

## THE QUALITY OF AFFORDABLE RENTAL ACCOMMODATION: A CASE STUDY ON FEMALE MIGRANT RMG WORKERS IN GAZIPUR, DHAKA, BANGLADESH

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### ABSTRACT

In Ready-Made Garments (RMG) sector, Bangladesh faced a big Economic change in late 80's. Now this sector which is the blood economy of Bangladesh where above 80% of the workers is mostly rural migrant women. These docile, vulnerable unprivileged rural migrant women workers now have become a vital issue for the socio-economic development of the country as well as to contribute to country's national economic growth. But their affordable accommodation, housing needs and living environment have been overlooked for years. The purpose of this paper is to find out their present affordable rental housing/accommodation environment of these rural migrant women workers in relation to their present economic status of two factories in Gazipur near Dhaka and study their quality of living.

**KEYWORDS:** RMG Factories, Women Migrant Worker, Rental Affordable Housing, Living Condition

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### INTRODUCTION

After the liberation war in 1971 and during 80's, Bangladesh has experienced an excellent advantage of business opportunities that had emerged in the global markets in light weight industries especially RMG, knit wear, shoemaking sectors. Low labor cost, supportive Government policies, MFA (Multi Fiber Agreement) quota free status of Bangladesh, Flexible import policies of accessories, reduction of interest has led these industries to boom up. In total export of earning, the share of this apparel sector rose from 3.89% in 1983-84 to 76% in 2006-2007 (Golam Faruk, 2009). Thus, the sector becomes a colossal industry earning the Lion's share of the country's foreign exchange and has produced a group of strong private entrepreneurs who can contribute to the growth and development of a nation.

Today, the country represents more than 5000 manufactured factories which employ around 3.6 million employees, Growth rate of RMG sectors was over 20% over the last two decades (BGMEA, Members' Directory 2010-2011). One of the main reasons for the expansion of this industry is the accessibility of female labor. Thus, the RMG industry of Bangladesh holds good for under privileged rural women of the country to work at the factories and change their socioeconomic lives and life styles (Mahmud, 2003). As a result, 80 percent of the workers are women in this sector (Golam Faruk, 2009) and most of them are migrant workers from sub urban and rural areas. The reasons behind flocking to the city are economy, lucrative urban life, education and other distressful factors such as losses of houses due to natural hazards such as cyclones, flood, draught, riverbank erosion and so on. Employers prefer female workers not only because

of their efficiency and availability but also because they are vulnerable group, docile, illiterate and easily manageable than male workers (Sikdar, Sarkar and Sadeka, 2014).

Several accidental hazards in the garments sector have led to downturn in the growth of this sector in the past few years that includes, the worst-ever industrial accident the collapse of Rana Plaza in 2013, causing the death of 1129 workers and the life threatening injuries of 2515 workers, fire at Tazreen Fashions in 2012, causing the deaths of 117 workers and injuring severely further 200 workers (Lokman Ali, 2017). These accidents drew attention to the whole world. As a result, the buyers are now demanding factory to follow minimum labour standards related to wages, working hours, leave and holidays, safety and security, provision of health and hygiene, housing facilities and so on. Today many government and non government factories are shifting to special economic zones such as EPZ (Export processing zones) areas like Gazipur, Savar, Narayanganj, which are located outside the city to reduce the hazard, pollution and congestion.

This paper will study on the provision of civic amenities (1) of these deprived migrant workers living houses in this sub-urban area (1) and their needs and satisfaction regarding their affordable living environment in Gazipur areas where many scattered factories are running their works (business). In this paper, remedy of the problems is not figured out. Nonetheless, these constraints can be taken as initial steps for further research to make pragmatic policy and practices.

A very little information of qualitative and analytical study on housing provision of women workers of Bangladesh was found .Therefore; this paper reports the output /result from the physical survey on the housing of migrant women workers of two RMG industries in Gazipur. This paper examines their affordable rental housing condition and their quality of living with satisfaction.

### **CONTEXT: BANGLADESH**

In Bangladesh, there are no rules set for labour standards and the workers' housing needs, particularly in BEPZA (Bangladesh Export Processing Authority). Therefore, there are the relatively rational developments of new lands for the newly shifted industries in many sub urban areas towards the north of Dhaka such as Gazipur, savar and the southern part of Dhaka in Narayanganj, but no land allocation for housing done for those migrant workers who agglomerate around the industries. As a result, the workers especially, the migrant women have to find rental accommodation by themselves. In most cases, they prefer to stay in informal sectors such as slums, squatters and mess closer to industrial estates, because it is cheaper and saves their transportation cost.

