

Inclusion of Physically Challenged Women in Bangladesh's Garment Sector: Facilitators and Barriers

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ABSTRACT:

Recent studies indicate the growing participation of physically challenged women (PCW) of readymade garment (RMG) sector in Bangladesh, although their inclusion poses several challenges which remain underexplored. This study examined the factors facilitating PCWs' inclusion in the garment factories, and the barriers they encounter in entering, adapting to and sustaining in the garment factories. A qualitative research design was adopted using purposive sampling. Information was gathered through extensive interviews with (n=34) women with visible physical impairments, complemented by key informant interviews with (n=5) personnel from the "Center for the Rehabilitation of the paralyzed (CRP)" and (n=3) employees from garment factories. Interviews were transcribed, and systematically coded using NVivo and analyzed thematically. The findings revealed two major themes: facilitators and barriers to inclusion. Key facilitators included vocational training, workplace accommodations, flexible leave policies, maternity support, inclusive work environment, housing facilities, and continuous counselling and mentorship. However, CRP and garment factories encounter resource limitations, accessibility, and production pressure. PCWs experienced structural barriers, difficulties meeting production targets, time management constraints, workplace harassment, inadequate accommodations, and job insecurity. The study recommends greater efforts by government, NGOs, donor agencies, garment factory owners, individuals to promote accessible, supportive and inclusive working environments for PCWs in the RMG sector.

Keywords: Physically challenged women; readymade garment; facilitators; barriers; inclusion; vocational training; employment

Introduction

The understanding of disability emerges through the interplay between disabled people and the social and environmental impediments that impede their active and equal participation across all aspects of society (Ahmed et al., 2018; Ramanna, 2016; Rahman, 2021). Employment is a substantial feature for social

participation and livelihood emancipation of physically challenged women (PCW); the irrefutable fact is that PCWs run into many barriers to inclusion in the labor market. Bangladesh's ready-made apparel sector has emerged as a significant source of employment for the people with disabilities. However, PCW workers in the country still encounter many

barriers, limiting their access to health and well-being (Rahman et al., 2023).

Consequently, the achievement of sustainable development goal (SDG) 8, promoting inclusive, sustainable economic advancement, meaningful employment and equitable work opportunities for disable persons, still appears to be a distant dream (Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics, 2022). The World Bank (2017) states that 15% of people worldwide live with a disability, and of them, 50% are female (World Health Organization, 2011). Recent statistics indicate that developing nations also have higher rates of disability prevalence; Bangladesh is no exception to that; there are 160 million individuals, of which 24 million are disabled (Thompson, 2020). In terms of various types of disability, physical disability accounts for the highest percentage, with 1.35%, while other types have percentages less than 1% (Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics, 2022). Of the working-age (15-64) individuals with disabilities, 33.78% are employed; 12.80% are females. Those who are in employment, among them 54.24% are self-employed, only 2.66% received some training, and 15.24% work of ready-made apparel sector (Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics, 2022).

The RMG is the largest contributor to the economy of Bangladesh and a major employment source for women. The industry has played a substantial role over the past few decades in fostering women's economic participation, providing income-generating activities, and thereby reducing poverty (Kabeer, 2004; World Bank, 2021). Women who relocated from rural communities to urban areas seeking employment opportunities constitute the majority of the garment workforce, which is a significant shift in gender roles in the country. Despite these progressions, the sector continues to be characterized by structural inequalities, including low remuneration, hazardous working conditions and restricted opportunities for professional growth progression (Ahmed & Maitra, 2021).

Though the RMG sector of Bangladesh provides employment opportunities for around 4.1 million workers (BGMEA, 2020), the PCWs face limited access to employment opportunities within Bangladesh's garment manufacturing sector. Against this backdrop, the "Centre for Rehabilitation of the Paralyzed (CRP)" has been engaged in assisting individuals with physical disabilities by providing a wide range of superior services since its inception. CRP-Ganakbari offers physically challenged women access to vocational training facilities, which helps

them to be engaged in Income Generating Activities (IGA) and ensures their inclusion in mainstream society. Marks and Spencer, a well-known buyer, collaborated with CRP since 2006 and has been hiring and providing PCWs with training on modern industrial sewing and employment opportunities in Bangladeshi garment factories. So far, 3484 persons with disabilities have gained industrial sewing and linking skills through free residential training facilities (Annual Report of CRP, 2022-2023); among them, 70% to 80% are women with disabilities. However, how far their inclusion has been ensured is yet to be seen.

Over the past few years, the inclusion of workers with disabilities in Bangladesh's RMG industry has progressed, which shows that we need to pay greater consideration of their residential and workplace conditions (ILO, 2016). The main impediments to improving the employment chances for people with disabilities are the absence of strong organizational policies in the ready-made garment and leather industries, negative approaches concerning the skills and capabilities of people with disabilities, barriers at the institutional, environmental, and attitude levels, and the non-provision of incentives and health benefits (SACDIR & CSID, 2016).

