Women's Safety Audit

Policy Brief

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Making Public Spaces Safe for Female Garment Workers

Ensuring the safety of female garment workers in public spaces is not only a matter of human rights but also a critical factor in sustaining the economic vitality of the garment industry in Bangladesh. As the backbone of this sector, these workers contribute significantly to the national GDP, yet they often face harassment, violence, and inadequate security measures during their daily commutes and in public areas. Addressing these vulnerabilities is essential to fostering a safe, productive, and inclusive work environment that supports both the workers' well-being and the industry's long-term stability.

To uphold international commitments like the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), which Bangladesh has ratified, it is imperative to address the safety concerns of female garment workers in public spaces. To do so, it is important to assess the areas of safety concern and implement protective measures quickly.

To support this effort, Naripokkho, a member of the Shojag Coalition, conducted a series of Women's Safety Audits to identify potential hazards within living spaces and transit routes for women, and possible protection mechanisms to put in place. These audits took place in September 2023, in several key locations where garment workers reside in Gazipur, Savar and Mouchak.

Key Messages

1. Women garment workers face significant safety risks during their daily commutes and in public spaces.
2. Inadequate infrastructure, poor lighting, and unsafe residential facilities heighten vulnerabilities for female workers.
3. Verbal harassment and fear of violence, especially at night, severely limit women's freedom of movement.
4. Strengthening complaint mechanisms and improving police-community relations are essential for ensuring women's safety.
5. Involving men, local leaders, factory owners, transport companies and associations, is crucial to changing harmful gender norms and enhancing security for women.

Methodology

The audits employed a participatory approach tested first in Canada and later adjusted and applied in many countries. The primary focus of the audit was to identify risks faced by individuals across different age groups, professions, and religions in specific geographical areas. In each area, a team of women was carefully selected to undertake the audit. For each area, maps were prepared so women could identify the risks, types of risks, timing of risks, targets of risks, in each specific geo-locality. The findings were then presented to the community which then prepared an action plan to address the specific problems identified. Community members identify risk-preventing measures such as streetlights and were thus able to resolve some of the problems.

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Findings: Safety Concerns for Women and Girls

Inadequate infrastructure. Public spaces like markets, bus stops, transport hubs, and roadsides are fraught with dangers. The lack of proper footpaths, open drains, and hazards such as twisted wires and garbage piles create unsafe conditions for women as they navigate these areas. Commuting is further complicated by narrow roads, overcrowded conditions, make it particularly risky during the rainy season. Broken roads, mosquito infestations, and unsanitary environments, put women's health and safety at greater risk.

Lack of lighting. The absence of streetlights in many areas leaves women vulnerable to harassment and fear, especially at night. The darkness allows anti-social elements like drug addicts and other miscreants to loiter, increasing the threat of verbal harassment, theft, and robbery. Many women feel unsafe walking alone after dark, and garment workers avoid traveling alone after late-night shifts. Families often discourage women from leaving the house at night due to these prevalent safety concerns.

Housing facilities are no safer. Inadequate sanitation facilities—sometimes shared by as many as 24 families—pose significant risks of sexual harassment, especially during night-time usage. Housing is also characterized by a dire lack of privacy and overcrowding.

Inadequate local level services. While the government has established systems aimed at preventing violence and ensuring service delivery, these mechanisms are largely unknown to the community and remain underutilized. Local arbitration practices (shalish) often fail to address the most severe issues, such as harassment and robbery. Women often do not know about legal services that may support them. The lack of awareness and accessibility of formal support structures further deepens the vulnerabilities faced by women in these communities. Community members hesitate to report problems to the police due to complex and costly reporting processes.

Recommendations

1. **Develop Effective Complaint Mechanisms**
   Local administration and local government should develop effective complaint mechanisms for citizens' facing various forms of sexual harassment in public spaces and the community and local citizen's including women workers, self-employed women, students, and others should be provided information on how and where to report complaints. Ensure a respectful and approachable system for reporting gender-based violence (GBV), sexual exploitation, and abuse, offering justice and protection to victims.

2. **Strengthen Surveillance in Public Places**
   Local administration and law enforcement authorities should improve safety in public spaces with security cameras, police presence, and streetlights, supported by community committees. Local government should establish community watch groups and women workers should be given loud whistles to blow when in danger. CBOs and CSOs can play a role here. Local authorities should develop and maintain safe zones in key public spaces, such as bus stops and market areas, that are frequently used by female garment workers during their commutes. Police should organise regular meetings with the community to nurture trust.

3. **Create a Supportive Environment for Seeking Help**
   Employers and local administration should work together to raise awareness around sexual harassment and abuse so that local community members and bystanders also stand up for victims. Efforts should be undertaken to educate community members through media, social media and other forums to promote an environment of zero-tolerance for violence. Break the taboo around seeking help. Employers and local NGOs should provide information on available legal, health and other support services.

4. **Raise Social Awareness Among Boys and Men**
   Engage boys and men in educational and community programs to challenge and

transform harmful gender norms and reduce violence against women. The effort should range across age groups, from primary school children to youth in or out of educational institutions, working men and elderly people. Engage religious institutes, schools, universities, and vocational training centres to help spread the message of respect and safety.

5. **Improve Infrastructure**
   Local government should ensure housing, sanitation and road conditions comply with minimum standards for safety and security.

Conclusion

These recommendations address key issues affecting female garment workers' safety and well-being, aligning with global standards and best practices to improve working conditions. By enhancing safety, Bangladesh can ensure that female garment workers are not only protected but empowered to contribute fully to the nation's progress.

> *A few weeks ago, as I was taking the bus home from work, I noticed a man sitting in an aisle seat, leaning over a woman sitting next to him, to spit out the window. They were in the seat behind me. I assumed they knew each other. At one point, the woman complained about the man's repeated spitting. When I saw he would not desist, I told him to leave her alone. He said I should mind my own business. So, I called the bus supervisor. He also told me to mind my own business. I said I would call 999 and report the bus. Grudgingly, he moved the man to another seat near the front. I learned to speak up from the safety training sessions at Shojag. This incident is a common happening, but now I am aware of my rights. I feel more confident asserting myself.*
>
> **Shobnom Shumi**
> RMG Worker

About Shojag Coalition

Shojag Coalition is a network of organizations in Bangladesh dedicated to combating gender-based violence and promoting women's rights. It works to raise awareness, provide support services, and advocate for policy changes to create safer, more inclusive communities. