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Hyper-Precarious Lives: Understanding Migration, Global Supply Chain, and Gender Dynamics in Bangladesh

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Abstract

This article examines the lived experiences of precarity in Bangladesh's ready-made garments (RMG) industry, focusing on female migrant workers employed in Dhaka and surrounding industrial areas. Over the past three decades, the growth of the RMG sector has attracted economically disadvantaged rural women, distancing them from their traditional domestic and agricultural roles. This sector predominantly employs young women due to their perceived flexibility, low wages, and limited union involvement. Additionally, their status as "unskilled" workers in the lowest echelons of a gender-stratified labour market, along with the influence of socio-cultural power dynamics, constrains their capacity to negotiate their positions effectively. Drawing on in-depth ethnographic research conducted in Dhaka and Gazipur, this article unravels the intricate interplay between insecure labour conditions, the impact of the global supply chain, and gender dynamics. It underscores the pivotal significance of socio-cultural power dynamics in understanding the vulnerability experienced by female migrant labourers. We assert that a comprehensive understanding of precarious work requires recognising the inherent link between precarious employment and precarious life within the broader context of socio-cultural power dynamics, gender norms, and societal relations.

Keywords

expendable labour; gender inequality; global supply chain; health; intersectionality; ready-made-garment industry; well-being; young female migrant

1. Introduction

This article examines the multifaceted factors influencing the hyper-precarious circumstances faced by migrant female workers in the ready-made-garment (RMG) industry in Bangladesh, and considers the hierarchy present in global supply chains, working conditions, and socio-cultural power dynamics within this thriving sector in the country.

Over the past three decades, the expansion of the RMG sector has enticed millions of economically disadvantaged rural women, redirecting them from their traditional domestic and agricultural roles. The sector primarily employs young women due to their perceived flexibility, low wages, and limited union representation. The need for cost-effective labour in global assembly lines and the growing poverty and marginalisation of women in rural production systems resulting from the mechanisation of agricultural work has facilitated women's entry into the labour market (see also Bal et al., 2021a).

The RMG sector plays a crucial role in Bangladesh's economy. The country has consistently upheld its global stature in this sector, maintaining its position as the second-largest apparel exporter in 2020 and 2021, despite facing disruptions due to the pandemic (WTO, 2022). In the fiscal year 2021–2022, the sector contributed 81.82% of the country's total exports (BGMEA, 2023), underscoring the nation's notable reliance on this single source of foreign income. Scholars have identified the vast labour force, low wages, suitable locations, and export-friendly policies as the competitive advantages of Bangladesh's RMG industry (Bari & Jin, 2021; Hossain, 2012; Islam, 2021; Kabeer & Mahmud, 2004; Mostafa & Klepper, 2018). Despite the RMG sector's pivotal role in driving the Bangladeshi economy, its labour scenario continues to be characterised by a significant degree of flexibility and uncertainty. Bangladesh currently holds the third-lowest minimum wage in the garment industry, set to increase from 8,000 BDT (73.60 USD) to 12,500 BDT (114.16 USD) as of November 2023, ranking behind only Ethiopia and Madagascar (Fleck, 2022).

Despite claims that the industry offers job opportunities and autonomy to economically disadvantaged rural migrant women with lower levels of education, a substantial gender-based gap persists within the RMG sector. Female workers usually start as helpers, undergo months of training before becoming sewing machine operators, and, with experience, may advance to supervisory positions. Conversely, men generally occupy higher-paid positions with greater authority, such as managers, supervisors, workers in cutting and finishing sections, or machine mechanics. However, these disparities also expose women to gender-based violence and gender inequalities both within and outside the factories (cf. Action Aid, 2019). Many women face inadequate compensation, unrecorded overtime, and limited opportunities for career advancement (e.g., Bal et al., 2021a, 2021b; Strümpell & Ashraf, 2021).

Much of the existing research on RMG in Bangladesh predominantly focuses on precarious working conditions in general, often overlooking the gender dimension. This article, grounded in extensive ethnographic research, argues that intricate interconnections between cultural norms and diverse power dynamics construct precarity within the workplace and in society. It also makes a two-fold contribution to the discourse on precarity, global supply chains, and gender. First, it disentangles the complex relationships between precarious and expendable labour, gender, and the supply chain. Second, it emphasises the crucial intersectional role of socio-cultural power relations in assessing the precarity experienced by female migrant workers, highlighting the necessity for a comprehensive examination that encompasses their real-life experiences.

