

Psychosocial stressors and ready-made garment industries in Bangladesh: An ethno-epidemiological study of its causes and consequences

Background: Bangladesh is a major low-cost producer of ready-made garments (RMGs) for European and North American countries. It is widely accepted that the drive for low-cost production translates into poor psychosocial working conditions, which adversely affect the health of Bangladeshi RMG workers. Nevertheless, research on this issue remains sparse. Further, dominant approaches to work stress research developed since the 1980s have focused on employment conditions in Western societies. The application of these models to dramatically different work contexts in space (Bangladesh) and time (2000s) appears methodologically inappropriate.

Objectives: To address current methodological limitations and knowledge gaps, we propose four objectives: 1) to explore the embeddedness of Bangladesh's RMG industry in overarching global structures and networks, 2) to examine stressors outside the workplace that contribute to work stress and poor health, 3.1) to study the potentially adverse and/or beneficial role of social relationships in RMG factories, and 3.2) to replicate and improve our mechanistic understanding of a specific finding from the epidemiological component of our prior project (i.e. links between good promotion prospects and higher cortisol levels).

Methods: We will carry out an exploratory sequential mixed methods study. The fieldwork will mostly be carried out in and around three RMG factories in Narayanganj, Bangladesh (about 1,800 workers in total). Addressing objectives 1-3.1, the anthropological project will draw on informal interviews with key players of the RMG sector (e.g., members of associations, factory owners, and managers) and on long-term participant observation in the RMG factories and the associated labour colonies. Building on insights from the anthropological study, we will conduct epidemiological surveys and collect hair samples for cortisol analyses among workers in the three RMG factories. This data will be used to explore the potential links of stressors outside the workplace, social contacts at work and promotion prospects with self-reported health outcomes and hair cortisol concentrations among workers (objectives 2-3.2).

Implications: Our findings will, firstly, provide a nuanced understanding of how working conditions in Bangladesh's RMG industry are produced through historically contingent structures and relationships operating on various scales from the local to the global. Secondly, by shedding light on the potential non-occupational stressors and social work stressors our study may inform policies such as the development of interventions (e.g. in Bangladesh, but also in the RMG-importing countries), which address the highly adverse working conditions. Finally, our study will improve our understanding of the potential detrimental health effects of job promotions in contemporary work settings, which may be universal and thus not specific for the RMG sector

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