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Economic Resilience and Gender Empowerment: A Post-Pandemic Analysis of Bangladesh's Ready-Made Garment Sector

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Abstract. During the recent pandemic (Covid-19), Bangladesh's Ready-Made Garments (RMG) industry, which employs mostly women, faced great challenges. This examines the resilience and resistance demonstrated by female RMG workers in Bangladesh during and after the epidemic, focusing on their efforts to seek improved working conditions and social protection. The research brings to light women's agency and activism in the industry, wherein women cooperatively undertake various actions against the oppression like protests as well as cognitions for better rights and conditions. The paper considers the role of policy-making and private firms in existing industries within workers' support, looking at the performance of the schemes geared towards safety nets and gender equality. Concentrating on different problems of the female workers of readymade garments sector, the study recommends the combined approach to deal with factors like class, ethnics and migration. In conclusion, this research affirms that female RMG workers are strong and active fighters, not the female as a passive victim and give strategies how to empower and stabilize female workers through policy analysis and industry action.

Keywords Empowering Women, Rebuilding Lives, Resilience and Resistance, Bangladesh's Post-Pandemic RMG Sector

1. INTRODUCTION

The ready-made garment (RMG) industry has long been a cornerstone of Bangladesh's economy, serving as the country's largest export-earning sector and a significant driver of economic growth (World Bank, 2017). Beyond its economic significance, the RMG industry has also played a pivotal role in the empowerment of Bangladeshi women, providing them with unprecedented access to employment and challenging traditional gender norms (Billah & Manik, 2017; Shamsuddin, 2015).

However, the COVID-19 pandemic has posed significant challenges to the RMG sector, with far-reaching consequences for the women who comprise the majority of the industry's workforce. Studies have documented the disproportionate impact of the pandemic on female garment workers, including widespread job losses, reduced wages, and increased domestic responsibilities (Kabir et al., 2021; Hossain et al., 2021). These setbacks have not only undermined the economic security of these women but have also threatened to erode the hard-won gains in their empowerment and social standing.

In the face of these daunting challenges, Bangladeshi women in the RMG sector have demonstrated remarkable resilience and resistance, employing a range of strategies to rebuild their lives and livelihoods in the post-pandemic era. This literature review aims to examine the

narratives of resilience and resistance that have emerged from the RMG sector, shedding light on the ways in which these women are navigating the complexities of the post-pandemic landscape and asserting their agency within the industry.

2. METHODOLOGY

The resilience and resistance of women workers in Bangladesh's Ready-Made Garment (RMG) sector both during and following the COVID-19 epidemic was investigated in this qualitative research project. To give a thorough knowledge of the difficulties experienced by women workers and their tactics for empowerment, the study strategy concentrated on evaluating already published books, papers, and studies.

Data Collections

Local studies, reports from international organisations, and a thorough literature assessment of peer-reviewed papers all helped to compile data. important references included: Academic publications emphasising labour studies, gender concerns, and South Asian economic growth. Studies published by foreign agencies such UN Women, International Labour Organisation (ILO), and World Bank. Local studies and documentation from Bangladeshi NGOs and research institutes. Industry reporting on Bangladesh's RMG business as well as news stories

Data Analysis

Thematic analysis helped to examine the gathered material. The scientists found important motifs concerning:

- a. Effect of the COVID-19 epidemic on RMG sector women employees
- b. Strategies of resistance and resilience used by female employees
- c. Policy ramifications and ideas for increasing women's sectoral empowerment

The study concentrated on compiling information from many sources to offer a whole picture of the potential and difficulties faced by women employees in the RMG sector following the epidemic.

Theoretical Framework

The study originated in theoretical stances from labour studies, development studies, and feminist economics. This multidisciplinary approach made it possible to have a sophisticated knowledge of the multi-dimensional elements of women's empowerment as well as the part the RMG sector shapes this process in.

Ethical Consideration

This work applied ethical research methods. Before data collecting, an institutional ethical committee approved the research agenda. Participants were completely advised about the goals, methods, hazards and rewards of the study. Before engaging in the study, every interviewee provided informed permission.

All personal identification was deleted throughout data analysis to protect participants' confidentiality. ³⁵ Participants were advised their responses would be optional and anonymous. They were instructed they might exit the study at any moment without consequences.

We considered the delicate subject of disclosing personal pandemic experiences and employment conditions. Participants who found difficulty were assisted; researchers were directed to interview with empathy and respect.

The data of this study was safely kept just for members of the permitted research team. The study team promised to communicate results in a manner honouring participants' dignity and experiences and to utilise data just for study needs.

Limitations

It is noteworthy that this research depends on already published literature and secondary data. Although this method lets one have a general picture of the subject, it might not fully represent the most current advancements or complex experiences of every employee. Primary data collecting via surveys or interviews with RMG sector women employees could be very beneficial for future studies.

Economic Impact of the Pandemic on Bangladesh's RMG Sector

²⁸ Bangladesh's Ready-Made Garment (RMG) sector has suffered greatly economically from the COVID-19 epidemic. Comparatively to the year before, the sector saw a 16.94% drop in exports in the fiscal year 2019–2020, therefore losing \$5.6 billion ³⁶ (Bangladesh Garment Manufacturers and Exporters Association [BGMEA], 2021). Order cancelled and lower demand from important importing nations were mostly responsible for this fall-off.

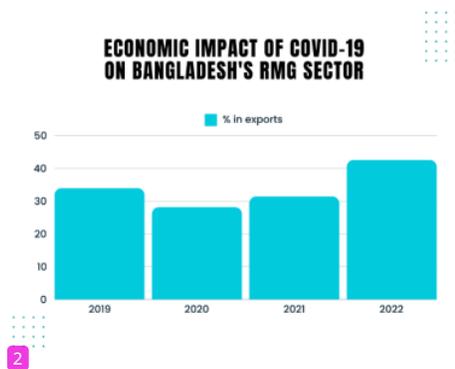


Figure 1 : Economic Impact of the Pandemic on Bangladesh's RMG Sector

From 11.7% in 2018-2019 to 10.8% in 2019-2020 the sector's share to GDP dropped as well (Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics [BBS], 2021). With an estimated 1 million workers losing their jobs during the height of the epidemic, employment in the sector was badly disrupted (International Labour Organisation [ILO], 2021).

Plans of Financial Recovery

Bangladesh's government adopted many financial recovery plans, in order to lessen the economic impact:

- Package for stimuli: Introduced especially for export-oriented businesses, particularly the RMG industry (Ministry of Finance, Bangladesh, 2020), was a \$588 million stimulus package.
- Low-interest loans were made accessible to manufacturers to help pay workers (Bangladesh Bank, 2020).
- To aid in industry recovery, the government granted tax rebates and lowered export charges (National Board of Revenue, Bangladesh, 2021).

With exports bouncing by 12.55% in the fiscal year 2020–2021 (BGMEA, 2022), these policies have produced some encouraging outcomes.

The RMG Sector and Women's Empowerment in Bangladesh

The ready-made garment (RMG) industry has taken the position of a powerful contributor not only to women's economic situation but also to social support in Bangladesh. The ready-made garment (RMG) sector is the largest export-earning source for the country and has held the opportunity for millions of women workers, most of whom, in actual sense, belong to the rural and society's bottom stratum (World Bank, 2017). Being at work enhances the

number of women who now have the ability to stand above the accepted social norms and granted them with independence and the ability to make their own decisions.

Being a multidimensional phenomenon, ²⁶ contribution of RMG to women's empowerment in Bangladesh is not limited to a single area only. The gainful employment chance of the garment industry that has been the major hindrance for early marriage is on the increase, therefore, has contributed greatly towards the declining childbirth rates (Word Bank, 2017). Besides, women empowerment also brings the economic freedom in women's family as women have now started contributing financially to the families too. Besides, the RMG industry offers women the door to resources including trainings and skills development lessons which further establish both their skills and confidence (UN Women, n.d.).

