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Ensuring women health in readymade garments (RMG) industry

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Statement of the Problem: Bangladesh is the world's third largest garment producer. An estimated 3,000+ factories currently employed around 4 million workers and 85% of them are women. The industry is the single largest source of employment for 14-35-year-old women, largely migrants from rural areas and from disadvantaged backgrounds. These women have limited or almost no access to healthcare.

Methodology & Theoretical Orientation: Most workers do not know the importance of sexual and reproductive health. Health issues including malnutrition, communicable diseases, and pregnancy complications, incorrect use of family planning materials, reproductive infections and diseases undermine their productivity.

Findings: The incidence of suffering from health issues was found higher among married (66%) workers in comparison to unmarried workers (44%). Elder workers appear to be more prone to SRHR issues than younger workers. Family Planning (31%), MR/Menstrual Hygiene/Abortion/Unwanted pregnancy (24%) and Menstrual Hygiene (19%) were the top-3 SRHR issues. Due to long working hours with little time to spare, and financial constraints a significant portion of the workers are unable to seek healthcare services and commodities from the formal providers. In addition, there is social stigma that hinders them from accessing proper healthcare. 89% access pharmacies and unqualified providers. Illness leads them to loss of paid days. Women report missing up to 4-6 days' works a month because of reproductive health issues. In the absence of affordable healthcare services, and no support/subsidy from government, women end up with a huge medical expenditure, which in turn lowers their financial capacity leading to poor living conditions, poverty and affecting women empowerment.

Conclusion & Significance: Sustainable healthcare solutions that ensure easily accessible and affordable services for RMG workers need to be established across the sector. And a holistic approach from information to behavioral change towards availing services needs to be in place

Biography

Farhtheeba Rahat Khan is a Development Professional with experience backed up by private sector interventions and development sector working realities and challenges. As the Lead of 'Private Sector Health project', she has undertaken studies to understand private sector healthcare market dynamics and simultaneously worked on the policy front with Ministry of Health and Family Welfare and its directorates in addressing the supply side issues of healthcare market. She has provided technical assistance for formulation of policy framework, guidelines and accreditation systems in the health training, and emphasized on avenues for women employment in the health sector. Currently, she is the Team Leader for the Working with Women project implemented by SNV where she is facilitating interventions in garment factories, following a gender sensitive and gender-specific approach to ensure equity in healthcare service provision for female garment workers.

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