

Preventing and protesting workplace sexual harassment: Women agro-processing workers in Bangladesh

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Summary

Motivation: Sexual harassment of women in the workplace is considered to be one of the reasons holding back women from entering work and a major reason for women dropping out of work in Bangladesh. However, paid work is an important pathway to empowerment. To enable and sustain women's entry into the formal sectors of the economy, it is important to understand their voice and agency in preventing workplace sexual harassment and from the obstacles they face in doing so.

Purpose: The article explores how language and social and gender norms constrain young women's voice and agency in response to sexual harassment. Our research asked how language, gender norms, and informality in work arrangements influence young women's voice and agency in response to sexual harassment at work.

Methods and approach: Based on case studies with factory workers in agro-processing firms in the outskirts of the capital, Dhaka, 21 in-depth interviews were carried out, supplemented by participatory techniques of gender safety audits and body mapping.

Findings: I show the informal nature of formal workspaces and the failure of formal institutions which create precarity for the women working there. Young women's experiences, perceptions, and articulation of sexual harassment and attempts at prevention or redress are determined by gender norms and how these norms influence the factory workspace and interactions with others in that space. I argue that sexual harassment is normalized, formal complaints mechanisms do not work, and so informal means aligned with social norms may be the only option available.

Policy implications: The policy implications of the research include the need to recognize the informal mechanisms being used and the importance of developing a common language that will allow the "victims" to speak openly about their experiences and make complaints, increasing access to and confidence in formal complaints mechanisms and developing young women's civic and political capacities to protest harassment and seek redress.

KEYWORDS

agency, gender norms, precarity, sexual harassment, voice

1 | INTRODUCTION

Workplace sexual harassment of women in Bangladesh, which is prevalent in both formal and informal sectors, is considered to be one of the reasons holding back women from entering work and a major reason for women leaving employment, both formal and informal (Rahaman & Jahan, 2015). This is an issue of concern as women's involvement in paid formal work is an important pathway to their empowerment but the national rate of female participation in the labour force is low. The Report on Violence Against Women (VAW) Survey 2015 for Bangladesh shows that sexual violence is also likely to occur in the "husband's house" (45.5%), followed by the workplace (32.8%), and vehicles, roads, or streets (18.3%) (BBS, 2018, p. 49). Actual figures are likely to be much higher because of the sensitivities related to talking about sexual harassment and violence. Mazumder and Pokharel (2019) state that 84% of Bangladeshi women experienced staring, deliberate touching, groping, and sexual comments while travelling, and that 60%–80% of sexual assaults have never been reported to the police due to fear of subsequent victimization by police or society (Loukaitou-Sideris, 2014). Younger, unmarried women are more susceptible to being harassed and are likely to have less experience in prevention, protest, and seeking redress (BBS, 2018, p. 51; Oosterom et al., 2022). There has historically been more research on workplace sexual harassment of women in the ready-made garments (RMG) sector, where recent work has shown violence by supervisors as a model of supervision (Ahmed & Uddin, 2022).

Precarious workers, such as seasonal, casual, and migrant workers, and domestic workers are more vulnerable to workplace sexual harassment (Rahaman & Jahan, 2015; Siddiqi, 2003). Material and spatial factors like working hours, isolated work, and the nature of public transport to the workplace also matter (Siddiqi, 2003). Institutional factors include laws and policies and firm-level institutions: asymmetric incentives between supervisors and workers, supervisors' control over recruitment, and production quotas (Lin et al., 2014; Siddiqi, 2003). I will argue that there are women in the formal sectors working under informal conditions which are also precarious.

The key research question addressed was how gender norms and informality in work arrangements influence young women's agency in response to sexual harassment at work. One of the questions I sought to answer was why formal rules on workplace sexual harassment do not lead to change. This article will contribute conceptually to the discussion on work and women's empowerment literature in low- and middle-income countries—the role social norms play in limiting the possibilities of paid work enhancing women's agency. While it has been demonstrated that existing gender and social norms constrain women from reporting incidents of harassment (Kabeer, 1994), it has not been studied in depth within specific work settings. This article contributes to the debate on the role of social and gender norms with respect to the voice and agency of female workers, supervisors, and managers in agro-processing factories in Bangladesh. This article will address an empirical gap by studying a less researched sector than the RMG sector, which is expanding economically but is less strictly monitored by buyers and the government.

One of the key findings is that social norms in relation to honour constrain women's freedoms but, at the same time, they influence some of the managers to safeguard young women on the factory floor. I will argue that social norms play a contradictory role: while social and gender norms constrain young women's voice and agency in response to sexual harassment, these same norms also encourage action by management to protect workers. I argue that the experience of sexual harassment has been normalized, and the informalization of the workplace results in formal complaint mechanisms functioning in informal manners.

