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Psychosocial Stressor and Coping Mechanism among Female Ready-Made Garment (RMG) Workers in Dhaka, Bangladesh

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ABSTRACT

Post-economic liberalization in Bangladesh after 1975 led to the emergence of an export-oriented Ready-Made Garment (RMG) industry, predominantly employing women. This paper analyzes the stressors faced by these workers and their coping mechanisms from a mental health perspective, utilizing Hans Selye's General Adaptation Syndrome (GAS) model. Departing from existing research that often adopts a clinical lens, this study takes a holistic approach to explore the multifaceted mental health challenges encountered by female RMG workers, situating them within the broader socioeconomic and structural context of the industry. The study identifies and examines a range of stressors inherent to the RMG work environment, including exploitative labor practices, precarious employment conditions, social stigma, and familial pressures. Furthermore, it investigates the diverse coping mechanisms adopted by women workers, which encompass individual resilience strategies and collective solidarity initiatives within their communities and workplaces. In contrast to conventional paradigms, this research emphasizes the need to consider the mental health of workers not only at an individual level but also in relation to its interconnections with broader socioeconomic determinants that shape their well-being. By situating mental health within the nexus of globalization, labor market dynamics, and gendered power structures, the findings provide critical insights into the nuanced complexities of mental health challenges faced by the women. The implications of this research extend beyond academic discourse, offering significant relevance for policymakers, practitioners, and stakeholders engaged in social and economic development, public health interventions, and labor rights advocacy. The study underscores the imperative of adopting a holistic approach to address the mental health needs of marginalized communities in the garment industry and beyond, and offers actionable insights to inform evidence-based policy interventions and grassroots initiatives aimed at promoting mental health resilience and socioeconomic empowerment among working women.

1. Background and context

The economic liberalization in Bangladesh post-1975 gave rise to an export- RMG industry (Majumder & Begum, 2000; Rahman & Siddiqui, 2015). The industry primarily employed women as workers because they could be paid less and were perceived as less likely to resist or form unions (Kabeer, 2004; Siddiqi, 2009). This allowed factory owners to maintain a steady workforce at a low cost without facing much resistance (Ahmed & Nathan, 2014). The conditions of work for these employees are informal in nature, contributing to their precarious working environment (Islam & McPhail, 2011). The growth of the RMG sector has been heavily

influenced by the political economy and power dynamics within Bangladesh, where elite perceptions and external interventions have shaped labor markets and the industry's trajectory (Hossain, 2012). The trajectory of the garment industry since its establishment has been shaped by the implementation of new policies by the government, pressure from international buyers, and periodic protests from workers (Yunus & Yamagata, 2012; Rock, 2003). In recent years, significant policy shifts have been observed in the RMG sector, including the revision of the minimum wage structure and stricter labor law enforcement to address the concerns raised by

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international stakeholders following incidents like the Rana Plaza building collapse in 2013 (Ahmed & McCarthy, 2018).

Recent policy reforms in the RMG sector have been heavily influenced by international pressure and global supply chain regulations. In response to the Rana Plaza disaster, the Bangladesh government, in collaboration with international brands and labor unions, established the Accord on Fire and Building Safety in 2013 and the Alliance for Bangladesh Worker Safety. These initiatives focused on conducting factory inspections, improving building safety, and ensuring compliance with fire safety regulations. The Accord was succeeded by the Ready-Made Garment Sustainability Council (RSC) in 2020, which now oversees safety inspections and compliance measures, aiming to establish long-term sustainability in labor practices (International Labour Organization, 2020).

2. Review of literature

2.1. Historical and structural foundations of Bangladesh's RMG sector

After Bangladesh gained its independence in 1971, the newly formed government enacted the Bangladesh Industrial Enterprises Order, which nationalized privately-owned textile factories and created a state-owned enterprise (SOE) called the Bangladesh Textile Mills Corporation (BTMC) (Islam, 1996). This move led the government to acquire 85% of the capital assets in the industrial sector, thereby significantly altering the economic landscape. As a result, many well-established private businesses were transferred to state ownership, leading to the decline of traditional business owners and the emergence of a new class of entrepreneurs post-economic liberalization in 1975 (Ahmed, 2004). The mid-1970s saw a reconfiguration of Bangladesh's economic governance, as the military-led administration moved away from state-centred development towards neo-liberal reforms, with lasting implications for state-market relations (Ahmed, 2004). By the 1980s, Bangladesh, under the influence of the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund (IMF), implemented structural adjustment programs that expanded the domain of private capital and disrupted traditional labor strongholds (Muhammad, 2011). During this period, the global reorganization of production systems resulted in the outsourcing of labor-intensive industries, such as RMG, to countries like Bangladesh, where labor costs were substantially lower (Bair, 2010).

