



Gender Norms and the Potential for Transformational Change in the Bangladesh Garment Industry

November 2024



Introduction

Harmful gender norms, combined with factors specific to the garment industry, increase the risk and prevalence of gender-based violence and harassment (GBVH) against women garment workers in Bangladesh, while at the same time preventing the problem from being reported and obstructing efforts to tackle it.

In recent years, GBVH in the garment industry has received increased recognition amid growing awareness of the problem as a broader societal issue. Yet little attention has been devoted to understanding the role of gender norms as an underlying factor contributing to GBVH, alongside other structural barriers, such as the lack of policies prohibiting sexual harassment in the workplace or mechanisms to redress the harm suffered by survivors.

Given that gender norms are reinforced at all levels of the garment industry—from person-to-person interactions between management and workers to the lack of women in leadership positions—collaborative action by buyers, brands, suppliers, and practitioners alike is needed to create transformational change by addressing not just the symptoms but also the root causes of GBVH.

It is well known that survivors of sexual violence and harassment at work are predominantly women. GBVH can cause physical, psychological, sexual, and economic harm to survivors and witnesses,¹ as well as have a negative impact on business performance and reputation. Gender inequality makes GBVH both more prevalent and more acceptable. Workplace sexual violence and harassment is rooted in unequal gender norms that are present both in factories as well as in other spheres of life.

In Bangladesh, GBVH is normalized at home and at work, meaning that it is understood as both typical and acceptable behavior. Key norms that drive GBVH in this context are male authority, dominance over women's bodies, and showing toughness to demonstrate masculinity.² For instance, many men use verbal abuse to demonstrate their authority over women—particularly if women have challenged men's authority in some way. Rape is a grave example of men demonstrating dominance over women's bodies. Social and gender norms impact many individual and workplace behaviors, ranging from a woman's perceived and actual safety to leave the house and commute to work; whether she has control over the money she earns; whether and how she is heard, respected, and promoted at work; and the type, severity, and response to GBVH in the workplace.

What is a gender norm?

Norms are the unwritten rules of behaviour that most people accept and abide by. Gender norms tell people how to act, express themselves, and interact with others based on their gender, inside and outside of their homes. There are often severe consequences for challenging gender norms, including GBVH, so many will still conform to norms even if they do not personally agree with them. For instance, a gender norm present in many parts of the world is that women should be seen and not heard. When women speak up against GBVH, their behaviour is going against this norm, and they are regularly sanctioned for this – through firing, through increased workload, and stigma even by other workers.



GBVH is exacerbated in the garment industry by structural factors that increase women's risk while also preventing reporting and prosecution. These factors include inadequate legal framework, factory policies and management systems, insufficient skills in factory management to prevent, address, and remediate such issues and lack of trusted grievance mechanisms and processes. Additional challenges include poor working conditions, high production pressure, low levels of unionization and reduced social dialogue spaces.

Many GBVH interventions in garment factories in Bangladesh aim to build a policy environment for grievance and redressal mechanisms while also shifting individuals' knowledge and attitudes to change their behaviors. But the gender norms that influence GBVH are often not fully understood or addressed. With the understanding that gender norms influence GBVH prevalence and impact the effectiveness of prevention and remediation methods in Bangladesh, it is critical to tackle these norms to achieve change.

In this brief focused on the workplace, we discuss evidence from [RISE Respect](#)—a program to promote gender equality and prevent GBVH—gathered alongside partners [Mamata](#) and Network for Research and Training ([NRT](#)) as part of RISE's May 2024 Bangladesh Norms Analysis. Data were collected through in-depth interviews (IDIs) and focus group discussions (FGDs) with 84 participants, including women and men workers and managers. The exercise sought to rapidly identify and analyze the gender norms that facilitate perpetration of GBVH in the garment industry and block workers' ability to utilize reporting and grievance mechanisms.

Data from the 2022 RISE Respect Bangladesh Needs Assessment, by [Consiglieri Private, Ltd.](#), also informs this report. This assessment was conducted to understand the current GBVH situation in the garment sector and explore ways RISE can contribute to addressing it. Data were gathered from 92 participants through workshops, IDIs and FGDs engaging women and men workers, managers, anti-harassment committee (AHC) members and local community leaders. In both 2024 and 2022, data collection took place in community settings and within workplaces across the main garment zones in Tongi, Gazipur, Mirpur and Narayanganj.

