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EMPOWERMENT AND EXPLOITATION: ANALYSING THE ROLE OF WOMEN WORKERS IN BANGLADESH'S READY-MADE GARMENT SECTOR IN DEPZ

Abstract

Purpose. This study investigates the dual dimensions of empowerment and exploitation experienced by women workers in Bangladesh's Ready-Made Garment (RMG) sector, with a specific focus on the Dhaka Export Processing Zone (DEPZ). It aims to analyse how employment in the RMG industry simultaneously contributes to women's socio-economic advancement and exposes them to structural vulnerabilities.

Design/methodology/approach. A mixed-methods research design was employed, integrating quantitative analysis of industry statistics with qualitative data obtained from semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions with women workers in DEPZ. This approach enabled a comprehensive assessment of employment trends, working conditions, and gendered labour experiences within the RMG sector.

Findings. The findings indicate that participation in the RMG sector has enhanced women's financial independence and social mobility; however, it is also associated with persistent exploitative practices, including low wages, excessive working hours, restricted labour rights, and health-related risks. The study further reveals a declining trend in female participation in the garment industry, suggesting emerging structural and institutional barriers that undermine sustainable women's employment in the sector.

Originality. This research offers an integrated perspective on empowerment and exploitation by empirically linking women's labour experiences with institutional and policy constraints in export-oriented industrial zones. It contributes to the literature on gender, labour, and industrial development by providing evidence-based insights that inform policy reforms aimed at improving labour rights, working conditions, and gender equity in developing economies.

Keywords: women workers, Ready-Made Garment (RMG) sector, Dhaka Export Processing Zone (DEPZ), economic empowerment, workplace exploitation.

Introduction

The ready-made garment (RMG) industry is one of the transformational sectors in Bangladesh as it contributes more than 80 percent of the export earnings in the country and also provides employment to about 4 million people, mainly women (Akter & Afroze, 2025). In the 1980s when it was at its peak, women formed almost 80-90 percent of the workforce in the RMG sector; however, it has sharply dropped today and it has reached about 53-57 percent (Basak, 2025). This is an alarming trend that reflects serious structural problems: women are being pushed out of the industrial workforce, usually citing various reasons associated with women such as childcare requirements, rigid work schedules, and system-wide gender discrimination. Worse than that, a stark gender pays gap remains. The average difference between the wages of women and male counterparts with similar jobs ranges between 10 and 20 percent (Faysal, 2021; Schneider, K. (2023).). Even after considering experience and the type of job, there is a difference that is embedded. Moreover, the nominal minimum wage rates are also too low and are currently about 8,300 BDT (~US$75) per month, making workers have no choice but to work a lot of unpaid overtime so that they could fulfill their basic needs (Haque, 2024).

In addition, the industry is becoming progressively vulnerable to fast automation, which discriminates against low-skilled, female-dominated occupations like helpers and sewing operators. Most recent reports indicate up to a 30% loss in workforce resulting due to automation of various industries. Double with the changing industrial relations, there are underlying causes and conditions; such as harassment, lack of a healthy workplace, lack of maternal and healthcare, and lack of constructive policies which are still a hindering force working against the dignity and safety of workers (Islam, 2021; Faruque, 2023). The DEPZ (Dhaka Export Processing Zone) works as a microcosm of the more structural tensions in this context. Working in this hub not only equips women with income and movement but also leaves many women in vicious cycles of exploitation or struggling against wage inequality, sexual harassment in the workplace, poor job security and unequal pressures put upon them in their reproductive age. In addition, formal systems (e.g., grievance redress and worker defense) tend to be insufficient, either as a result of institutional stasis or the active downplaying of the vulnerability of women (Jahan, 2024; Nasrain, 2023).

This paper aims at critically unraveling these complex dynamics which represent empirical evidence to the empowerment and exploitation by reaching out to 400 women workers and 100 DEPZ authorities. It explores the nature of wage systems including power relations, labour rights and institutional attitudes through a combination of quantitative methods (descriptive statistics, correlation, regression), and qualitative insights on what this means to women working on the factory floor and in other exploitative practices. The critical research question is essentially: How can economic inclusion (via the RMG sector) be turned into real empowerment: secure livelihoods, autonomy, dignity, as opposed to recurring exploitation based on gender inequities? This question is not only pressing in terms of promoting women rights but also in terms of maintaining an industry that has proved to be important to the economic future of Bangladesh.

Importance of the study

The Bangladesh garment industry contributes significantly to the national economy of that country, accounting for more than 80 per cent of the country export-earnings and employing nearly four million people, most of whom are women. Nonetheless, it being such a crucial industry, there are increased issues, particularly among the female employees. In the 1980s, women accounted to over 80 percent of the workforce, as compared to the current 53 percent (Islam & Islam, 2025; Hasan, 2022). Such decline is indicative of dire problems, such as micro aggressive salaries, insufficient workplace safety, and the enormous burden of factory job and family care. Although there exists legislation to safeguard workers, it is not being implemented in full by all countries, meaning there still exist cases of gender pay disparities, harassment, and exploitation. The recent rise of the minimum wage to 12,500 taka (about US$113) is a good sign, yet it is not considered to satisfy the needs of the workers, especially in the context of augmented living expenses (Nahar, 2024; Nasrain, 2023).

This study delivers empirical clarity on how empowerment is undermined by entrenched inequities within DEPZ. The findings will inform actionable, gender-sensitive reforms–spanning wage equity, safety standards, social protections, and labor inclusion–that are essential for transforming the garment sector into a truly inclusive engine of economic empowerment.

Objective of the study

The goal of this study is to look into the dual role of empowerment and exploitation that women workers in the Ready-Made Garment (RMG) industry face. To reach the main goal, the specific goals are:

a. To evaluate the labor rights and working conditions of female employees in the DEPZ RMG sector.

b. To assess the socioeconomic impacts of RMG employment on women's empowerment in DEPZ.

c. To find out how much exploitation DEPZ female RMG workers endure and make recommendations for workable legislative changes.