The 1980s economic liberalization coincided with global shifts in production systems in advanced capitalist economies, which began reorganizing into small-scale, decentralized, and more flexible economic units (Chen, 2012). This trend led to the outsourcing of production to countries like Bangladesh, where production costs were significantly lower. Consequently, many standard jobs were transformed into non-standard, informal jobs,

characterized by hourly wages, few benefits, or piece-rate compensation (Portes, Castells, & Benton, 1989). These reforms laid the groundwork for export-oriented industrialisation, including the rapid growth of the ready-made garment sector, within which labour precarity, gendered exploitation, and psychosocial stress became structurally embedded. The informal economy thus became a permanent, yet dependent, feature of capitalist development (Portes et al., 1989). During this period, the export-oriented RMG industry emerged with substantial policy and material support from both the Bangladeshi government and international financial institutions (Muhammad, 2011).

The RMG industry attracted significant foreign investment due to Bangladesh's competitive advantage, which was based on two factors. First, Bangladesh has a large proportion of its population at or below working age, offering a demographic dividend for economic productivity. Second, the implementation of labor laws in the country is weak, allowing for the informal employment of workers with minimal wages and benefits (Absar, 2002). These factors resulted in low labor costs, which became the main attraction for foreign investors. However, the gendered nature of employment in the RMG sector has also perpetuated inequalities, as women continue to face exploitative labor practices and limited opportunities for upward mobility within global supply chains (Ruwanpura, 2016). Approximately 90% of workers in the garment industry are women (Absar, 2002). Industrialists favored hiring women because they could be paid lower wages than men and were perceived as less likely to form unions or resist exploitative practices (Kabeer, 2004; Rahman, 2006). Many of these women are uneducated migrants from rural areas with limited skills and experience, making them vulnerable to exploitation. Employment in the RMG sector provides these women with better wages and higher status in their families and communities compared to jobs in domestic service (Absar, 2002).

The working conditions, however, in most garment factories in Dhaka are atrocious. There are no formal job contracts, which means the terms and conditions for work remain ambiguous, and all the power is in the employer's hands (Hossain et al., 2018). Women often work more than 8 hours a day, sometimes without any holidays on weekends when there are large shipments to be delivered (Akter et al., 2017). The factories are mostly rented buildings and houses that were not built for the purpose of running a factory, as land is expensive and space is limited in the city (Ahmed & McCarthy, 2018). The poor quality of buildings is evident from the 2013 building collapse in the greater Dhaka area, in which more than 1,000 workers died (Butler, 2013). Inside the factories, the space is congested with many machines, leaving very little room for workers to move (Kabeer, 2004). There are extremely uneven ratios of workers to toilets (Jamaly & Wickramanayake, 1996). Fire protection systems in the

factories are also inadequate, as evidenced by the 2012 fire at the Tazreen Fashion factory in the outskirts of Dhaka, which resulted in over 100 fatalities. Workers are ideally supposed to have an 8-hour shift on 6 days a week. According to the Factory Act of 1965, a woman can work overtime only up till 8 p.m.; however, in reality, to meet delivery deadlines, they often work up till 3 a.m. and report back at 8 a.m. the next morning (Absar, 2002). There are no formal job contracts given to these workers, leaving the terms and conditions for the job ambiguous and giving employers the power to control employment status (Muhammad, 2011).

Sometimes workers work an entire month without a single holiday, even though the Factory Act stipulates that no employee can work more than 10 days consecutively without a break (Aker et al., 2017). A minimum of one-hour break after every 6 hours of work is required to enhance productivity, but only half-hour breaks are given regardless of the length of the shift (Bearnot, 2013). According to the Minimum Wage Act (1993), unskilled, semi-skilled, skilled, and highly skilled workers should be paid different rates; however, in practice, most workers receive the salary of an unskilled worker regardless of their job (Bearnot, 2013). Employers manipulate the rules to their advantage by keeping workers on probation to avoid eligibility for higher wages and by miscalculating overtime, resulting in widespread exploitation (Hossain et al., 2018).

2.2. The intersection of gender, mental health, and systemic inequalities in Bangladesh's RMG industry

The dynamics of gender and labor within the globalized economy are crucial for understanding the systemic challenges faced by female workers in the RMG sector. Benería, Berik, and Floro (2015) argue that globalization has exacerbated gender-based inequalities by embedding patriarchal structures within labor markets and fostering precarious work environments for women. In the context of Bangladesh's RMG sector, these dynamics manifest as exploitative labor practices and limited opportunities for women to advance economically or socially. The treatment of women's labour as a low-cost and compliant resource contributes to ongoing structural marginalisation and weakens their agency and negotiating power within the workforce. Integrating these perspectives highlights the need for policies that not only address immediate labor grievances but also challenge the broader socio-economic structures perpetuating gender inequality in global supply chains (Benería et al., 2015).