These findings, alongside RISE Respect latest programming experience (engaged with more than 19,000 workers across nine factories), provide the basis for recommendations for buyers, brands, practitioners, and suppliers who have joined the fight to end GBVH in the garment sector in Bangladesh.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This report was developed by Isadora Loreto, Anne Sprinkel, Smita Nimilita and Shukrana Ahmed, with inputs from Christine Svarer, Lucie Goulet, Sreya Nath and Subindu Garkhel.

RISE would like to thank all the women and men workers and other participants who shared their opinions and experience with us in confidence.

RISE would also like to thank the following organizations for contributing their time and expertise: Mamata, Network for Research and Training, Consiglieri Private, Ltd., ActionAid Bangladesh, and Karmojibi Nari.

Image credits: RISE

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How Norms Enable GBVH in Factories and Sustain the Problem

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My supervisor one day started screaming at me for a production-related issue. He used slang, abusive words, and threatened me. I went to the manager to file a complaint. The manager told me that the supervisor is under pressure and it's normal to get angry. The manager also said that I should say sorry to the supervisor. I left my job that day and didn't go back.

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Men in Positions of Authority: Power and Control

The underlying gender norms that drive GBVH across regions and workplaces are principally those that define masculinity in terms of men being physically strong, leaders, providers, managers, and decision-makers—both inside and outside the home.

The gender norms for women, on the other hand, are that they are viewed as physically and mentally weak, are expected to be obedient and not challenge men in their roles and decisions, take care of the home and children, and limit their work outside the home to more menial and/or feminine roles. These norms directly impact the jobs women are hired into in the garment industry. For instance, the notion that women have “nimble fingers” has been critical in driving women participating in the garment industry into manual jobs that involve sewing. This has facilitated large-scale labor force participation but also kept women in lower-level and sewing roles without opportunities for advancement³ to more technical jobs or horizontal mobility to

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Workers don’t work properly if
there is no yelling or shouting.”

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other departments which could offer better positions. Occupational gender segregation, the unequal distribution of female and male workers across and within job types⁴, is prevalent in garment factories in Bangladesh. Being in lower-level and specific jobs with limited opportunities for

advancement increases women workers’ risk of being the target of GBVH, puts them in situations where they are more vulnerable to harsher and more violent forms of abuse, and decreases their ability to utilize grievance and justice mechanisms.

Women and men workers alike attribute many forms of GBVH, especially verbal harassment and abuse, to the fact that men

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I was a committee member in a factory, once I saw a supervisor slap an old woman. When I protested, the supervisor said, ‘You think you become so powerful by taking some training, I will show you, just wait.’ When I came back from [maternity] leave, I observed they kept changing my floor, my work and I realized after a while that they were doing this because I protested. They made my work life miserable, and I had to leave the job eventually. The factory had all sorts of policies, but those are just for show.

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hold the positions of authority within factories. Management positions are overwhelmingly held by men, while line worker positions, particularly related to sewing, are held by women.

Workers from all groups interviewed in the Norms Analysis rationalized abusive behavior as the result of line supervisors’ and management’s stress and the responsibility they hold to meet production deadlines. The gender divide within factories reinforces this power dynamic and prevents women workers from speaking up to authority and against abuse. Speaking up would challenge male managers’ and supervisors’ traditional role as decision-makers and women’s traditional role as obedient workers. Speaking up could also have severe consequences for women, such as being subjected to further abuse, having their work assignments changed—either by being moved to a different line, receiving more work, or being made to work overtime—or even being fired.

Culture of Silence: the Shame, Blame, and Stigma Faced by Survivors

All groups of women interviewed in the Norms Analysis confirmed that speaking up against verbal and sexual harassment is not common.

Low understanding of what constitutes harassment and abuse among men and women workers alike can block reporting, but when something is correctly identified and reported as GBVH, women’s own reactions to and support for reporting remain mixed due to gender norms and a culture of impunity.

