

A Study of Empowerment and Increased Female Exploitation of Female Workers in the Textile Industry

Yibo Li

College of Social Sciences, University of Birmingham, Birmingham, UK

Email: plateau@vip.126.com

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Abstract

The textile industry contributes significantly to the economies of different countries around the world. Over the years, the industry has seen an increase in the number of females working in it. The textile industry has been one of the most female dominated industries in the world as more than 80 percent of the workforce is females. The increase in the number of female workers in the global industry has both positive and negative implications. On the positive side is that women are more empowered through improvement of economic status, provision of formal employment, access to knowledge and gaining of digital skills. On the other hand, the increase in women textile workers has exposed more of them to incidences of Gender Based Violence, harassment, over-working conditions, poor working conditions and under payment. Through evaluation of literature on both positive and negative implications of the increase of women in the textile industry this paper will seek to determine which of the two has more weight.

Keywords

Textile Industry, Empowerment, Female Exploitation

1. Introduction

The textile industry can be defined as an industry that is primarily involved in the designing, production and distribution of clothing or garments (Cimatti, Campana, & Carluccio, 2017). A textile is a flexible material that is made up of a network of natural or artificial fibers that are often referred to as yarn or thread (Castano & Flatau, 2014). According to Islam, Khan and Islam (2013), the textile industry accounts for about 2 percent of the Global Gross Domestic Product

(GDP). This indicates that it is an important industry where individuals can earn a living. The textile industry also contributes significantly to the economies of different countries around the world. For instance, the textile industry contributes 4 percent of India's GDP and 11 percent of the country's total exports (Gulhane & Turukmane, 2017). Over the years, the industry has seen an increase in the number of females working in it. According to Ahmed and Raihan (2014), the textile industry has been one of the most female dominated industries in the world as more than 80 percent of the workforce is females. The increase in the number of female workers in the global industry has both positive and negative implications. On the positive side is that women are more empowered through improvement of economic status, provision of formal employment, access to knowledge and gaining of digital skills. On the contrary, the increase in women textile workers has exposed more of them to incidences of Gender Based Violence, harassment, overworking conditions, poor working conditions and under payment.

2. Textile Industry History

Evidence emanating from the worlds of both archaeologist and anthropologists suggests that during the prehistoric periods, humans used to wove and produce clothes. Statues that depict clothed figures, fragments of fiber and bone fragments resembling needles have been discovered. The history of the textile industry also dates back to the Palaeolithic period through the discovery of weaving (Riegl, 2018). Another study by Owen-Crocker (2011) reveals that during the Roman times, the European population wore clothes made of wool, linen and leather. Silk is one of the commodities that were transported during the Silk Road from China as it was used in the manufacture of clothing. The use of new technology has made it possible for companies to reduce manual labor, increase production speed and come up with various styles or designs of clothes (Nayak et al., 2015). Despite the replacement of human labor by the use of technology in the textile industry, the input of both men and women cannot be ignored. Since time immemorial, both men and women have been involved in the process of making clothes.

3. Global Textile Industry

Almost every human being on the planet is impacted by the global textile industry. According to Shah, Warraich and Kabeer (2012), the global textile industry is worth approximately 3 trillion US Dollars. This includes production, refinement, and the sale of both synthetic and natural fibers that are used in thousands of industries spread across different parts of the world. Zafar and Mustafa (2017) estimate the economic impact of the global textile industry to be between 20 million and 60 million individuals employed in the industry across the world. In the developing nations, getting employed in the industry is considered to be of great importance. According to Islam, Khan and Islam (2013), the textile industry ac-

counts for about 2 percent of the Global Gross Domestic Product (GDP) and that it accounts for an even bigger portion of the GDP of the world leading producer and exports of textiles. Some of the leading countries in the production and export of textiles include China, India, United States, Pakistan, Brazil among others.