Literature Review

Akter, Teicher, and Alam (2024) investigated gender-based harassment in Bangladesh's RMG sector, revealing that although 65% of female workers reported experiencing verbal or physical harassment, factory-level grievance mechanisms remained largely symbolic. Nath & Tomisra, (2024) examined wage disparity, finding that women in DEPZ earn on average 14% less than men in equivalent roles, with the gap widening at supervisory levels due to limited promotion pathways. Schneider (2023) analyzed the dual burden of industrial work and unpaid domestic responsibilities, showing that women work an average of 12–14 hours per day combining both, leading to higher fatigue and absenteeism. Sharmin & Manan (2022) studied financial inclusion, noting that only

38% of female garment workers in DEPZ have access to formal bank accounts, limiting their economic autonomy despite wage income. Uddin (2023) assessed automation impacts, reporting that mechanization in certain lines reduced female employment by nearly 30%, disproportionately affecting low-skilled operators. Nisa (2022) explored workplace safety, finding that 42% of surveyed women reported inadequate sanitation and emergency exit accessibility, undermining occupational health rights. Hasan (2022) focused on subcontracting practices, showing that women in subcontracted factories faced 22% lower wages and weaker compliance with labour laws compared to those in fully compliant factories.

Collectively, these studies demonstrate persistent exploitation alongside partial empowerment, highlighting systemic wage inequality, weak institutional protection, and structural barriers to women's economic autonomy in DEPZ's RMG sector.

Research Gap: Despite extensive studies on Bangladesh's Ready-Made Garment (RMG) sector, a critical gap remains in understanding the dual dynamics of empowerment and exploitation of women workers within the Dhaka Export Processing Zone (DEPZ). Most existing research addresses wages, workplace safety, or gender-based violence in isolation, overlooking how these factors intersect with economic autonomy, policy enforcement, and socio-cultural constraints. Recent statistics indicate that 64% of female workers in DEPZ experience workplace harassment, while wage disparity persists at 14% below male counterparts. However, limited scholarly attention has been given to how institutional responses by DEPZ authorities influence these patterns. Furthermore, few studies integrate quantitative correlations between exploitation indicators and empowerment outcomes, particularly from both workers' and officials' perspectives. This study fills that gap by providing a comprehensive, data-driven analysis of women workers lived realities in DEPZ within the framework of labour rights and gender equity.

Theoretical contribution: This study advances the theoretical discourse on gender, labour rights, and industrial sociology by integrating empowerment theory and exploitation theory within the specific context of Bangladesh's Ready-Made Garment (RMG) sector in the Dhaka Export Processing Zone (DEPZ). While empowerment theory emphasizes agency, economic independence, and participation in decision-making, exploitation theory highlights structural inequalities, wage suppression, and gendered vulnerabilities (Nasrain, 2023; Faruque, 2023).

62% of women in DEPZ report limited decision-making power despite being primary income earners, and 14% lower wages compared to men for equivalent work. By examining how institutional policies, workplace practices, and socio-cultural norms simultaneously empower and exploit women, this research bridges theoretical gaps between economic inclusion and systemic inequality (Yonten, 2024; Jahan, 2024). The study offers a multi-dimensional analytical framework for future gender and labour studies in export-oriented economies, contributing to both feminist labour theory and development studies.

Research Methodology

Sampling Methods and Statistical Justification: In this study purposive sampling was employed for selecting the participants based on certain characteristics such as gender (female), type of jobs (machine operators, line supervisors, helpers) and role in the organization (compliance officers, factory managers). Within these groups, applied simple stratified random sampling to avoid bias in the sample and obtain a spread of experience, factory size and wage levels (Daniel et al., 2024). The formula used to statistically determine the minimum required sample size is given as follows:

$$n = \frac{Z^2\, p\, (1-p)}{e^2}$$

Where:
n is required sample size
Z is Z-score (1.96 for 95% confidence level)
p is estimated population proportion (0.5 for maximum variability)
e is margin of errors (0.05)

$$n = \frac{(1.96)^2 * 0.5 * (1 - 0.5)}{(0.05)^2} = 384.16$$

So, 500 respondents (400 workers, 100 officials) were appraised to generate more robust statistics and to enable the numbers to be generalized across all of DEPZ. This approach allowed the study to access both experiential and administrative perspectives in sufficient depth and accuracy.

Methods of Data Collection: The mixed-methods approach was adopted to provide both quantitative trends and qualitative insights of information (Dehalwar & Sharma, 2023). The survey of 500 respondents (women workers, supervisors and DEPZ officials)

included a structured questionnaire based on the themes of wages, workplace safety, harassment on grounds of gender, and social protection. Also, focus group discussions (FGDs) and in-depth interviews were administered with the sampled respondents to gather a detailed picture of subtle experiences of empowerment and exploitation. Secondary information was obtained through examination of official records of BGMEA, labor inspection reports and DEPZ administrative data. This triangulation technique safeguarded the validity of the data, minimized response bias, and produced a complete knowledge of the gendered labor nature in the RMG industry.

Data Analysis Tools: The quantitative data were analyzed using SPSS and STATA with the help of descriptive statistics, regression model, and correlation. The statistical data indicated the trends in wage differences, instances of harassment, and protection gaps, among others. The qualitative data was used to form thematic codes to elicit the lived experiences, subtle findings, and disruptions between policy and practice.