Many women privately supported speaking up against verbal harassment, but many women also viewed it as unnecessarily combative because such behavior is commonplace among male supervisors. This was especially true among older women workers (aged 30 and up). These older women workers involved in the Norms Analysis approximated that 70% of women working in factories wanted to speak up against verbal harassment but feared losing their job; 20% accepted it as normal behavior that does not merit a complaint; and 10% protested and/or filed a formal complaint.

In both the 2022 and 2024 studies, male workers were resistant to talk about harassment and violence, especially when it was sexual in nature. Furthermore, many male supervisors denied that harassment occurred in their factory or other factories. The Norms Analysis found that male workers, supervisors, and Welfare Officers at factories were aware of the foundational government guidelines, their own factories’ policies, and the support mechanisms for GBVH survivors. However, these mechanisms, which were meant to be protective, actually reinforced the norm of silence, allowing men to ignore the existence of GBVH in factories. For instance, the Norms Analysis found that the zero-tolerance policy for sexual harassment led

men to not report the violence when they witness it because the consequences are so severe. That is one reason cases are not reported, and if there are no known reported cases, men—and male management in particular—can claim that GBVH is not occurring in their factory. Even when male workers did acknowledge the reality of GBVH in their factory, supervisors were reluctant to speak up against it due to their solidarity with other men in general and other supervisors in particular—even if they viewed harassment as “immoral” and unacceptable.

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Sexual harassment does not happen to good women.

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This silence is deeply rooted in harmful gender norms that result in survivor-blaming. There is a perception that women can avoid any harassment if they are careful enough, which leads to the notion that the survivor let the harassment happen to her and is thus responsible for the incident. This means that speaking up calls the survivor’s honor into question because most people—including other women workers—assume that the survivor, especially when she is younger, had some part in it or “invited” the abuse in some way. Even survivors’ families are unlikely to blame the male supervisor in the situation and/or to believe the woman when she discloses the harassment or abuse to her husband.



Survivor-blaming was present among workers, anti-harassment committee members, and management in the 2022 Needs Assessment, regardless of their gender. In all the instances of sexual harassment, female survivors were blamed for not being able to prevent such incidents. As a result, survivors usually deny the harassment for fear of social humiliation and blame. Furthermore, rumors about the woman involved spread among workers within gathering spaces (e.g., washroom, dining area, restroom, work floor inside the factory, and tea stalls outside the factory). Instead of complaining, the survivor chooses to leave the job in most cases of sexual harassment.

The personal shame imposed by fellow workers and management was particularly impactful for younger women who said the lack of support dissuaded them from reporting and speaking up against GBVH. If co-workers were likely to spread rumors about them when the incident is reported, assume it was their “fault,” and not place any blame on the supervisor who perpetrated the offense, it would be unlikely the survivor would support a protest or complaint. This leads some co-workers to actively counsel women not to report sexual harassment in order to protect their honor.

The consequences for breaking these norms of silence and speaking up were clear. While women workers reported that keeping quiet about an incident was mostly due to this shame, they also mentioned other reasons for not speaking up: the risk of losing their job is high and the perpetrator may even inform another factory, lowering the survivor’s chances of getting another job.

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In cases of sexual harassment, it is the women who lose their social dignity.

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Call to Action: What Practitioners, Buyers, and Suppliers Must Do To End GBVH in the Garment Industry in Bangladesh

RISE supports progress, not just for the individual worker, but for women workers collectively, and thus recognizes the importance of addressing restrictive gender norms as they manifest in GBVH in the workplace. Addressing gender norms requires not just practitioners, but also brands and suppliers themselves to understand and address the root causes of GBVH and to invest in the systems and processes that can help prevent and remediate the problem. As awareness of GBVH in the Bangladesh garment sector has risen, the moment calls for collaborative action within the ecosystem to address not just the symptoms but also the root causes of this complex problem.