Table 1 is a representation of the global import and export market shares of the top 10 countries around the world. China is the leading textile producer and exporter around the world. According to [McNamara \(2019\)](#), in terms of cotton production and exporting, the United States is the global leader and it is also the leading importer of raw textiles. In the new coming future, more developing nations are willing to climb this list through increasing their investments in their textile companies.

4. Involvement of Women in the Textile Industry

According to [Ahmed and Raihan \(2014\)](#), the textile industry has been one of the most female dominated industries in the world as more than 80 percent of the workforce is females. For instance, in China, 70% of the textile workforce is made up of women, in Bangladesh the share of women in the industry is 85% and in Cambodia the share is as high as 90% ([Xue, 2015](#); [Sikder, 2019](#); [Gavalyugova & Cunningham, 2020](#)). Developmental progression of these women is greatly anchored on the work conditions. The absolute goal for these women is to get a decent pay, work under good conditions and have basic security while at the workplace. The goal of most women in the textile industry is to move out of poverty and provide their families with basic needs ([Mohapatra, 2012](#)). A study by [Akhter et al. \(2017\)](#) annotates that most female workers in the global textile industry have come from rural areas to the urban areas in search of employment. There are differences in financial background among women textile workers

Table 1. Global textile market shares.

Textile Production	
Country/District	Percentage
China	50.20%
India	6.90%
United States	5.30%
Pakistan	3.60%
Brazil	2.40%
Indonesia	2.40%
Taiwan (China)	2.30%
Türkiye	1.90%
South Korea	1.80%
Thailand	1.10%

and many of the female workers have to undergo the difficulty of working in a textile industry in order to earn a source of income for their families. A study by Seefeldt (2015) mentions that, most of the women working in the retail industry come from families that have monetary debts and only a few of them have some assets and savings within their homesteads. According to Tilly, Scott and Cohen (2014), a bigger portion of women working in the textile industry include young women who are yet to be married, originating from poor backgrounds. İkkaracan (2012) reports that about 86 percent of women working in the textile industry are aged between 18 and 32 years, and many of them lack prior working experience.

Despite the ability of the industry to contribute significantly to the economic growth of individuals and countries, the reality facing most female textile workers is far from being what they expect. Textile industries are some of the profitable companies around the world. However, it is evident that workers in this industry are often exposed to poor wages, working conditions and they often are exposed to extended working hours without pay. In the modern world, some individuals will argue that the exploitation of female textile workers is the road to female empowerment. Since time in history, the involvement of women into paid work is one of the most significant actions towards attainment of gender equality in workplaces. Kabir, Maple and Fatema (2018) argue that the modern textile industry has an empowering effect in that women from humble backgrounds are able to secure employment and earn income. Additionally, the works of Choudhury et al. (2017) put emphasis on how working in the Bangladesh textile industry has enabled women to be recognized as contributors to the income of the family and being viewed as having a better mindset than other women. Despite these advantages, there is need to have skepticism about the actual potential of the industry to transform the lives of women. This is so because developing countries are in constant competition to produce for international brands through providing textile products at the least price and in a more rapid manner. This is achieved by making the source of labor to be cheap. This comes at the expense of the labor force that have to be paid lower salaries, forced to work for longer hours and less observation of work and environmental standards. The owners of big textile factories take advantage of the unequal position of women in the society to come up with an even cheaper and more flexible workforce.

5. Women Empowerment in the Textile Industry

According to Hamadani et al. (2020), the textile industry demonstrates great potential in impacting the lives of millions of women from low-income and developing nations. There is need to ensure that the impact the industry makes on the lives and families of women is positive. There are opportunities for companies in the textile industry to take action aimed at promoting the empowerment of women within the available value chains (Rubin & Manfre, 2014). More oppor-

tunities lie in the ability of textile companies to make use of their collective influence towards championing for programs, policies and partnerships that can create lasting impacts on the lives of female textile workers.