The intersectionality of gender, labor, and globalization is deeply ingrained in modern economic structures. Connell (2005) emphasizes that constructions of masculinity underpin power hierarchies and reinforce gendered disparities in labor, particularly in male-dominated sectors. Similarly, Standing (2011) highlights the precarious nature of contemporary labor markets, arguing that women are disproportionately relegated to insecure, low-paid work. These observations resonate with

Bangladesh's RMG sector, where female workers often navigate systemic inequities that compromise their economic empowerment. Moreover, the undervaluation of care work and the gendered division of labor extend to the global scale, as discussed by Ehrenreich and Hochschild (2003). The commodification of women's labor reinforces gendered inequalities under the guise of economic efficiency (Elson, 1999). Fraser's (2013) critique of neoliberalism adds another layer, linking the marginalization of women in labor to broader economic policies that prioritize profit over equity. Acker's (1990) theory of gendered organizations claims workplace practices reinforce hierarchical gender norms. In the context of RMG factories, this manifests in practices that not only devalue women's contributions but also limit their mobility within organizational structures. Integrating these perspectives underscores the need for systemic interventions that challenge the patriarchal underpinnings of global labor markets and advocate for equitable, gender-sensitive policies.

The connection between labor conditions and mental health has been extensively discussed in the literature, with significant attention to the gendered dimensions of workplace stress. Karasek and Theorell's (1990) Demand-Control Model highlights the interplay between workplace demands, autonomy, and stress. The model posits that high job demands coupled with low decision-making autonomy can result in significant mental health challenges, while high autonomy in demanding jobs may mitigate stress. Such insights are pivotal in understanding how structural inequalities and labor dynamics intersect to affect mental well-being. Lund et al. (2010) emphasize the cyclical relationship between poverty, labor precarity, and mental health, particularly in low- and middle-income countries. Huang and Sverke's (2007) research on women's occupational health further elaborates on how workplace stress and gendered role responsibilities disproportionately impact women's mental health. These frameworks collectively illuminate the gendered nature of labor-related mental health disparities, providing critical perspectives for understanding broader implications in global and local contexts.

To understand the broader context of labor and gender dynamics, it is crucial to consider the impact of globalization and international buyer pressures, particularly in sectors like garment manufacturing. The global shift towards low-wage labor, particularly in developing countries, has been well-documented in the literature. Appelbaum and Lichtenstein (2016) highlight how international buyers exert significant pressure on local industries, driving down wages and labor standards, with direct implications for worker well-being as seen in the RMG sector in Bangladesh. Friedman (2005) explores how the flattening of the global economy affects labor markets worldwide, particularly in developing nations facing competitive pressures from multinational corporations. In the garment industry in Bangladesh, the influence of international buyers on labor conditions is

particularly pronounced, as noted by Hossain (2016), who compares the effects of buyer power in Bangladesh and Vietnam. This global economic dynamic is further illuminated by Mayer (2014), who emphasizes the gendered impacts of international trade policies, particularly how women in developing countries bear the brunt of exploitative labor practices. These global processes, as discussed by Benería *et al.* (2015), intersect with gendered labor markets in developing countries, affecting women's mental health and well-being. As such, local labor conditions cannot be fully understood without considering the broader global economic forces at play, including the pressures from international buyers and the structures of global supply chains.

2.3. Research gap and study rationale

Despite extensive research on labour conditions and gendered inequalities in Bangladesh's ready-made garment (RMG) sector, there remains a clear lack of intersectional mental health studies that explore how women's psychosocial stress is shaped by overlapping workplace, social, and domestic pressures. Existing research primarily investigates physical working conditions, wage inequalities, or economic vulnerabilities (Kabir *et al.*, 2019). However, there is a lack of empirical work examining the psychosocial experiences of female RMG workers and the strategies they employ to cope with stress arising from both workplace demands and cultural expectations at home (Kabir *et al.*, 2022; Islam *et al.*, 2025). This study directly addresses this gap by contributing qualitative evidence on mental health and coping practices among women in Dhaka's garment sector (Dreher *et al.*, 2022)

Existing scholarship focuses heavily on economic and occupational aspects such as wages, safety, and compliance, while paying limited attention to the psychological and emotional wellbeing of workers (Kabir *et al.*, 2019). Recent research has identified psychosocial stressors including workplace bullying, inadequate supervisory support, and low trust, linking these to self-reported health complaints (Dreher *et al.*, 2022) and chronic physiological stress markers such as elevated hair-cortisol concentrations (Dreher *et al.*, 2023). Although several qualitative studies have examined harmful working conditions and their impact on health, few have investigated how women actively cope with these challenges or draw upon social and familial supports to manage stress (Kabir *et al.*, 2022; Islam *et al.*, 2025).