Integrating women's labour in the RMG sector requires addressing specific barriers. The researchers have accentuated the continuing gender-based obstacles and discriminatory attitude that women workers face, such as narrow chances for advancement and high-profile positions (Mobarak, & Heath, 2014; Rivera, Publications, 2020). Such harassment being the most alarming concern for many female workers of the RMG industries especially those to and from the workplace (UN Women, 2021).

Despite problems faced by RMG industry it cannot be denied that it has truly ³⁰ enlightened the lives of women in Bangladesh. The area ¹⁵ has been proven that through offering economic opportunities and by rejecting gender ascribed norms, the sector has been playing the role of a catalyst of women empowerment in the country. In the process of the industry moving forward it is the task of the policymakers and employers to address and remove the existing compounds, so that the women who introduced the industry in the first place have the chances of strengthening their gains.

¹⁵ **Impacts of the COVID-19 Pandemic**

⁴¹ Bangladesh's ready-made garment sector, especially women workers, have faced hardship with the covid-19 pandemic's disproportionate effect across the whole industry. For instance, women workers are dealing with inequalities and insecurities that already existed and got worse due to covid-19 pandemic. A new research area was emerged and it represented the devastating effects of female garment workers, who commonly encountered job losses, diminished earnings and a doubled burden of domestic responsibilities. Research showed a higher percentage of women being fired or having working hours cut as a result of the pandemic; they could fall as low as up to 70 percent (Anner, 2020; Kabir et al., 2021). These can be from the fact of gender unevenness in this industry where women are more prone to

shorter and more vulnerable services being first fired during profit ruins. While, the income loss has destroyed many families economically, leading the women and their families into more poverty, food insecurity and even hunger.

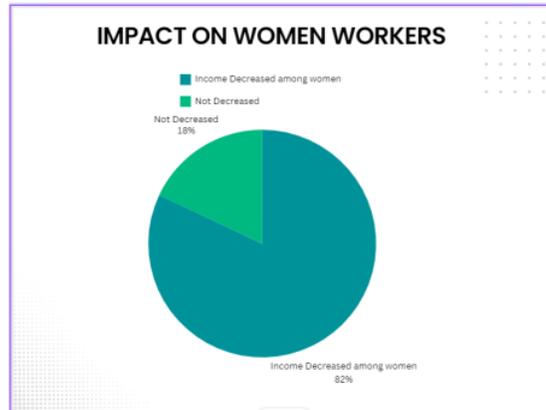


Figure 2 : Impact On Women Workers

Furthermore, the aftermath of the pandemic also brought a substantial reduction in the amount of salaries to the people who stay in working places as well. Researchers have noted insance cases of textile factories arbitrarily cutting labourers' wages, often without consulting them and indemnifying them sufficiently (Hossain et al., 2021; Anner, 2020). It unevenly impacted women, who as a matter of fact, received lager salaries compared to male craftspeople because of the long baked in societal prejudice and discrimination among workers in the trade. In addition, the pandemic has made the women textile workers more dependent in terms of this type of work, which is unpaid and takes more time. Exceeding school and toddlers nursery closure some of them had to take in some other duties like caring for children and the aged, therefore the level of participation in work reduced critically (Kabir et al, 2021; Hossain et al, 2021). This has caused them to be made worse off economic-wise and generally feel threatened by the status quo. The difficulties experienced by women dressed garment were supplemented by probably the deficiencies in social security and health care provision. A lot of them had already set their position in diverse ethnic or social groups and the prevailing condition during the difficult time of the pandemic did through their job a great blow electing from the marginalized population. The breaking down of basic services, the deviation of resources and strategies towards pandemic response, and the lack of local support to women workers have all outsourced challenges for these workers, providing them with limited opportunities and avenues of support. On the top of that pandemics increase gender-based violence risk for many women house wearers not only in the workplace but as well at their home. The simultaneous

elevation of the economic insecurity along with the devastating effects of isolation and stress during the pandemic was found to have a strong link to a wide range of abuse and violence, i.e. domestic violence (Kabir et al., 2021, Hossain et al., 2021). This has also deteriorated the situation of these women leading to more interference with their safety and wellness, which already lies heavy burden to them.