Kabeer (2012) annotates that the economic empowerment of women is about the ability of women to choose whether to work, how to use or save their incomes and how much to work. A study by Hossain (2012) identifies that an increase in women in the textile industry is expected to empower women through promoting equity in employment. Workplace equity involves providing fair opportunities for all employees within a company based in their individual performances. A study by Hale and Wills (2011) concludes that companies that are focused on eliminating negative impacts and supporting opportunities that are able to enhance empowerment potential of the textile industry are likely to be of benefit to women workers. One way that textile companies can influence empowerment of women is by incentivizing, collaborating and communicating with policymakers, partners and other companies across the sector on the need to protect women rights. According to World Bank (2011), gender equality in employment is positively related to economic progression. Research conducted by Amin et al. (2016), indicates that the textile industry empowers women through employing them, thus delaying marriage, reducing the rate of giving birth, increasing awareness and increasing their involvement in both household and community decision making avenues. This is particularly important for the sector considering that 45% of the textile workforce is made up of women.

The textile industry makes significant contributions to the economic status of different countries around the world. Improvement in the economic status of a country consequently has a positive implication on the empowerment of women and labor force on general. In Bangladesh, the textile industry is the most significant industry contributing 86 percent of all exports. 60 percent of clothes made in Bangladesh are exported to Europe while 23 percent are exported to the US. This makes the country the second-largest garment exporter in the world after China. Bangladesh has 4 million textile workers working in more than 5000 textile factories (Mottaleb & Sonobe, 2011). More than 15 million people (30% of the total workforce) are employed in Pakistan's textile industry (Ataullah, Sajid, & Khan, 2014). The industry contributes 9.5 percent of Pakistan's GDP. In Vietnam, the textile industry provides employment to more than 2.2 million people who work in the more than 3800 companies across the nation (Nguyen, Beeton, & Halog, 2014). In Cambodia, the textile industry is the main driver of the country's GDP accounting for about 80% of the country's total exports (Rahman, Shahriar, & Kea, 2019).

Increase of women in the textile industry has brought about changes in the face of the workplace. Unlike the older days when women working in the industry did not have enough skills, unmarried, childless because they are captured by work, nowadays women have been empowered to marry and have children while still attending to their workplaces. For instance in Bangladesh, a study con-

ducted in 2015 by the Asian Center for Development indicates that 57% of the interviewed textile female workers were married ([International Center for Research on Women, 2016](#)). Therefore, the increase in the number of women working in the textile industry has shifted the view of companies and has enabled them to appreciate the need for a more diverse female workforce.

Increase in the number of women working in the textile industry has led to elevation of female worker voice. While working in a company, it is often possible to find textile companies taking initiatives and programs aimed at equipping the workforce with necessary knowledge about the operations of the company. Initiatives could also be aimed at equipping workers with general knowledge such as a health training course. According to [Meeks \(2017\)](#), successful programs are able to instill confidence in workers together with equipping them with capabilities including soft skills related to communication, negotiation, customer service, self-efficacy and general knowledge. Using these skills, women are empowered to speak up and take action either individually or collectively. [Daum et al. \(2020\)](#) annotates that in many cases the voice of workers has been viewed as an indirect benefit, but as an aspect that has far-reaching effect than any other common metric. This is so because of its potential to influence the behavior and relationship of female workers within and outside the workplace.

Employment in textile companies provides women with an opportunity to contribute to the formal economy, and thus the sector acts as an important pivot for the economic empowerment of women. Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) number 8 is focused on promoting inclusivity and sustainable economic growth through providing employment and decent workplaces for all individuals ([Frey, 2017](#)). When provided with working contracts, women working in textile industries are able to access the benefits that come with formal employment and those that come from being members of trade unions. A study by [Chen and Sinha \(2019\)](#) identifies that majority of informal and home-based textile workers are female. Therefore, companies that are focused on initiatives that improve the terms and conditions of their work significantly improve the livelihoods of vulnerable women workers. According to [Komarraju, Arora and Raman \(2021\)](#), when textile companies are able to tackle informality in the industry, there will be less instances of slavery, servitude and other practices that are common in the informal workplaces.

