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**Sexual harassment in Readymade Garment Sectors
(RMGs) - A case of Bangladesh**

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Abstract

The thesis focuses on the issue of sexual harassment against female workers in the readymade garment sectors of Bangladesh (RMGs). The study looks at this issue from the employers' perspective and it aims to shed light on: i) their acknowledgement of this problem, ii) their approach towards it. The thesis is a qualitative conducted study where interviews were used as a data collection tool. Few theories were used to guide this study which will allow the thesis to reach to its conclusion with analysis of the collected data and the findings of the data will show whether the employers acknowledge sexual harassment against their female workers as a problem.

Key words: sexual harassment, female, readymade garment, employers, Bangladesh.

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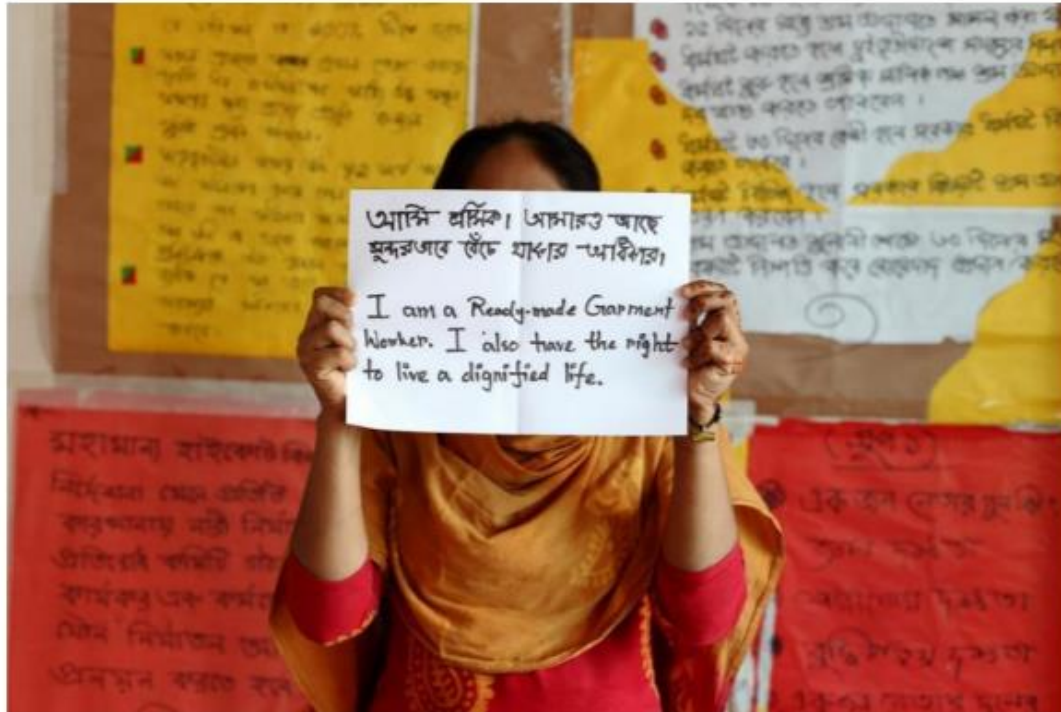
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1. Introduction

The readymade garment industry of Bangladesh is an essential economic drive force as this industry helps to generate employment in the nation and contributes in reducing poverty nationwide. The readymade garment sector (RMGs) of Bangladesh is the second largest exporter of garments in the world (Mohammad Nurul Alam, 2017, p. 8) and this sector is predominantly operated by female workers. The RMGs employ more than 4.2 million workers and from this around 90% of female workers (Dr Nazrul Islam¹, 2017) who help in the production line of these factories, contributing their labour to earn foreign income for Bangladesh.

This industry is well known for its positive contribution in building a better Bangladesh (Kaniz Farhana, 2015, pp. 564-566) but this industry also bear criticisms of having a high percentage of women being harassed in their factories or workplaces with reporting of 84.7% verbal, 71.3% mental, 20% physical and 12.7% sexual harassment (Jennifer L. Solotaroff, 2019, p. 23). But what is sexual harassment? According to the International Labour Organisation (ILO) sexual harassment is anything with a verbal or physical act having a sexual intention behind it. Sexual harassment involves any action that feels inappropriate and unwelcomed by the employees receiving from either their managers, co-workers or employers causing that employee to feel uncomfortable, insulted and violated at her workplace. Sexual harassment can have various forms and they are: (i) **verbal harassment** which involves telling inappropriate jokes, comments and misbehavior, (ii) **physical harassment** which involves inappropriate touching, (iii) **visual harassment** which involves provoking employees with displaying inappropriate pictures and gestures, (iv) **psychological harassment** which involves

putting pressure over the employees to accept unusual and unacceptable favours or requests (China, 2010, p. 3).



1. Nurjan (pseudonym) holding up a message to the people who buy the clothes she makes. Image credit: Fabeha Monir/ActionAid

Picture collected from Action aid (Actionaid)

1.1 Research Background

As the readymade garment sectors of Bangladesh acts like the bloodline for the economy by contributing 14.07% to its gross domestic product (GDP) and allowing itself to become the highest foreign income earner with a total of 81% (M. Saiful Islam¹, 2016, pp. 50, 54): there comes some circumstances where particular compromises find its way. The employers of these readymade garment industries often gain

power over how they want to operate their factories. Their decisions of using the power are usually business centric and self-accomplished where they are less considerate about their workers' needs, wants and feelings (Chowdhury, 2017, p. 120). The employers or other higher hierarchical level may misuse their designated power in choosing to neglect the labour rights and voices and the reason they may do so is because there is no proper formation of legislating bodies which can regulate big platforms like these and target a specific ground such as sexual harassment in the readymade garment sectors of Bangladesh, allowing the employers to gain further strengths on dominating the vulnerabilities of the female workers (ibid).

However, there may not have any specific laws formed for sexual harassment particularly for the readymade garment industries but Bangladesh in generally have a nationwide law regarding sexual harassment in the world of work despite what industry it is and the law is called **Nari O shishu Nirjaton Domon Ain 2000** (Women and Children Repression Prevention Act 2000) . The Nari O Shishu Nirjaton Domon Ain 2000 identifies sexual harassment as a criminal offence and it must be punishable by the law of Bangladesh. From the Act, section 10, sub section i and ii states:

i. Whoever, to satisfy his sexual urge illegally, touches the sexual organ or other organ of a woman or a child with any organ of his body or with any substance, his act shall be said to be sexual oppression and he shall be punished with imprisonment for either description which may extend to ten years but not less than two years of rigorous imprisonment and also with fine.

ii. Whoever , to satisfy his sexual urge illegally, assaults a woman sexually or makes any indecent gesture, his act shall be deemed to be sexual oppression and he shall be punished with imprisonment for either description which may extend to seven years but not less than two years of rigorous imprisonment and also with fine. (Bangladesh, 2000, p. 4)

According to this law, section 19 sub-section 1 stated if the offender is found guilty then he can get arrested without the police having a warrant for him and cases like this are non bailable (section 19, sub-section 2) (Kabir, 2020)

In relation with the law, the High Court of Bangladesh have also created some guidelines which specifies on the recognition of sexual harassment in the workplace of the readymade garment sectors of Bangladesh and in which three important grounds of identifications are highlighted and they are: promoting awareness of sexual harassment, consequences of sexual harassment and the punishments of the perpetrator. The guideline provides with the definition of sexual harassment, its different categories i.e. verbal, physical, financial, and mental. It also covered the categorial parts of blackmailing the victims, sending out unwanted proposals, misuse of work power, threats- activities which will make the victim afraid to come at the workplace or put pressure for absenteeism. In order to prevent such a situation from taking place in the garment factories, the article 6, 9 and 10 ((BNWLA), 2010)ⁱ from the guideline emphasized in formatting internal complaint faculty in where the victim can anonymously address and inform their experience of sexual harassment while at work, get justice from laws which were established against sexual harassment and get a sense that they shall not be the target of attacks from their male subordinates or colleagues. Upon receiving the complaint, investigation should begin within 30 working days and if proven guilty then punishment will be based on the decision of the complaint committee where they can fire the offender and/or if the extent of harassment corresponds with categories that has been mentioned in the guideline i.e. threats, blackmailing etc. then the case may be taken under consideration of the criminal law which is the Nari O Shishu Nirjaton Doman Ain, but this may be done possible only if the victim press charges.

Despite having all these laws and guidelines created by the government of Bangladesh, there remain certain getaways for the employers of the readymade garment sectors to move forward with conducting business and prioritizing production target and delivering deadlines which they receive from their buyers both locally and internationally; overlooking factors such as sexual harassments experienced by their workers

while producing the final products. And one of the gateways worth mentioning is the vulnerabilities of the female garment workers. They are vulnerable because most females who work at the garment industries have no formal education and this makes them weaker in understanding of their own rights and certain labour laws (Farhad, 2019). As they have less education, their acknowledgment for sexual harassment is not broad enough for them to speak up against it or to seek justice. Due to the decreased level of education among the female garment workers, this makes their quality of employment poor (Arengo, 2019, p. 10), less flexible in employment leads to job insecurities and less probability of being promoted. Such fear of getting terminated and having low or no education makes the female garment workers weak, targeted, and manageable by the management team of the readymade garment sectors of Bangladesh.

ⁱ Translated from the original language, Bangla, guidelines provided by the High Court regarding sexual harassment in the education institutions and workplace

1.2 Problem discussion

The term sexual harassment is looked down upon internationally as this topic stir up further topics of human rights, labour rights and so on. Sexual harassment is an issue that discriminate among genders and cause alarming impacts over an individual who has experienced it causing further complication like decrease in productivity, job dissatisfaction and absenteeism. Sexual harassment can be faced by both male and female however, it is the female who is more likely to experience sexual harassment than male (Hersch, 2015).

“Men will be men” is a catchphrase often used in various situation however, in regard of sexual harassment, but it is not the gender which determines the acceptance of consequences over its effects on an individual (Brock, 1994, p. 277).

Therefore, sex discriminating sexual harassment is a deep-rooted problem worldwide however, this following study will look at it from the employer’s perspective of the readymade garment sector of Bangladesh.

1.3 Research question and aims

The research question for this thesis is as following:

Do employers in the readymade garment industry of Bangladesh acknowledge the sexual harassment? If so, what do they act on it?

The following study has been conducted over the readymade garment sectors of Bangladesh having the aim to describe how the employers of RMGs view the issue of sexual harassment, what do they consider about it and what are the measures they adopt in order to abolish this practice from their factories. The study aims to view at this issue from an organizational point therefore, it seeks to find out results whether the employer’s acknowledgment of sexual harassment has a relation with the structure of the organization they operate.

1.4 Research limitations

Time played a crucial factor while compiling all the data for the thesis. For a broad yet explanatory topic like sexual harassment in the readymade garment sectors of Bangladesh would have required more time than what was invested for this research. The magnitude of the intensity of output given by the respondents was difficult to under-

stand due to the short length of time in hand. However, according to Regina (Scheyvens, 2014, p. 64), most qualitative researchers experience this limitation and find it challenging to draw conclusions as there is a constant reminder in the mind pushing the fact of whether the researcher is “generalizing” the situation and the respondent-population.

Also, as the pathway of interviews with my respondents were made possible by the facilitator, who held a prestigious role in the society; they (the participants) might have kept some of their experiences blur to me in order to make them sound well-articulated in front of the facilitator’s eyes. Nevertheless, the extent of this blurring may be beyond my assumption and awareness.

2. Literature review

To dive deep into this thesis topic, first we need to understand the reason why culture of workplace harassment takes place. Firstly, the readymade garment sectors of Bangladesh receive multiple international garment orders and it is the managers and supervisors who stays under constant pressure to meet the given deadline to complete the delivery on time. Usually their stress is later passed on to the production level workers as they are the one who needs to finish the bulk order on time; short completion time and bulk order often makes the production level workers a target of sexual harassment because meeting the deadline on time means overtime, extra-long hours of work and exposition to verbal abuse from managers and supervisors.