RECOMMENDATIONS FOR Practitioners

Alongside strengthening anti-harassment policy, **identify other factors that might be keeping women silent regarding GBVH**, such as patriarchal gender norms, through qualitative analysis that aims to identify behaviors that constitute GBVH, what happens when women speak up against abuse and why. **Use this information to tailor project activities to address the most pertinent norms and attitudes in each context.**

Through programming:

- 1 Increase gender equitable attitudes across the factory population**, particularly women's gender-equitable attitudes related to "acceptability of violence," to combat shame. In addition, increase men's disapproval of sexual harassment as "immoral," which could potentially weaken the most severe consequences younger women reported for using grievance mechanisms and challenging norms that keep them silent.
- 2 Support factories to put in place robust mechanisms to safeguard against reprisals** for reporting and/or supporting workers who report GBVH. The consequences for going against these norms that promote silence are clear and keep norms in place that promote GBVH, so programming must anticipate retaliation.
- 3 Support collective action against harassment and abuse.** This starts with critical reflective dialogue on gender and power and women workers identifying their allies and asking for their public support. This requires bringing workers and managers together to jointly solve the problem.
- 4 Capture data** that measures change in the attitudes, behaviors, and norms of both factory workers and management that drive GBVH. This data contains important indicators of short-term and longer-term progress, as well as systemic change that is required to end GBVH in the garment sector.

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RECOMMENDATIONS FOR Buyers and Brands

- 1 **Seek to understand the root causes of GBVH**, the impact of gender inequality on workers' well-being and productivity, combined with the industry's structural challenges, and address them comprehensively.
- 2 **Reflect on the active role that brands can play** in the prevention and remediation of GBVH, including by 1) engaging with factories on GBVH prevention and remediation beyond regular audits by integrating a discussion on the gender norms prevalent in the sector, and 2) identifying brands own purchasing practices that can create top-down pressure and exacerbate inequitable gender norms within factories, enabling GBVH and working against brands' own policies.
- 3 **Encourage collective action and combat fragmented, one-off approaches**, by using existing buyer and brand platforms within the industry to raise awareness of what is working, where, and how norms are addressed in GBVH programming.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR Suppliers

- 1 **Implement comprehensive workforce and management training** including by 1) providing gender training to increase understanding that we all hold biases, and gender norms affect how we see the world, and 2) educating managers and workers on what is and is not acceptable behavior in the factory and constitutes GBVH. Leaders, such as managers, are responsible for upholding and promoting norms that prevent and respond to GBVH in the workplace, and thus have a unique opportunity to create a healthy work environment, free from GBVH.
- 2 **Implement GBVH policies and appropriate grievance mechanisms to enable workers to report such behaviors, without fear of reprisal.** Providing access to grievance mechanisms, including safeguard for reprisal, is another central part of a leader's role to both protect survivors and the factory's reputation.
- 3 **Weave a commitment towards understanding the root causes of GBVH and providing a working environment that is free from harassment and violence** through the company values and culture, policies, risks assessment and prevention plans.

About RISE

RISE is a global platform to catalyze collective action at scale for the benefit of women workers and gender equality in the global supply chain. To date, RISE partners have jointly deployed more than 7,000 training programs with more than 5 million workers, resulting in increased skills, knowledge, and confidence. RISE combines four organizations with more than 15 years' experience in implementing women's empowerment programs in global supply chains, including CARE, BetterWork, BSR's HER project, and the PACE program by GAP Inc.

What is RISE Respect?

RISE Respect works with buyers, suppliers, and workers to look at the various levels of the system to guarantee a holistic and robust approach toward inverting power imbalances and achieving more gender equal workplaces free of violence and harassment.



ENDNOTES

- 1 C190 - Violence and Harassment Convention, 2019 (No. 190), ILO. Accessed July 10, 2024 at https://normlex.ilo.org/dyn/normlex/en/f?p=NORMLEXPUB:12100:0::NO::P12100_ILO_CODE:C190
- 2 ALiGN. "Gender-Based Violence." Align Platform. Accessed August 9, 2024 at <https://www.alignplatform.org/gender-based-violence>
- 3 Stephanie Barrientos, Cambridge University Press, 2019; "Gender and Work in Global Value Chains: Capturing the Gains?". Accessed September 12, 2024 at [Gender and Work in Global Value Chains](#)
- 4 CARE, 2021; "Worker Wellbeing Project in Bangladesh, Indonesia and Vietnam". Accessed September 20, 2024 at [End-line-Evaluation_CARE_Sept-2021_Target.pdf](#)

DISCLAIMER

Since the sample size in this research is limited, further studies are recommended to capture additional, nuanced insights and provide a deeper analysis of the issue.

To protect participants' confidentiality, specific factories or community locations cannot be disclosed.