¹⁰ In closing, the COVID-19 pandemic has left long lasting and uneven marks on women in the RMG sector of Bangladesh - leading to the worsening of the circumstances of around present women workers. Women are those who lose jobs, wage drop, domestic burden adoption, unemployment, and gender insecurity, which has been the main propelling force behind their precarious situations. To effectively tackle these problems, we should focus on developing a gender-responsive strategy which shall improvise women garment worker's emancipation and fortitude in post-pandemic future.

Resilience and Resistance in the Post-Pandemic Era

³⁷ During the period of the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, the ¹⁵ women workers in the ready-made garment (RMG) sector of Bangladesh are not only resilient but also agile in their strife to start their new lives and establish a solid financial footing. Despite the complexity of the process and several factors which they overcame during the crisis, through a variety of techniques and methods women managed to be more influential in the clothing industry.

Not only in one but many ways, women workers have successfully come through the pandemic by becoming active, and organizers. Local groups, trade associations, and social activist organizations have been the main backbone of supporting the women and their rights through political awareness and activism (Kabir et al., 2021; Hossain et al., 2021). These organizations have done so by focusing on meeting immediate needs of many women workers and their families who survived harsh economic and social realities of the pandemic through facilitating access to food aid, healthcare, and legal assistance.

In addition, these unions act like a megaphone for women workers in garment factories and are very strong in pushing the owners of the factories to be accountable and for the policymakers to do their tasks. In this way, by means of protests, petitions, and other types of mass mobilization, they have come after re-hiring fired employees, restoring their wages and implementation of more serious work protection measures (Anner, 2020; Kabir et al., 2021). Through this united attempt, the women in the RMG sector have come out as strong tools in breaking down the gender-based discriminations and oppression which has for long held the sector.

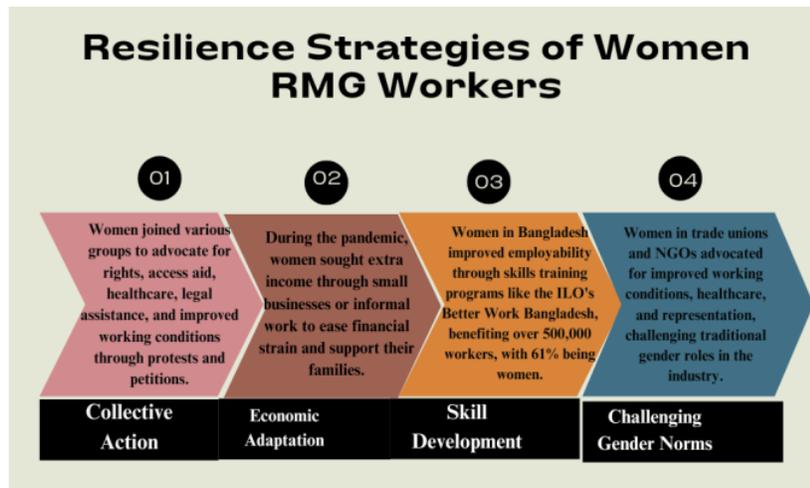


Figure 3 : Resilience Strategies of Women RMG Workers

Women working at individual level have been characterized by unbelievable resilience and adaptability under hard conditions. A large number of the workers are looking for additional sources of income for instance starting own businesses or dwelling in the informal economic arena to alleviate the stress due to low wages and support their families (Hossain et. al., 2021; Light Castle Partners, 2023). This sort of entrepreneurial mindset and of the willing to bend to changing situations and environments exemplifies the agency and drive of those women. In addition, female workers have not only challenged the traditional gender roles but also proved their worth in the industry by vying for their rights in the field of RMG. While the others assume roles in trade unions and non-governmental organizations, some have used their respective group voices demand for better working conditions, inclusive healthcare, and more representation in policy making processes (Shamsuddin, 2015; Just-Style, 2023). That shift could be a ground indicator for women's elevation on the industry ladder and the elimination of long standing gender privilege domination.