This study addresses these research gaps by adopting an intersectional and psychosocial framework to examine two core issues: first, the psychosocial stressor experienced by female RMG workers across workplace and household domains; and second, the coping mechanism they employ to navigate these intersecting pressures. By centering women's lived experiences through qualitative inquiry, this research provides context-specific evidence to inform worker-centred

mental health strategies and policy responses within Bangladesh's RMG sector (Dreher *et al.*, 2022).

3. Theoretical framework

This study employs Hans Selye's General Adaptation Syndrome (GAS) as the theoretical framework to examine the impact of psychosocial stressors on workers in the RMG sector.

While Hans Selye's General Adaptation Syndrome (GAS) has traditionally been used to explain the physiological stages of stress (Selye, 1956, 1976), its application in this study moves beyond the biomedical domain to encompass the psychosocial and sociostructural realities of female garment workers. The adaptation of GAS to the RMG sector is appropriate because the nature of garment work systemically generates chronic stress, arising from prolonged exposure to exploitative conditions such as low pay, excessive workload, and gendered power hierarchies (Hossain, 2016; Standing, 2011). In such a setting, stress is not episodic or situational but rather a structural inevitability embedded within the organization of labour itself. Therefore, models such as Lazarus and Folkman's (1984) Transactional Model of Stress and Coping, which emphasize individual cognitive appraisal and subjective interpretation, offer limited new insights, as the sources of stress in this context are shaped by enduring economic and institutional forces rather than individual perception. Similarly, while Karasek's (1990) Job Demand–Control Model effectively links strain to job autonomy and decision latitude, it does not sufficiently capture how gender, socioeconomic precarity, and cultural expectations intersect to intensify women's stress responses in patriarchal labour systems (Connell, 2005; Benería *et al.*, 2015). In this environment, GAS provides a more comprehensive lens for understanding how continuous exposure to structural and gendered stressors leads to physiological and psychological exhaustion, while still allowing for the interpretation of women's coping as an adaptive mechanism to sustained imbalance rather than isolated stress events.

4. Research objectives

The overall objective of the study was to understand the type of psycho-social stressors experienced by the women workers and their coping mechanisms. Following are the specific objectives:

- i. To examine the nature of work and working conditions in the garment factories.
- ii. To study the environment at home of the women workers.
- iii. To understand the types of psycho-social stressors experienced by the women workers and their ways of coping.

5. Research questions

- i. What are the psycho-social stressors faced by the female RMG workers in Dhaka, Bangladesh?

ii. What are the coping mechanisms utilized to deal with the psycho-social stressors experienced by the female RMG workers in Dhaka, Bangladesh?

6. Research methodology

This study adopted a qualitative approach to explore the psychosocial stressors and coping mechanisms experienced by female RMG workers in Dhaka, Bangladesh. Drawing from Hans Selye's General Adaptation Syndrome (GAS), the study conceptualized stress as a physiological and psychological response to environmental and psychosocial stressors in the workplace, such as poor working conditions, job insecurity, low wages, and gender discrimination (Selye, 1983). The framework guided the exploration of how these stressors, prevalent in the RMG sector, affect workers' mental and physical well-being, and how they adapt or cope with the demands placed on them.

The research focused on key areas relevant to mental health, gender dynamics, and labor conditions, which are often at the core of the psychosocial stressors encountered by female RMG workers (Lyon, 2000).

6.1. Sampling strategy

The study employed a purposive snowball sampling approach to recruit 15 female garment workers employed in different factories across Dhaka. This method was considered suitable because the target group represented a hard-to-reach and socially vulnerable workforce, often hesitant to participate in formal research due to workplace restrictions, fear of employer retaliation, and demanding work schedules (Noy, 2008; Atkinson & Flint, 2001). Initial participants were identified through trusted community contacts, and subsequent participants were recruited through peer referrals. This approach facilitated rapport-building and encouraged participants to share personal and sensitive experiences related to stress, coping, and wellbeing in a safe and trusting environment (Biernacki & Waldorf, 1981).