The article is organised as follows: It begins with the methodology and theoretical sections, followed by a discussion that addresses three interconnected aspects related to the emergence of hyper-precarity. These aspects include: (a) the construction of precarity within the global supply chain, particularly concerning time, wage, and work pressure as experienced by the lowest strata within it; (b) the influence of time, wage, and work pressures on the health and well-being of female RMG workers; and (c) the examination of socio-cultural power dynamics within the workplace and in everyday life. The concluding section summarises our main findings on the complex, multifaceted, gendered, and intersectional aspects of precarity in Bangladesh's RMG sector.

2. Methodological Approach and Migration Background of Research Participants

This article draws from a wide range of qualitative research methods, including ethnography, in-depth interviews, and participatory action research conducted among female RMG workers in different areas of Dhaka and Gazipur from 2016 to 2018. These research activities were part of a broader project focusing on young female migration, livelihoods, and sexual and reproductive rights (SRHR) in Dhaka (for details see Bal et al., 2024). Follow-up interviews and informal discussions were conducted with labour activists and 15 workers in 2020, 2023, and 2024. This research employed a snowball approach and covered broad discussion topics, including migration, SRHR, work trajectories, everyday negotiations at home and work, and plans for the future. The study encompassed a diverse cohort of participants, ranging from unmarried, married, widowed, and separated women to individuals from various ethnic minority backgrounds, such as Bengalis, Garo, and Chakma, aged 15 to 45. This inclusivity enabled a comprehensive exploration of intricate migration patterns, urban work experiences, interpretations of work, reasons for migration, connections with rural areas, and considerations about leaving employment.

After familiarising ourselves with the research participants, 35 life story interviews and 81 semi-structured interviews were conducted with RMG workers (both married and unmarried) at their homes (after work or during the weekend) or in the village during the Eid holiday. Besides, living near the workers' colony enabled us to engage with the participants extensively, from early mornings before they headed to factories, evenings after working hours, to extended periods during the weekends. This closeness facilitated the development of strong connections with female garment workers, involving ongoing communication through platforms such as Facebook Messenger and IMO. Additionally, seven factory owners and 25 mid-level employees were interviewed. The participatory action research approach also allowed us to pinpoint the most challenging issues for the RMG workers. Over a year, a female RMG worker from our labour union partner facilitated ten sessions, each with 13–20 participants, focusing on work, gender, migration, and reproductive health while we were present as observers. The sessions were carefully designed to create a safe space for open discussion exclusively among female migrants, free from potential repercussions at home, at work, or in their communities.

In-depth interviews were conducted in an informal conversational style, systematically validating the consistency of their narratives. Several participants engaged in multiple interviews, while ongoing interaction was sustained with others throughout the two-year research period, and some participants continued to remain connected. All research activities were conducted exclusively in Bengali, automatically ensuring respondent anonymity. We ensured consistency checks on the transcripts and categorised the data into themes to analyse the interaction between rural-urban migration, work experiences, and gender norms.

Most of the Bengali research participants migrated from environmentally stressed regions, predominantly the Sirajganj district, impacted by riverbank erosion and flooding, while some were from drought-prone regions in the northern part of the country. Indigenous Garos and Chakmas migrated from economically impoverished areas in Mymensingh and Bandarban districts. Despite differences in age, ethnicity, and family situations, all participants shared a common goal: escaping severe financial struggles. Divorced and separated women moved to cities due to social stigma, village job scarcity, and urgent financial needs. Unlike previous migrations with families, most participants moved alone for work, often due to the lack of male family companions. Families still consider female migration a last resort. Their move aimed to alleviate extreme poverty rather than seeking independence, yet they hoped for some economic progress (see also Bal et al., 2021a; Shewly et al., 2020).

3. Theoretical Discussion: Hyper-Precarious Lives

Although labour precarity has historical roots, its emergence in scholarly discourse started in the 1970s with a significant emphasis on the neoliberal shaping of flexible, contingent, and irregular forms of labour (Allison, 2014; Strauss, 2018). As defined by Kalleberg (2009), precarious work encompasses employment marked by uncertainty and unpredictability from the worker's perspective. In contemporary terms, precarity is commonly understood as a condition arising from an employment system characterised by deregulated labour markets, resulting in various forms of insecure work. The International Labour Organization (ILO, 2011) defines precarious work as a strategy employers use to transfer risks and responsibilities onto workers. A precarious job is typified by uncertainties regarding employment duration, the potential for multiple employers, or an employment relationship that is disguised or ambiguous. Such jobs often entail low pay and substantial legal and practical obstacles to joining a trade union and engaging in collective bargaining (ILO, 2011, p. 5). Additionally, the ILO (2019) emphasises the necessity for substantial efforts from governments, employers, and workers to safeguard certain rights within this evolving system.

The focus on precarity appears more pronounced in Western Europe and highly industrialised post-World War II contexts. At the same time, the Global South has encountered precarity as a norm without using the same label. Nevertheless, discussions in the Global South acknowledge the relevance of precarity. Although not a new experience, a sense of post-Fordist nostalgia exists, longing not for a secure past but an unachievable future (see Muehlebach & Shoshan, 2012). Similar to Global South scholars who have embraced the concept of precarity (i.e., among others, Das & Randeria, 2015; Millar, 2014; Paret, 2016), we view precarity not as a fixed empirical entity but as a framework to understand how unstable work intersects with fragile life conditions and societal power relations in specific contexts.

In academic discourse, two fundamental elements of precarity are widely acknowledged. Firstly, scholars assert that the extensive adoption of precarious employment patterns within the dominant neoliberal labour market paradigm exposes specific demographic groups to exploitative and unpredictable work conditions (Bourdieu, 1998; Fantone, 2007). Broadening the scope beyond localised employment conditions, Lambert and Herod (2016) and Kalleberg et al. (2022) provide a contextual analysis of how the interplay between globalisation and national political reactions influences the proliferation of precarious employment. Their work illuminates the intricate interactions that have moulded labour market dynamics and the character of precarious employment.

Secondly, the concept of precarity extends beyond its representation solely within the labour market. It encompasses its multifaceted impact on various aspects of life, such as family dynamics, individual contexts, and social welfare provisions (Neilson & Rossiter, 2008). It takes on the character of a broader existential condition—one in which the individual fundamental human condition becomes precarious (Allison, 2014; Lazzarato, 2004). Furthermore, Allison (2014) highlights multiple forms of precarity, encompassing work, social, and even life-and-death dimensions. This broader understanding aligns precarity with ontological insecurity (Giddens, 1991; Neilson & Rossiter, 2008) and is viewed as a pervasive facet of human existence in diverse contexts (Ettlinger, 2007). Similarly, Butler's (2004) perspective portrays widespread precarity as a consequence of oppressive governance in everyday situations and, more recently, as a response to varying exposure in the aftermath of violence and suffering rooted in socio-political contexts (see also Butler, 2009).

The link between precarity and capitalism is inherent on a global scale (see Barchiesi, 2012). Economic reforms, particularly privatisation and trade liberalisation since the 1970s, marked a shift towards neoliberal globalism and associated policies. Bangladesh transformed from an agrarian society to a neoliberal capitalist nation, with approximately 36% of its population now residing in urban areas (Hasan, 2022; Mondal, 2021). The government's divestment from various industries enabled the private sector, including foreign investors, to significantly shape the development of the garment industry. The RMG sector emerged as a pivotal player, making substantial contributions to export earnings and employment. The state adoption of neoliberal development policies, integrating local economies into global production networks, has resulted in differential treatment and regulation of specific populations, particularly garment factory workers in Bangladesh (Banerjee & Alamgir, 2019). While providing job opportunities for economically disadvantaged women, their circumstances illustrate the complex creation of precarity through influential actors in transnational supply chains across the Global South and North.

This article defines "hyper-precarious life" as an uncertain condition stemming from the interplay of various asymmetrical power dynamics shaped by the forces outlined above. It is marked by the absence of social protection mechanisms, a sense of disposability, and the inability to achieve a decent life for the self and family. We emphasise the need for a holistic comprehension of precarity. We contend that the state plays a pivotal role in shaping the dynamics between the market and the family, ultimately influencing the prevalence of class, gender, and ethnic disparities. A focus on female migrant workers' precarious lives in the RMG sector demonstrates that precarity is not a collection of isolated spheres; instead, different spheres collectively contribute to the construction of a precarious life.

We aim to illustrate the process of precarisation driven by global supply chains, government policies, factory owners, and socio-cultural dynamics, focusing on the day-to-day experiences of female workers in and outside RMG sector factories. This interconnected process profoundly impacts the everyday work, home, and social lives of female migrant workers, leading to their hyper-precarious existence. Adopting a feminist intersectional approach, we echo Butler (2004, 2009) to argue that precarious life is differentially constructed, with ethnic minority female workers in the RMG industry in Bangladesh facing heightened vulnerability to certain precarious conditions, such as racism and sexism, compared to their Bengali counterparts. Conversely, men in similar roles experience relatively more favourable circumstances. Marital status also contributes to differential experiences of precarity among unmarried, married, and single mother RMG workers. Our research highlights the importance of intersectionality in understanding workplace

inequalities, providing fresh perspectives on the interplay between various forms of inequality in professional settings. Additionally, it aids in comprehending how institutionalised regulations, norms, beliefs, values, and attitudes generate specific vulnerabilities often overlooked within work environments (De los Reyes & Mulinari, 2020).