As earlier it has been mentioned that they too are under stress therefore, they burst out on their lower level workers to make them work faster (Jo Morris, 2019, p. 11). In order to achieve the target, such verbal harassment is practiced by the managers or supervisor over their lower level workers. Secondly, workplace sexual harassment in the readymade garment industries of Bangladesh may be difficult to represent as the managers and supervisors do not consider verbal and mental harassment as a part of sexual harassment. They consider those as productivity tools and they often deny accepting gender discrimination, making sexual harassment invisible in general (Jo Morris, 2019).

The pressure over production level workers do not end here as it also depends employers but not just managers and supervisors. Employers in the readymade garment sectors of Bangladesh prefer to employ females as their production line workers. But why? And the reason is because they believe female workers can be more controlled than the male workers. It is easier to supervise them than the men as they are more calm and collected at their designated work assignment and also, the employers suggest that culturally sewing, cutting and stitching is a task for female and they are the one who is best at doing it. Managers also prefer women to conduct the lower level labour intensive work as they are manageable by them, meaning the managers do not have to deal with union problems or complaints as women workers are believed to keep themselves away from such complications. Therefore, here a sense of gender segregation can be detected as employers have done a job distinction on the basis of gender and it is the women workers who are discriminated from their human capital advancements and work growth opportunities (Absar, 2001, p. 4). On the hand, managers too claimed that female garment workers are more manageable than the male, meaning that they can easily impose various types of harassment on them by: they tend to “manage” the production level workers by using harsh words or shouting at them because this acts as one of the fast-disciplinary tools for them to make female workers work better. The other tool is to pull them by their hair or lay hands on them (Siddiqi, 2003, p. 40).

All these harassment approaches are considered acceptable as a faster production measures by the employers and senior level management team so that they can achieve their targets on time or getting the order placed by the buyers completed by their female production level workers accurately however, what they do not realize is that such “measures” or disciplinary tactics fall under the definition of sexual harassment (Sadika Akhter, 2019, p. 7).

3. Theoretical framework

This study has theories which are already in existence on the issue of sexual harassment and in this section three theory will be mentioned which will guide the study in terms with sexual harassment in the readymade garment sectors of Bangladesh. The study will be later compared with these theories in the discussion section.

3.1 Hierarchies, jobs, bodies: A theory of gendered organizations by Joan Acker.

A gendered organization is a theory formed by Joan Acker where she described that an organization is built upon levels of work and responsibilities and these hierarchies are created by the males in order to practice and expand their domination over the female workers in an organization (Acker, 1990, p. 141). According to her, the roots of these gendered organizations began far back in the historical approaches and establishments of institutions and organizations of patriarchy. Patriarchy portrayed how sexuality will play a major role in formation of the division of work and created levels of who manages whom in the hierarchical power structure. And in this formation, it is mostly the women who has to tolerate the upper level stress and sexual harassments as this lay under their work condition- them being at the lower level of the hierarchy. This is a

result of such gendered organizations- women facing with objectifications and harassments whereas the men gets away with this by being at the top levels (Acker, 1990, pp. 151-154).

The hierarchical structure in an organization showed the imbalance and unequal relationship among gendered workers, meaning the relationship between males and females. Such formation affected the females more than how it affected the males because the acknowledgment of such power was received differently among the both genders (Acker, 1990, p. 142). She argued that sexual harassment existed in an organization because the role of genders, the malpractice of power and exploitation of the vulnerable was in presence. She quoted Moss Kanter in her theory which said:

A 'masculinity ethic' of rationality and reason can be identified in the early image of managers. This 'masculinity ethic' elevates the traits assumed to belong to men with educational advantages to necessities for effective organizations: a tough-minded approach to problems; analytic abilities to abstract and plan; a capacity to set aside personal, emotional considerations in the interest of task accomplishment; a cognitive superiority in problem-solving and decision making (1974, 43) (Acker, 1990, p. 143).

Joan Acker argued that the class and hierarchical structures were always gendered and the organization itself was seen as a gendered place where inequality and differences takes place between male and female due to the control of the labour market, education attainments, symbols of genders and their identities (ibid p.145). In her theory, Joan Acker mentioned the work or job itself was presumed as a “man” and this ideology excludes and belittles women who were less skilled and less educated by making them feel not considered as a “real worker” because the role could be only played by men and even if a woman tends to achieve the respective role then she was seen as the “man” (Acker, 1990, p. 150) instead of just a worker doing the job.

3.2 Sexual harassment of working women by Catharine MacKinnon

Catherine MacKinnon's theory on sexual harassment had few similarities with Joan Acker's gendered organization theory which suggested how women tend to be employed more in the lower level of the hierarchy than men. Catharine MacKinnon's theory on sexual harassment of working women gave an insight of their labour participation and what came along their ways. To begin with, MacKinnon classified sexual harassment at the workplace in two categories: one was *quid pro quo*, meaning demanding a sexual favour in return for a work advancement and the other was the hostile work environment, meaning addressing women in a negatively different manner due to their gender (MacKinnon, 1979, p. 1). She identified the fact that working women faced sexual harassment in their workplaces due to their inferior roles in the industries which made them prone to experience with sexual harassment and eventually made them vulnerable towards the work position (MacKinnon, 1979, p. 4). She claimed such a situation arose due to the existing inequalities in the labour force (*ibid*), and that if such sexual discriminations were to be demolished then it would be much easier for the women to achieve job satisfaction without thinking of getting harassed at their workplaces.

Also, in similarity with Joan Acker's theory, MacKinnon stated that the job is gendered, meaning that there were certain fixed jobs which were for women and the other for men. For example, garment production- she said it was a *sex-defined* work most suited for women where they are under the supervision of men (*ibid* p .10,11,13). Platforms like these were where male could exploit their sexual power to control women, creating a discriminated workforce which was quite difficult to manage or regulate (MacKinnon, 1979, p. 20).

MacKinnon mentioned that sexual harassments could take place in any forms and considered the verbal sexual harassment to be the first phase; this often began with passing inappropriate jokes towards the female workers by their male supervisors or managers which gradually led to unwanted touching and giving out sexual proposals which may move the women workers mentally (ibid p. 2). Verbal sexual harassment could also include remarks over a female worker's figure or to ask them to visit the manager's office frequently so that they can spent some time alone (ibid p. 29).