Although the use of snowball sampling may have introduced a degree of selection bias, it proved effective in fostering trust and openness among participants whose occupational settings are often shaped by power asymmetries and surveillance. The strategy also allowed the inclusion of women with diverse ages, marital statuses, and lengths of employment, ensuring variation in psychosocial experiences. While the sample size ($n = 15$) is relatively small and limits the generalizability of findings, it was adequate to achieve thematic depth and analytic adequacy within the study's qualitative exploratory focus, which seeks to generate contextual understanding rather than broad generalization (Guest et al., 2006).

Qualitative data were gathered through 15 in-depth interviews with female RMG workers, providing rich, context-specific insights into their lived experiences with stress and coping. The interviews aimed to uncover the underlying psychosocial stressors that workers face and

explore the strategies they employ to maintain equilibrium in a challenging work environment. In addition, two Key Informant Interviews (KIIs) were conducted with government officials and representatives from civil society organizations working in the garment industry to gain perspectives on broader issues of mental health, gender inequality, and labor rights (Goleman et al., 1993).

All interviews were audio-recorded, transcribed verbatim, and analyzed using thematic analysis. Thematic analysis allowed for identifying recurring themes related to stressors, adaptation, and coping strategies, enabling an in-depth understanding of the dynamic interaction between stress and worker well-being, as outlined in Selye's model of stress response (Selye, 1983). This methodological approach ensured that the voices of the workers were central in framing the discussion around workplace stress, gendered labor dynamics, and the broader psychosocial context of the garment industry. The in-depth interviews were conducted with the help of a semi-structured interview schedule. Observation was also used to collect data. An observation checklist was made to understand the conditions in the factories and at home. Out of 15 interviewees 14 work at the post of operator and 1 works at the post of sample-man. All the participants are migrants from different villages in Bangladesh. The below table further explains the demographic background of the women RMG workers interviewed for the purpose of this paper.

6.2. Limitations

This study used a purposive snowball sampling technique to access a hard-to-reach and potentially vulnerable workforce, which may limit generalizability. Additionally, the relatively small sample size ($n = 15$) reflects the qualitative exploratory nature of the research, prioritizing depth of psychosocial experience over numerical representation. While thematic saturation was achieved, the findings should be interpreted with caution, and future studies with larger and more diverse samples are recommended.

7. Findings and discussion

7.1. Participant characteristics

The interview sample consisted of fifteen women employed in the ready-made garment (RMG) sector in Dhaka. Participants ranged in age from 18 to 30 years (mean = 22.2 years), reflecting the relatively young demographic profile of the RMG workforce. The majority of participants were unmarried ($n = 9$), while five were married and one was divorced. Educational attainment was generally low, with most participants having completed schooling up to Class 5 or 6, although educational levels ranged from Class 5 to Class 12.

Participants' work experience in the garment industry varied from 1 to 10 years (mean = 5.9 years). All participants were employed as machine operators, except

Table 1: Demographic Background of the Interviewees
(The names of respondents have been changed to maintain confidentiality)

Name (Changed)	Age	Marital Status	Education Qualifications	No. of years in the Garment Industry	Designation	Salary /month (Taka)* data from 2015	Overtime Rate/Hour
Morium	18	Unmarried	Class: 5	4	Operator	6000	33
Shathi	20	Unmarried	Class: 6	9	Operator	6400	33
Shorna	18	Unmarried	Class: 12	1	Operator	5300	33
Farida	25	Married	Class: 8	8	Sample man	11000	0
Rahema	19	Unmarried	Class: 5	5	Operator	6450	36
Olima	21	Married	None	6	Operator	7000	40
Rani	30	Married	None	8	Operator	6000	32
Ruby	30	Divorced	None	10	Operator	6600	38
Parul	27	Married	Class: 7	6	Operator	6500	37
Anju	30	Married	Class: 5	10	Operator	6200	30
Jhumur	19	Unmarried	Class: 6	5	Operator	6600	38
Nahar	19	Married	Class: 8	4	Operator	6500	32
Shapla	20	Unmarried	Class: 8	3	Operator	6400	32
Tohura	20	Married	Class: 7	5	Operator	6500	32
Morjina	18	Married	Class: 5	1	Operator	5300	30

one who worked as a sample man. Monthly wages ranged from BDT 5,300 to BDT 11,000 (mean = BDT 6,583), while overtime compensation varied between BDT 30 and 40 per hour (mean = BDT 34.2). These figures highlight the limited financial resources available to workers despite long working hours and extended overtime.