4. The Global Supply Chain and Labour Precarity: Time, Wage, and Work Pressure

Anner (2020) explains how global trade regulations, technological advances, and financialisation have amplified power imbalances in the global supply chain, leading to two detrimental mechanisms for workers. The first, the "price squeeze," relates to price negotiations between buyers and suppliers. The second, the "sourcing squeeze," involves reduced lead times, altered order sizes, and last-minute changes to product specifications. These factors collectively result in increased work pressure, extended overtime, use of substandard (less safe) buildings, workplace bullying, and other adverse conditions, which we show in this section.

Bangladesh has continued to witness growth in its export figures, and factory owners have effectively competed with major apparel-producing nations like China, Vietnam, India, Pakistan, and Thailand by providing clothing products at a lower price than their competitors (Anner, 2020; Kabir et al., 2022, p. 546). This price squeeze and competition between apparel-producing countries stem from persistent power imbalances inherent in the global supply chain of the RMG industry, which heavily favour brands and retailers (Anner, 2019; Banerjee & Alamgir, 2019). This interview excerpt from an anonymous garment factory owner in our research reflects this power imbalance:

> Bangladesh has sustainable RMG factories, notably platinum-certified ones, but buyers do not pay $0.05 extra for their products. For example, a shirt that was $3.00 last year could be negotiated down to $2.80 this year. If not agreed, buyers go to cheaper factories. This mirrors our investment for competitiveness against China, Vietnam, and others.

In reaction to pricing pressures, garment producers make diverse adjustments, including modifications to fabric, trims, embellishments, labour costs, and local freight expenses to the port (Anner, 2020). On the factory floor, workers experience price squeeze through suppressed real wages and adverse effects on labour conditions (Anner, 2019; Kabir et al., 2022). Introducing the notion of a "pressure chain," Kabir et al. (2022) show that, ironically enough, the rise in the minimum wage in 2018 led to a further increase in workload, work pressure, mental stress, and unhealthy working conditions.

After the Rana Plaza disaster, internal market competition and the fear of boycotts or losing business to other countries pressured Bangladeshi garment producers into accepting lower product prices. For instance, there was a 13% decrease in prices, and delivery timelines were shortened by 8% (Witteman, 2018). Factory owners also increasingly embraced advanced technologies, with 47.37% of large enterprises and 25% of medium-sized enterprises incorporating automated machinery into their operations (CPD Bangladesh, 2018). As a mid-level factory manager explained during an interview just before the 2019 RMG minimum wage increase:

> Larger factories are replacing helpers with automated machines, primarily in response to the government's mandated minimum wage of 5,300 BDT post-Rana Plaza. This transition makes

> financial sense, as hiring a helper costs approximately 16,000 BDT in three months' wages, while investing in automated machinery yields a return on investment within the same period, ultimately generating profits.

Ironically, automation also intensifies the workload pressure on women, especially sewing machine operators, a profession dominated by females. Farida, an RMG worker with nine years of experience, left her village at the age of 13, progressed from a helper to an operator, married a co-worker, and now supports her children in the village by working in Dhaka. She lamented:

> I might quit the garment industry and return home. The workload has shot up. I used to make 120 pieces per hour, but now they want 200–250. We had 50 helpers for 150 machines, but new machines replaced them after the 2013 pay raise. Now, we work with materials straight from the cutting area, causing more pressure. When the factory raises pay by 100 takas, landlords increase rent by 300 takas. Food costs are rising too. How can we manage this overwhelming workload if we can't even afford proper meals?

Other participants also discussed a variety of negative consequences for workers following a minimum wage increase. These included reduced break times, heightened workloads, the imposition of additional production targets, and extended working hours. Workers like Farida employ diverse strategies to cope with their low wages, often making trade-offs between increased earnings and potential health risks. Laboni, 28, migrated to the city after eloping in the tenth grade. Despite aspiring for further education, she had to join a garment factory due to her husband's financial constraints. She recently transitioned from one factory to another, signifying a decline in the work environment. However, this move allowed her to increase her income to survive. The following interview excerpt sheds light on this aspect of daily survival and the financial challenges she and other workers are confronting:

> At my old factory, rules were good. We had weekends and government holidays off. Women got maternity leave and benefits along with childcare. But no chance for overtime. Living on such a low salary was tough. That's why I moved to my current factory with overtime facilities. But it's wrecking my health. Now I'm wondering, what's the point of more money if I can't stay healthy?

