Policy Brief

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Male Family and Community Support to Protest Workplace Sexual Harassment

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Youth Researchers, The Gendered Price of Precarity

Introduction

Around two to four million people are employed as domestic workers (DWs) in Bangladesh. Of them, over 80% are women. Domestic work is informal and hence outside the purview of the Bangladesh Labor Act 2006. As a result, they are subject to various forms of exploitation and sexual harassment.

This policy brief is based on research carried out in 2021 to understand young women domestic workers' (DW) views on workplace sexual harassment (WSH) and compare their perspectives with the attitude of their fathers and husbands about their daughters/ wives working as DWs both in family and "bachelor"[1] homes. The research took place within wider research on "The gendered price of precarity: Workplace sexual harassment and young women's agency" funded by the British Academy. The research in Bangladesh was conducted by the BRAC Institute of Governance and Development (BIGD), BRAC University in partnership with the Institute of Development Studies (IDS), University of Sussex.

Research Methodology

The research was based on in-depth interviews (IDIs) with six selected part-time female DWs aged between 18 and 24 years from the Kallyanpur area in Dhaka and their male family members. Two of them were unmarried, while four were married with children. All of them belonged to very poor financial backgrounds and were barely earning amidst the COVID-19 pandemic. The research was carried out by Youth Researchers under the overall research program.

Types of sexual harassment faced by respondents include touching, groping, demeaning comments, songs, and catcalls. Some respondents recalled stories about other employees being harassed. Some

[1] Common housing shared by bachelors, mainly men.

respondents were able to confront the perpetrator even though protesting these incidents is difficult. However, most respondents were hesitant and unwilling to share the incident with family members, especially men. They said, "why fuss over things that will bring nothing but trouble to the marriage."

Why don't domestic workers speak up?

There are several reasons why domestic workers do not speak up. Firstly, domestic workers earn very little but that income is very important to them and is often the only income of the household. They do not want to protest and risk losing their jobs and therefore their income. Secondly, domestic workers have no legal rights as workers and their terms and conditions are completely unmonitored. Thirdly, they are in a subservient position as they come from a vulnerable economic group with little or no education. Finally, there is a reputational risk if others find out that they have been harassed. The prevalent gender norms will result in the victim of harassment being disgraced instead of the harasser. The behaviour and attitudes of the people around domestic workers affect their ability to speak out when they experience workplace harassment. This includes the attitudes of their family members and the community people.

Although fathers and husbands generally do not want the women to work as domestic workers, women take up the work due to their poverty. During the interviews, three domestic workers' family members said that they would not keep quiet if anything happened to the women at work. They would go to the police and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) to seek help or take legal action. But the rest felt that it is better to keep quiet, especially within the community, to protect their reputation.

Husbands' Attitudes

In general, husbands do not like their wives to work as domestic workers as it is seen as lacking respectability and expect them to maintain their dignity and family honour. While some women said they would tell their husbands if they faced any harassment, others said they would keep quiet. An 18-year-old unmarried domestic worker, for example, said that she would not share anything with her father as she fears getting beaten up, although she tells everything to her mother.

In another interview, we learned of a woman being raped when she was 10 years old and when she told her husband, it affected her relationship and he threatened to divorce her. She also said that she would tell her husband if she is harassed at work, but he would most likely blame her for the incident. His view on sexual harassment was that husbands are to be blamed first for any sexual harassment that their wives suffer. The perpetrator would be the last to be blamed. He also believed that if it happens to a woman then the husband should divorce her.

The husband of a 23-year-old woman with two children said that he had never heard about any harassment experiences from his wife, but believed that his wife would tell him if anything happened and he would take legal action in such a situation. However, he said that if both parties were to be blamed, he would not seek help from others or take any legal action.