7.2. Stressors experienced by women RMG workers

7.2.1. Physical and organisational stressors (micro-level)

Habit, defined as the automatic execution of behavior through repetition, has garnered heightened interest in the study of technology adoption. Research suggests that as users consistently interact with a system, their intention to utilize it intensifies, as the behavior transitions from being solely deliberative to more habitual. In the context of electronic ticketing, studies of railway systems suggest that habit is a key predictor of intention to use a ticket-reservation application. A study on Indian railway ticketing revealed habit, in conjunction with hedonic incentive and performance expectancy, as a key precursor to the intention to utilize the IRCTC Rail Connect service (Castanha *et al.*, 2022). Although limited research on e-ticketing focuses solely on habit, the extensive literature regarding digital payments and self-service technology indicates that habit substantially affects intention and usage behavior (Mansur *et al.*, 2018). Collectively, these data indicate that individuals who consistently book

travel tickets online are more likely to intend to purchase e-tickets, as their past behavior influences future intentions.

H7: Habit significantly influences passengers' intention to purchase tickets online. Participants consistently described factory work as physically demanding and repetitive. Operating sewing machines for prolonged periods, often in fixed sitting or standing postures, resulted in chronic pain, fatigue, and musculoskeletal problems. Workers reported limited opportunities for rest or recovery, even when experiencing illness. The inability to take breaks or sick leave without fear of reprimand or job loss intensified physical strain.

In addition, overtime work was frequently imposed without prior notice, particularly during shipment deadlines. Workers reported having little control over the length of their working day, which further exacerbated physical exhaustion and psychological stress.

7.2.2. Workplace hierarchies and control (Meso-level)

The factory environment was described as highly hierarchical, with workers occupying positions of minimal authority. Supervisory practices were reported to be strict and, in some cases, abusive. Several participants mentioned experiences of verbal harassment, intimidation, and, in some instances, sexual harassment by supervisors or managers. The constant pressure to meet production targets, combined with fear of dismissal, created a climate of insecurity and stress.

Workers described their labour as alienating, with limited awareness of the broader production process or the final destination of the garments they produced. This fragmentation of work contributed to a lack of ownership and diminished sense of pride in their labour.

7.2.3. Living conditions and urban precarity (Meso–Macro Level)

Migration from rural areas to urban industrial zones exposed workers to additional stressors beyond the workplace. Due to low wages, participants were compelled to live in marginal urban areas where rent was comparatively affordable. Housing arrangements typically involved single rented rooms in shared buildings with limited sanitation facilities and restricted access to kitchens and bathrooms.

For many workers, commuting involved long distances on foot, as paid transport was unaffordable. Even during illness, participants reported being unable to hire transport, which heightened both physical discomfort and psychological stress. Morjina explained:

“Previously I used to live with my aunt when I first came to Dhaka. The factory in which I got a job was very far from my aunt’s house, so every day I had to walk more than half an hour to reach my factory and again half an hour to come back. It was very tiring.”

Although housing conditions had marginally improved over time, privacy remained limited, particularly for married couples. The absence of private space strained marital relationships and contributed to ongoing stress.

7.2.4. Gendered Social Pressures and Stigma (Macro-level)

Participants reported experiencing significant social stigma associated with factory work. Garment employment was frequently perceived as morally suspect, particularly for unmarried women. Participants described being judged for working outside the home and for the perceived autonomy associated with factory employment. Shorna stated:

“People think girls working in garments are ‘not good’. But it’s just a job. We make clothes. There is nothing bad about that.”

This stigma affected marriage prospects for unmarried women and social standing for married women. Shathi described how her son felt ashamed of her occupation, which prevented her from participating in school-related activities. Such experiences reflect broader patriarchal norms that penalise women’s paid labour while normalising similar freedoms for men.

7.3. Coping mechanisms: constrained and adaptive responses

7.3.1. Behavioural coping

Participants reported enduring physical pain, fatigue, and illness in order to maintain employment. Skipping meals, working while unwell, and suppressing physical

discomfort were common strategies adopted to avoid job loss.

7.3.2. Social coping

Social support emerged as a critical coping mechanism. Married participants highlighted the importance of supportive husbands and in-laws who shared domestic responsibilities or assisted with childcare. Ruby explained: “My mother-in-law drops and picks up my son from school because I leave early and come back late.”

Unmarried women often relied on co-workers or relatives, particularly when family approval was initially absent.

7.3.3. Structural and institutional coping

Participants acknowledged improvements resulting from labour law reforms, including maternity leave, minimum wage increases, and enhanced factory safety standards. However, weak enforcement limited the protective impact of these measures. The introduction of mobile financial services such as bKash was identified as a significant institutional support, enabling workers to remit money home efficiently. Parul noted:

“Now I don’t have to ask anyone to take my money to the village. I can send it directly.”