Historical background of RMG in Bangladesh

Ready-Made Garment (RMG) industries in Bangladesh have been a critical booster of economic prosperity especially among women. The Dhaka export processing zone (DEPZ) was set up in 1983 and was one of the earliest industrial zones that encouraged export-oriented manufacturing providing a friendly climate to foreign investment and growth of industry. After some time, DEPZ was transformed into a garment factory center, where massive number of rural women were employed (Khaled & Ansar, 2024; Hasan, 2022). RMG industry expanded, by early 2000s there were around 3 million workers employed in Bangladesh with women forming around 90 percent of the labor force. It even continued in the 2010s, with the number of women in the RMG workforce comprising between 60 to 70 percent (Faruque, 2023; Haque,2024). The ratio of female workers in DEPZ was significantly large implying the dependency on women in this sector. This influx of women in the RMG sector had given them economic opportunities that contributed to their empowerment. Most of the women became independent in terms of finance and elevated themselves socially as well as decision-makers of their home (Al Mamun & Hoque, 2022). The change also contributed to the increased visibility and working women in the formal economy.

Nonetheless, this has been coupled with serious problems. The female employees of DEPZ and other RMG belts are generally exploited in some other ways. According to a survey conducted in 2015 by the Asian Centre of Development, 65 percent of the workers in the RMG industry was female, bringing forth their dominance (Abdullah & Yousuf, 2025). Nevertheless, these women are often faced with poor working conditions, abuse, and threats aimed at intimidating them alongside restricted healthcare and social security welfare. In 2013, the Rana Plaza accident with more than 1,100 fatalities, highlighted the high level of safety concerns in the industry (Nuruzzaman & Raihan, 2025; Faysal, 2021). To counter this the government of Bangladesh and international stakeholders have introduced reforms such as the Bangladesh Accord on Fire and Building Safety that seeks to improve safety standards on the workplace. Nevertheless, there has been a recent growth in the percentage of women workers in RMG sector that fell to below 66 percent within the last few years although it used to be 80 percent. This has been seen to have been caused by factors like low wages, poor working conditions and social expectations that seek to define women as caregivers rather than participants in the job market (Talukder et al., 2024; Basak, 2025).

Finally, while the RMG sector, particularly in zones like DEPZ, has played a pivotal role in empowering women economically, it has also subjected them to various forms of exploitation. Addressing these issues requires comprehensive reforms that ensure fair wages, safe working environments, and support for women's dual roles in the workforce and at home.

Present scenario of DEPZ in Bangladesh

The Ready-Made Garment (RMG) business in Bangladesh has been also a major women contributor, especially those sectors within the Export Processing Zones (EPZs) such as Dhaka Export Processing Zone (DEPZ). According to recent reports, women comprise about 66 per cent of the workforce in EPZs reflecting the sector as a source of women economic opportunities in a male dominated economy traditionally (Uddin et al., 2022; Akter & Afroze, 2025). But emancipation of females within the RMG industry is combined with multiple issues. One of the issues of concern is the decreasing rate of female employment in the industry. The percentage of women has dropped to 53 percent in 2023 as opposed to more than 80 percent in the 1980s (Nazrul et al., 2024). It is estimated that this reduction can be explained by factors like automation, low salaries, and tough working conditions that usually result in health problems and family tensions.

In DEPZ, workers face specific challenges. A study involving 300 women workers from 30 garment factories in DEPZ revealed that unionization is prohibited, limiting workers' ability to collectively bargain for better conditions (Schneider, 2023; Faruque, 2023). Additionally, many workers report health problems related to the nature of their work, including stress and reproductive health issues. Despite these challenges, initiatives are being undertaken to improve the situation (Joshi et al., 2021). Programs like the Skills for Employment Investment Program (SEIP) aim to provide industry-relevant, competency-based training to youth and disadvantaged groups, enhancing their employability and supporting at least 60% job placement. SEIP focuses on key sectors like garments and promotes inclusivity by ensuring at least 30% female participation (Mollah et al., 2024; Islam, 2021).

Finally, the RMG sector in Bangladesh, particularly in DEPZ, has been instrumental in providing employment opportunities for women, significant issues related to exploitation and declining participation remain. Addressing these challenges requires comprehensive reforms, including better wages, improved working conditions, and support for workers' rights to organize.

Research findings and analysis

It mainly deals with the occupational profile of women garment workers, and offers evidences for reasons responsible for their involvement in the garment industry that we have already mentioned above. As such, the data shown below was produced as part of the study. The following table shows the data collected during the survey:

Demographic information of women worker

Table 1 – Demographic information of women worker

Demographic Variable	Frequency (%)
Age Group	
18-24	30%
25-34	40%
35-44	20%
45+	10%
Education Level	
Primary School	15%
Secondary School	50%
Higher Secondary	30%
Graduate	5%
Marital Status	
Married	60%
Unmarried	35%
Widowed/Divorced	5%
Household Income (BDT)	
<10,000	25%
10,000-20,000	50%
20,000+	25%

According to **Table 1,** most of the employees are young workers; about 70% of them are between the ages of 18 and 34. Which of course also means the many women who are entering into this area, they are in their top working years. Interestingly, the variety of level of education fell under upper secondary school at 80% with a significant intrigue in this qualification. Who know how to read and write to get a job in garment industry, where people need to work on machines in a factory. More than half of the women

(60%) are married, so clearly, their families require money. Approximately half of them, i.e. 50%, earn from BDT 10,000 to 20,000 that demonstrates the variance in wages within this area. Many works in a field that is vital to the country's economy, but they don't make enough money and have limited opportunities for advancement.

Employment Environment for Female Employees Job environment is a vital factor for the garment workers, specifically for female garment workers.