Farida's apprehension about increased workloads and insufficient pay hikes closely echoes the concerns of one of our research partners, a labour union activist. He is frustrated with the wage boards' failure to align pay raises with a living wage. Ultimately, the government prioritises business interests over the well-being of workers. In one of our conversations just before the recent pay rise, he raised a compelling question: Why does a worker in Bangladesh, producing the same product for a global fashion brand, earn only $70, whereas a counterpart in Colombia earns over $200 for identical work? His enquiry echoes the sentiments of the factory owner and mid-level manager, highlighting the intense competition to produce goods at the lowest cost while prioritising speed and efficiency. It underscores the benefits reaped by the upper tiers of the supply chain, often at the expense of meagre wages and the well-being of the most vulnerable workers at the bottom.

Generally, protests by RMG workers for regular salary and wage increases are met with violent suppression by the police (see also Akhter, 2023). The recent murder of trade unionist Shahidul Islam highlights the continuing oppressive conditions surrounding wage negotiations (Clean Clothes, 2023). Factory owners

have also consistently demonstrated a lack of accountability towards their workforce during crises like the recent pandemic and economic inflation (Bal et al., 2021a; Siddiqi, 2021).

In essence, raising wages might not significantly improve workers' living and working conditions. As this section demonstrates, the RMG industry is subjecting millions of workers to harsh conditions. Despite this, we found that women return to the RMG sector after exploring other employment opportunities. No single, uniform minimum wage applies to all workers in Bangladesh; instead, minimum wages are determined by various wage boards specific to different sectors and industries. Since other job opportunities often pay much less than RMG factories, workers prefer continuing or returning to RMG employment. Consequently, the RMG factory owners are not concerned about the well-being of workers or resolving disparities between living and minimum wages. A labour union activist called this an "abundant supply tragedy," with more labour than demand.

5. Health and Well-Being Impacted by Work

This section highlights how work precarity extends its impact to encompass issues such as nutrition, break times for meals and drinks, maternal health, and childcare arrangements. These factors profoundly influence the overall health and well-being of women workers in the RMG industry.

5.1. Factory Work and Women's Health

Research participants are torn between their work obligations and health needs. Our study uncovered instances illustrating the differential impact of wage disparities, general health issues, and extended working hours on male and female workers. Due to their social, cultural, and occupational circumstances, women encounter significant disadvantages when addressing these challenges. Many workers struggle with limited time for meals and staying hydrated. This problem goes beyond low wages and water consumption restrictions and pertains to the impracticality of accessing food on the work floor.

One participant highlighted the inconvenience of the canteen being situated on the sixth floor of another building, forcing workers to descend eight floors and climb six during lunch, significantly reducing their break time. Ethnic minority workers frequently endure derogatory remarks about their food during lunch. Despite the availability of safe drinking water, workers sometimes resort to drinking water from the restroom during short breaks before returning to hours of stitching:

> Drinking more water means frequent bathroom breaks, which negatively affects my productivity. Falling behind on production targets results in reprimands from supervisors. As a result, I only drink when I am extremely thirsty, leading to poor eating and drinking habits that contribute to factory-related health problems. (Jamila, age 23)

Factory rules, work schedules, and gender expectations complicate health, family planning, and childcare decisions. Women, facing long work hours with overtime, often resort to local pharmacies for healthcare, especially for contraception in the form of pills or injections, avoiding clinics due to their busy office hours. When they decide to go to health clinics, societal taboos lead many to skip work without explanation rather than seek permission from male supervisors for leave or passes, causing them to lose a day's pay.

Working conditions and the organisational structure significantly impact pregnant employees, especially since their work involves extended periods of sitting or standing. Research participants face discomfort when requesting restroom breaks from male supervisors, struggle with work-related pressures, and encounter obstacles in accessing maternity benefits due to various circumstances, all contributing to significant stress during pregnancy. All the participants in our study emphasised the overwhelming tension experienced during pregnancy, driven by the constant fear of losing their jobs and/or maternity leave and benefits. Take, for instance, Rahima's situation, a 19-year-old, second-generation garment worker whose mother migrated from a landless family in Rangpur district to work in the garment industry. Rahima found herself in a position where she had to work until eight months into her pregnancy to qualify for maternity benefits. However, her pregnancy-related complications prevented her from doing so, resulting in the premature birth of her child at seven months and the subsequent denial of half of her maternity leave and associated benefits. Sabina and her sister moved to Dhaka to join the RMG workforce after their parents lost land to riverbank erosion. Sabina postponed marriage for a decade to support her family and eventually married two years ago. Now, she is expecting her first child. She aptly expressed these concerns by saying: "If I fail to meet my production target due to pregnancy, I'll be asked to leave the job, a fate shared by other women."

Officially, garment factories provide four months of maternity leave, but our interviews revealed inconsistencies in its implementation. Many women reported receiving three months and twenty days of maternal leave (52 days before and 52 days after delivery). Variations existed in how different factories administered maternal benefits. For example, Laboni's factory did not provide the benefit in advance but instead after ten days of returning to work, possibly as a strategy to discourage women from changing factories after giving birth. Additionally, the distribution of maternal benefits was stretched over several months after resuming work, which often compelled women to continue working despite irregular salaries.

5.2. Balancing Work and Motherhood

Securing adequate childcare proved a significant challenge for many of our research participants. Despite the recent introduction of childcare facilities in some factories, these establishments often fall short of fully meeting the genuine needs of working mothers. Typically, these facilities only accept children as young as six months, while women are required to return to work 52 days after giving birth. This situation poses a dilemma for mothers who are reluctant to leave their breastfed infants at such a young age. Furthermore, these services are only offered to women who become pregnant six months after starting their jobs, and children older than three years are generally not accommodated. Factory managers often believe that women prefer to rely on village relatives for childcare, leading to a lack of investment in these services. Mothers also expressed dissatisfaction with the quality of care and safety concerns. The fear of accidents, such as the Rana Plaza incident, makes women hesitant to use factory facilities.

Beauty began working in the garment industry after her father's sudden death. Five years into her job, she married, had a son, and, two years later, briefly returned to her village to give birth to her second child, leaving the infant with her mother before resuming work. She expresses her apprehension aptly as follows:

> Leaving your child in childcare is the last resort for a woman. It's a choice made by those who lack parents or relatives to care for their child in the village or city, cannot afford to hire a maid, and, at

the same time, cannot afford to stop working. In such circumstances, they have no option but to use childcare services.

The shortage of childcare services in factories emphasises the crucial need for alternative arrangements, prompting many women to return to their rural areas during childbirth. Particularly, divorced women with children often leave them with their families in the village. When families lack support in their village, they usually opt to send their children to *madrasas*, religious schools that provide day-care services. This decision is driven by the comparatively shorter hours of public schools, typically ending at lunchtime, leaving children unsupervised during their mothers' working hours. Consequently, for those without access to family support in their village, enrolling their children in *madrasas* that offer day care becomes a practical solution.

In summary, the escalating time constraints, low wages, insufficient childcare facilities, and the heightened demand for increased workplace productivity place pressure on mothers. They must strive to secure an adequate income, ensure proper childcare, and maintain their families' overall health and well-being.

6. Socio-Cultural Power Dynamics and Gender Norms in and Beyond the Workplace

Previous sections examined the impact of low wages, workplace pressures, and an unwelcoming, non-inclusive work environment on women's health and financial well-being within and beyond the garment factory. Paid employment opportunities for rural, economically disadvantaged women in urban garment factories have far-reaching effects on gender relations. Research indicates that emphasising the transformative potential of women's workforce participation can overshadow gender norms influencing female RMG workers. These norms affect career choices, socio-economic advancement, wage negotiations, and union involvement, often directing women towards uncertain career paths associated with societal stigma. This section shows how socio-cultural norms and gender role expectations contribute to female workers' challenges in the global apparel supply chain. It centres on themes such as gender hierarchy in job roles, the impact of gender stereotypes on the division of labour, and surveillance systems monitoring women's conduct inside and outside factories.

6.1. Gender Disparity in Job Hierarchy and Socio-Economic Advancement

Once employed in an RMG factory, gender norms are crucial in shaping female workers' career prospects and upward mobility. While one might expect women to be promoted from sewing machine operators to supervisors after a few years of experience, the role of a supervisor requires a specific skill set and qualifications that may not align with prevailing cultural expectations for female individuals. Moreover, the supervisor's role, which does not involve operating sewing machines, demands higher education, proficiency in maths, and the ability to oversee and manage daily and hourly production targets. Supervisors generally employ stern language and communication methods to meet these targets. While a sewing machine operator typically remains seated at their designated workstation for eight hours, a supervisor must continuously move about, monitor multiple operators, and report to senior staff, who are often male. Consequently, socio-cultural norms are reinforced by workplace dynamics, leading many women to prefer remaining sewing machine operators even after a decade or more of work experience. One research participant shared that she had to transition from a supervisory role to that of an operator after her marriage. Her husband disapproved of her interacting with senior male colleagues and moving around the factory

floor. Supervisors, earning higher salaries than operators, are required to arrive at the factory earlier and leave later, after ensuring that all operators have completed their tasks and accounting duties. In addition to husbands' frequent disapproval of their wives working outside factory hours, women also expressed concerns about their safety on the quiet factory floor due to the risk of sexual harassment. Ethnic minority workers expressed significantly greater apprehension about this, not just within the factory premises but also during their commute to and from work. Moreover, such a schedule often proves impractical for women who are typically responsible for household chores.