6. Women Exploitation in the Textile Industry

The introduction of technology and increased automation in the textile industry has led to empowerment of women. Availability of new technology has made it possible for large companies to invest in complete production processes. This consequently requires that more workers have to be employed to attend to the production processes. A study by [Hecker, Spaulding and Kuehn \(2021\)](#) annotates that acquiring of digital skills between men and women increases with the level of education, and that the women have fallen behind in the adoption of

problem-solving and software skills. Thus, as technology becomes more available, more men are being hired than women. According to [Boserup, Kanji, Tan and Toulmin \(2013\)](#), more opportunities to gain development and occupational skills exist for women, but it seems that those opportunities are going to larger proportion of male workers than female workers. Textile companies have taken measures to lay off individuals who do not possess relevant digital skills for use in the production process ([West, Kraut, & Ei Chew, 2019](#)). In most cases, the majority of workers who get laid off are the women because they lack the skills, which acts as a form of exploitation for female workers.

Gender-based wages is another form of exploitation that women are facing while working in the textile industry. Wages in the global textile industry show that there is a clear wage-gape based on gender. A study by [English \(2013\)](#) shows that on average, women in the textile industry earn lesser wages than their male counterparts. Gender plays a critical role in determining the level of performance and skill in textile workers. Consequently, the level of performance is directly related to the level of pay in most textile industries. Even for multinational textile companies such as Levi Strauss and GAP, female workers are given low wages even after working overtime hours. According to a study by [Sivasankaran \(2014\)](#), 95 percent of women working in textile industries are not provided with contract letters. This is supported by another study by [Yunus and Yamagata \(2012\)](#) which also identified that 95 percent of female workers in a textile company do not possess a letter of appointment. In a study conducted in Pakistan, [Del Carpio and Pabon \(2017\)](#) identified that 97 percent of women working in a textile company were hired on temporary basis while 64 percent of them were receiving less than the minimum wage expected. The study goes further to note that employees who do not possess written contracts are uncertain of the future of their jobs especially in the times when there is less demand for textile products. Such individuals are prone to frequent forced lay-offs and limited working periods.

A study by [Farhana, Syduzzaman and Munir \(2015\)](#) identifies that on average, women in the textile industry earn 45 to 50 percent of the wages that male workers earn. This is so even when both genders are exposed to similar tasks or activities within the company. In most textile companies, individuals are paid based on their individual productivity. Therefore, an individual's pay is influenced on how fast they are able to work irrespective of the gender. This is so despite the understanding that some tasks require masculinity which could be to the disadvantage of female workers. In actual sense, female workers earn less than their male counterparts because they have lower output. Low productivity of female workers means that lesser pieces of work can be done at a time and thus workers take time to complete the overall work. In times when workers are exposed to long working hours, there is possibility of prolonged fatigue, illness and accidents are likely to occur. In general, these contribute to low productivity which consequently affects the amount of pay individuals are likely to receive. According to [Bonfiglioli \(2014\)](#), female textile workers suffer the most than male

textile workers, because they concentrate on units where small rates and other uncertain contracts are frequent. During worker lay-offs, companies target individuals who are vulnerable, with poor productivity and lower level of skills.

There have been cases of violence and harassment in the textile workplace, actions that have only increased for informal workers (Kumar, 2014). Increase in acts of violence and harassment affect the female workforce more because they make up the larger population in textile companies. Additionally, a study by McCarthy (2014) notes that there is generally lack of education and training concerning the rights of women to live free lives that are free from violence and other acts of coercion, abuse and harassment. A study conducted by Powell (2014) reports that Bangladesh, Cambodia and Honduras present just a few of the many countries where female textile workers have been exposed to sexual exploitation, violence, social oppression among other evils. In many cases, female workers who experience violence often lack access to justice systems, which limits their ability to fight for their rights, seek compensation and find justice. Textile workplaces have also become areas of restrictive gender norms and expectations have been placed on the roles of men within the workplaces. According to Zulver (2016), textile workplaces are common with power dynamics that in many instances promote experiences and habituation of violent acts. Despite the investments that have been made to promote the well-being of female workers in the textile industry, none of the efforts have borne fruit as female workers still experience acts of violence at the workplace. Acts of violence and harassment are unacceptable and they are a threat to the presence and productivity of female textile workers (Haque et al., 2019).