If the female workers stood against such derogatory events or does not agree to visit the manager's chamber for unnecessary reasons then they faced the quid pro quo situation, meaning they face work retaliation or face with threats of termination (ibid p. 32). Another form of harassment that the working women often faced from their higher-level workers was the confrontational work environment. This took place due to their noncompliance of the inappropriate offers offered by their senior level colleagues or managers (MacKinnon, 1979, p. 35). When the male workers could not retaliate directly, they often started putting workload pressures on their female workers by scheduling them with extra hours, or not giving them work hours completely, hampering their wages.

This particular scenario is quite common in the readymade garment sectors of Bangladesh and this will be elaborated in the finding chapter.

Catherina MacKinnon argued that sexual harassment in the working world towards female workers were formed from a *social context* (MacKinnon, 1979, p. 2) and that the role which women have in the labour market and among their employers were seen as a sexual expression which will occur repeatedly nevertheless as this was considered as an accepted behaviour among the society (ibid).

This normalization played an essential role for demeaning women in the labour force and this made them further vulnerable and docile towards the sexual harassments which they experienced while them trying to contribute to the economy. Such social backlash often resulted in job advancement doubts, for instance, MacKinnon stated that it was the society both inside and outside of their workplace who believed that if a women achieved promotion or work advancement at her job then she must have have given sexual offers to her managers in order to reach to her success(ibid p. 37).

“People who do not take sexual harassment seriously are an arm of the people who do it.” (ibid p. 40)

Here, she emphasized on the acknowledgment of sexual harassment at the workplace. MacKinnon argued that sexual harassment occurred due to sex discrimination that existed in the organization. She mentioned that sexuality could not be measured equally among men and women as they responded to it differently due to not only because of their gender or biological differences but also to the preexisting social inequalities among the genders which were not considered as the same. MacKinnon evaluated in her theory that working women felt insecure and ashamed if they experienced sexual harassment at their workplace because this demoralized them mentally, make them feel broken inside (ibid p. 48) because women workers, to begin with, gets employed to do the low-status, unskilled or least respected jobs, but still why did they do that? They did that because no matter how small their work contribution was, female workers felt and gained a sense of financial independence by doing so. However, that independence or financial freedom should be respected because MacKinnon stated that when a female was to be hired to complete a task for a male; she should be only hired for her work skills but not herself over whom a male could practice the power for his own personal pleasures (ibid p. 216).

Sexual harassment at work was considered as a sexual power play among the employers and employees' relation in an organization. Women tend to be the victim of this humiliation because they have been objectified of having a feminine body (ibid p. 52). According to MacKinnon the work role designed for female in an organization could also be performed by males, but did they go through sexual harassment similar to the females? No, because sexual harassment was a tool designed by the patriarchal society to take control over the women. It is was a social construct which was man-made but not naturally built; also, it was a tool to create discrimination and inequalities in the society in general (ibid p. 220).

MacKinnon's theory of sexual harassment for the working women pointed out that sexual harassment was all about sexuality rather than individuality. It was a measure that male supervisors used to attack the vulnerability or *powerlessness* of women who were working for them, differentiating them as a particular sex, *as women* (ibid p. 221).

3.3 New spaces of gender violence by Jacqui True

The theory formed by Jacqui True regarding gender violence looked at the problem of sexual harassment from a wider lens. It looked at it from a macroeconomic standpoint where she states, *'the creation of "free trade" exacerbates gendered inequalities and creates unregulated environments in which violence against women thrives.'* (True, 2012, p. 78). By this statement she pointed out the fact of policy loopholes where the corporates gain power over government, meaning, organizations often hired young, unskilled female labourers in order to help them gain labour intensive production output; cutting labour costs by hiring cheap female workers made the organization's labour costs stay at a low- this technique still made the organizations to make higher profits as their labour cost was being kept to the lowest in comparison to how much labour effort was being put.

Therefore, this technique helps the corporates to achieve a win-win situation where they can generate less expensive labourers while keeping their output at a rise and their costs at a low margin.

This situation gained a wide recognition in developing countries because this helped the nation to lower the rate of unemployment however, this also allowed the companies in hiring those cheap labours to get away with certain government regulations- leading to labour exploitations and the creation of an unregulated work environment for the cheap female workers where they often experienced with abuses, sexual harassments and hate crimes due to them falling under a particular cheap sex: being women (ibid p. 79).

Such neoliberalism or free trade environment welcomed and pushes the economic development forward but here the party that lost the most were the vulnerable women workers over whom the multinational corporations fed on, by neglecting their voices, their rights. While the corporations gained from them by exploitation. And if the women stood against it then they must keep in their minds to lose their job and get unemployed, falling back to their poverty and financial dependencies all over again thus, they chose not to say anything against it and suffered being suffocated silently (True, 2012, p. 81).

Therefore, in her theory regarding gender-based violence she reflected how this thrives even further due to the trade liberalization worldwide where manufacturing industries got an escape route to practice labour exploitation and dominance over the weak and cheap workers. In her theory conclusion, she suggested national government to intervene in order to eliminate sexual harassment. Jacqui True suggested that the country where the international manufacturers operated or international garment buyers placed their orders in, the local government should intervene in regulations and bring sexual harassment under legal policy framework. She believed that this action would curb down the extent of sexual harassment in such export oriented and labour intensive workplaces (ibid p. 93).

4. Methodology

In the methodology chapter, research method, methodological approach, method of data collection and analysis, research design, and ethical issues have been described.

4.1 Research method

Research methodology refers to the style a researcher chooses to conduct a research. A research can be done by using qualitative, quantitative or a mixed manner (Alan Bryman, 2019, p. 35). A qualitative research is when human behaviour and expression is being understood in depth and is being taken under consideration instead of numerical figures unlike quantitative research method. Qualitative research method depends on finding the “how and why” of a situation instead of the “what and where” unlike quantitative research method (Bryman, 2012, p. 116).

For the following study, qualitative research method have been used as this study is focusing on the employer’s behaviour and acknowledgment regarding sexual harassment in the readymade garment sectors of Bangladesh instead of investigating the percentage of this issue being taking place in the RMGs. Hence, this study is a qualitative research.