7.3.4. Cognitive coping

Many participants adopted cognitive strategies characterised by acceptance and external attribution of control. Viewing hardship as inevitable or fate-driven allowed workers to cope with persistent stressors. This external locus of control reduced self-blame but also constrained perceptions of agency.

7.4. Interpreting stress through Hans Selye’s general adaptation syndrome

Hans Selye’s General Adaptation Syndrome (GAS) provides a useful framework for understanding women workers’ psychosocial stress experiences.

7.4.1. Alarm stage

Initial migration to urban factories and entry into industrial work triggered acute stress responses, including physical shock, fear, and anxiety.

7.4.2. Resistance stage

Over time, workers developed adaptive routines, social support systems, and cognitive coping mechanisms that enabled continued functioning despite ongoing stress.

7.4.3. Exhaustion stage

Prolonged exposure to stress without adequate recovery led to physical breakdown, chronic illness, marital abandonment, and workforce exit. Ruby’s experience of illness followed by abandonment and temporary withdrawal from employment exemplifies this stage. Similarly, Moriom described her mother’s exit from factory work due to chronic back pain.

7.5. Gendered implications and broader interpretation

The findings indicate that women's stress in the RMG sector is structurally produced rather than individually determined. The interaction of low wages, insecure employment, patriarchal norms, and inadequate social protection places women in prolonged states of physiological and psychological strain. While coping mechanisms enable short-term endurance, they do not mitigate long-term exhaustion. These findings align with existing research on labour precarity in export-oriented industries while extending it by foregrounding psychosocial depletion as a gendered outcome of sustained structural stress.

8. Recommendations to address the social determinants of health and improve the well-being of female RMG workers in Bangladesh

To comprehensively enhance the well-being of female ready-made garment (RMG) workers, this set of recommendations incorporates policies that promote gender equality, reduce social stigma, improve workplace culture, integrate mental health services, and align local practices with global standards.

8.1. Enhancing coping mechanisms for managing household responsibilities and employment stress through inclusion of men

- **Intersection:** Many women in the RMG sector bear the dual burden of employment and household responsibilities, such as caregiving and domestic chores, with limited male participation (International Labour Organization [ILO], 2020).

- **Impact:** This intersection compounds stress levels and affects their productivity, mental health, and coping strategies.

- **Policy Action:** Offering tax incentives or social benefits to families where men participate equally in caregiving could encourage this shift (World Economic Forum, 2024). Factories could also conduct educational workshops to reinforce the importance of equal responsibilities at home, helping to alleviate domestic burdens on female workers.

- **Example:** Inspired by the "HeForShe" campaign by UN Women (2020), Bangladesh can implement initiatives encouraging men to share household responsibilities. Promoting caregiving as a shared responsibility through public service campaigns and school workshops can challenge gender roles and reduce stress on female workers.

8.2. Removing stigma associated with female garment workers

- **Intersection:** The gendered nature of labor in the RMG sector places women in precarious work environments due to traditional societal norms and economic structures.

- **Impact:** Women are preferred in these jobs because they are perceived as compliant, less likely to unionize, and are paid lower wages than men (Kabear, 2004). This

perpetuates gender-based exploitation and limits upward mobility.

- **Community engagement:** School workshops and community programs could address negative stereotypes and foster positive attitudes toward working women. Highlighting the role of RMG workers in improving Bangladesh's Human Development Index (HDI) would emphasize their importance in the country's progress (UN Women, 2021).

- **Campaign example:** Bangladesh could follow Japan's "Womenomics" initiative, which promotes female workforce participation as essential for economic growth (World Economic Forum, 2024). A similar "Women at Work" campaign could showcase the contributions of female RMG workers to GDP growth and national development through media, public endorsements, and award programs.

8.3. Improving the workplace environment and transparency

- **Intersection:** As low-wage workers, female RMG employees have limited access to healthcare, mental health services, and education (ILO, 2020).

- **Impact:** Their socio-economic status restricts opportunities for advancement, reinforcing systemic inequalities and cycles of labor exploitation.

- **Collaborative work culture:** Establishing peer mentoring programs within factories can foster collaboration, creating a cohesive work environment. Encouraging competition between factories, rather than within them, could further reduce internal divisions and hostility.

- **Example of worker-inclusive practices:** Drawing inspiration from Spain's Mondragon Corporation, factory owners could implement employee advisory boards involving workers in company decisions about performance and future goals (UN Women, 2021). These practices would reduce workplace hierarchies and promote transparency.

8.4. Integrating mental health services through an intersectional approach by addressing gender, mental well-being, and social stigma

- **Intersection:** Poor labor conditions—such as long working hours, low wages, workplace harassment, and job insecurity—directly affect the mental health of female workers (Human Rights Watch, 2021).