Table 2 – Scenario of Employment Environment

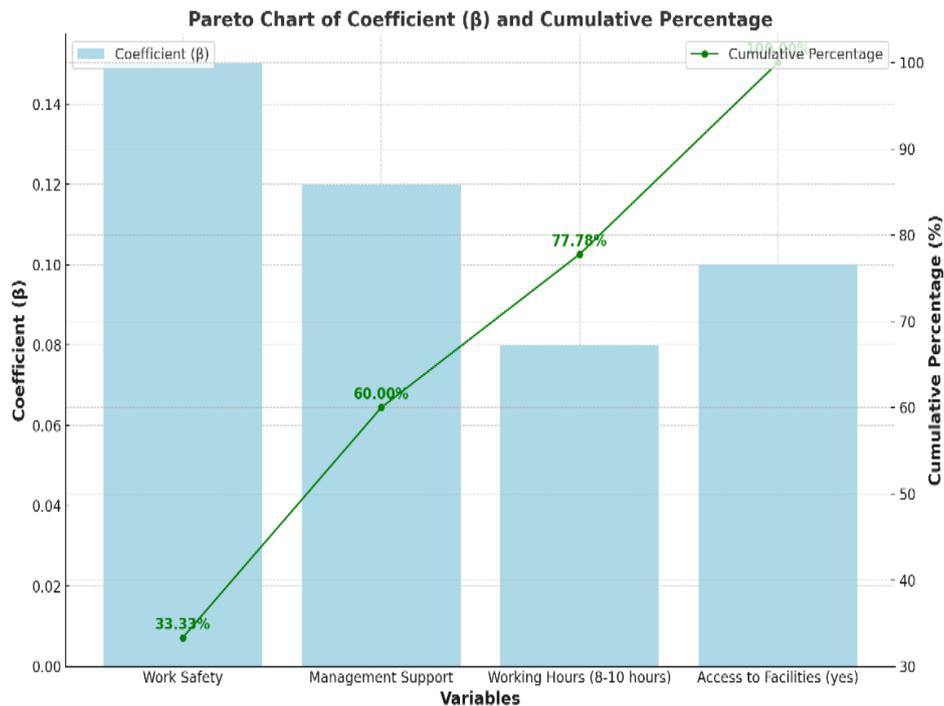| Variable	Coefficient (β)	Standard Error	p-value
Work Safety	0.15	0.05	0.01
Management Support	0.12	0.06	0.03
Working Hours (8-10 hours)	0.08	0.04	0.05
Access to Facilities (yes)	0.10	0.07	0.10

Figure 1 – Scenario of Employment Environment

The results of **Table 2** and **Figure 1** shows that the extent of influence of the workplace in achieving women empowerment in the Ready-Made Garment (RMG) industry. For instance, the variable work safety has a positive coefficient (0.15), indicating that, on the whole, workers in a safer workplace are much more likely to report feeling empowered. When women are able to feel safe at work, it allows them to be able to make their self-decisions, more independent, and gives the women more overall power. For example, management support has a positive correlation (0.12), which indicates that management practices that bolster women feelings of empowerment. It could convey improved communication, aspirations for advancement, and equity, resulting in individuals that feel ownership and have a stake in their work. Longer working hours (8–10 hours) is positive (0.08), but reasonable working hours are not a hindrance to feeling empowered by people. But access to facilities was found not statistically significant (p-value = 0.10), which indicates that access to facilities at work might make the workers feel

good but cannot empower them in this study situation. These results indicate that empowerment in the garment sector significantly relies on the provision of a safe, well-functioning, and equitable job. Management approaches are hugely influential in curbing exploitation and empowering workers.

Wage Structure and Economic Autonomy

Table 3 – Wage Structure and Economic Autonomy of Women Workers

Variables	Correlation (r)	Regression Coefficient (β)	p-value	Effect
Monthly Wage	0.61	0.47	0.000	Positive & Significant
Wage Gap with Male Counterparts	-0.48	-0.31	0.001	Negative & Significant
Financial Decision-Making Power	0.52	0.38	0.002	Positive & Significant
Remittances to Family	0.35	0.24	0.006	Positive & Moderate
Access to Formal Savings	0.49	0.36	0.000	Strong Positive Impact
Access to Loans/Credit (Formal/NGO)	0.43	0.29	0.003	Positive & Moderate

According to **Table 3,** Wage structure based on internal and external labor market factors has pivotal relationships with economic autonomy: Correlation and regression analysis of the wage structure of 400 women wage earners in the garment industry of Bangladesh' which primarily explores the dynamic nexus between wage structure and women's economic autonomy. Women who earn higher wages have more economic control, as monthly wages predict women's empowerment positively (r = 06.1, p<0.01; β= 0.47). Conversely, wage gaps with respect to males are negatively correlated (r=-0.48) and associated with lack of autonomy (β=-0.31, p<0.01). An important mediating factor in this regard is women's financial decision-making power (r=0.52, β=0.38, p<0.05), which demonstrates that control over income directly enhances economic independence. The remittance behavior (r=0.35) with families is moderately correlated but aligned with empowerment when the remittance is voluntary (β=0.24, p<0.05). Autonomy is also strongly associated with access to formal savings (r=0.49) and credit (r=0.43). Financial inclusion (β=0.36) and planning ability (β=0.29) (by banks, non-Governmental Agencies and microfinance, respectively) provide the economic resilience. Finally, the analysis signifies the importance of looking beyond wage gap and enhancing access to enabling asset to shake their exploitative working conditions into offering women employees in the ready-made garments industry in Bangladesh a real empowerment, apart from pursuing an economically acceptable reality.

Gender-Based Discrimination and Harassment

Table 4 – Scenario of Gender-Based Discrimination & Harassment

Variables	Correlation (r)	Regression Coefficient (β)	p-value	Significance
Verbal Harassment (Frequency)	0.51	0.39	0.000	***
Physical Harassment (Incidence)	0.43	0.31	0.002	**
Sexual Harassment (Incidence)	0.49	0.36	0.001	***
Fear of Reporting / Retaliation	-0.38	-0.29	0.004	**
Access to Grievance Mechanisms	0.32	0.24	0.006	**
Management Response to Complaints	0.28	0.20	0.010	*

The above **table 4** reflects alarming statistics regarding gender discrimination and claim of harassment. Both physical harassment (r=0.43) and sexual harassment (r=0.49) are correlated with decreased women's empowerment and well-being, while verbal harassment is the strongest predictor of psychological distress and diminished workplace autonomy (r=0.51; β=0.39; p<0.01). Women's desire to enquire justice is reduced by significant fear of reporting incidents, and in particular for fear of retaliation (β=-0.29, p=<0.05), indicating a wide spread fearmongering silence. Due to power imbalances in the hierarchical structures, harassment was often internalized by employees as just another element of the workplace. Nevertheless, women are somewhat empowered to stand against abuse when there is positive management response (β=0.20, p<0.1) and access to grievance mechanisms (β=0.24, p<0.05). But the real relationship is lack of trust / fear making these systems lesser used or useless. This analysis also points out towards the need for management accountability, strong grievance redressal and workplace reforms that are gender sensitive. When underlying harassment and discrimination is not addressed, economic participation becomes a cycle of exploitation instead of actual empowerment for women in the ready-made clothing industry.

