVH was their fault somehow (probable reasons include being pretty, naïve or new in the factory) even though that was not the case.

The workers shared five types of GBVH experiences among which, 45 percent was sexual violence and harassment, 22 percent psychological, 17 percent verbal, 9 percent economic and 7 percent was physical.

Of the 18 male workers interviewed, three reported experiencing extreme sexual assault by their supervisor or co-worker, both male and female.

GBVH Impacts Workers Psychologically

89% said they broke down mentally
83% lost interest in their jobs

She shared that she felt lighter just by sharing this experience. She later traveled far to visit me and said that the harassment was still happening to her, but she felt better when she can at least share it with me.
- One of the researchers

Places of GBVH Incidents

Factory 71%
Commute 5%
Home 9%
Outside of Factory 15%

When I got paid at the end of the month and spent 400 taka ($3.70) on medicine for my sick mother, my husband beat me badly. My back was bleeding. I get a total salary of 12,000 to 13,000 ($115) including overtime, but I don't have the power to give 400 taka ($3.70) to my mother from here.
- A garment worker

Note: Here, outside of factory refers to outside/near factory’s gate, parks, house of co-worker, bus, etc.
shared that their perpetrators have power because of their good relations with mid- to senior-level management.

of perpetrators have connections with the local influential people and their men.

said that their co-workers exacerbated their GBVH experience through character shaming and spreading rumors, which is often used by management and perpetrators to justify their abuse. Though co-workers may not be the main perpetrators, they can indirectly reinforce the GBVH with psychological abuse.

said supervisors or factory management deduct their wages or hold them for extra hours without overtime pay if they do not agree to their sexual advances.

said that their husband controls their salary, especially in case of electronic transfer or mobile banking of payments, as they do not have a bank account or mobile phone of their own and cannot read text messages about the salary transfer.

Perpetrator(s) of GBVH

Note: Mid- to senior-level management refers to managers, general managers and managing directors.
RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on education and awareness processes and participatory action research, workers and researchers make the following recommendations for the Bangladesh government, employers and trade union federations to address gender-based violence and harassment (GBVH) in the ready-made garment industry.

Government of Bangladesh

- Ratify and implement ILO Convention 190 (C190) concerning Violence and Harassment in the World of Work.
- Formulate and implement legislation and policies that incorporate ILO C190 standards to address gender-based violence and harassment.
- Improve the quality and approach of investigation and prosecution of allegations against people accused of GBVH.
- Build the capacity of government departments and service providers who are responsible for providing support and services to GBVH survivors (including police departments, one-stop crisis centers, etc.) to provide trauma-informed support to GBVH survivors.
- Increase the number, accessibility and quality of services for survivors of GBVH.
- Mandate inclusion of neutral third parties in anti-harassment committees (AHCs) to promote fair handling of GBVH complaints in workplaces.
- Disseminate awareness-raising information on GBVH at national and international level through popular mediums (including cartoons, short video clips, etc.).
- Ensure safe transportation for workers, including vehicles dedicated for women.

Employers

- Enforce a “zero tolerance” policy for addressing systemic GBVH, especially for cases where factory owners, senior- and mid-level officers are directly or indirectly involved.
- Ensure that workers who report GBVH do not face retaliation. Provide compensation to victims of GBVH at work.
- Ensure workers have the right to organize and collectively bargain for workplaces free of GBVH.
- Build on the landmark Lesotho Agreements 3 to end GBVH in the garment supply chain by negotiating binding agreements with global brands, unions and women’s groups to end GBVH in the workplace.
- Raise awareness among management and workers, through videos, images and infographics, to address GBVH in the world of work.
- Appoint and increase the number of women officers in factory administration.
- Appoint women to the positions of welfare officer, doctor, paramedic and nurse in the factory.
- Make workplaces women friendly by activating day care centers and nursing corners, and by providing sanitary napkins, adequate washrooms for women and people of various gender identities, and prayer room facilities.
- Make workplaces accessible for people with disabilities and take necessary measures to ensure that they are not exposed to GBVH.

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Trade Unions and Trade Union Federations (TUFs)

Build capacity of unions and trade union federations (TUFs), both technically and financially, to address and prevent GBVH by undertaking the below actions/steps:

- Prioritize “prevention of GBVH” and “women workers’ safety” as core union issues.
- Mainstream GBVH prevention into all policy and decision-making processes.
- Formulate TUF gender policies and action plans to address GBVH, which can be replicated for unions at the factory level.
- Include establishment of anti-harassment committees (AHCs) in factories as a provision in collective bargaining agreement (CBAs). Promote active representation of workers in AHCs that are established.
- Form internal active AHCs within the TUFs.
- Eliminate obstacles for women workers in their union decision-making process.
- Ensure skills development for competent investigation of GBVH reports received via training of workers’ representatives in AHCs.
- Raise awareness among all stakeholders about GBVH through campaigns, banners, assemblies, human chains, rallies, protest programs, training, video clips, yard meetings, booklets, posters.
- Play a more active role in coalitions to represent workers’ voices in efforts to jointly prevent and address GBVH.
- Advocate through stakeholder meetings.
- Sensitize the media to GBVH in the world of work to promote more worker-centered reporting on GBVH and increase media coverage about the root causes of GBVH and the measures that could prevent it.
- Provide training on utilization of electronic banking systems so that women workers have more control over their salary.