The following conversation between Runa and one of our interlocutors illustrates how women view their work in the factories as temporary and not in line with their desired roles and responsibilities as wives and mothers:

> R: Will you switch factories for higher pay or a higher position after three years?
>
> P: No, not necessarily. I've been at X-factory for three years, and Eid is approaching. Switching would mean missing out on two Eid bonuses. I'm settled here and not keen on a higher position.
>
> R: Why not? After three years as an operator, wouldn't you want to become a supervisor?
>
> P: As a woman with a family, I might take a break from work for a year or two. So, a higher position doesn't seem worthwhile.

Ashraf, 42, assistant general manager and husband of a former RMG worker says:

> With my promotions, my salary increased, making it unnecessary for my wife to continue working. Had I allowed her to work, people might have commented, "look at him, he's now an assistant general manager, but he still has his wife working in the garment industry."

Ashraf's view reflects a complex interplay between personal choices, societal expectations, and perceptions of success within the context of marriage and professional advancement. The conversation excerpt and the subsequent quote with a worker's husband offer insight into the intricate dynamics of career, gender roles, and societal norms. Both quotes echo a prevalent sentiment among women and men in this study: that the preferred role for women is primarily within their households, fulfilling their primary roles as wives and mothers. Women typically resort to factory employment only when their situations demand it.

6.2. The Double Burden of Paid and Unpaid Labour

Female workers in the RMG sector also bear the burden of a double workload as they are disproportionately tasked with household work, such as cooking, cleaning, and caring for children, in addition to their factory responsibilities (see also Ahmed, 2015; Paul-Majumder & Begum, 2000). Borsha, a 19-year-old newly married garment worker who with the help of a neighbour migrated to escape verbal and emotional abuse from her stepmother, gives a vivid description of such work pressure:

> During peak seasons, my daily routine was quite demanding. I would rise at five in the morning, quickly shower, and prepare meals. With eight families sharing just two toilets, two showers, and a

> single kitchen equipped with multiple gas stoves, there were often long queues for access. I'd sometimes manage to eat, but more often than not, I would pack my lunch. Afterwards, I'd take a tempo [a ten-seater auto] to reach the factory by 8:00 am, working until 10:00 or 11:00 pm. I'd return home around midnight, prepare another meal, and eat by 2:00 am. My sleep was limited to three hours before I had to wake up and repeat this gruelling routine for several days.

Borsha often found herself cooking, allowing her husband more rest and longer sleep, as he firmly believed cooking was not his duty. When work pressures escalate, during peak seasons and shipment times, women are often required to take on night shifts and are denied their weekly day off (see also Ahmed, 2015).

6.3. "Good Women, Bad Women": Gendered Norms at Work and Beyond

Garment workers actively practice gender norms in their daily lives to preserve and institutionalise them. Our research findings closely align with what Bhaiya and Wieringa (2007) recognise as the continuous and steadfast reinforcement of the notion of "normalcy" through traditions, culture, the market, and the economy, both as separate components and in conjunction. For example, Balika, Sabina's younger sister introduced earlier, a 22-year-old unmarried garment worker, was asked about her village visits and interactions with married cousins. In anticipation of hearing an empowering perspective, her response was quite revealing. She shared: "I feel a sense of embarrassment. Although I visit my parents occasionally, I stay indoors and avoid engaging in social interactions with cousins my age." Balika's evident discomfort can be attributed to the perception of having surpassed the traditional marriageable age without finding a suitable life partner, highlighting the significant socio-cultural pressures she encounters.

Marriages between co-workers often lead to a shift in job positions, reflecting the need to conform to expected gender norms. This adjustment also hints at power imbalances within the home and the apprehension of potential workplace sexual harassment, as illustrated in Borsha's experience. Initially, Borsha was a "reporter," but her husband Imtiaz disapproved of her role in that section, where she had to provide daily production information to the general manager and production manager after regular working hours. Borsha mentioned: "The reporting section was not suitable. Different bosses have different mentalities. You never know what's on someone's mind." As a result, Borsha acquired sewing skills and transitioned to the sewing section.