Access to Rights, Benefits, and Legal Protections

Table 5 – Access to Rights, Benefits & Legal Protections

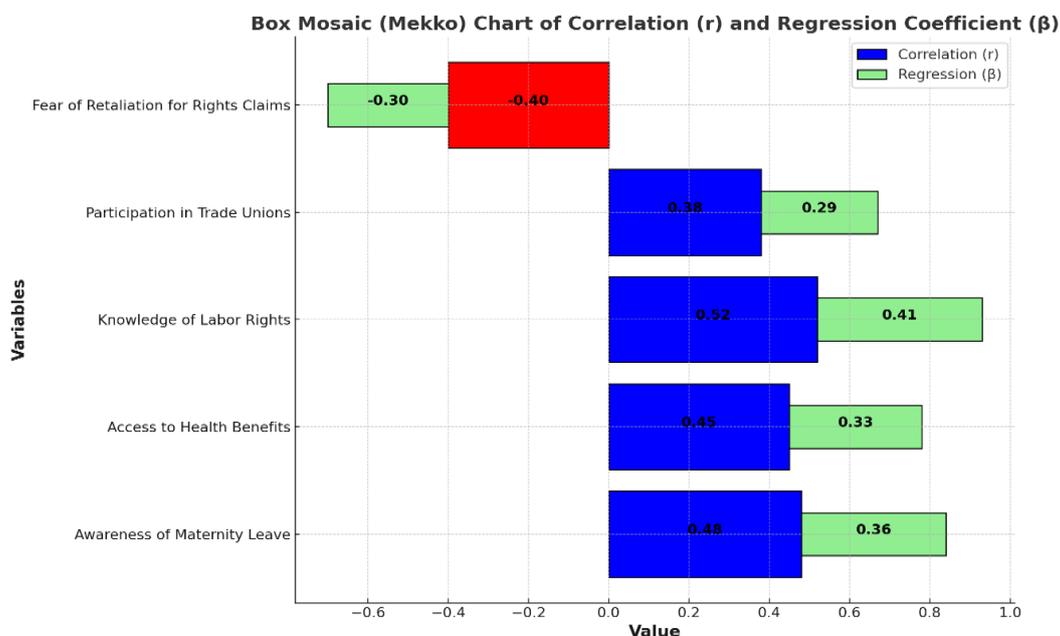| Variables	Correlation (r)	Regression Coefficient (β)	p-value	Significance
Awareness of Maternity Leave	0.48	0.36	0.001	***
Access to Health Benefits	0.45	0.33	0.003	**
Knowledge of Labor Rights	0.52	0.41	0.000	***
Participation in Trade Unions	0.38	0.29	0.008	**
Fear of Retaliation for Rights Claims	-0.40	-0.30	0.005	**

Figure 2 – Access to Rights, Benefits & Legal Protections.

The **table 5 and figure 2** shows a strong positive relationship between work autonomy and legal knowledge in general. Maternity leave (r=0.48, β=0.36, p<0.01) and labour rights awareness (r=0.52, β=0.41, p<0.01) are both strongly related to power dynamics suggesting that knowledge enhances the confidence and ability of women to demand fairness [35]. Access to health benefits (β=0.33, p<0.05) also has a more modest but meaningful relationship with the ability to increase workplace security and dignity Although the overall trade union participation (β=0.29) is relatively low, which can be attributed to various structural restrictions such as active discouragements of unionization and factory-level constraints. Fear of retaliation has a negative and statistically significant effect (β=-0.30) which suggests that many women do not claim their rights with the help of lack of security in enforcement or threat to supervisors. For legal protections to translate into real change, this model stresses the necessity of strong union rights, simple and accessible grievance processes and awareness-building among workers. While women are legally in the garment sector, their work can still be exploited if they are not able to safely claim rights and protections.