4.2 Research design

According to Bryman and Bell (2019) research design determines the framework to collect data and later analyse it. Research design is the foundation of how a research will be conducted or formulated and as mentioned earlier, this study is qualitative therefore, the collection of data has been done in an explanatory manner. Explanatory research design is when a researcher seeks to have an in depth and detailed understanding of a situation (Alan Bryman, 2019, pp. 66, 67) involving interviews with the sample and getting to understand or have a knowledge of what the participants view over and/or about a situation. Here, the researcher is viewing the situation through the participant's eyes. Therefore, the following study will understand the acknowledgment and perception of sexual harassment in the readymade garment sectors of Bangladesh from the employer's point of view.

4.3 Sample

A sample is a group of people selected from a population for investigations. The selected group of people may be chosen on a probability or non-probability basis (Bryman, 2012, p. 181). Probability sampling is where everyone in the selected population has the expected opportunity of being selected whereas in the non-probability sample, the selection is not based on randomization but rather chosen on the basis of research requirement (Bryman, 2012, p. 187). In order to complete the following thesis, I have used the snowball sampling method, which is a non-probability sampling system, which targets a specific group of people (Bryman, 2012, p. 424). And in this case, the employers of the readymade garment sectors of Bangladesh have been the target, complementing the thesis with a focus upon their conception and perception of female sexual harassment in the garments industry workplace.

Since covering the whole garment sector of Bangladesh and getting access to everyone in this industry is impossible due to the massive size of the industry itself and the lack of time therefore, snowball sampling fit appropriately according to the research's need as one interviewer gave access to more interviewers who holds knowledge about the research ground and matched the criteria as an interviewee i.e. management or top level hierarchy of the garment factories.

4.3.1 Reaching the participants

In order to complete the thesis, there has been the use of a facilitator, also known as a gatekeeper since the data collection was completed from overseas. As I was not physically present in Bangladesh for gathering the data or conducting the interviews thus, I took help from a gatekeeper for overcoming a few potential barriers which could have come in the way for the data collection process, such as accessing the correct audience of respondents and the readymade garment zone of Ashulia in Dhaka because getting access to this platform is very bureaucratic and requires help from the upper hand to get in; as no random people can gain access to investigate of such an information protective area, which the readymade garment sector of Bangladesh is .

A gatekeeper is a person who acts as a medium between the researcher and the respondents (Christine Øye, 2015). They assist with help to the researcher in finding out ways to reach the potential respondent groups required by the researcher (Christine Øye, 2015).

For the following thesis I was assisted by Saleh Ahmed Azam, who is a religious leader for the local community in Dhaka. The reason I have taken his assistance in completion for the thesis is because as he is a local religious leader, he has a wide group of people who keeps trust on him and takes his words and actions seriously therefore, he can gain access to informants more quickly than if it was me doing it alone because people would have more difficulties in trusting me and the research work and the intentions behind it.

How do I know my gatekeeper? As mentioned previously that he is a local religious leader; I met him a long time ago at a mosque where I used to go to pray occasionally and listen to his after-prayer preaching. I have contacted him and described my thesis intention which he seemed to like and gave me his words of being my constant help wherever I needed him.

4.4 Location of the study

For the thesis Ashulia garment zone has been selected as this zone holds the greatest number of garment factories in Dhaka, Bangladesh and has various number of incidents related with garment health and safety hazards (Michael Blowfield, 2015). Especially after the Rana Plaza indecent, collapsing of 8 storied garment factory, that took place in the year 2013, 24th April (ibid), Ashulia garment zone has been well alert and aware of the safety and fire hazardous precautions, meaning all the garments located in that zone takes extra protection to avoid repeating the Rana Plaza incident (Organization, 2020). Since this zone takes measures regarding organization health and safety precautions therefore, do they also take measures regarding sexual harassment against its female laborer? The following part of the thesis will reveal this answer in the discussion section.

4.5 Interviews

In this study total 16 participants were interviewed including 7 employers from the apparel industries of Bangladesh, 6 female employees who have worked in different garment factories for many years, 1 line in charge of a factory and 2 external factory auditors. The age group of the employees were from 19 to 25 years and the employers were all above age 32 to 38 years. Their names have been hidden in order to provide their identity with anonymity as per mentioned in the Ethical chapter of this thesis. Each interview session lasted for 30-40 minutes and was recorded and later transcribed for findings and analysis.

I structured pre-formed sets of questions, depending on the category of participants i.e. employers, employees, line in charge and the auditors. The set of questions were kept open-ended and the same set of questions were followed constantly throughout the interviews conducted on the group of participants. The questions were not structured complicatedly nor was it close ending and inflexible questions. Keeping the interview questions open ended allowed me to conduct pressure less interviews as this structure helped the respondents to talk freely and more broadly over the thesis topic, aiding me in return to grasp a wide view of the situation regarding sexual harassment in the world of readymade garment sector of Bangladesh.

Before proceeding with my required interview questions, I have pre handedly asked about their names, how long they have been managing or owning the factory/factories, how many employees do they have and other general questions. I have also followed the ethical protocols (which is elaborately described in the ethical section of the thesis) and finally moved towards the interview questions, which are showed in the appendixes of this thesis.

The first set of questions were directed towards the employers and the managers only however, a different set of questions were asked to the employees who agreed to respond to my interview requests. I have involved the employees in this regard because I wanted to reflect the difference in the approach and acknowledgement regarding sexual harassment in the RMGs of Bangladesh. Although the group of employee respondents were smaller than the employers but nevertheless, they have answered somewhat different regarding how their boss or chief in charge treat them and the whole idea of sexual harassment in the workplace or their factory floors to be more precise. While answering the questions they have shared their stories and also mentioned a few other stories which have been faced by their colleagues or friends from work and their answers have been elaborated in the finding chapter of the thesis. The set of questions which were asked to the employees are also given in the appendixes at the end of this thesis.

4.6 Research approach

Research approach is the chart or acts like a map through by using which the researchers need to conduct their studies. This helps the researcher to have a guideline through which the researcher will construct their problem and objectives and show their results or findings from the collected data during the time of study (Sileyew, 2019). There are three types of research approaches and they are deductive research approach, inductive research approach and abductive research approach (Alan Bryman, 2019, pp. 22-24).