The policy implications of the research include the need to recognize the informal mechanisms being used in formal sectors and the importance of developing a common language that will allow the "victims" to speak openly about their experiences and make complaints, thereby increasing access to and confidence in formal complaint mechanisms and developing young women's civic and political capacities to protest harassment and seek redress. The research provides evidence on gender norms that will influence women's ability to articulate the harassment faced and the factors that constrain or enable them to speak out to complain or seek redress, which need to be addressed by policy-makers, employers, and labour and women's rights actors if a safe and enabling working environment is to be ensured. The adoption of the Convention on Violence and Harassment No 190 and its

Recommendation R206 in 2019 by the International Labour Organization (ILO), which applies to both formal and informal workers, has provided an impetus for government, employers, and trade unions to address these issues seriously (International Labour Organization, 2019).

Section 2 provides the context for the research, and Section 3 sets out the concepts of social and gender norms, the role of language, and how these influence and are influenced by women's empowerment, voice, and agency. These concepts will then be used to present the findings of the research with regard to individual, collective, and employers' strategies to prevent and redress workplace sexual harassment. After describing the approach and methodology in Section 4, Section 5 will describe the precarity of the working conditions prevalent in the agro-processing factories studied. Section 6 will explain the dynamics of workplace sexual harassment in the selected factories and explore the role of social and gender norms in workers voicing and taking action. The article will conclude with a discussion of the policy implications of the research.

2 | CONTEXT

Agro-processing firms are recognized for their potential for inclusive growth, and there is likely to be a significant shift in agricultural employment, away from farming towards more commercialized agro-processing (Raihan et al., 2017; World Bank, 2018). This sector is relevant for future job creation for women, increasing the urgency to make it safe. Furthermore, the Government of Bangladesh (GOB, 2018) is seeking to improve regulation of this sector to promote further growth and ensure compliance with various directives. According to a study for Katalyst (Innovision Consulting Private Limited, 2016), the agro-processing sector in Bangladesh has grown at an average of 7.7% per annum between fiscal years 2004/2005 and 2010/2011 and stands at USD 2.2 billion. The Bangladesh Agro-Processors' Association (BAPA) reports export of agro-processed products from Bangladesh increased from USD 60 million in 2010–2011 to USD 224 million in 2014–2015.

Agro-food processing now employs about 2.2% of the total workforce in the country, of which close to 70% are unskilled labour (Mahmood, 2019). Agro-processing firms employ large numbers of female workers. In 2017, women constituted 21% of Bangladesh's total employment in the processing preserving of fruits and vegetables, 16% of production workers, and 44% of temporary workers (World Bank, 2018). The larger agro-processing companies, such as PRAN and Square, have been able to ensure steady jobs and a regular income for their workers (Jha et al., 2015).

Although, as a formal sector, agro-processing workers would technically fall under the labour law, working conditions are often characterized by varying degrees of informality, in keeping with the international trend of “de facto informalization” studied by various authors (Chang, 2009; Salmivaara, 2021) whereby employers seek to maximize profits and the government and businesses seek to weaken trade unionization by providing short-term employment and informal arrangements to a large portion of the labour force in certain industries. The Bangladesh Labour Act (BLA) 2006 (amended in 2013, see GOB, 2013) provides for various categories of workers with different types of entitlements. In Section 4 of BLA on the Classification of Workers and Period of Probation, workers are classified into the following categories: apprentice, casual, *badli*¹ (i.e. replacement), probationer, and temporary.² “Badli” casual workers are employed in an establishment on daily wages and are not treated as permanent workers due to the “ad hoc, or temporary” nature of their work. Employers may recruit non-regular or casual workers, and can use the loophole in the law to escape providing the workers the benefits of a full-time or formal employment contract. In addition, while firms may be formally registered, the unevenness of government monitoring means that laws and regulations are often enforced in a lenient manner. The

¹Section 4(3) BLA: “A worker who is employed in an establishment in the post of a permanent worker or of a probationer during the period who is temporarily absent).”

²Section 4(5) BLA: “A worker shall be called a temporary worker if he is employed in an establishment for work which is essentially of temporary nature, and is likely to be finished within a limited period.”

various kinds of informality in the organization of labour create vulnerability for female workers and barriers to empowerment in the marketplace.

3 | GENDER NORMS AND EMPOWERMENT

Analysing gender norms is essential to understanding empowerment. This section will explain the relationship between gender norms, specifically for empowerment and voice with regard to challenging harassment. It will also elaborate on the specific norms that operate in Bangladeshi society and how they relate to both the personal and work lives of women and men. The precarity which I have discussed above interacts with sociocultural and gender norms concerning women's behaviour, as does violence.