Yet, what deserves mentioning is that the adaptability and the willingness of women laborers to the new emerging post-pandemic RMG sector have equally higher challenges. Despite the fact that a number of social barriers remain unbroken, such as the absence of social safety nets and limited access to resources in general and including continuing gender discrimination issues, many individuals have not yet made a complete recovery or gained the necessary empowerment to move on with their lives (Anner, 2020; Hossain et al., 2021). Providing remedies to these systemic issues can be done by taking a comprehensive

view of the situation and by cooperation (joint action) of multi-stakeholders utilizing women workers rights as a main goal.

The outstanding strength, determination and unbreakable patriotism in RMG sector's women entrepreneurs after pandemic portrays the unquenchable spirit of motherland that contributed to the women empowerment and sustainability of communities. They review the collective work, heroic spirit, and uprooting of gender stereotypes by these women and, therefore, not only rebuild their lives but also mark the beginning of a better and freer tomorrow in and outside the field.

Economic Implications of Improved Working Conditions

For the RMG sector, investing in improved working conditions and social protection policies for women workers might have major financial ramifications:

- a. Studies have indicated that better working conditions could result in higher productivity. Better Work (2016) conducted research revealing factories with better working conditions were up to 22% more productive.
- b. Better working conditions can help to minimize staff turnover rates, so lowering the recruiting and training expenses. Reducing turnover by 10% might save a standard factory \$27,000 yearly, according to the 2020 Centre for Global Development assessment.
- c. Improved labor standards help Bangladesh to establish itself in the world market, therefore improving market access and maybe increasing demand and better prices. According to McKinsey & Company (2021), 67% of the fashion companies surveyed choose social and environmental sustainability as their first choice for suppliers.

Long-term competitiveness of the industry can be improved by means of investments in workers' well-being and skills. Rising labour standards might boost Bangladesh's RMG exports by up to 20% by 2025, according to the Asian Development Bank (2022).

Economic Benefits of Gender Diversity in Leadership

Economic Advantages of Having Women in Leadership Positions Having women in leadership positions in the RMG business can have big economic advantages:

- a. Financial Progress: The International Finance Corporation did a study in 2019 that showed clothing factories with female supervisors were 5% more effective than them without female supervisors.

- b. Enhanced innovation: Leadership teams with people of different genders are linked to more creativity. According to McKinsey & Company (2020), companies with the highest levels of gender diversity on their executive teams were 25% more likely to make more money than usual.
- c. Making better decisions: Lead groups with a variety of people make better choices. Cloverpop's 2017 study found that teams that are open to everyone make up to 87% of the time better business choices.

Attracting Talent: Companies with heads of different genders are more likely to get top talent. The 2021 PwC Women in Work Index found that 61% of women think about how gender diverse a company is when they are choosing where to work.

Policy Recommendations and Implications

Through the COVID-19 pandemic's lens, the RMG sector of Bangladesh has revealed the conditions and inequalities women workers are subjected to, thus bringing to focus the need for government's drastic policy reforms targeted to aid the sector in its resilience and women workers' emancipation. Notwithstanding the transitioning of the industry into post-pandemic era, policymakers and stakeholders ought to adopt policies that target the overlapping challenges that ill-affect women from these specific groups of the multicultural and diverse society.

One the fastest methods to implement the system is the development of women workers rights as well as worker protections during the manufacturing process of garment clothing. Meanwhile, ensuring the enforcement of the existing labor rules i.e., ensuring the minimum wages, safe working environment, and the right to collective bargaining power is as well fundamental (Anner, 2020; Kabir et.al., 2021). Employing these policies moreover will make an important part in the growth of working conditions and the whole health of women employees due to the fact that they address issues such as the maternity leave, the support provided on a daily basis for the children, and most importantly the eradication of the gender-based violence at workplace.