As the study is qualitative, the usage of **grounded theory method** has been used with consideration of **deductive approach** to it. Grounded theory method is a study of human experiences and it is a methodological approach where a theory is formed by the outputs from the collected data of a particular study only but not from any other external sources (Goulding, 2002, pp. 39, 41). Therefore, this thesis has used the data collection from the participated sample in order to identify the reasonings and general idea of acknowledgment regarding sexual harassment in the readymade garment sectors of Bangladesh. **Deductive approach** begins with a hypothesis (Gabriel, 2013) which will be either confirmed or rejected with the process of the study (Research-Methodology, 2019). The study followed this approach because the aim of this study was not to establish or formulate a new theory but to begin a research with the existing theories, unlike inductive reasoning which is a way to learn from the outputs collected from the data allowing the researcher to generate a theory at the end of the study (Research-Methodology, 2019).

4.7 Data analysis

According to grounded theory making an analysis of data falls under three categories and they are open coding, axial coding and selective coding (Punch, 2014, pp. 180-184). Open coding is the first stage of analysis where I have recorded and noted the basic information of the participant i.e. their name, age, factory information and so on. This allowed to form the foundation of the analysis by giving me the general characteristics of the participants so that rigorous comparisons and revisits of the data could be made.

Constantly keeping the study of sexual harassment in the readymade garment sector of Bangladesh as a central piece, I categorized my participants in 3 categories: employers, employees and external auditors. Noting the perception of the participants over this topic allowed me further in understanding their differences in views and the reasons for the differences. Open coding ended when the data reached its saturation, meaning when the participants started to give similar responses during the interviews.

The next step was axial coding where the causes and conditions of sexual harassment in the RMGs were recognized through the responses of the participants. Common key words like “normal”, “termination”, “uneducated”, “target deadlines” were noted down and these elements mentioned by the participants for the occurrence of sexual harassment were recorded in order to make comparisons and to build a central ground for the study. Finally, when the central ground was achieved, I transcribed a baseline showing how all categories are related to each other.

4.8 Ethical consideration

Ethics is the study of virtues, consciousness of actions and the tool to underline what is morally good and correct (Punch, 2014, p. 36). The reason a thesis is established upon the ethical foundation is because all the information while gathering data should not create or cause harm to those who have helped the researcher for his/her findings (Oancea, 2014, p. 36). The researcher also must show respect to those being conducted interviews upon, all of their morals and responses should be listened to in a respectful manner and should be validated. Before proceeding with the interview, the researcher must take the respondent's consent over answering the questions, also they must be informed about the dissertation's publication and its usage. The respondents have the right to withdraw from the interview or to skip certain questions they do not feel like to answer to (Scheyvens, 2014)

But why should any researcher adapt to the ethical grounds while conducting a research? In order to conduct any interview, a researcher must oblige with the ethical consideration because this falls under their criteria of duty. As I have chosen a qualitative approach for the thesis therefore, following ethical consideration strictly on the matter of reaching out to my respondents to talk about the sexual harassment in the readymade garment sector of Bangladesh was very essential during conducting the interviews.

4.8.1 Ethical protocols in practice

I have dutifully considered this ethical consideration because respecting ethical norms plays a vital role for the data collection and the analysis behind their answers. The general idea to imply this consideration is because I must fully understand an individual's (respondent's) thought process and the social ground upon which their an-

swer is based (Liedtka, 1992, p. 161). Me being a native Bangladeshi, I must also consider the cultural factor (Ngozwana, 2018, p. 28) where certain topics should not be brought up; topics such as sex. Topics related to sex is considered as *lojja*, meaning shame and the participants may not be comfortable enough to speak about it freely with the interviewer. Therefore, I had to be very careful with the use of my vocabulary while asking my participants to talk about what they think or how they acknowledge about the sexual harassment in the RMG sectors. When asking them regarding sexual harassment, I tried to be as formal as I could get in my native language so that I can show them a sense of respect while getting their answers on a topic which is often not respectable to speak about or even discuss openly.

Sexual harassment at workplace is a very sensitive topic to write about, especially if it is written from the employer's perspective; it does not only get sensitive but also becomes a "hot topic" to explain and elaborate. Therefore to handle such a sensitive issue, this following thesis has considered key factors from the ethical ground and has maintained to follow the ethical protocols in order to safeguard the thesis area and the image of the thesis material which includes the respondents and their responses regarding their industries and their identities.

Personal interview-based thesis, like the following thesis- three steps of ethics have been maintained and which are: trust, truthfulness, and respect (Oancea, 2014, pp. 39, 40). Trust has been gained by the interviewer in order to get a more relaxed and elaborated answer instead of the respondents being scared or nervous while answering the questions- a sense of coherence can be achieved through gaining trust so that they do not have to prepare a readymade answer nor do they have to stage it. In order to reach this ground, respect must be provided to the respondents so that in every way they feel their answers are being valued and their identity is being protected as anonymity provides the respondents to talk more comfortably knowing their responses will not imply any negative affect upon their garment industries and themselves on a personal level (the Sample chapter has more elaboration over it).

Providing anonymity will not only be respectful but it also shows to be productive as the respondents become more familiarized with the thesis question, the purpose behind the conducted interviews and it also aids them to express their feelings to a deeper extent (Ngozwana, 2018, p. 26).

However, before heading towards the interview, I have taken full consent of publishing the thesis, recording the interviews from the respondents (Scheyvens, 2014, pp. 165-167). I have also mentioned to my respondents that their identities will be hidden and that the names of their garments will be changed into numerical figures allowing it to stay anonymous. These measures has been strictly followed because the readymade garment industry is a very powerful platform in Bangladesh and such ethical tools gave the respondents a sense of confirmation that their responses will not cause any harm to them or to their garment factories as they will be answering questions regarding their perceptions of sexual harassments in the RMGs of Bangladesh.

5. Findings

The interviews which were conducted with the employer participants of different garments responded almost the similar thing when they were asked questions regarding sexual harassments at workplace however, few answers varied when it came to whether do they provide their employees with training programs about sexual harassment in compliance with the International Labour Organization (ILO) guidelines as per (Conference, 2019). The participants recognized physical abuse and financial or wage exploitation as a form of sexual harassment however they have failed to realize verbal abuse and mental abuse which too falls under the definition of sexual harassment.