Gender norms are social norms defining acceptable and appropriate actions for men and women in a given group or society (Cislaghi & Heise, 2019). Bangladesh society is generally characterized by discriminatory and restrictive gender norms which devalue women and girls, limit their autonomy and mobility, and discourage women from being seen and heard, both in the home and in public, with strong restrictions on women's sexuality and interactions with the opposite sex outside marriage and kinship relations. The norms regarding sexuality privilege heteronormativity, with sexual relations outside marriage being considered taboo for women, while being tacitly accepted for men. Women and girls are considered as sexual objects who can provoke lust and undesirable thoughts and feelings in men and boys and are therefore responsible for veiling and covering themselves. This notion is closely tied to notions of *purdah* (the practice in certain Muslim and Hindu societies of screening women from men or strangers, either through segregation or through veiling). Although in earlier times *purdah* meant not being seen by males outside the immediate family, in recent times, it has come to mean the practice of protecting one's "honour" (*shomman* and *izzat*) by "modest" behaviour and clothing. Working women have gone against the traditional norms in choosing to work outside the home and have to prove that they are able to maintain "*purdah*" while being exposed to men and the outside world (Kabeer, 2000).

It is important for women to protect their honour by not attracting attention and blame and maintaining their "goodness." In the case of unmarried girls, this would mean virginity, whereas for married women, this would mean "faithfulness" to the married partner. While any slurs or attacks on their chastity might not be the girls' responsibility, they are to feel shame (*lajja* or *shorom*), and society will blame them first and hold their families responsible for allowing this to happen (Rozario, 2001; White, 1992).

Another important aspect of the social norms is the role of the male members of the family as guardians in protecting the female family members and safeguarding their honour. When male family members are not available, this role can be taken by other men of the same community (as seen in the case of the factories studied and described below) and in the workplace, the male supervisors may reproduce the social restrictions related to interactions between male and female workers that are considered to be culturally suitable and take on the role of guardians. While this is reproducing discriminatory social norms, I will demonstrate that it was this norm that provided some protection to women from sexual harassment in the workplace.

Finally, there are social norms concerning hierarchies of class and age. Social norms emphasize respect for age whereby younger persons are supposed to defer to their elders and show them respect. The social class hierarchies are emphasized in language and behaviour with various forms of deference being expected and given (White, 1992). These compound the difficulties in speaking out about matters of harassment for women and girls as it means defying various sociocultural norms. Some have written about "cultures of silence," as women feel ashamed about their experiences of workplace sexual harassment (Naved et al., 2018; Rahaman & Jahan, 2015; Ullah, 2017).

Social and gender norms influence women's voice and empowerment, which in the context of this study would concern the ways in which women challenge sexual harassment and the workplace, confront perpetrators, and use mechanisms for redress. Empowerment will mean understanding how women, particularly young women, confront workplace sexual harassment and how they are able or not able to use their voice and agency to negotiate and

challenge unsafe work environments. Scholars in social sciences and gender studies have emphasized how empowerment is about gaining critical consciousness (including about inequalities and injustices) and gaining voice and agency to challenge forms of marginalization and exploitation (Kabeer, 2000; Nazneen et al., 2014; Nazneen et al., 2019). Women will need to have the knowledge about what their rights are as workers, what constitutes sexual harassment, and that such harassment is a violation of their rights. They will need to have the language to express themselves, voice their feelings, and protest. And they will need to be able to trust that the institutions will provide justice.

Without “power within” or the confidence to express themselves to determine their own agendas and make their own decisions, which is a self-generated understanding of subordination and how it is maintained (Kabeer, 1994; Rowlands, 1997), they will not be able to speak up. This confidence is also supported by “power with” or collective strength provided by the family, community, co-workers, or labour associations, where “there is a sense of the whole being greater than the sum of the individuals, especially when a group tackles a problem together” (Rowlands, 1997, p. 13). Norms influence how women can speak about harassment (which explains the importance of linguistic analysis). We can assume that positive experiences of agency in terms of protest and finding redress (“power with” and “power to”) will encourage empowerment processes and the gaining of greater individual confidence (Kabeer, 1994; Rowlands, 1997). It will also provide other workers and their community with examples of women who have complained and had a positive outcome. Therefore, individual empowerment of women workers could potentially lead to, or facilitate, collective empowerment. While, in theory, labour associations could contribute to collective agency, research has shown that in practice women did not mention them or experience their support. This reflects the difficulties of labour unions in attracting women and of the women in becoming involved (Nawaz & Haque, 2019). This article will trace these various processes in the lives of the firm workers interviewed and seek to understand the opportunities and constraints they faced at various stages and the influence of gender norms on voice and agency at each of these, with patriarchal structures constraining women's agency relative to men's (Oosterom et al., 2022).

4 | APPROACH AND METHODS

The research approach included a desk review of academic studies and grey literature, qualitative interviews, and visual methods conducted in focus groups. The field research was conducted in Savar, Ashulia, and Hemayetpur—semi-urban industrial areas on the outskirts of Dhaka—during 2020–2021. Site and sample selection was affected by the COVID-19 pandemic, the ensuing lockdowns, and the rise in COVID-19 case numbers. This delayed field-work, which then was conducted with necessary precautions. While the sampling initially targeted young women in the 18–24 age group, factories were employing youth from 14 onwards for “light work,” which is allowed under the Bangladesh Labour Act 2006 amended in 2013 (GOB, 2013). As a result of the falsification of their ages on formal documents to get jobs, some of the respondents were as young as 13. In the case of respondents under 18, parental consent was obtained and questions were tailored to their age. Interview respondents were selected from the group exercises and through a snowball process.