Empowerment in Family and Community

Table 6 – Empowerment in Family & Community

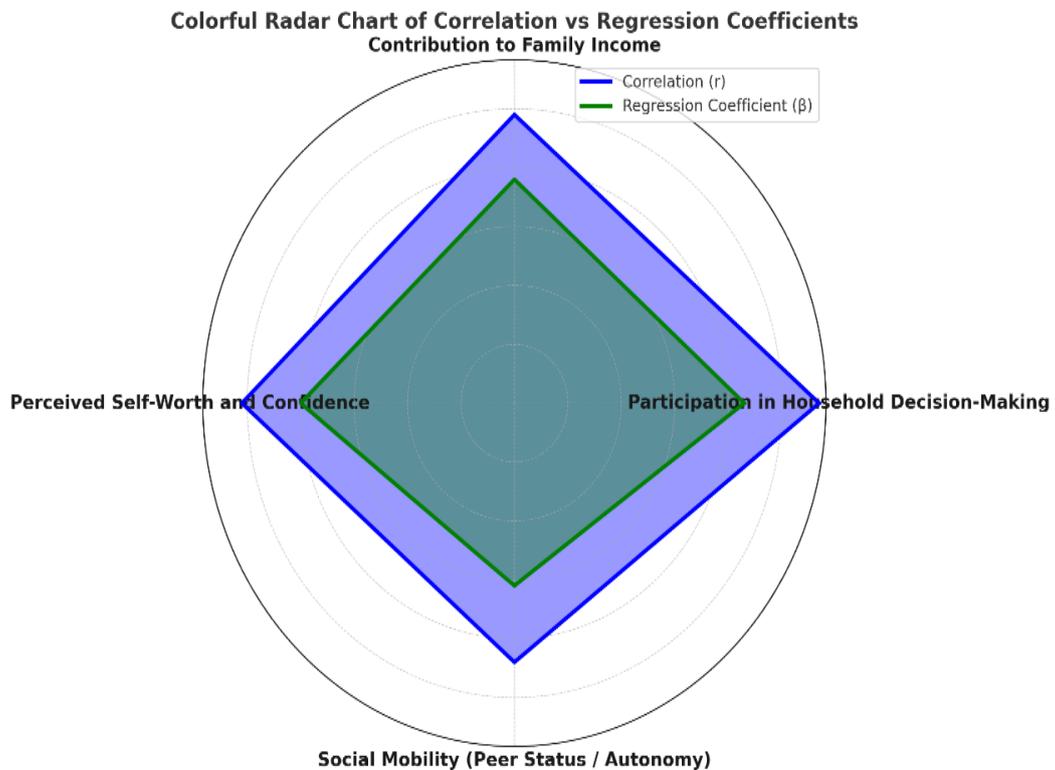| Variables	Correlation (r)	Regression Coefficient (β)	p-value	Significance
Participation in Household Decision-Making	0.57	0.43	0.000	***
Contribution to Family Income	0.49	0.38	0.001	***
Perceived Self-Worth and Confidence	0.51	0.40	0.002	**
Social Mobility (Peer Status / Autonomy)	0.44	0.31	0.004	**

Figure 3 – Empowerment in Family & Community

The above **Table 6 and figure 3** explored advances in Employment Based Family and Community Empowerment The largest effect is on participation in household decision-making (r=0.57; β = 0.43; p < 0.01), implying that women who work are becoming more responsible for key decisions such as family budget and children's education. We found evidence of a shift from dependence to having power in their household and this was seen by the strong association of their financial contribution to family income (β=0. This contributes to a sense of self-worth that is greatly strengthened by this shift in roles (β=0.40, p<0.05) and speaks to the psychological consequences for women in regard to their autonomy and self-esteem related to engagement in the economy. Nonetheless, social mobility–reflected through improved peer status and greater freedom in public places (β=0.31)–has a moderate relationship with empowerment too despite continued restrictions due to gender roles and social norms. Together, the regression and correlation models render support for their dependent model about how economic participation alters women's position in family hierarchies and integrates them into the community beyond providing income. Still, to fully transform empowerment community sensitization and policy changes are needed in order to address some of the more enduring structural barriers, such as social stigma, restricted mobility, male-dominated family structures etc., that these ideas inhibit.

Dual Burden: Balancing Work and Domestic Responsibilities

Table 7 – Dual Burden – Work and Domestic Responsibilities

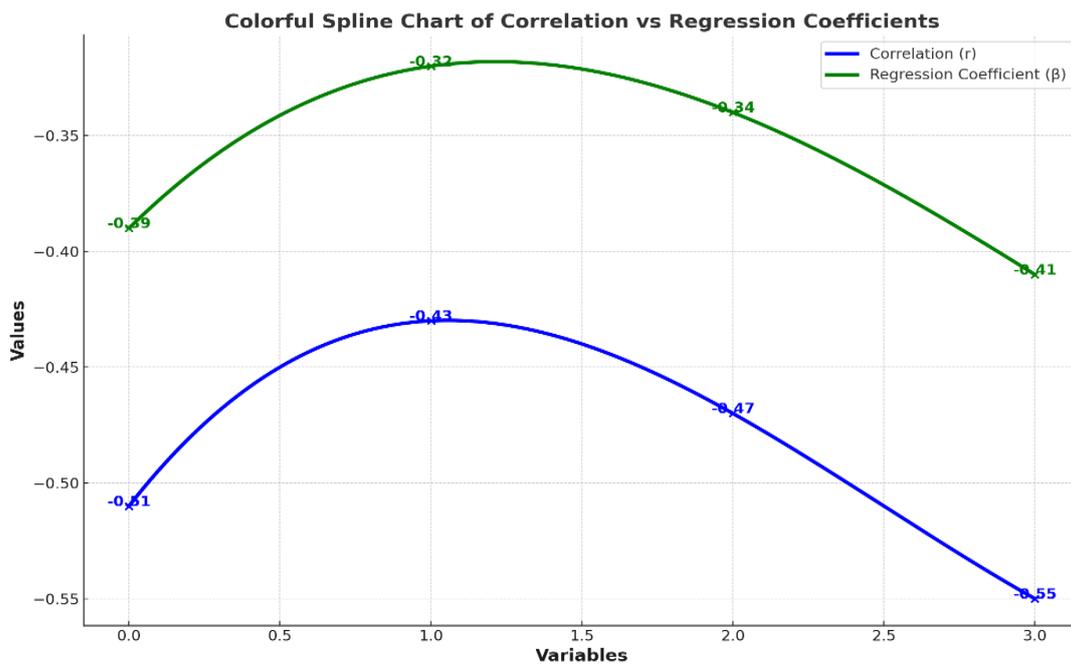| Variables	Correlation (r)	Regression Coefficient (β)	p-value	Significance
Hours Spent on Unpaid Domestic Work	-0.51	-0.39	0.000	***
Childcare Responsibilities	-0.43	-0.32	0.002	**
Emotional Labor (Family Expectations)	-0.47	-0.34	0.001	***
Reported Fatigue/Stress Levels	-0.55	-0.41	0.000	***