Existing literature suggests that physically disabled women face multiple barriers for the employment in Bangladesh's garment sector, including inaccessible infrastructure, limited educational opportunities, discriminatory employer attitudes, gender inequality and social stigma. However, facilitators such as vocational training, accessible workplaces, family support, disability-inclusive policies, and NGO interventions can enhance their participation and socioeconomic inclusion (Quinn et al., 2016). Despite the growing importance of disability inclusion in the RMG industry, research specifically focusing on physically challenged women is inadequate, emphasizing the need for further scholarly investigation.

There is a considerable amount of research on gender-related workplace abuse in Bangladesh's garment sector (Akhter, et. al., 2019; Rahman & Ferdous, 2024), but far less attention to the experiences of PCWs working within this sector. This group remains largely invisible in both academic research and policy discussions. To fill the knowledge gap in a scientific manner and due to a growing emphasis on inclusive development, this qualitative study attempted to explore the benefits and challenges PCWs face in accessing and sustaining themselves in this sector.

With this value addition, the findings of this study will support rehabilitation service providers and policymakers to tackle the specific requirements of PCWs in inclusion policies and programs of CRP and the garment manufacturing industry to improve the status quo of these women and to achieve SDGs goals in a fruitful manner.

2. Research Methods and Design

2.1 Study design and study setting

A qualitative methodology was employed to investigate the key facilitators and barriers of including PCWs in the garment sector of Bangladesh. Two industries, namely two garment manufacturing companies, hereafter referred to as Rupali and Sonali (pseudo names), were selected purposively because PCWs are referred here for work following training on modern industrial sewing through the Marks and Start initiative, led by Marks and Spencer and supported by CRP collaboration. Both factories are located in Gazipur District in Bangladesh. Another study site was Ganakbari, a CRP sub-center where participants received training through the Marks and Start project.

2.2 Study population and sample selection

The targeted population were PCW workers from the two factories. The welfare officer from both the participating organizations provided lists of employed PCWs who received training from CRP. Keeping in view of the study's objectives, 34 PCWs with visible physical impairments were purposively selected. In addition, the sample included five CRP personnel and three employees from garment factory for key informant's interview. The CRP rehabilitation wing nominated five staff members, whereas Rupali Garment Manufacturing Industry and Sonali Garment Manufacturing Industry nominated one and two staff members, respectively, for the interviews. Before nominating, they asked about the study purpose and these persons could provide the most valuable information about the study. The informants provided rich, in-depth data relevant to the research objectives.

2.3 Instrument and data collection method

The PCWs' detailed narratives and comprehensive information were obtained through in-depth interviews with a semi-structured questionnaire, and key informant interviews were deployed. Each interview lasted approximately 40 to 50 minutes with PCWs in the garment factory; however, informal follow-up interviews were subsequently conducted at the participants' residences. Though PCWs were the primary informants, CRP rehabilitation officers and

employee of the garment factories were also included as research informants to examine different issues on PCWs inclusiveness in the garment industries. The interview with CRP personnel and staff of the garment industries was lasted approximately 60–90 minutes. Initially the researcher intended to record the interviews with the PCW workers, but because the informants were not comfortable exposing their harsh reality in the recorded form, the researcher adopted traditional ways of data collection, such as unobtrusive observation and writing down notes and anecdotes. It helped to gain the trust of the informants, and the informants opened up regarding their challenges, obstacles, and grief, which helped the researchers to get better insight about the situation of the informants. Unobtrusive observation helped to contextualize their situation and capture issues related to the intersectionality of women. The same techniques were applied in the key informant's interviews of CRP personnel and employees of the garment factory.

2.4 Data analysis

The data were analyzed following Braun and Clarke's (2006) thematic analysis steps, and verbatim were presented to maintain the integrity of the data. The researcher regularly maintained a diary and elaborated field notes as soon as possible using Microsoft Word. Interviews were transcribed verbatim, translated into English where necessary and checked for accuracy. The analysis followed six phases :1) the first author familiarized with the data through repeated reading of transcripts to gain comprehensive understanding of participants experiences regarding workplace inclusion, discrimination, organizational support and barriers to employment; 2) coding was conducted across the entire dataset to ensure that all relevant experiences were captured; 3) related codes were grouped together to form preliminary themes and subthemes; 4) themes were reviewed and refined to ensure consistency with the data set; 5) definition and concise name were developed for final themes, and 6) production of the report using illustrative participant quotations. To ensure trustworthiness, the researchers maintained an audit trail, engaged in reflexive discussions throughout the analytical process, and provided descriptions supported by quotations.