Safety audits and body mappings conducted in two focus groups were used to engage the respondents in a discussion of where, how, and when workplace sexual harassment would take place (safety audits) and also which parts of the body are considered to be sensitive and are targeted by the harassment/harassers (body mapping), thereby allowing the researchers to capture and understand the respondents' perceptions, experiences, gender norms, as well as the language used. The interviews were transcribed and NVivo software was used to process and analyse transcripts. Another level of linguistic analysis was undertaken to understand the use of language to express workplace sexual harassment and voice complaints. The results were presented in Bangla in the communities to firm workers and trade union representatives for validation. A national-level dissemination in early 2022 engaged policy-makers and other stakeholders engaged in the area of workers' rights, violence against women, and workplace sexual harassment.

5 | WORKING CONDITIONS

The factory jobs fulfilled by women were largely informal, reflecting global trends in the informalization of labour (Chang, 2009; Salmivaara, 2021), and working conditions were precarious because of the lack of job security and benefits. They were working in medium to large formal establishments which had been in operation for at least five years, with their own buildings and various categories of staff, such as guards, daily workers, permanent workers, supervisors, machine operators, and various layers of management. While seeking employment in these factories at the worker level was relatively easy, the women had to present birth, education, and citizenship certificates (all of which can be obtained informally in exchange for a “fee”), after which they could start immediately. The daily workers were paid at a daily rate, and their monthly salary was calculated at the end of the month. The daily rates were in the range of USD 4–8, but the women felt that this was better than other available alternative sources of income. Although they had identity cards and attendance sheets, they had no contracts and therefore no legal rights. As daily workers, they had no leave entitlement nor were they entitled to paid leave. Most factories worked in two or three shifts of 10–12 hours or eight hours each, with both women and men doing night shifts. None of the women interviewed felt that the night shift was difficult for them as they had transport, adequate lighting, and felt secure. Also, female security guards would be on duty if women were doing shift work. Some of the larger factories provided transport for the female workers. In the case of women walking to and from work, they would travel in small groups for security reasons or be accompanied by male family members.

The factory management emphasized the physical separation of women and men in the workplace in line with community norms emphasizing purdah and segregation of the sexes. Workers entering or leaving the factory would be checked by male or female guards (separately if there were two gates), or women would be asked to leave before the men, to avoid women and men crowding together. There are separate canteens and toilets for women and men. Tasks were gender-segregated, even within the smaller plants, e.g. with women doing packing and men doing loading. There was adequate lighting within the factory and on the grounds. Finally, there were CCTV cameras all over the compound and inside the plants, and workers were conscious of the risk of being caught on camera either stealing or engaging in sexual activities. While these precautions are taken for the safety and security of the factories, these also make the workplace more secure for women and girls. Some factories provided new recruits with orientation on roles and responsibilities, including complaint mechanisms. However, this is limited to taking up issues with the supervisors and, in theory, being able to complain to the administration or human resources. None of the respondents was aware of the Workers' Participation Committees³ and Complaints Committees (to deal with sexual harassment) that are mandated by the Bangladesh Labour Act. It is within this context of general working conditions for women factory workers in the agro-processing firms that I will place their experiences of sexual harassment and how social and gender norms both helped and hindered the voicing of their complaints and the exercising of their agency by seeking redress.

6 | HARASSMENT, NORMS, VOICE, AND AGENCY

6.1 | Types and prevalence of harassment

The contents as well as the kind of language used in the interviews and focus group discussions (FGDs) revealed the normalization of sexual harassment in the experience of the workers. The types of harassment reported by

³Establishments of more than 50 workers have to set up committees with equal number of representatives from management and workers. The main function of the participation committee is to develop a sense of belonging among the workers and employers and make the workers aware of their commitments and responsibilities to the establishment. These are mandatory.

the young firm workers consisted of a wide range of abuse of different degrees of severity that took different forms at the workplace and on the way to the workplace. Harassment on the way to work is common, and young respondents found it easier to talk about harassment on the streets or in the community than harassment in the workplace.

Harassment in the form of verbal abuse, unwanted compliments, propositions to have sex, and gestures and looks were more common, while touching was less so. Comments might appear as compliments but were experienced as harassment because of the tone, facial expression, or the age and relationship to the woman. Romantic expressions were considered to be generally culturally inappropriate. The firm workers did not report any physical sexual abuse. While most forms of abuse at work did not seem prevalent, verbal abuse seemed more common and several talked about their previous experience in garment factories where parents are often invoked in abusive language. In Hemayatpur in September 2021, one young woman (Firm Worker No. 15) said, "They called my parents fuckers...Yes, I get hurt if anyone abuses me mentioning my mother. I get angry if my husband tells me anything wrong mentioning my mother. I go crazy and can't control what I say."