### **METHODOLOGY**

The study/survey was conducted in two factories in Gazipur, one named, Silken Sewing Ltd at Bhubanipur, Gazipur, another one in Essential Clothing at Mouchak, Gazipur. Survey was conducted among 50 female workers in each factory, out of the total 100 Female factory workers were around 45% of the total working population in these industries.



Figure 1.

A self structured questionnaire survey was conducted to collect the primary data. Women were taken as samples for their higher percentage of participation in workplace. They were interviewed to collect the data on some important social, economic and demographic factors which influence the conditions of livelihood such as housing status, monthly salary/ income, house rent, overtime, age, level of education, family status, migration status, and overall satisfaction regarding housing condition and uses, comfort ability, uses of open space, privacy, health issues: sanitation, water supply, etc. Simple statistical analysis such as percentage was used to analyze qualitative data. Photographs were taken to understand the housing situation and environment.

**Table 1: Socio-Economic Background of Female Workers of Silken Sewing Ltd & Essential Clothing Ltd**

Characteristics	Categories	Participants (50) (Silken Sewing)	Participants(50) (Essential Clothing)	Percentage
Age Group	Less than 18	0	0	0
	18 to 30	40	38	78
	30-40	10	8	18
	40 above	0	4	4
Education Level	Primary	15	28	43
	Secondary	30	18	48
	Higher Secondary	5	4	9
	Above Higher Secondary	0	0	0
Marital Status	Single	18	8	26
	Married	32	40	72
	Divorced	0	2	2
Migration Status	From Rural Areas	34	27	61
	Within Surrounding Areas	16	23	39
Religion	Muslim	49	47	96
	Others(Hindu, Christia)	1	3	4
Status of house	Temporary Shed (Metal wall & roof)	9	21	30
	Semi paka (Brick wall & metal shed)	36	27	63
	Permanent (Brick wall & RCC roof)	5	2	7

**Table 1: Contd.,**

Residence type	Own house	13	15	28
	Rent (Alone)	5	10	15
	Rent (Family)	20	22	40
	Rent (Shared with co-workers)	10	5	15
Monthly Salary	6000-8000 (below100 USD)	17	9	26
	8001-10000( +100 USD)	33	41	74

## **SURVEY RESULT**

### **Sample Workers Data**

Table 1 represent that 100% of the female workers were of reproductive age (18 to40+ years) and most of them are at very young age (78% below 30 years). 48% of them had secondary education, 43% had primary and the rest 9% had higher secondary education.

Here, in the study 72% of the female workers were married and one third of them had 1 to3 children and 26% were single. Regarding migration status, around 61% of the women workers came from rural areas and 39% from local area and from Dhaka city (although their origin from nearby village). The study also found 96% of the women were Muslim and most of them wore hijab; the rest 4% belong to other religion such as Hindu, Christian and Buddhist.

There was no proper accommodation or dormitories for female workers at the examined areas. Therefore, the migrant women workers who were 61% of the total women workers had to live to nearby rentable spaces offered by the local landowners. The rest women lived on their own houses with their families, relatives and others.

Among 100 participants, three fourth earned above 8001bdt (above 100 USD) and the rest earned between 7000bdt-8000bdt (around 95usd) per month. Here, income distribution varies depending on age, work load, experience and additional working hours which goes to show that Bangladesh delivers a poor wage labor market.