Next to that, the inclusion of labor rights of women garment workers is a pressing issue that need to be addressed by expanding social protection mechanisms, which happen to be inaccessible to the marginalized members of the society. Such embracing may include installing a wide range of social security programs that, among other things, provide wealth accidental funds, health insurance and pensions for the old age (Hossain et al., 2021, Light Castle Partners, 2023). Such measures perform the pivotal role of protecting women workers

from the instability and uncertainty that arise in the economic environment thus helping them to withstand the shocks and later resume their livelihood activities during the time of crisis.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

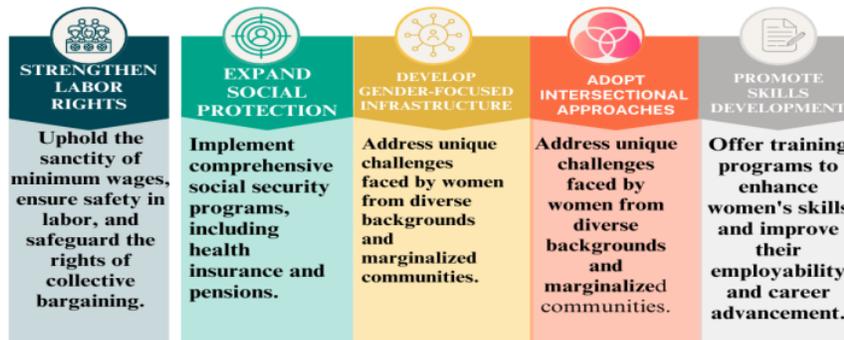


Figure 4 : Policy Recommendations

Moreover, governments must identify and prioritize interventions in the field of gender-focused infrastructure development and services, which are more aligned to the requirements of women workers in the RMG industry. This could be through setting up affordable and easily accessible childcare facilities, ensuring provision of safe and reliable transport mechanisms and advancing health services targeted for the women in the workplace (Shamsuddin, 2015; The Daily Star, 2020). Such interventions can significantly alleviate the burden of unpaid care work and improve the overall well-being and productivity of women in the industry.

It is important to note that the challenges faced by women garment workers are often intersectional in nature, with gender intersecting with factors such as class, migration status, and ethnicity. Policymakers must adopt a holistic, intersectional approach that recognizes and addresses the unique barriers and vulnerabilities experienced by women workers from diverse backgrounds (Kabir et al., 2021; Uddin, 2020). This may involve targeted initiatives to support marginalized communities, such as the provision of language classes, skills training, and legal assistance.

The potential for the RMG sector to serve as a model for women's empowerment and sustainable development in other industries and contexts should not be overlooked. By implementing comprehensive, gender-responsive policies and interventions in the RMG sector, policymakers can demonstrate the transformative impact of investing in the resilience and

agency of women workers. This, in turn, can inspire similar efforts in other sectors, contributing to the broader goal of achieving gender equality and inclusive economic growth.

In conclusion, the COVID-19 pandemic has underscored the urgent need for policy interventions that prioritize the rights, well-being, and empowerment of women workers in Bangladesh's RMG sector. By addressing the intersectional challenges faced by these women, policymakers can not only support their resilience and recovery but also pave the way for a more equitable and sustainable future within the industry and beyond.

24 Financial Literacy and Economic Empowerment Programs

Improving financial literacy and economic empowerment programmes for women workers in the RMG sector can have far-reaching consequences:

- a. **Savings and investment:** Programmes that teach basic financial management can assist employees in saving money and making sound investment decisions. The World Bank (2021) discovered that financial literacy programmes raised savings rates by up to 25% among Cambodian garment workers.
- b. **Entrepreneurship:** Economic empowerment programmes might encourage employees to become entrepreneurs. A BRAC (2022) research found that such programmes resulted in a 15% rise in small company development among former RMG workers in Bangladesh.
- c. **Economic resilience:** Financial knowledge can boost workers' economic resilience during a crisis. According to the Asian Development Bank (2021), garment workers who have basic financial literacy are 30% less likely to slip into poverty amid economic shocks.