In the case of the firm workers, verbal harassment came mainly from male firm workers. The most explicit words of harassment were shared by the young women working in the dairy section. The word "*dudh*" (milk) is one of the words used for "breasts," and this allows comments with sexual insinuations, as Firm Worker No. 17 explained when interviewed in Dhamrai in September 2021, "In the milk section, we check the litre of the milk packets. So, boys from different sections tell the young girls, 'Come close, and let's check out the milk.' They use this kind of bad language."

The research did not find evidence of verbal harassment from supervisors or managers, who often took on the role of guardians to ensure segregation and protection of the women, in contrast to the kind of abuse by supervisors reported in the garments industry (Siddiqui, 2003). Some of the workers and the parents compared the agro-processing factories to garment factories and felt the former were more suitable for younger workers as there was less work pressure and they would experience better behaviour. An interesting question to explore would be how workflow and management patterns could account for these differences.

Generally, male colleagues did not verbally harass agro-processing workers inside the plant in which they worked because of the supervisors, but this happened when girls stepped outside the plant, for example, to use the washroom, or immediately outside the factory gates where boys and men were present. Sometimes girls received comments on their bodies or were asked for their phone numbers. Other times they were targeted obliquely where the men said to each other, "There goes your wife!" or "It would be good if I could taste those goods/objects" (with women being referred to as "goods/objects"). Sometimes if the young female workers did not respond they were threatened with kidnapping.

Two firm workers had mentioned that they experienced unwanted touching but did not complain because they thought that those boys might take revenge later. The young firm workers could not or did not share any experience of attempted rape or rape in the workplace. Only a 13-year-old firm worker spoke about a boy from the factory raping a girl from the same factory, but the assault took place outside the factory. The boy was apparently fired from his job. According to the respondent, the factory policy did not prohibit romance but it did not allow any physical relations between workers inside the factory. The action illustrates the blurring of the workspace with the outside space. A female security guard also mentioned that the female toilets on the factory premises were a "danger point" because male outsiders (e.g. truckers) might not follow instructions, and the guards had special instructions to ensure that men did not enter the washrooms.

In some instances, the line between verbal harassment and romance is blurred. On the one hand, norms prohibit socializing between young men and women, which makes courting difficult. On the other hand, when a man makes an effort (thus transgressing the norm), this could become unwanted attention. Dominant stereotypes of courting represent men aggressively pursuing reluctant women who finally succumb to the men's attention. A 14-year-old girl's description of how a boy approaches a girl could be interpreted as stalking if the girl was unwilling, as Firm Worker No. 16 explained when interviewed in Hemayatpur in September 2021:

The guy has to keep asking for it [phone number] for several days. The girl cannot understand, so the guy needs to show his presence. For example, walking along with the girl from a distance or routinely standing in front of the factory gate are ways he does that.

Romance was quite common in the agro-processing factories in the study. One firm had strict rules about men and women talking or meeting, but other factories seemed to have a reputation for being “dating grounds.” Respondents from one particular factory called the factory a “love go-down” (warehouse). A few of the respondents had met their husbands and got married while working together. Although these love affairs were mostly between the workers, there were a few stories about “love” between the supervisor and the worker. It would be difficult to say if the relationships were consensual or exploitative but there was definitely a power difference between the supervisor and the worker which would make it difficult for the worker to refuse to enter into or continue the relationship.

6.2 | Norms and expressing sexual harassment

The dearth of language to describe experiences of sexual harassment results in its being described in general terms which hide and downplay the insult, violence, and even trauma felt by the recipient. The acts are often defined in non-sexual terms. For example, Bangla words such as “*ottachar*,” “*jhulum*,” and “*nirjatan*”—all meaning “torture”—were repeatedly used to mean that sexual abuse had been committed. Some of them used phrases such as “disturbing,” being rude, using bad language, and “doing bad things” to refer to the sexual harassment they had experienced. Also, while describing a threat of rape, Firm Worker No. 5 when interviewed in Demra in September 2021, used the term “to abduct” where the intention of the abduction was implicit. Terms such as “accident,” “bad things,” “bad behaviour,” “loose language” (“*elomelo kotha*”), and “mischief” (“*shoitani*”) were repeatedly used by the participants to refer to their experiences of sexual harassment. Similarly, while referring to perpetrators, they called them lewd or having a “bad character.”

These diluted terms for violence contribute to making them and others think that these acts are “trivial issues” that need not be reported or protested against. Explicit terms were avoided, and indirect expressions dominated. Broad, non-sexual terms were used even when they reported the act as a crime. This demonstrates how much of the language is implicit, reflecting how the social norms limit or even prohibit the direct expression of incidences or issues to do with sexuality. These taboos persisted even when the young women were talking to female researchers within a safe and confidential research setting.