A 24-year-old married domestic worker whose husband is a 32-year-old rickshaw puller from Dhaka felt that her husband was supportive, but he advised her to walk "properly" and she felt saddened by that. She mentioned that the caretaker of one of the houses she passed while going to work used to come up and talk to her. When she told her husband about it, he advised her not to tell anyone, because it would be bad for their reputation. However, he said during an interview that if any incident of sexual harassment occurs to his wife, he would surely stand up against it and take action.

A young woman aged 24 said that she told her husband about the incidents and he asked her about details. Her husband advised her to cover herself and follow social norms and if anything, bad happened, he would support her. And if it happened in his presence,

he would take action. She mentioned that if her husband was more financially stable, she would not have to be humiliated working in other people's homes. Her husband, when interviewed, said that he had a good understanding with his wife and believed she would tell him if anything ever happens. In such a case, he would go to the local commissioner. But he did think that the responsibility could be from both sides which might signify that he would have doubts about whether his wife was also to blame.

Parents' Attitudes

Fathers are also conservative and tend to blame their daughters. An 18-year-old unmarried young woman was afraid to tell her father about the incidents as she is very much afraid of him and his physical abuse. She tells her mother about these things and her mother advises her to follow the "rules of our society."

She recounted an incident that took place a few days ago where some men threw acid at a girl. She heard the girl was financially compensated but there was no justice served. If she ever faced something like that, she would not say a word to anyone out of the fear of being beaten up by her father. She believes her father would not fight for her if anything occurred.

The father said that he had never heard any stories of harassment but if it happened, he would take action. He said he would make a complaint to the police and contact the culprit's guardian to come to a discussion. His main focus was his daughter's safety. In contrast to what his daughter said, he felt that his daughter was very friendly with him and also shared everything with him.

Wider Community Including NGOs and Police, Attitudes

The domestic workers and their families were cautious about sharing information with the wider community and other actions for fear of being dishonoured. They also did not have much experience in reaching out to NGOs or state agencies such as the police and did not feel confident about being able to get justice. A 19-year-old young female domestic worker believed her family would support her no matter what. If harassed, she would tell her parents first, then she would proceed to talk to the NGOs to seek their help in the matter. But she would never go to the police, as she and her family have had bitter experiences. She has seen girls from her community not talk about their experiences due to the fear of being stigmatized. Once a girl was compensated with an amount of BDT 50,000[2] by the harasser to keep her mouth shut. Another 18-year-old unmarried woman shared an incident about another domestic worker that she heard of. The girl was beaten and later the police arrived. But the family bribed the police, so they did not proceed with the case. The girl later left her job.

Conclusions and Recommendations

WSH is a common occurrence. It can happen in front of our eyes or behind closed doors. We may think that domestic workers face sexual harassment because of their vulnerable financial position and relative powerlessness. However, WSH does not only happen to people to economically vulnerable persons only. Women of any economic background may become victims of WSH as well. Some of the women interviewed said that they could talk about harassment with their mothers but not with the male members of the family because they might lose their freedom to work if they told their fathers or their husbands. We heard how they were discouraged from talking about the harassment they faced fearing that the reputation of the victim and her family would be tarnished. We have also heard about some families who silenced their daughters and stopped them from voicing their opinions.

We would like to make the following recommendations:

1. There should be community-level services where young women would be able to go for advice and counselling on how to deal with WSH and how to make complaints should they wish to do so.

[2] USD 588.33

2. Family members should be made aware that they have a role to play in supporting their wives and daughters to demand safe working environments and protest any misconduct.

3. Young domestic workers should seek to develop their confidence and capacity to speak out about any abuse they face, seek support from their family and seek redress for the harassment they have faced.

4. Orientation on the policies and legal provisions about workplace sexual harassment should be provided to employers and workers in both informal and formal sectors by local government representatives and local community organizations.

Public awareness about sexual harassment and WSH should be created through mass media and social media. Blog link for further reading: https://www.ids.ac.uk/opinions/young-domestic-workers-in-bangladesh-face-the-economic-fallout-from-covid-19/

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