3. Ethical Considerations

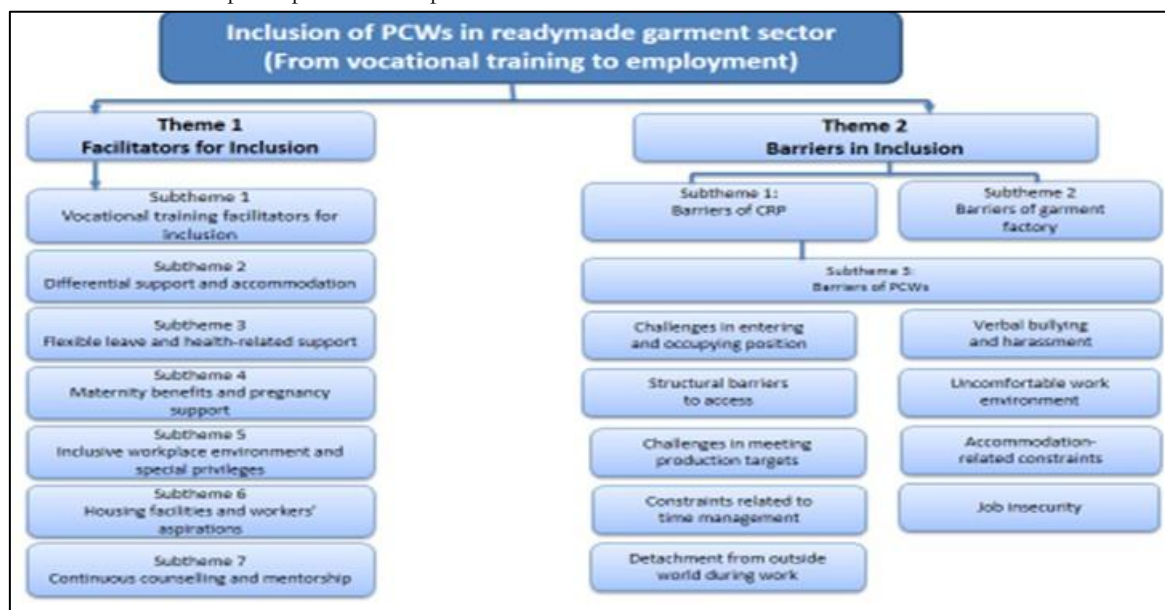
All procedures performed in this study were in accordance with the ethical standards of the institutional research committee, and to protect the confidentiality of the informants and the garment manufacturing industries, pseudonyms were applied.

The researcher obtained approval from the CRP (Center for Rehabilitation of the Paralyzed) Ethics Committee (Ref. no.: CRP-R & E-0401-227). The management of the garment industry granted permission to conduct fieldwork with PCW workers based on a reference provided by CRP. To ensure confidentiality and protect identities of both the garment factory and the informant, pseudonyms were used throughout the study. Prior to the formal interviews, the researcher obtained verbal informed consent from all the participants. Participants were

informed of their right to withdraw from the interview process at any stage without consequences.

4. Findings

The average age of the participants is 27. Through inductive thematic analysis, two major themes were developed pertaining to the inclusion of PCW workers in the garment factory: theme 1) Facilitators for inclusion and theme 2) Barriers in inclusion: under these themes, there are several subthemes.



Theme 1) Facilitators for inclusion

Subtheme 1: Vocational training facilities

The Marks and Start programme of CRP aims to prepare highly employable, multi-skilled machine operators with physical impairment. Upon the arrival of PCWs at CRP, A multidisciplinary team comprising a doctor, physiotherapist, occupational therapist and social worker evaluated each trainee to decide on the appropriate treatment and recommend suitable skills-training programs. The training course is for two months and CRP helps illiterate persons with disabilities to read and write letters, numbers and signatures.

"When training is proceeding, we take them to visit different garment industries once a month to gain a practical understanding of the workplace and foster a competitive mentality among the trainees to cope with the industrial environment. (A staff of CRP)"

Upon completion of the training, each trainee receives a certificate and a medical investigation at CRP in preparation for entering the garment sector. Marks and Spencer started their project Marks and Start in

2006 with six women at CRP Ganakbari; to date, 3,484 persons with disabilities have achieved industrial sewing and linking skills through free residential training facilities. Among them, 75% to 80% are female; they are supplying PCWs as workers in about 80 garment factories.

The findings indicate that the programme not only provides technical sewing skills training but also develops literacy, workplace exposure and psychological preparedness, enabling trainees to adapt to the competitive environment of the garment industry. Furthermore, large participation demonstrates the programme's contribution to promoting economic inclusion and employment opportunities for women with disabilities.

Subtheme 2: Differential support and accommodation

Although the terms and conditions of employment are formally the same for all workers, management provides additional support and flexibility to PCW workers in recognition of their specific needs.

"PCW workers are assigned lower production targets of about 70-80 pieces per hour, compared to the standard target of 100 pieces per hour for other workers. (The senior social welfare officer of garment industry)"

From CRP, PCWs simply learn how to work on the machine so their skills do not match with as required. The industries have various training units; if workers do not pass the skill test, they are sent to the industry-training center to retrain on modern industrial sewing machines. The industry management trains them in three to four months and inspires them to learn quickly to become operators.

In addition, these workers receive extended break periods to help them avoid overcrowded spaces and physical strain.

"They are granted an extra 10 minutes during lunch and 15 minutes early breaks. There is a separate stair and an extra gate for the PCW workers entry and exit. Moreover, industry has an elevator for pregnant women and PCW workers. (The senior social welfare officer of garment industry)"

This adjustment reflects a humane approach to workplace productivity expectations.

Subtheme 3: Flexible leave and health related support

The factories demonstrate flexibility regarding health-related absence for PCW workers.

"If we feel sick, supervisor gives us a gate pass for one hour. If the sickness is severe, the authority permits leave for us. Besides these, if we experience any health problems, we are allowed to leave early. (Rabela, right leg impaired)"

When workers are unexpectedly ill and unable to work, they are allowed to inform the authority by phone. On the following day, they submit a formal leave application to the Production Manager (PM). This indicates a supportive and understanding administrative system regarding workers' health conditions.

Subtheme 4: Maternity benefits and Pregnancy Support

The factories provided maternity benefits and paid maternity leave for PCW workers. A senior welfare officer reported that Rupa, a PCW worker (on leave during fieldwork), was granted maternity leave during her pregnancy. Her wages were delivered to her home while she was on leave, enabling her to continue supporting her family financially. Several members of her family were also employed in the same industry.

"I became expectant for the second time and expressed my happiness that the industry will provide me 112 days of paid maternity leave, and industry approved the same maternity leave at my first delivery and I had a C-section in the hospital with the money. (Jyotsna, an abnormally short worker)"

The experiences of Rupa and Jyotsna demonstrate that such maternity benefits not only ensure continuity in income and healthcare access but also promote a sense of dignity, inclusion, and job security among PCW workers.

Subtheme 5: Inclusive workplace environment and special privileges

The factories maintain certain workplace rules while also accommodating workers with special needs. *Workers are not permitted to have lunch on the production floor, only the pregnant workers and wheelchair users are allowed. (Morjina, a wheelchair user)* Although eating lunch on the production floor is generally prohibited and workers are expected to store meals in the cafeteria, exceptions are made for pregnant women and workers who use wheelchairs. These workers are permitted to eat on the floor for convenience and accessibility. Such findings demonstrate an effort to create a more inclusive and supportive environment for physically challenged women and health-related needs.

Subtheme 6: Housing facilities and workers aspirations

The Sonali Garment Manufacturing Industry provides hostel facilities for female employees, including PCW workers. Single women workers are allowed to reside there. *Before marriage, we lived in an industrial quarter where we used to cook our meals. (Khuki and Marufa).* This housing support contributes to workers' safety, convenience and overall wellbeing. Some respondents from the Rupali Garment Manufacturing Industry were aware of these facilities and expressed a desire for similar residential quarters in their own factory. This reveals workers' aspirations for improved living arrangements and institutional support beyond the workplace.

Subtheme7: Continuous counselling and mentorship

It is essential for them to provide ongoing guidance on appropriate behavior, work ethics, and health management. The rehabilitation providers from CRP visit monthly to conduct joint counseling sessions;

"Rehabilitation providers from CRP come into the garment manufacturing industry to monitor whether we are abiding by the rules and regulations of the industry and can mix with other workers in the industry. They counsel us on how to prosper in

the workplace and get a promotion (Khaleda, right eye impaired)"

The quote reveals the critical role of ongoing rehabilitation support in facilitating the workplace integration and professional development of PCWs. Regular follow-up by rehabilitation providers not only ensures compliance with workplace expectations but also offers continuous counselling and mentorship, empowering workers to build confidence, improve performance, and pursue career advancement opportunities.

Theme 2) Barriers in inclusion

Subtheme 1: The challenges of CRP for inclusion of PCWs

The CRP staff go to different districts and motivate PCWs to come to CRP. In this process, they confront initial challenges in persuading the families of PCWs to bring them to CRP.

"It is tough for CRP staff's to convince the family members of physically challenged women by going to every house. The guardians of PCW's question where a young girl will stay. At times, the villagers think of them as women traffickers, but those who know CRP agree spontaneously. (The assistant manager of the rehabilitation wing)"

This quote highlights the deep social stigma, mistrust and safety concerns surrounding the mobility and rehabilitation of PCWs. It also demonstrates that while awareness and trust in CRP can reduce resistance, and persistent misconceptions among families and villagers ensuring the access of PCWs to rehabilitation and support services.

"The home, CRP and workplace environment is not the same. CRP staffs face significant difficulties in changing some village habits of PCW's and making them habituated to the new environment of CRP. It takes time to adjust them to the new setting. (The assistant manager of the rehabilitation wing)"

The quote indicates that PCWs often experience difficulty adapting to the structured rehabilitation environment at CRP because of its differing setting from home and village. It also emphasizes that successful rehabilitation requires continuous support and adjustment to new environments are gradual processes rather than immediate outcomes.