For instance, owners A, B , C and D have stated the fact that they have indeed misbehaved with their female production level workers when it was required because they believe scolding and usage of bad terms often bring out the productivity out of them which leads them to work better and faster and help complete the target of the day. They have proceeded with their statement by saying “*see, they are uneducated and if we treat them nicely they don't seem to understand but if we are harsh with them, they are scared of losing their jobs and this fear brings out the best of them*”.

They also mentioned that the garment industries are infiltrated with illiterate production workers and if they fail to achieve the given target then that is the only time they make use of the verbal misbehaviour so that next time they finish their tasks properly. For them misbehaving is “*shadharon bepar*”, meaning a normal situation when it comes to prioritizing proper production fulfilment.

Furthermore, owners D, E and F said that they also create a false production target which they later set for their workers to fulfill. Owner D gave an example and that was *“for instance, we tell our workers that they need to finish a batch of 220 pants by today, but the real target is actually 200 pants. Therefore, at the end of the day my workers can accomplish making 210 pants- which is still above the real target- and few pants are taken out of the pile during quality control and quality assurance checks. Thus, we can reach our target of the day eventually by giving them a false target number.”*

From this situation, a false impression of target setting can be detected which often leads to mental stress and creates pressure for the workers and this mental abuse was not recognized by the respondents. Therefore, out of four types of sexual harassment the respondents acknowledged only two and the other two which are mental and verbal abuse was not taken under their consideration of being a part of sexual harassment.

Moving on to other answers, none of the respondents provided their employees with any particular training except for Owner F. Other than owner F, rest of the participants mentioned during the interviews that they do not offer any anti sexual harassment program to promote awareness and educate over the topic of sexual harassments for the factory workers. According to the interview, it was only owner F that conducted certain seminars in compliance with the ILO guidelines adopted from the 108th conference for his employees so that he can eliminate physical sexual harassment from his factory.

After their response on training programs, the employers were asked how do they handle certain sexual harassment complaints which (if ever) their female employees supposedly filed against someone from their factory and for this question the participating owners said that if the offender can be proven guilty then he will be fired immediately from his work. Therefore, terminating the offender was their only form of punishment. However, they said to commence this punishment on the perpetrator, the victim must provide the higher-level management with evidence of her being sexually harassed.

To make a comparison with what the top-level management said regarding their views on sexual harassment, this research has also included a mid-level worker as a participant who works more closely with the production level workers. Jamal the line in charge, who is one of the two line in charges responsible for 1000 workers at his garment factory, have shared his stories regarding receiving complaints from the female workers at his workplace. He mentioned that female workers were not proactively handing in complaints however, the few complaints he received over the past 3 years were handled by him solely thus, it did not require to reach the attention of the higher-level management. His way of handling the sexual harassment complaints was to warn the offender and make him ask for forgiveness from the victim. When being asked why he did not involve his senior managers in this, he replied that it would bring a negative image upon his work performance as he was given the task to responsibly handle all those production level workers. Therefore, he wanted to take over all the complaints which were filed by the female workers initially but if any case reached to an extreme extent i.e. rape then he would have involved his higher-level managers.

He was later asked about the frequency of misbehaving with the female workers and to which he replied *“we use slang words to bring them on track. We call them with names if we find that they have done a production mistake and we do so in order to create a fear in them. This usually helps them to remember not to do any further blunder. I mean, we would not have done that, but our hands are also tied from our senior*

level workers- so basically this is a chain reaction. Our supervisor shouts at us and we pass those shouting on to our junior level workers.”

To have additional view over sexual harassment that exists in the RMGs of Bangladesh, this research has involved external auditors, whose tasks are to inspect factories and check the working condition of the employees. The external auditors were questioned regarding their factory tours, why do they go for inspection and who sends them to do it and lastly how do they receive or handle complaint cases from the garments they visit for audits and their responses were as following:

“We visit selective factories with which foreign buyers will place their orders in. We are told by foreign buying houses to visit factories as a third party to check its magnitude of compliance to national labour laws it maintains or practice in its factory. Now, foreign companies will be less likely to place orders in factories which does not hold minimum standard of local labour laws. That is why auditors like us visit factories to check its operational standards and report back to the buying companies with our records- it can be either negative or positive depending on what we have seen in the visited factories.

Most factories that we go for audit has a grievance box, meaning a complaint box where the workers are told to put in anonymous complaints if they experience any sexual harassment at their workplace. However, when we go to audit those factories, we receive very little complaints as we believe the management team puts away complaints from that box in order to give us a good impression over their factory. Our judgement for them is quite important as we grade them over their management performance which later on attracts foreign buyers for them therefore, showing a good image in front of us is very essential for them.

We believe we could have received more complaints and have an actual view of the internal sexual harassment problem if we went their unannounced but unfortunately all of our visits has to be announced and this gives the mid or senior level management time to hide away the complaints from the grievance box”.

Finally, the response of the employees regarding sexual harassments in the RMGs were involved in this thesis so that a variation of response can be understood. The production level female employees were asked to share their point of views over sexual harassment, stories regarding their attempts of complaints against it and the complaint consequences aftermath. The responses from the participants were as following:

‘We do not complain to our line managers if our supervisor misbehaves with us because we are poor, we need to hold on to our jobs. If we say something, then what if they sack us? There are many other girls who are ready to take our jobs and it is too difficult to get into another factory right away because we are less educated and also have a record of being fired- it gives a bad image of us’- said XO

‘Although I have some level of education, this still does not level up with my seniors as they are more educated than me thus, they know more than me. I have less education, yet I am a skilled sewer currently and this happened because I have learned while being at work, by seeing my other colleagues, how they do their work and whatnot. Such on-job- training makes our employment security more weak because there will be incoming workers who do not have education nor skills but they too can gain skill just like me- while they are at work by seeing others. This makes us easily replaceable’- said FM

“See sister, we are poor and we must have a job to support our families so even if we experience with verbal abuse and inappropriate touch from our supervisors, we keep our mouths shut or else they will find another way to torture us. Maybe they will give us overtime which will be unpaid or even they can fire us if we go against them”- said TM and TX.