The respondents' language also avoided the mention of sexually related body parts, especially to their male supervisors. The Bangla equivalents of “breasts,” “hips,” or “vagina” were almost absent in the language used in the interviews. They either described them in a vague way or used non-sexual terms that indirectly indicated those parts. For example, a 16-year-old single factory worker mentioned that if she was to report someone touching her breasts, she would mention “negative body part” and explained that the supervisor would understand. This example demonstrated how gender norms about women not speaking of sex explicitly interact with social norms of hierarchy and age, where older men in supervisory positions will be addressed differently from the same-aged women of a similar background. The respondents also mentioned that they would talk more openly to female supervisors if they had them.

The interviews and the observations brought out the influence of age and education levels of the women in how confident and outspoken they could be. They were more likely to use the phrase *jowno hoirani* which is the formal term for sexual harassment. Those who had worked for longer periods in the factories were more aware of what to do to protect themselves and also what to do if there were difficulties, either in terms of harassment or non-payment of wages.

While some women felt that they could not talk to their families and husbands about sexual harassment because of the shame or because they would react by asking them to stop work, other women reported talking to other women or family members in order to gain some mental support. In most cases, they received advice on how

to deal with their situation. This would seem to depend on the nature of the relationship the woman had with her husband, her family, and her neighbours. An 18-year-old newly married and newly migrated Firm Worker No. 3 from Hemayatpur in September 2021 mentioned that if anyone were to harass her, she would first tell her husband. She said, "I can tell him everything. He will try and solve the problem, he knows my work, he knows how I behave".

In the case of the factories, the formal rules and messages from management encourage women and girls to protect themselves but also to speak out if they feel uncomfortable or threatened. This may be as much to protect the factory's reputation as to protect the safety of the workers. However, they know who to report to and it appeared that certain "Sirs" were approachable. The firms have an important interest to maintain their reputation regarding safe working environments, which ensures that they can recruit and retain workers while avoiding bad publicity.

A few firm workers believed that they could complain when such incidents happened to them if colleagues were helpful. A 19-year-old married Firm Worker No. 18, from Demra in September 2021, when asked if colleagues can be of any help to complain about sexual harassment taking place in her factory, answered:

"Yes, others can also help her to complain. A woman may not say or complain due to shame or fear, but other workers help her to send her complaint or solve this issue. They complain to Sir"

An essential factor for voicing to formal mechanism is courage, which is the "power within," and two firm workers stated that many women are not complaining because they are not courageous enough. When asked about what enables them to complain, a 19-year-old firm worker No. 1 from Demra in September 2021 said, "It depends on that woman and not everyone has this courage".

6.3 | Norms and self-protection strategies

This section demonstrates how gender norms around honour and shame result in women using a range of strategies to prevent sexual harassment in the first instance, rather than directly challenging them. We can differentiate between prevention and confrontation as being different forms of agency. Self-protection is an important form of agency and happens in individual and collective ways, thus illustrating the use of "power to" and "power with." Individual prevention and self-protection strategies which are in keeping with gender and social norms include keeping quiet and not talking back, keeping one's eyes down and not looking men in the eye, and keeping one's body covered. That is being non-provocative and non-confrontational in keeping with the prevalent gender norms. An unmarried girl of 14 who was new in the area and in the factory mentioned that she would stay silent even if someone said anything so as not to provoke the men to do anything worse. A married woman aged 24 explained that she was following the advice of her parents and now her husband to be sure not to do anything immoral and to protect her personal and family honour.

A collective prevention strategy is involving male family members as protectors and guardians of their reputation and honour which illustrates the women's agency and "power with" through the support they mobilize and receive. A newly married 18-year-old female factory worker in Hemayatpur and her husband have negotiated that they together do a day shift one week and a night shift the next week. They go to the factory together although he is in another plant. If for some reason he does not go, her father-in-law walks her to the factory for the night shift. An older worker who has been working in a factory for six years and is considered more senior than others said that she advises younger girls to bring their brothers and fathers. Another strategy adopted was threatening the men or boys harassing them that they would complain to the supervisor or to their male relatives.

Common collective prevention strategies include staying together with other girls, which was mentioned by several of the girls, in the words of Firm Worker No. 5 interviewed in Dhamrai in September 2021: "Staying with another girl is enough to keep ourselves safe." Another strategy is going to the factory washroom with at least one other girl during the night shift (there are separate washrooms for women and men).

In both locations, there were social and familial networks between the women and girls working in the factories from which the interviewees were selected. Some of the younger women had their mothers, mothers-in-law, aunts, neighbours, as well as male relatives, working in the same factories. This allowed a certain measure of security and confidence in the workplace, allowing parents and husbands to send their daughters or wives to work in those places. An older woman with more experience, Firm Worker No. 21, mentioned when interviewed in September 2021 that she had the responsibility of looking after younger, newer workers: "The seniors like me and others always tell the juniors to tell us whenever possible if something happens or if any boy says something to them. And they share with us."