The machine used in the garment factory differs from that type used in CRP. Since the PCWs from a rural background lack knowledge of contemporary industrial sewing machines, CRP trains them by using a low-speed machine to avoid mishaps. However, in the industry, the machine is the newest and fastest;

thus, most of them do not meet the requirements for competency assessments.

Sometimes they face problems managing a job for severe PCWs. After providing a job, CRP arrange their accommodation near the garment manufacturing industry with other PCWs working there, which is at times problematic for them because the homeowners do not like renting them houses.

"At times PCW's dropped out from the garment industry because they disliked the industry environment and systematic lifestyle, misconduct of the supervisors, and failure to meet the per-hour production target. Sometimes they leave the factory without informing us so when they want to return to the industry making it difficult for CRP to rearrange their job. It creates a wrong impression about CRP in the industry. (A staff of CRP)"

The quote reveals that rigid production demands, unsupportive supervision, and difficulty adjusting to the industrial work environment contributes high dropout rates of PCWs. Besides unplanned resignations undermine CRP's credibility with garment factories, making future job opportunities more difficult.

Subtheme 2: Challenges of garment factory for inclusion of PCWs

Readymade garment factories also face challenges to include PCWs. Senior social welfare officer said, "From CRP they only learn how to operate the machine, so they cannot pass the proficiency test and require extra training to meet the required standards." In a factory, a production line consists of 28 workers, each with a per-hour production goal. If a PCW worker is unable to meet the production target, the supervisor may decide not to assign them to the line; at this point, the Welfare Officer steps in to explain, *it is a direction from the higher authority to assign them.*

"We have to remember which person has what kind of physical impairment; accordingly, we have to arrange work for them. If anyone has leg impairment, the authorities must provide a unique chair for the worker in the workplace. (Junior Executive Admin, the HR and Compliance)"

The quote emphasize the employer's responsibilities to provide reasonable accommodations, such as specialized seating for workers with lower-limb impairments, to promote accessibility, comfort and equal participation in the workplace.

"One worker hurt another worker three times with scissors. Then they called her guardian and told to take her home. A physically challenged woman worker hurt another worker with

a nail. Then they counselled her and said she would lose the job if she does it again. (Senior social welfare officer)"

The quote illustrates how workplace management involving guardians and providing counseling make an effort to promote workplace safety and behavioral accountability while offering opportunities for corrective action before imposing employment consequences.

Despite being instructed that anyone who feels unwell or becomes pregnant should notify the social welfare officer, *individuals often hesitate to share their issues and choose to hide their condition for fear of losing their job or facing verbal abuse*. As a result, when emergencies occur, the social welfare officer is compelled to transport them to various hospitals on an urgent basis, facing significant challenges due to the lack of accessibility in both the transportation system and the hospitals as well.

The findings reveal that garment factories are encouraged to include persons with disabilities, but the structural barriers such as inadequate skill proficiency, productivity pressures insufficient workplace accommodations, and negative workplace attitudes and inaccessible transportation limit their effective inclusion and job security.

Subtheme 3: Barrier faced by PCW workers

Under the subthemes the vulnerability of PCWs in accessing and coping, occupying position and sustain in the garment sector are presented in various categories.

Barriers in entering and occupying position

The garment factories bring PCWs from CRP after completing training under the Marks and Start project, and an industrial engineer (IE) tests their sewing abilities by putting them through a machine. The authority appoints them as assistant operators (helpers) not machine operators when they fail to meet the hourly production target (70 to 80 pieces) in the skill test.

Wheelchair users encounter significant difficulty in procuring a job in the garment factory, though they took training under the Marks and Start project. Morjina (paralysed), shared her history of joining that, one day, when the Marks and Spencer manager visited the Marks and Start project of Ganakbari, she went to him and said,

"Sir, I need a job badly. I have two sons. How will I maintain my livelihood if I go home? I will feel better if I get a job and concentrate on work. I am helpless, Sir."

The manager called several garment factories in hopes of finding a job for her, finally, Rupali Garment Manufacturing Industry could set her up with a position in quality checks.

The data indicate that despite receiving vocational training under the Marks and Start project, PCWs, particularly wheelchair users, continue to face significant barriers in securing suitable jobs in garment factories.

Structural barriers to access

In the Rupali Garment Manufacturing Industry, there is no ramp system for wheelchair users in the factory gate; a wooden slab connected the industry to the road, and they must ask a gatekeeper for assistance in order to enter the industry.

"I work on the fourth floor, and face problems climbing up the stair. When I reach the industry, the elevator is closed, and I have to climb up the stair, which is very difficult for me with broken spine. (Noyon, spinal cord impaired)"

Even though Jyotsna is pregnant, she said, *I have to use the stairs, as there is no elevator in the building.*

The data demonstrate that inadequate workplace accessibility infrastructure, including the absence of ramps and accessible elevators, creates significant physical barriers for workers with disabilities and pregnant employees, limiting their safe and independent mobility within the garment factory.