Later, MR shared a story where her mobile phone was taken away from her by her supervisor and he then asked her to collect it after work from his office. She did not go to his office after work because she knew he had a bad intention to meet her privately in his office as she knew from her colleague that he has a bad reputation with female workers thus, such avoidance was her tactic to prevent herself to experience any sexual harassment.

Participant AB did not want this study to publicize her sexual harassment, but she agreed to share the repercussions of it. AB said, she did in fact file a case to her senior management team about it and later her offender was fired but that took another serious turn when her supervisor took away important buyers from that factory to the other factory he later joined as a worker. His termination caused her factory to face severe client drop-outs leading her factory to offer him to come back and rejoin his old workplace. Therefore, she said that filing complaints often led to situations like that hence they kept their mouth shut from then onwards in order to avoid consequences like that.

(Author) *How often do you hear yourself called with names?*

According to SK, the very common bad term used by most line in charges or supervisors on her and her friends was “*magi*”, meaning prostitute. This happens when they made any mistake while sewing a product or if there was a delay in cutting fabric properly. Later, they would seek forgiveness for their bad behaviour but this cycle of verbal abuse and asking forgiveness took place very repetitively therefore, seeking forgiveness did not hold any value for the female workers.

6. Discussion

Joan Acker's theory on gendered organization complemented with the sexual harassment in the readymade garment sectors of Bangladesh. As mentioned in her theory that women are the one to be at the bottom of the hierarchical structure; seems precisely like in the garment sectors of Bangladesh. It consists of higher percentage of women workers who were in charge of sewing, cutting, knitting procedures- being at the bottom of the organization. To relate with Moss Kanter's *masculinity ethic*, in the readymade garment sectors of Bangladesh it was the less educated and unskilled women who worked at the production line whereas the men who have higher *education* advancement than them tend to be the one supervising them, making them work under pressure by avoiding their emotions as the supervisors need to meet deadline of the orders. For the supervisors of RMGs, it is the task or production target which must be accomplished rather than considering the workload and mental pressure which the production line female workers go through. Also, due to the lack of education a certain amount of fear works for the women workers as their supervisors can easily replace them (Acker, 1990, p. 146) by taking in other skilled or more productive workers. Therefore, the central issue of such hierarchical and gendered organizations like the RMGs of Bangladesh consisted of managerial department that only focused on how to achieve their desired production target and in order to accomplish that they would take on any strategy i.e. verbal, mental or sexual harassments-leaving behind ethics and emotional considerations of the female workers.

One the other hand, Catherine MacKinnon's theory was found in the RMGs of Bangladesh as it was believed to be a gendered industry where women were believed to work in the production line since sewing was supposedly a work for women. Therefore, a gender discriminating work atmosphere is being found in the RMGs. Also, the experience of participant MR served as a *quid pro quo* sexual harassment example-matched with MacKinnon's theory

Jacqui True's theory, however, did not complement with the sexual harassment situation in the RMGs of Bangladesh as she talked about government intervention to abolish sexual harassment from workplace. It did not match the finding of this study because Bangladesh government does intervene in the regulations of workplaces by setting laws against occupational sexual harassments. It does intervene by sending auditors or inspectors to record the work conditions under which women performs their job. Bangladesh has jurisdictions for sexual offenders and from the findings it was not detected that it is the international buyers who boost the local sexual harassment in the RMGs of Bangladesh, rather it was an individual masculinity power, as said by Moss Kanter in MacKinnon's theory. Therefore, trade liberalization has no relation with the acknowledgement of the employers regarding sexual harassment in the RMGs of Bangladesh.

7. Conclusion

The aim of this study was to identify whether the employers of RMGs in Bangladesh acknowledged sexual harassment and if so, what are their perception and measures over this issue. Focusing on the gendered organization theory by Joan Acker and sex discriminating theory of Catherine MacKinnon, I would conclude this study by answering the research question:

This study has found out that the employers of the readymade garment sectors of Bangladesh does realize sexual harassment occurring at their organizations but to some limited extent. The extent of acknowledgment is limited because the employers do not consider verbal harassment as a part of sexual harassment as they acknowledge this to be a normal part of their production line female worker's working life. A key finding from this study was that the employers or the top hierarchical employers use verbal abuse to encourage women workers to perform their tasks faster and better.

Whereas in the interviews they defined sexual harassment from their own knowledge of it and claimed it to be a bad practice however, along the way of analysis it was the employers or the senior level management team which failed to recognize that verbal harassment. They failed to realize that verbal harassment too is a sexual harassment. According to the employers it was the lower level of education that victimized the female workers of “verbal” sexual harassment. They believed if they were skilled and educated enough then they would not have to hear inappropriate words from them in order to meet a tight deadline or compact orders from their buyers. They blamed lower education among their production line female workers that made them “lousy” and less productive instead of realizing that their bad behaviour against the workers maybe the reason for them to slack in work or work under fear which leads to lower productivity.

This gap of understanding the sexual harassment among the employers may be recovered if they are being given external trainings and education by third party authorities i.e. NGOs. The implementation of active trade unions and transparency of grievance boxes may too eliminate the sexual harassment problems in the RMGs of Bangladesh as this will alert the top-level workers and employers that their sexual harassment are being notified and that the voices of their female employees are being heard therefore, they will be careful before breaching any sexual harassment clause. All these mentioned strategies may lead or motivate into future studies where implementation of employers training can show results on shifting sexual harassment in the RMGs of Bangladesh.

9942 words

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Appendix

The interview questions, which were asked to the employers or the top-level management workers were:

1. What is sexual harassment and how will you describe it if that happens in your factory?
2. Being at the top-level management position, have you ever received any complaints from your lower level female workers?
3. How did you handle that complaint and situation?
4. Did you ever feel that your mid-level management team is not letting the complaints reach you?
5. Do provide any internal trainings to all your employees regarding sexual harassment?
6. Do you follow and maintain the ILO and national guidelines regarding sexual harassment at workplace?

I have asked the employees the following questions:

1. How long have you been working in the RMG sector?
2. What is your working position?
3. Whom do you have to report to and who supervises you?
4. Have you experienced any sexual harassment while working?
5. Do you know if someone else rather than you who have faced sexual harassment i.e. your colleague or friend?
6. Do you file a complaint about it?
7. How does your management team handle sexual harassment complaints?