Gender norms also prevail within factories, leading to the termination of employment for women who become pregnant outside of marriage. A female welfare officer at a garment factory shared a distressing incident involving a single (divorced) woman who became pregnant and suffered a miscarriage in the restroom. The welfare officer suspected that the woman was about five months pregnant and had possibly attempted to induce a miscarriage using medication, which had ultimately taken place at the factory. The woman wrapped the fetus in rags and disposed of it in the toilet. The next person to use the restroom could not flush it away, so a cleaner was called to retrieve the fetus. The factory management announced its intention to identify the person responsible. When nobody came forward, the management team reviewed the video footage and summoned all the women who had used the restroom during a certain period. Faced with the threat of involving the police, one lady admitted to the act, and the factory promptly terminated her employment. The welfare officer remarked: "No garment factory would retain someone with such a troubling history." The management team did not consider the circumstances surrounding the pregnancy or the reasons that led her to take such a measure.

7. Conclusion

By investigating the process of precarisation in Bangladesh's RMG industry, the article unites discussions of "precarious work" (i.e., Bourdieu, 1998; Kalleberg et al., 2022; Lambert & Herod, 2016) and "precarious life" (i.e., Allison, 2014; Butler, 2004, 2009) providing a holistic view of vulnerability's interconnected dynamics in both labour and broader social spheres. Throughout the article, we demonstrate that labour market precarity and precarious life factors such as gender, sexuality, and race are not distinct but rather exacerbate vulnerable and marginalised circumstances for workers. Through this comprehensive overview, the article also underscores the interconnected construction of precarity in various scales (local, national, transnational), transcending the conventional notion that precarious work in the Global South is contingent on local conditions. Although the RMG factories are predominantly situated in the Global South, the precarious nature of the industry is influenced by various factors originating from both the Global North and South.

We emphasise the complex connections between the worldwide supply chain, economic inequalities, social frameworks, and female garment workers' daily work and living conditions. The article first examines the intricacies of precarity in the global supply chain by emphasising the difficulties associated with time constraints, wage disparities, and the burdensome work pressures encountered by the most marginalised segments of the supply chain. Then, we detail how time, wage, and work pressure affect the health and overall well-being of female RMG workers. Lastly, we scrutinise the socio-cultural power dynamics prevailing in these individuals' workplace and daily life experiences. The article illuminates how these elements interweave and form a complex web of vulnerabilities for garment workers, especially women. Throughout the article, we demonstrate that precarity is not segmented into isolated spheres (i.e., work, social/family life, etc.), but emerges through the interconnectedness of various domains and power relations.

We employ the concept of hyper-precarity to describe the state of profound uncertainty arising from the interaction of disparate power dynamics. It is characterised by a lack of social protection mechanisms, a sense of disposability, and workers' inability to achieve a decent life for themselves and their families. Notably, the notion of hyper-precarity also highlights that precarity is deeply gendered and affects women disproportionately. An intersectional approach of hyper-precarity allows us to deepen our understanding of the multifaceted challenges female workers face in global supply chain-related inequality, through low wages, and via socio-cultural power dynamics. To comprehend the vulnerability of diverse groups, it is crucial to analyse different interconnected factors like gender, ethnicity, age, marital status, occupation, societal norms, and family dynamics.

The lived experiences of female RMG workers also underscore the nexus between precarity and neoliberalism. As elucidated in this article, a neoliberal global system of exploitation within the RMG supply chain is driven by profit-focused initiatives with limited accountability and transparency across the entire global supply chain, aided by the state's complicity. It is also crucial to consider the structural influence of capital, which denotes the ability of businesses and financial entities to shape government policies without exerting direct pressure (Gough, 2015). This cycle sustains a state of uncertainty and exploitation for the most vulnerable workforce at the lower echelons. Moreover, it underscores how global supply chain dynamics intensify socio-economic disparities, expanding our understanding of work precarity. Additionally, it highlights how these dynamics worsen socio-economic inequalities, affecting aspects like nutrition, maternal health, childcare, and time constraints for female RMG workers, significantly impacting their overall

well-being beyond the factory. Similar to Kalleberg et al.'s (2022) argument on precarious work in Asia, this article suggests that precarious work in Bangladesh, and potentially across other regions of the Global South, is influenced by the interaction of global and regional capitalist dynamics alongside the relationships between the state, businesses, society, and labour within the countries under study.

To conclude, we recommend further exploration of the relationships between ethnicity, migration, and precarity within and beyond the RMG sector, especially in the Global South, where this aspect has not been thoroughly investigated. While our study revealed a significant relationship between ethnicity and precarity, a detailed examination of this intersection within the RMG sector went beyond the scope of our research. Such an endeavour would contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of the multifaceted challenges that female migrant workers encounter.

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Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

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