Boys of the same locality as the girls also felt responsible for upholding norms regarding women's honour and providing them with protection. Firm Worker No. 16, an unmarried 14-year-old in Hemayatpur who had been working for a year, said, "Boys from our locality also work there. They said that we can tell them if someone disturbs us. They said, 'If someone says anything bad or inappropriate, do tell us. We will look after it.'" Both women and men who share the same norms and community members (including women) expect that the men will play a protective role towards "their women," which gives the women greater confidence ("power with").

Interestingly, the factory supervisors and management also adopt the role of male guardians towards the women. As mentioned above, they advise the women not to talk to the men and not to go out alone, i.e. to follow the various restrictive gender norms governing the behaviour between women and men. On the factory premises, the male supervisors ("sirs" and "brothers") assume the role of guardians, disciplining those men who misbehave with the girls. They advise them on what to do and not to do (e.g. not to go to washrooms on their own, not to talk and joke with male workers, etc.). They also told the women that they could complain to them. And when complaints were made, they did take action. An interesting anecdote that was recounted during one of the group discussions told of an electricity failure in one of the factories during the night shift. The supervisor asked all the women to sit around him in a circle and he sat in the middle to ensure that none of them was harassed during the blackout.

6.4 | Social norms, voice, and agency when challenging harassment

This section demonstrates how gender norms result in women using various strategies to challenge and confront sexual harassment, either individually or collectively, again illustrating the use of both "power to" and "power with." One such strategy is involving male family members or supervisors to confront incidences of harassment. This informal mechanism illustrates the use of "power with" to deal with harassment after it occurs. An older, experienced woman, Firm Worker No. 21, when interviewed in Hemayatpur in December 2021, gave the example of how they had dealt with a man from outside the factory who was bothering one of their co-workers:

We said to him that we are not alone and that we will not even complain to the Sir; we have brothers and fathers outside. So then he apologized saying he misunderstood. After that, it didn't happen further. Some boys do understand and stop doing it, but some are bad, then we tell it to our male guardians.

While in the example above the women did not explicitly articulate the action of the perpetrator as "sexual harassment," the women took collective action to make clear to him that his behaviour was unacceptable and made him stop his harassment, illustrating that they had both the "power to" protest and take action and also "power with" in their mobilization of other women workers and potentially of male family members.

The reporting of harassment, whether formally or informally, may be classified as "power to." A number of the factory workers mentioned that they would complain to their family members (fathers or brothers) about boys or men harassing them on the way to work. The male family members would come and reprimand them politely or even beat them up. Complaining to one's male relatives was mentioned by several factory workers. A 13-year-old, Firm Worker

No. 8, recounted when interviewed in Hemayatpur in September 2021, how she had complained about a boy to her older brother who scolded him.

An important finding of the research was that, while formal mechanisms for complaints may exist, informal means aligned with social norms may be preferred. Firm workers who participated in the FGDs mentioned that, in the factory, both male and female workers can complain to their superiors who behave well with them, listen to their complaints, and take action. In effect, the supervisors act as their guardians. Firm Worker No. 1 said, "If anyone behaves rudely and doesn't obey the Sir, then they will fire them." Firm workers who participated in safety audit discussions explained the process of complaining formally by filing a complaint first to their unit "in-charge" and then to the administration.

The incident happens in a formal space and the complaint is made to a person formally charged with dealing with these matters. However, the manner in which he deals with it might be semi-formal—telling people off, slapping them, or even firing them without necessarily following due process allowing the accused to be heard. A young worker, Firm Worker No. 5, who was studying in Class 7 and who had just started working during the COVID-19 school closure, gave the example below when interviewed in Dhamrai in September 2021, of a supervisor taking action:

One day my friend and I were walking along the road. It was 7 pm. A forklift was being driven by the driver. A boy said to Farhana, "Hey Farhana. Your figure is beautiful." Farhana did nothing, just said, "I will hit you with a shoe, you animal." She scolded him and informed this to Sir. Then Sir called that boy and asked him why he did so and slapped him. After slapping him, Sir said to him, "Get lost." After that, he [the boy] didn't come later.

Interestingly, the present research did not come across cases of collective mobilization and protest at the workplace as has been found and documented in the RMG sector (Ashraf & Prentice, 2019) although the size of the factories in terms of workforce is similar. The reason might be the lower rates of unionization in the agro-processing sector.

Reporting to the police is not considered to be a viable option, except in extreme cases of violence, because of the bribery costs and lack of interest on the part of the police. While talking in Dhamrai in September 2021, about complaining within the factory, a female worker, Firm Worker No. 17, said, "If they ensure justice, then why should I go to the police?" And neither trade unions nor locally elected public representatives were mentioned by the women on their own. The former is understandable in view of the very low coverage of trade unions in non-RMG sectors and the latter is due to locally elected representatives considering the workers to be migrants and not local citizens.