Barriers in meeting production targets

In the factory, the manager has always been reluctant to offer tasks to them because they believe that the PCW workers would not be able to fulfil the production target. Some PCWs are not happy because they completed their training at CRP and employed in the factory, yet the authorities are hesitant to provide them machines, apprehending that they would not meet the production target. Some informants claimed that supervisors behave positively when they are able to work harder, meet their hourly productivity goals, and behave poorly when they fail to meet the target. Three PCW resigned for this particular reason.

"We have to show production hour by hour in the sector, which constantly puts stress on our fragile health, and I expect that CRP management will recommend curtailing our working hours. (Khairun, two legs paralysed)"

The data reveal that productivity-driven workplace practices and conditional supervisor attitudes create continuous physical and psychological stress for PCWs, contributing to discrimination, job

dissatisfaction, health strain and workers' resignation despite their vocational training and employment.

Constraints related to time management

Another constraint for PCW workers is about managing time, as all workers arrive to the industry before 8:00 am, causing a heavy traffic jam at the entrance and adjacent roads. PCW workers find it difficult to enter the industry in this crowd gathering and to avoid crowds; PCW workers arrive at the garment factory by 7:30 am. For such reason, they must take breakfast at 7:00 am in the morning, so they get hungry before noon.

"We cannot carry food into the industry, even a bar of chocolate. One day I came to the industry with a fever, carrying chocolate in my handbag. The supervisor snatched away my ID card and the chocolate and complained to the authority. When the authority called me, I saw the persons of authority taking snacks. When I told them about my sickness, they wanted to give back my chocolate and ID card, but I took only my ID card and came back saying, you take it. (Ojupa, one hand and leg impaired)"

They are given an additional 10 minutes for lunch, but they are unable to utilize the entire lunch break; they arrive early to catch up on their unfinished work because they are afraid of falling behind schedule.

The data reveal that PCW workers experience inflexible organizational practices, surveillance, and production pressure that undermine their health, dignity, and ability to effectively manage their physical and nutritional needs.

Detachment from outside world during work

Cell phones are forbidden at the workplace. Noyon reported that one day, after finishing her overtime shift; she went back to her home at 8:00 pm. Upon checking her phone, she noticed numerous calls; when she answered, she learned about her uncle's sudden death. With a heavy heart she lamented, *if I could hear the news in the morning, I could go because my uncle extended a kind hand to us after my father's death.*

The data suggest that rigid workplace regulations such as restrictions on mobile phone access can isolate workers from urgent family communications and emotional support systems, contributing to psychological distress and reduced personal autonomy.

Verbal bullying and harassment

Bullying and harassment of any kind are prohibited in the two factories under study; if anybody rebukes a PCW worker, in this factory; she or he will be fired.

However, Noyon disclosed, *at times, I am treated as a laughing stock in the factory because of my tendency to bend down while walking.* Buli Akhter (right leg impaired) stated, *when we perform poorly, the supervisor reprimands saying, 'You are receiving the same salary, but why are you not working equally'?* Jorina Ferdous (left leg impaired) shared,

"If I fail to meet the production goal, my supervisor rebukes me, saying that the Rupali garment factory hired me; no other industry would consider hiring me, which disheartened me, though I do not share it with anybody."

Anu's supervisor yells at her when she is unable to work quickly because of her illness, but she remains silent most of the time. He sometimes tells her that she is not required to report to work from the following day; when her tolerance crosses the limit, she responds, *'If Human Resources (HR) forbids me, I will not come'.*

The data reveal the lived experiences of PCW workers who continue to face ridicule, verbal abuse intimidation, and discriminatory treatment from supervisors due to their physical conditions and lower productivity.

Uncomfortable work environment

Some PCWs shared that in the industry's fusing area, due to lack of fans and the heat in the room, make working in this section uncomfortable; when the fan is turned on, the bokrom fragments take off. Jorina Ferdous (left leg impaired) has several years of experience working in the Rupali Garment Manufacturing Industry, she disclosed.

"Compared to previous years, the workload had increased manifold; regular employees may dare to decline extra jobs assigned from managers, but PCW employees have no other option except to carry out the orders of the managers."

The data indicates that PCWs face harsher and more exploitative working conditions in the factory than regular workers- an uncomfortable environment and increased workloads with little power to refuse additional tasks due to their vulnerable employment status.

Accommodation-related constraints

CRP's rehabilitation staff and social welfare officer of the industry manage their housing location, connecting them with PCWs who are employed beforehand nearby to their respective garment manufacturing industries. Married PCW workers prefer to live in a single room with their husbands. The room is approximately eight feet by seven feet in size and its rent is TK1800 to TK4500. *In these rooms, we face*

difficulties especially using the washroom and using the tube well (Moyna, paralysed). Though one of the studied factories have quarter facilities for single workers, another factory does not have the facility. The data indicates the poor living conditions and daily hardship of PCWs.

Getting training related job

The majority of the PCWs got training-related jobs and some had not obtained a job as par with the training. In order to meet the dire economic necessity of the PCW, CRP had to arrange jobs for three informants even though they have not been trained yet.

"I received training on industrial sewing from CRP for three months; I did not get a job on sewing and have been working here for over the last four years as a helper. (Anu, left leg and hand impaired)"

"The authorities informed me during recruitment that they would assess my abilities after three months and appoint me to the position of machine operator. It did not so happen five months had already passed. (Shefali, leg and backbone curved)"

The authorities think that because of extreme physical problems, they are not capable of working effectively and it will deter that particular garment industry from achieving the production target.

The data suggests that despite receiving vocational training many PCWs are denied positions matching their skills due to employer assumptions about their physical limitations.

Job insecurity

PCWs are in threat of losing their jobs.

"From today, I am jobless. My company fired many workers; about 15 were physically challenged. My economic condition is dreadful as I have borne my mother's and two children's expenses with my scanty income and could not save anything. How do I maintain my livelihood? Madam, please do something for me. (Noyon, spinal cord impaired)"

The factory fired many workers, including 20/25 PCW workers, but fortunately I did not lose my job,

"Apu, please pray for me since I do not lose my job. Where will I go? I have no parents. I have a brother, but he is busy with his family. (Moyna, paralysed)"

She stated the factory owner took initiatives to restructure one of the office blocks since there were fewer orders from the buyer during Covid- 19. The authority specified that they would contact them once the construction is complete and they have received the order. Yet, the sacked workers organized a protest

at the entrance of the industry, and the sacked PCW workers participated there. The organization of movement had angered the authority and they declared that those who attend in the movement would not be hired again. She said, *'Apu, please do not share it with anybody.'* Due to the job insecurity of the RMG sector, Moyna is afraid of losing her work even though she did not lose it, take part in any protests, or involve herself with anyone in relation to this. This is because there are no other options available in the workforce for her.

Moyna's narrative reflects the precarious nature of employment in the RMG sector, where managerial control and economic insecurity suppress labor activism, leaving workers like Moyna feeling trapped due to the absence of alternative livelihood opportunities.

Job Satisfaction

Among the informants, the majority of these women said that they are satisfied with their job. Some PCWs stated that no other options are left for them, so they are satisfied. Somehow or other, if they get better jobs, they will leave the current industry. Some mentioned that their wages are too low to meet their daily necessities.

"I am satisfied because the Rupali Garment Manufacturing Industry environment is comparatively better. I worked in many garment-manufacturing industries and knew the industry environment. Here I am satisfied with my salary. However, I cannot manage my family with this meager income. For this reason, I want to switch to another job. (Khaleda, right eye impaired)"

Those who do not have the intention to switch opined that they are confused about getting a better job because no other factory would recruit them for their physical impairment. Two of them do not enjoy the job and feel insecure because several of them left the job because of the misbehavior of the supervisor with whom they joined the industry.

The narrative reveals that PCWs' job satisfaction is largely driven by limited employment opportunities, while low wages, workplace insecurity, discrimination, and supervisory mistreatment compel them to remain in unfavorable working conditions.

5. Discussion

Worldwide a growing body of literature examined the employment challenges of PCWs (Uiras et al., 2024; Quinn et al., 2016). There are study reports on workers with disabilities that identify the barriers they face in searching for jobs, as well as accessing and working in

the Jordan garment factory (ILO, 2022). Female workers in Cambodia's garment industry reported job insecurity, low payment, unsafe working environments, excessive working hours, insufficient workplace safeguards, and discrimination and harassment (Chy, 2024). In Bangladesh, research has been conducted on opportunities and barriers for people with disabilities to earn their livelihood in the readymade garment and leather industries (SACDIR & CSID, 2016). However, there is a lack of a comprehensive study on the facilitators and barriers of PCWs' inclusion in the garment sector of Bangladesh.

According to the current study, the average age of PCW workers in the labor market is 27, which is consistent with an earlier study that most workers in the RMG sector are young, with the majority falling between the ages of 15 and 30 (Begum, 2016). This suggests that their age did not stop them from joining the workforce or from working in the RMG sector for a considerable period, but the data shows that they had difficulty entering and adjusting to the RMG sector.

The study findings indicate that both CRP and garment factories face most significant challenges in including them in the garment factory. CRP do not get sufficient time to train them enough to be skilled in industrial sewing within two months; consequently, they cannot pass the proficiency test by the industrial engineer and require extra training to meet the required standards, which makes an impediment in the regular production target. The findings concur with the findings that women with disabilities' lack of some necessary work skills limits their employment opportunities; they are unable to use modern technologies due to the lack of training opportunities and face difficulty completing the required work on time (Almajali et al., 2022).

The data demonstrate that wheelchair users encounter significant mobility barriers in procuring a job in the factory in spite of having a vocational training certificate. The study findings concur with the findings that physical accessibility and workplace barriers are the key challenges to hiring and retaining workers with mobility impairments (Kapsalis, 2024; Yang et al., 2025).

The research findings reveal that PCW workers are harassed verbally by supervisors in the factory because of failure to fulfill the production target and for their physical impairment, which is consistent with the findings that 75% of workers in the RGM industry in Bangladesh have been verbally abused at work (Global People Strategist, 2024). They get hurt but remain silent most of the time, which supports earlier studies

that female workers experienced harassment at work but refrained from protesting out of fear of losing the job (Ahmed, 2016; Akhter, et al., 2019).

Since the cell phone is forbidden at the workplace, they are unable to learn about any accidents, deceases, or critical news pertaining to their relatives. This finding resembles Akhter, et al., (2019) in that the use of cell phones at the workplace is prohibited for workers. When they enter the factory, the gatekeeper scans their baggage and confiscates their phones to keep them apart from the outside world while they are at work; consequently, they suffer from acute pain and agony when they have sick family members at home.

This study observed that PCW workers usually reside in hired shanties facing various difficulties, especially using washrooms because of their physical impairments, which aligns with previous research that the garment workers live in fairly unsanitary areas (Bhuiyan, 2012) and most workers lack adequate housing options and look for subpar homes in order to save money (Ahmed, 2016).

The management of garment factories typically terminates workers for silly mistakes (Ahmed, 2016; Bhuiyan, 2012). It appears from this study that CRP is quite important for PCWs; they come into an employment agreement with the management of industry by accepting terms and conditions like payment, working hours, duties, and other things via CRP. In spite of that, PCW workers are also in fear of losing their jobs because the RMG workers regularly experience the threat of losing their jobs (Akhter et al., 2019).

A number of the informants reported that no other options are left for them, so they are satisfied with the job. The finding is consistent with a "better-than-nothing" pattern, where people accept low paying jobs due to limited opportunities, little education, or exclusion from better labor markets (Sardadvar et al., 2017). Most of the present study informants stated that wages are insufficient to meet their day-to-day basic human needs. The result shows a correlation between low wage work and worse satisfaction because of the role's financial expectations and the decreased ability to make ends meet with a scant wage (Pohlig et al., 2020). A few of them do not enjoy the job because a number of their coworkers left the job because of the misbehavior of the supervisor. The finding is supported by Steverson and Crudden (2023), whose result shows that positive co-worker relations and supervisor support can enhance job satisfaction.

This study also reveals that the workers of these factories receive maternity benefits. This outcome stands out from the common findings that expectant mothers conceal their condition out of concern for their occupation and that employers fire female workers if they disclose their pregnancy or appeal for maternity leave (Kabeer, 2002; Ahmed & Raihan, 2014), the leave application of pregnant women gets rejected (Osmani & Hossen, 2018).

6. Limitations of the study

This is the most significant qualitative study that attempted to explore the facilitators and barriers of PCW workers in accessing and sustaining themselves in the garment sector. This research significantly contributes to capturing the comprehensive and detailed struggle of PCWs in sustaining the readymade garment industry in Bangladesh hence supporting the policymakers in this sector for developing an inclusive garment sector. However, the present study has some drawbacks. First, the research adopted a qualitative approach with a relatively small purposive sample, which limits the generalizability of the findings to all PCW workers in the RMG sector of Bangladesh. Second, the study focused only on women with visible physical impairments, excluding those with invisible disabilities or other forms of impairments, whose experiences may differ significantly. Third, the data were collected from two selected garment factories and key informants, which may not fully capture the diversity of workplace environments and employment practices across the industry.

7. Conclusion

Throughout the research, the study has tried to understand the facilitators and barriers of PCW workers for sustaining themselves in the readymade garment factories as well as the challenges of CRP and garment factories in providing training and including them in the readymade garment factories. The major barriers include family-based socio-cultural resistance, lack of proper training, structural barriers to access and difficulties in meeting production targets. Constraints related to time management, detachment from the outside world during work, verbal bullying

and harassment, an uncomfortable work environment, accommodation-related constraints, job insecurity, low wages are also the key barriers. Though they get some unwritten benefits, these benefits are too little in comparison to their various challenges; the management should consider them more compassionately which is very crucial for their survival in this sector. The study is expected to significantly contribute to the study of disability and provide valuable information for the government, policymakers, administrators, and businesspeople. The study recommends that the needs of PCW workers should be examined more critically and discussions that are more extensive should be continued for effective policymaking. The study also suggests that government, NGOs, donor agencies, industry owners, individuals, and the community should take greater initiatives to promote a congenial environment for the PCW workers in the RMG sector. Eventually creating an inclusive garment sector is significant for achieving far-reaching goals of social justice and sustainable development in Bangladesh, where development leaves no one behind.

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Data availability statement

The datasets generated and analyzed during the current study are available from the corresponding author on reasonable request due to privacy concerns

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