### **Housing and Living Condition**

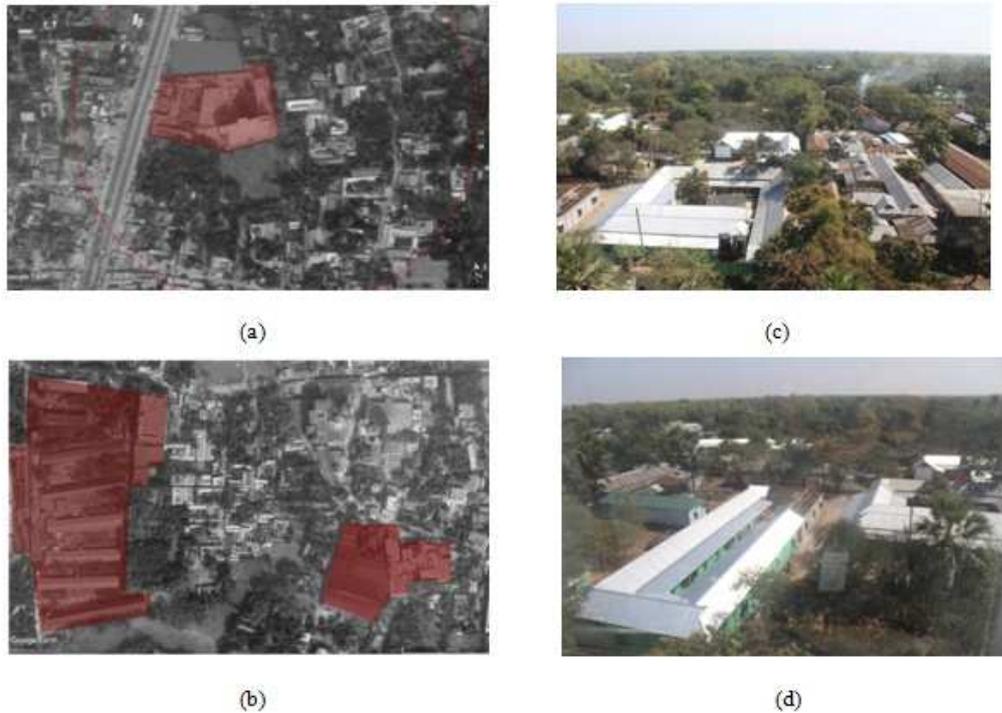
Since last 10 years of shifting of RMG factories from Dhaka to gazipur, very few housing accommodation for workers were arranged by the owners. As a result, most of the migrant workers are still dependent on renting and living on the local people's land which were basically farming land. Basically in those places, where the farm owners lived hierarchically seemed to change their houses into communal living spaces. This communal housing provided the farming land for rent to nearby working migrant workers to live. These type of communal housing has become a common phenomenon by transferring farming land which are regarded as lucrative renting business for the owners now a days.

### **House Form**

Based on the literature survey about the type of factory workers' housing, Liliana S. Arifin describes this type of housing as "Rental spontaneous housing" category. According to her, for the emerging industrial state in sub-urban areas which spontaneously attract surrounding landlord to get profit by renting part of their houses or rooms require no legal permission (Liliany S Arifin, 2001). In Gazipur, with this type the landlords who are farmers built long row houses in L or U shapes containing 7 to12 dwelling units around a central courtyard. Few of these units have attached toilet and small kitchen area where most of the housing have common toilets, while bath and cooking are kept aside of the courtyard.

These types of pattern and organization of the dwelling units around an internal courtyard resembles to traditional/vernacular housing form in rural areas of Bangladesh.

Here, the study tries to find out several living attribute regarding social, economic, cultural and climate issues based on their affordability.



**Figure 2: (a) and (b) Satellite Neighborhood View of and (c) and (d) View from the Roof Top of 2 Surveyed Factories Areas at Gazipur, Dhaka.**

### Population, Room Size and Uses

The communal houses are placed in rows and each dwelling units of around 3.5mX3.5 m area sharing a common wall. Each unit is shared by 2 to3 members of the family and friends. Along, the linear, veranda is subdivided for kitchen and wash area according to their needs. Some of these units having attached toilet are though expensive but preferable for the married couple workers as they both share the expenditures.

The average expenditure on accommodation, water supply, electricity, gas accounted for 20%- 25% of the each female worker’s monthly income which they declared satisfactory.

**Table 2: Expenditure on House Rent Per Month**

House Type (Semi Pucha and Temporary Structured Houses)	Rent Per Dwelling Unit /Month for 2-3 Persons	
	For Silken Sewing Workers, Bhubanipur, Gazipur (Beside Main Road and Factory )	For Essential Clothing Workers, at Mouchak, Gazipur(Away from Main Road and the Factory )
Provision of attached toilet and kitchen(Semi paka brick house with tin shed)	+4100 bdt (approx 50 usd)	-----
Provision of common(separate) toilet, bath and kitchen( temporary /semi pucha tin/mud walled houses with tin shed)	+2500 bdt(approx 25 usd)	+1700 bdt(approx 20 usd)
Expenditure on renting houses (Percentage of total Income)	25%	20%