- **Impact:** Chronic stress and burnout are common, but limited access to mental health support exacerbates these issues. The demanding nature of both work and household responsibilities leaves women with little time for self-care or recovery, contributing to emotional exhaustion.

- **Digital access to mental health support:** Mobile health platforms could supplement on-site services, ensuring workers have access to confidential mental health support anytime (ILO, 2020).

- **Program example:** Adopting practices from the ILO-IFC "Better Work" initiative, the Bangladesh Garment

Manufacturers and Exporters Association (BGMEA) could partner with mental health NGOs to offer on-site counseling and well-being workshops (Human Rights Watch, 2021).

This approach would provide workers with tools to manage stress effectively.

8.5. Strengthening labor laws and promoting global accountability

- **Intersection:** Bangladesh's reliance on global apparel supply chains pressures factory owners to cut costs, often at the expense of worker welfare (ILO, 2020).

- **Impact:** Weak enforcement of labor laws and minimal compliance with international standards exacerbate precarious working conditions. This system creates structural inequalities, where female workers are both exploited and marginalized within the global labor economy.

- **Global compliance and ethical certification:** Collaboration with international organizations such as the ILO can help strengthen labor standards. Factories obtaining Fair Trade or ethical certifications could gain access to global markets, encouraging sustainable growth and better working conditions (UN Women, 2021).

- **Example of unionization and labor law reform:** Bangladesh could adopt a simplified co-determination model, similar to Germany's, enabling workers to participate in company decisions through representation (World Economic Forum, 2024). Encouraging collective bargaining would improve grievance handling and reduce labor unrest.

9. Conclusion

This study examined the psychosocial stress experienced by women working in Bangladesh's ready-made garment (RMG) sector by situating individual experiences within broader structural, institutional, and gendered contexts. Drawing on qualitative interview data, the findings demonstrate that women workers' stress is not episodic or individually determined, but structurally produced and continuously reinforced through the interaction of precarious labour conditions, patriarchal norms, urban living constraints, and limited social protection (Kabeer, 2004; International Labour Organization [ILO], 2020).

Using Hans Selye's General Adaptation Syndrome (GAS) as an interpretive framework, the study shows how women's stress trajectories unfold across the stages of alarm, resistance, and exhaustion (Selye, 1956). Initial entry into factory work and urban life generates acute physiological and psychological stress responses. Over time, women develop adaptive strategies—such as endurance, social support, and cognitive reframing—that enable temporary resistance. However, prolonged exposure to multiple stressors without adequate opportunities for rest or recovery frequently culminates in exhaustion, manifested in chronic illness, marital disruption, and withdrawal from the workforce. By applying GAS to structurally embedded labour conditions, this study extends stress theory beyond

individual pathology to demonstrate how prolonged systemic stress within labour regimes produces cumulative psychosocial harm (McEwen, 1998; Selye, 1956).

The findings further underscore the gendered nature of psychosocial stress in the RMG sector. Women's stress is shaped not only by workplace demands but also by moral surveillance, social stigma attached to factory employment, reproductive expectations, and caregiving responsibilities. Decisions related to housing, mobility, and child separation intensify emotional strain, particularly for married women and mothers. These findings are consistent with feminist political economy scholarship documenting how women's paid labour is simultaneously economically essential and socially devalued within export-oriented industries (Kabeer, 2004; Salem & Rozario, 2020). This study contributes to the literature by foregrounding psychosocial stress as a central outcome of gendered labour arrangements rather than a secondary or individualised consequence.

From a policy perspective, the findings indicate that labour reforms focused primarily on wages and physical safety remain insufficient to address workers' psychosocial well-being. Although minimum wage increases and regulatory amendments have been introduced, weak enforcement continues to limit their protective impact (Salem & Rozario, 2020; Rahman, 2021). More comprehensive interventions require stronger enforcement of existing labour laws, guaranteed sick leave and rest periods, and explicit recognition of mental health as a legitimate component of worker welfare (ILO, 2020; World Health Organization [WHO], 2022). In addition, affordable housing near industrial zones, accessible childcare support, and community-based mental health services are critical for reducing cumulative stress among women workers.

The policy implications arising from this analysis are elaborated in the subsequent recommendations section, which outlines targeted interventions addressing social determinants of health, gendered labour norms, workplace governance, mental health support, and global accountability mechanisms. Future research would benefit from longitudinal designs examining stress trajectories over time, comparative analyses of gendered stress within the RMG sector, and further exploration of how institutional and digital support systems shape psychosocial well-being in export-oriented labour contexts.

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