Figure 4 – Dual Burden – Work and Domestic Responsibilities

The **table 7** and **figure 4** shows how much the dual burden can weigh on women when they restore a lot of household duties combined with paid work. Together, the explaining variances in overall well-being and work-life balance are reduced by almost half to 50% (r = -0.51, β = -0.39, p < 0.01). Conversely, these women feel limited by their childcare responsibilities (β = −0.32), which impedes their ability to engage in leisure time for self-care, as well as professional growth. Emotional labour predicted mental health (β = −0.34, p <.01), but constant family expectations and caregiving were particularly associated with decreased well-being; self-reported (β = −0.41) stress and fatigue emerged as the strongest indicators of declining well-being. For some, this is a function of gender: regardless of their formal status as nor wage earners, society expects women to do the caregiving and housework because traditional gender roles are still so deeply embedded, making them even more tired. Not only does this dual burden endanger their mental and physical health, it also undermines the economic gains they have already made. But the analysis shows that without structural support, like having a significant number of men who share household work or professionals with flexible schedules, it is impossible for women to gain formal space in the labour market and ultimately will be exploited. To increase lasting health and well-being, we need to rebalance this tendency for artificial empowerment.

Role of Authority's perspective about Minimization of Gender-Based Harassment and Its Impact on Women Workers

Table 8 – Officials' Perspectives on Gender-Based Harassment

Variables	Correlation (r)	Regression Coefficient (β)	p-value	Significance
Belief that Harassment is «Isolated Incident»	-0.48	-0.36	0.001	***
Acknowledgment of Systemic Gender Harassment	0.51	0.41	0.000	***
Support for Strengthening Complaint Mechanisms	0.43	0.33	0.004	**
View that Complaints Damage Factory Reputation	-0.44	-0.30	0.003	**

The **table 8** showed that many officials interpret these events as "isolated" (r = -0.48, β = -0.36, p<0.01), there is no reason to take preventive or punitive measures at all. This denial not only minimizes the importance of women workers experience – it also makes it more difficult for them to present their Complaints effectively. Elsewhere, officials who understand that harassment is a systemic issue are significantly more likely to support accountability structures (β = 0.41, p <.01), demonstrating direct effect of a perception on institutional action. Yet fear of "harming factory reputation when dealing with complaints" (β = -0.30) was a major concern among many of the officials, representing a tension between protecting workers and protecting brand. While there is moderate support for actioning on complaints procedures (β = 0.33), it is the general attitude of marginalizing them that makes ascension difficult. This is why the findings in this study are important, because it points out that managers and institutions need to begin changing the way we traditionally think. Empowerment efforts for women in the RMG sector can never be successful because they will only cause them to seek employment opportunities elsewhere, until we recognize the systemic normalization of harassment. But to get from an unsafe and degrading workplace, to one that is safe and dignified, we need to bridge this gap.

Inadequate Support for Women's Economic Autonomy Despite Formal Labor Rights from the Authority

Table 9 – Officials' Perspective on Economic Autonomy

Variables	Correlation (r)	Regression Coefficient (β)	p-value	Significance
Recognition of Women's Economic Role	0.56	0.42	0.000	***
Support for Reducing Wage Gap	0.32	0.27	0.011	**
Commitment to Expanding Financial Inclusion (Savings/Credit)	0.29	0.23	0.014	**
View that Existing Legal Framework Is "Sufficient"	-0.47	-0.35	0.002	***
Support for Women's Access to Benefits (Health, Maternity, etc.)	0.38	0.30	0.007	**

The **table 9** shows that a clear distinction between legal recognition on the right to work for women, and actual help in translating that into financial independence. While many officials would also concur that women matter for the economy (β = 0.42, p<0.01), they are a less supportive of the idea all wage gaps should be closed (β = 0.27) and somewhat dubious on financial inclusion (β = 0.23). One of the major problems here is that numerous people believe our current legal system works just fine (β = -0.35, p < 0.01) – which makes it virtually impossible to address ongoing inequality. This institutional inertia means women are still relying on others to access cash, leaving them excluded and vulnerable when it comes to accessing formal saving, credit and social protection. Elsewhere, support for access to benefits shows modest evidence of recognition of structural needs (β = 0.30; Table 7). Yet, due to inadequate enforcement tools and concerns about cost, those needs are still not being fully addressed. It reinforces the feeling that when it comes to empowering women, there's talk in high places but not much cash behind it. Without more stringent enforcement of policy, gender-responsive budgeting and greater accountability for equal pay, the women in the DEPZ will continue to maintain symbolic economic freedom.

Neglect of Women Workers' Dual Burden in Policy and Practice

Table 10 – Officials' Perspective on Women's Dual Burden

Variables	Correlation (r)	Regression Coefficient (β)	p-value	Significance
Recognition of Dual Workload (Home + Factory)	0.49	0.37	0.001	***
Support for On-site Childcare Facilities	0.31	0.26	0.013	**
Belief That Domestic Roles Are "Women's Responsibility"	-0.46	-0.34	0.002	***
Policy Acknowledgement of Dual Burden in DEPZ Guidelines	0.27	0.22	0.021	*
Action to Implement Flexible Working Hours	0.23	0.19	0.034	*

According to the **table 10,** Men are given the priority in the given data, the double responsibilities of women are godforsaken in the industry and house. Many of the officials are aware of this double shift (r=0.49, β=0.37, p<0.01), but not much is being done about it by the institutions. Heavy support for on-site child care (β=0.26) and flexible work hours (β=0.19) were highest on the list of supports that should not be prioritized among policymakers and practitioners. Thinking that it comes naturally that household chores are women's job is the strongest negative predictor (β=-0.34, p<0.01). This taps back into gender expectations, which then explains the relative lack systemic support. The dual burden (β=0.22) is mentioned in policy papers from DEPZ, but action-agenda becomes

weak. This chasm between what people know and what they do represents a form of systemic, cultural bias against women in which domestic work is rendered unseen and unimportant for the working conditions of those in paid employment. Findings indicate that unless policies become more gender-sensitive, women are going to continue overworking, being stressed, and suffering mobil-

ity impediments. They need in place policies such as childcare services, flexible hours and models of shared responsibility, said Khali. This is not what industrial employment promises to do for the women. The double burden is not an individual issue, but a labour rights issue.