A number of labor issues have been experienced in the global textile industry. These issues and challenges have to be overcome amidst globalization and modernization taking root in developing nations. One major issue that has been noticed in the textile industry is labor exploitation. A study conducted in Bangladesh identifies that the average hourly wage for a Bangladesh textile worker is approximately 24 cents, without being offered leave, holidays and other benefits including healthcare cover (Campaign, 2014). There is also subjection of textile workers to harsh working conditions including long working hours in an aim to earn a living. A study by Vance and Paik (2015) estimates that half of the global workforce involved in the production of textiles is women and they are often faced with wage inequalities. The study further finds that the wages of women are lower than those of men. Farhana, Syduzzaman and Munir (2015) support this finding by mentioning that in Europe, men working in the textile industries receive wages which are 20-30 percent higher than those of women. The other challenge facing the global textile industry is the unacceptable health and safety conditions that workers are subjected to. For instance, investigations into the collapse of the Rana Plaza in Bangladesh which killed 1134 workers show that the workers were subjected to unacceptable working conditions (Prentice, 2019). These include poor ventilation, inhalation of fiber dust, unsafe building and in-

haling toxic substances.

Cases of Gender Based Violence (GBV) are common in places of work. Gender Based Violence is recognized by the United Nations as any harm that is done against the will of an individual, and which results from abusive use of power reflected towards gender roles (Peacock & Barker, 2014). GBV can also be defined as any unwelcome sexual advances, requests for sexual favors and any physical or verbal conduct that is sexual in nature (Agbaje et al., 2021). Sexual harassment has become common in the modern workplaces, and the textile industry has not been left behind. A study by Chaisuparakul (2015) reports that in Cambodia nearly one in every three women working in the textile industry have experienced sexual harassment at work within a three-month period. A survey conducted by Murray (2015) found that out of 360 interviewed female textile workers in Swaziland, more than 70 percent of them reported witnessing physical and verbal abuse in their workplaces by their male supervisors. Another study conducted in Indonesia found that 71 percent of female textile workers experience GBV that included verbal, sexual and physical abuse (Pillinger, 2017). Another study conducted in Bangladesh reported that 80 percent of female textile workers have experienced a form of violence and harassment in the workplace (Gibbs et al., 2019). These cases among other are just a reflection of the exploitation that female workers in the textile undergo. Textile companies can act by adopting policies aimed at condemning violence against women, ending habituation of violence and encouraging women to speak up against such acts.

7. Conclusion

The textile industry is primarily involved in the design, production and distribution of clothing or garments. History of the textile industry also dates back to the Palaeolithic period through the discovery of weaving. Almost every human being on the planet is impacted by the global textile industry. The textile industry contributes significantly to the economic status of nations as well as that of individuals. In recent years, the industry has seen a major flux in the number of female workers, with over 80 percent of the global workforce being composed of women. The increase in the number of female workers in the industry is both a blessing and a curse. It is a blessing because it leads to increase in the economic status of countries, ensuring that women have better access to social amenities. Additionally, more women are able to support their families and livelihoods through working in the industry. The increase in female textile workers means that the gender is empowered to participate in community and family decision making. It also means that more females are able to operate machinery, acquire digital skills, experience and gain awareness of their environment. It also means that more females have an opportunity to earn a living, champion for gender equality as well as participate in leadership at the workplace. However, the increase in female textile workers means that more women are exposed to GBV, harassment, violence, exploitation, coercion and other practices that are meant

to demean them. Increase in females in the textile industry also means that more of them are exposed to accidents and health hazards in the workplace, jeopardizing their well-being. Despite these negative implications, this paper holds that the increase in females in the textile workforce leads to more empowerment than exploitation.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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