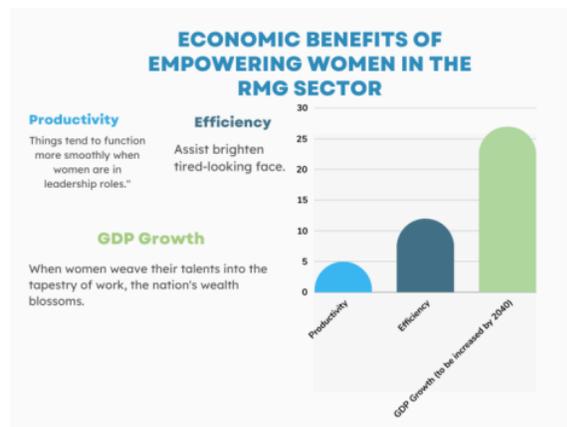


Figure 5 : Economic resilience

- d. Career advancement:** Understanding financial principles might help employees make better career choices. According to a study conducted by the International Labour Organisation (2020), financially literate workers are 20% more likely to pursue skill development opportunities.

3. CONCLUSION

At the end of this broadly researched literature review, it was found that sexuality in relation to migration among the South Asian diasporas is presented multifariously in their literature with a concern on contemporary stories about Bangladesh women working in the ready-made garment (RMG) branch during the COVID-19 pandemic and its aftermaths. These conclusions have shown that the intricate relationship between self, place, and the arena of diverseness displayed in the literature of South Asian diaspora writers is represented by the examples of works of those writers.

The study has pointed out the tremendously positive impact RMG sector has on the life of women in Bangladesh as a means of economic and social empowerment by increasing the number of female employed in the industry and fighting against gender stereotypes. Nevertheless, the COVID-19 crisis has been very harmful for such population groups, accelerating already existing inequalities and making the girls more vulnerable, for example, they might lose their job or get less salary, due to the conditions such as working at home in addition to gender-based violence threats. Amidst all the mentioned difficulties, the Bangladeshi women having the ability to cope with and stand against the situation of falling back of RMG sector in post pandemic period have been remarkable. Using their combined strength by organizing local campaigns and asserting on themselves the power and agency to change their and the industry's gender stereotypes and power structures, the women have not only recuperated their lives and their livelihoods, but they have also changed the status quo. Their tales of resisting the obstacle and standing for their rights mean much in the battle for women's empowerment and social change. Such a fight is not only with the South Asian diaspora but in the global affairs as well.

The results obtained in this literature review proves the imperative of copyright policies which are all encompassing in nature that deals with the factual scenario of the intersectional concerns faced by female workers in RMG sector. These measures include, among others, the popularization of labor rights, establishment of social protection schemes and the investment in gender-sensitive infrastructure and services. Through a whole host of comprehensive solutions focusing on intersectionalities, policy makers may stand by the transformation of

women workers into self-reliant and empowered individuals, along with RMG sector's industries becoming the source of inspiration for the other industries in terms of inclusivity and sustainability.

I think the future research on the topic of migration and sexuality within South Asian diaspora literatures should be about the various narratives of those people and still evolving but their focus should be on the most vulnerable communities and the intersections of their various identities like gender, class, and ethnicity. Moreso, Longitudinal studies can be done to follow how women that are front liners in the RMG Industry will be effected in the long run by the COVID-19 pandemic and the succeeding impacts of policies adopted in that sector.

Thus, the conclusion of the article illustrates that women of Bangladesh is capable to withstand, resist and change the work condition of readymade garment industry after the pandemic. Their stories manifest just how much agency and courage are occupied by diasporic subjects who struggle against the negation of theirs, creating a new way of perceiving the world and advancing an equally fair and tolerant tomorrow. The voices of these experienced personalities can be further known to the world and the policy makers can continue the support for the empowerment of women as well as social changes, both within the Southern Asian diaspora and beyond. Thus, scholars and policymakers take part in the preparation of these voices for women advocacy.

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