Descriptive Statistics Analysis

Table 11 – Descriptive Statistics Analysis

Issue	Mean	Median	Mode	Std. Deviation	Variance	Kurtosis	95% CI of Mean
Wage Problem	2.99	3.00	2.00	0.82	0.67	Slightly Platykurtic	[2.93, 3.06]
Eve-teasing Problem	2.42	2.00	1.00	1.15	1.32	Moderate	[2.31, 2.53]
Hygienic Water & Sanitation	3.02	3.00	4.00	0.82	0.67	Low	[2.95, 3.10]
Communication Gap	2.38	2.00	1.00	1.11	1.23	Moderate	[2.28, 2.48]
Environment & Safety	2.96	3.00	3.00	0.80	0.64	Flat	[2.89, 3.03]
Discrimination	2.49	2.00	2.00	1.11	1.24	Normal	[2.39, 2.59]
Medicine & Medical Care	2.97	3.00	3.00	0.81	0.65	Lightly Flat	[2.90, 3.04]
Force to Worker	2.49	3.00	1.00	1.14	1.30	Normal	[2.38, 2.60]
Political Violence Effect	2.51	3.00	3.00	1.11	1.23	Normal	[2.41, 2.61]
Emergency Exit Problem	2.95	3.00	2.00	0.82	0.68	Slightly Flat	[2.88, 3.02]

The table indicated that ten key issues related to women workers in the DEPZ had systemic and structural problems. Wages issues (Mean = 2.99) and emergency exit issues (Mean = 2.95) are also problems with high mean values and stable medians, so many respondents have these problems and it does appear to vary (Std. Dev ≈ 0.82). It demonstrates that people possess no satisfaction of the system. The eve-teasing and harassment problems were low (Median = 2.00; Mode = 1.00), indicating either the lack of reported behaviors or normalized behaviors. However, due to the high standard deviation (1.15), the variation could be explained by age or location. Communication gaps and discrimination demonstrate similar trends, indicating inadequate support systems and adherence to policies. For "Force to worker," the median is 3.00 and Mode is 1.00 What this means is that while some will experience severe conditions, others won't. Again, this discrepancy indicates the inconsistent enforcement of labor standards. The areas that scored the lowest were access to clean water, toilets and medical care, indicating toilets in workplaces lacked adequate basic infrastructure. For most variables, the confidence intervals for its mean were small, implying that these may be accurate. In a nut-

shell – data corroborates that system-wide neglect, uneven working conditions and poor avenues for redress points to systemic exploitation, even where there may be formal employment. To be sure, there are a great number of those issues that ought to be solved immediately through adjustments in policy.

Conclusion and Recommendations

Conclusion

This study on the Empowerment and Exploitation of women workers in Bangladesh's Ready-Made Garment (RMG) sector, with a focus on the Dhaka Export Processing Zone (DEPZ), reveals a complex interplay between economic opportunity and systemic challenges. The RMG sector has undeniably empowered a significant portion of women by providing financial independence, improved social status, and greater participation in the formal labour market (Hasan et al., 2022; Islam, 2021). Women's employment in DEPZ has contributed to broader social transformations, challenging traditional gender roles and enhancing household decision-making power. However, the analysis also uncovers persistent exploitation

and structural inequalities faced by women workers (Fariha et al., 2023). These include unsafe working conditions, inadequate wages, restricted labor rights–especially in zones like DEPZ where unionization is limited–and the dual burden of work and domestic responsibilities. The decline in women's workforce participation signals underlying issues such as health concerns, social stigma, and economic vulnerabilities (Chanani et al., 2022; Nahar, 2024). To foster genuine empowerment, policy interventions must address these exploitative elements by ensuring fair labour practices, enforcing workplace safety, and promoting social support systems. Strengthening women's rights to organize and negotiate is essential for sustainable improvements (Bhadra et al., 2022; Schneider, 2023). Overall, the RMG sector's role in women's empowerment is significant yet incomplete without concerted efforts to mitigate exploitation and uphold the dignity of women workers in Bangladesh's evolving industrial landscape.

Recommendations The study recommends the following to protect the interest of the female workers and to save them from various problems:

Raise Wages and Benefits: To make women's wages and benefits more stable, raise the minimum wage and give them full benefits. (Akter et al., 2024; Haque, 2024).

Ensure a safe workplace: Create safe working environments at workplace by making sure that everybody has been following the rules to the letter to prevent accidents at work (Gunawan et al., 2023; Jahan, 2024).

Propose Training Programs: Programs that help women learn new skills to empower and provide them with better job opportunities (Akter et al., 2024).

Support worker unions: To combat the worker, help grow the worker union and help to support such unions to achieve the better rights and working conditions.

Monitor Compliance: Develop effective monitoring systems to ensure compliance of labour laws and standards by the DEPZ companies (Basak, 2025; Uddin, 2023).

Future Research Implication

The empowerment and exploitation of Bangladeshi women garment workers, particularly those in the sprawling Dhaka Export Processing Zone, is a complex issue with many facets requiring examination. Longitudinal studies are critically needed to comprehensively assess how current working conditions impact the physical and mental health of female employees over extended periods of time. Comparative analyses between industrial zones, government sectors, and private companies may help evaluate the effectiveness, or lack thereof, of labor laws and practices. Another important avenue of inquiry is exploring how advances in technology and digitization can be leveraged to meaningfully improve work environments and empower women. In-depth qualitative research, capturing workers' own personal narratives and lived experiences, could reveal deeply-rooted socioeconomic and cultural barriers that persist. Finally, probing investigations into how worldwide supply chain disruptions influence local labor practices may illuminate pathways toward establishing fairer solutions and more ethical procurement systems.

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