7 | CONCLUSIONS AND POLICY IMPLICATIONS

First, the article demonstrates that the young women working in the agro-processing factories covered by our research are in informal and precarious jobs even in formal settings. They are subject to a number of vulnerabilities because of their age, gender, and the nature of their employment. Second, the study has demonstrated the role of gender norms in expressing sexual harassment, and how these norms influence how women report harassment in the firms and also the responses by supervisors. The ability of the women to withstand the various vulnerabilities, resist, or retaliate is limited by various sociocultural norms and restrictive and traditional institutional structures. Third, our research has also shown that the women lack the language to explicitly describe harassment and violence and convey the gravity of the situation. This situation is compounded by women's sense of shame talking about anything remotely sexual and fear of compromising their individual and family honour. Finally, within these constraints, the women do exercise their agency by deploying various preventive strategies to avoid workplace sexual harassment and involving families, communities, and even supervisors in this. They were

also able to demonstrate individual and collective agency in confronting and challenging instances of harassment using various informal mechanisms. While our research revealed that there is knowledge among even the young women workers about the formal mechanisms that can be used to make complaints within a factory, these formal channels do not work. In the community, the formal channels of making complaints to the police or local government representatives have also not been used. Women workers prefer using informal complaint mechanisms to colleagues, families, and supervisors and these are the only ones accessible to them in practice.

The paradox is that norms that we consider to be constraining for gender equality are used by both women workers and their male bosses to demand, on the one hand, and ensure, on the other, a form of protection. In some cases, this results in punitive action being taken against the perpetrator. Our research found that most of the cases brought to the supervisor were dealt with them directly and informally, through threats, scolding, and even by firing the perpetrator. But this is down to the individual supervisor rather than guaranteed by institutions/formal mechanisms. While these informal mechanisms do seem to work, there is a risk of workers being disbelieved and victimized and of the supervisors not being fair or impartial. There is therefore a need to recognize and strengthen these mechanisms so that all workers know about these processes and so that the supervisors also are accountable for the action they take to protect the person harassed and to punish the perpetrator. Similarly, the role of colleagues and older women workers can also be recognized and strengthened by giving them a formal identity as "persons of confidence" and making them accountable for the advice and action they take. Sexual harassment policies and user-friendly reporting systems should be developed in every workplace, so that any worker can access these easily and get speedy results. The presence of women in supervisory and management roles accessible to workers would be an important step in facilitating complaints and enabling women to express themselves freely.

This does not negate the need for formal mechanisms such as administrative action by factory management, filing cases with the police, or approaching local government representatives for mediation—all of which are mechanisms that could deter harassment. However, for this to be effective, the police, local government representatives, and factory management need to be aware of their roles and responsibilities to deal with cases of violence and harassment against women workers and work in gender-sensitive and friendly ways. Women must also develop trust in the formal processes in order to use them.

Having access to language that would objectively describe various actions with words that are not loaded with shame and embarrassment would enable women to describe their experiences more openly. Many body parts are known by slang words (which is indicative of society's unease in naming those parts and/or their eroticization) and people are unfamiliar with the "acceptable word." Complaining to a superior at work or the police using slang terms would be very uncomfortable.

Voice and language are essential in challenging workplace sexual harassment. In order to facilitate this, it is important to promote a more "neutral" language for body parts and experiences of sexual harassment so that women and girls (and even men and boys) can communicate their experiences more easily and openly, without the various negative connotations attached to the terms. Sex education in schools and media can help familiarize people with such language and also descriptions of various acts. Media campaigns can challenge the thinking that the shame is the victim's and instead establish that it is the perpetrator who should feel ashamed of their actions.

Finally, it is crucial to develop young women's civic and political capacities to protest harassment and seek redress. Current employment and private sector interventions ignore the need to improve safeguarding measures and strengthen young women's civic and political capacities, which are essential for negotiating safety at work. Workers should be provided with support for the strengthening of their civic and political capacities to develop the confidence (power within) and agency (power to) to challenge social and cultural norms favouring silence around sexual harassment and the courage to speak out and demand their rights if incidences occur. They will need to be assisted and supported by other workers, family members, and workers' associations (power with) to be able to take the matter to a resolution. Trade unions also have a role to play in this regard in terms of reaching out to workers both in the formal and informal sectors as well as to marginal workers in the formal sector. Social dialogue between employees, employers, trade unions, government officials/representatives, and organizations

working for women and youth is necessary to ensure greater awareness among all stakeholders. The Bangladesh Labour legislation has recently been amended to include provisions against sexual harassment. These new provisions need to be widely disseminated and trade unions should include issues of sexual harassment of these workers in their remit and make it a priority on their agenda.

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DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The data that support the findings of this study are available on request from the corresponding author. The data are not publicly available due to privacy or ethical restrictions.

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