Source: Field Survey, April, 2019

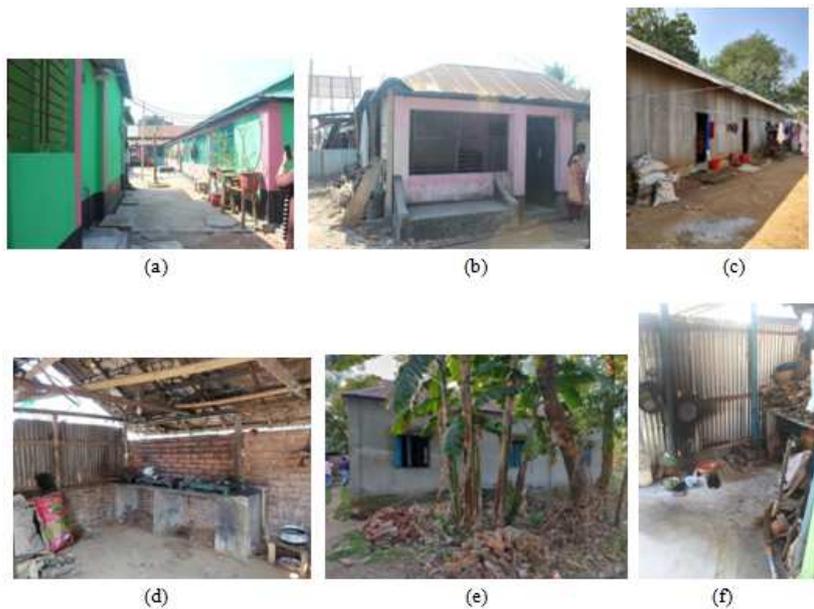
During week days, the women workers remain in the factories for more than 10 to 12 hours in a day. Their dwelling units remained lock and sometimes used by partners/relatives during this period. At night and on weekend, they use their limited units in multiple ways such as eating, gossiping, reading, watching T.V. taking rest and so on.



**Figure 3: (a),(b),(c) & (d) Multiple uses of Workers’ Interior Living Spaces: Eating, Sleeping, Cooking and so on.**

**Construction Materials and Technology**

Many of these one storied row houses are made with brick wall with corrugated pitched tin roof. Some houses which are made with low budget materials like bamboo and tin and polythene sheets, mud for walls and corrugated tin sheets for roofing are proving to be cheaper for renting. Raised floor materials are found mud in most houses but some floors of dwellings with attached toilet have finished patent stone floor. As the conventional structure system is expensive to the poor owners of Farm lands, they prefer cheap materials to build these units.



**Figure 4: (a),(b),(c),(d),(e) & (f) Different Cheap Available Construction Materials uses for Built Environment: Brick/Corrugated Tin, Plastic Walls in Resting Space and Tin/ Straw Thatched Roof as Temporary Shed in Common Kitchen.**

**Lighting and Ventilation**

As the central courtyard is considered one of the finest solution to keep the houses around be cooled and ventilated. In this structure, two openings are placed opposite to each other and are found in each unit, one opens towards outside the house

and another towards the courtyard. Therefore, ventilation is moderate during daytime in summer. The sharp pitched tin roof helped to drain out the rain water during rainy season. Here, the brick walled housing units work as insulator where as the tin/corrugated sheets walls of the dwelling units get the reverse results. During summer daytime, these units remain very hot due to the absorption and passing of the heat from Sun and on the other hand in winter, these room dwellers face harsh coldness inside. As a result, most the dwellers of these rented houses showed their dissatisfaction regarding comfort ability.



**Figure 5: (a), (b) Showing Good Daylight and Proper Ventilation Through Veranda of Brick Built Houses and (c), (d) Showing Poor Daylight and Ventilation of Low Cost Tin Walled Temporary Houses.**

### **Open Space**

Here, only veranda and courtyard were regarded as lively and enjoyable area of these working women, as it is the only extension of their living units. The courtyard acted as a communal living space in the shiny sun rays during daytime where they could perform different outdoor activities such as clothes, food, spices drying, food cooking in mud stoves, sitting and gossiping with the neighbours and relatives. This courtyard acts as a daily social gathering space characterizes the rural community of Bangladesh.



**Figure 6: (a), (b), (c), (d) Showing Multiple uses of Central Courtyard Cloth Drying, Drying Spices, Cooking in Outdoor with Mud Stoves and (f) Common Veranda in Various Uses.**

### **Level of Privacy and Safety**

As most of the young single and married female workers are migrants in this area, initially they felt insecure to find a good community to start a new journey in a new place. So there is a gap to support these vulnerable women and require further

approaches to overcome the issues as the sector cannot run without them. Disregarding workplace, in the survey, though they were quite satisfied with the privacy at their living place as there was a strong community bonding among them, the workers living in the housing units served with common toilets sometimes had to face privacy problem while sharing the common toilets with men. The owners of the dwelling units and husbands of working women themselves had to take responsibility for their safety and security. Most of Muslim women were found wearing Hijab while going to their workplaces where both men and women work together.

**Water, Health, sanitation, drainage system and solid waste disposal:** The dwelling units with attached toilet have piped water supply with deep water pumps. Other houses having common kitchen, toilets, bath and wash area has to rely on common water tap and sometimes, hand pump for all. There is no proper distribution of water, electricity and gas supplies due to demand and supply issues of these areas. Considering healthcare and comfort issue regarding toilets especially for women workers, the survey found sanitation system provided to them are in a very poor condition. The survey result found that the common toilets for male and female were inadequate in numbers, made of temporary structures, lack of proper maintenance and most of them without septic tank and sewerage connections. Hence, the poor condition of the sanitation system may cause unhygienic risks to transmit infectious diseases to these women.



**Figure 7: (a) Showing Permanent Built Attached Toilet with Fine Finished Material in Good Condition and (b), (c) Very Poor Temporary Built Common Toilets and Bath Facilities.**

The drainage and disposal of garbage were also common problem here. There were hardly any drainage system and dirty water and disposals accumulated and remained in the outer periphery of the houses, narrow walkway sides and the surrounding ditch areas.



**Figure 8: (a), (b) & (c) Showing Poor Drainage System All Disposals Accumulated to Nearby Houses.**

**Table 3: The Women Workers Showed their Satisfaction Regarding Toilet Facilities:**

Women Workers at Home	Toilet	
	Attached	Common
16%	Desirable	----
84%		Undesirable

Source: Field Survey, April, 2019

**Access to Cooking, Gas and Electricity**

Almost all the communal housing units in such sub urban areas have common kitchen with gas and electricity supply. It was good to notice from the study that solar panels were used by the owners to produce electricity of the houses in one of the houses. They have gas stoves, but they are costly and used them occasionally, whereas mud stoves are used daily which are placed at the common kitchen at corner of the central courtyard. All the common kitchens were found built with temporary structure such as tin/ bamboo walled with pitched thatched roof.



**Figure 9: (a), (b) & (c) Showing Electricity Supply and uses of Solar Panel in Better Housing Units which has Attached Toilet and Kitchen and (d), (e) & (f) Showing Semi Permanent and Temporary Structured Common Kitchen both with Gas Stoves and Mud Stoves Facilities.**

**Policy Taken by BGMEA/ Factory Owners/Government Initiatives for Affordable Housing**

From the Daily Star reported in Nov 2014 that the central Bank of Bangladesh and Bangladesh Garments Manufacturers and exporters Association (BGMEA) had signed a MOU to provide low-cost housing for the garments workers which would solve the scarcity of living in a new town for a migrant worker. Here, to promote housing for workers, Government will provide 60 percent and the owners will bear 40 percent of the total cost. Here, some cautionary notes were not approached such that the housing is not just a symbolic one; it must have fulfilled the basic requirements to the majority of the workers.

The daily star reported in 2017 about the 12 storied housing which was built in Ashulia by Public Work department (PWD) of the government costing 26.98 crores to enhance living standard and the efficiency of the workers, especially for women migrant garment workers which are still remained absent. Each room of the building contains about

61 seat beds which look like hospital ward where the tenant only had to pay 1000 bdt per month. Here, lack of privacy is considered as one of the main priorities for female workers, who face stressful working environment throughout the day. The other reasons are that entire 12 storied building had only 12 toilets and 12 baths, did not have gas service for cooking.

The reason behind this situation was due to lack of understanding of our social, cultural and moral values, policy and design decision making strategies regarding standard of living (Provision of private rooms utility service like kitchen and toilet facilities) religion, privacy, independency and others.



**Source:** Internet: <https://www.thedailystar.net/business/female-garment-workers-dormitory-has-no-takers-1485709>

**Figure 10: Showing Dormitories for the Women Workers Remain Vacant at Ashulia, Savar, Dhaka.**

## CONCLUSIONS

A good house constitutes a primary unit of a society which supports workability and changes in a society. Today, the RMG women workforce is the strongest support of Bangladesh which contributes three-fourth of total foreign export-import economy. Over the period of time, the socio economic status of these workers has been in forefront of the development. Therefore, the provision of proper housing facilities cannot be ignored to foster this sector. Though, few RMG owners are ready to take initiatives for developing workers' housing and dormitories, It is necessary to formulate better decision making and take potential steps to provide those women workers a better living in the days to come.

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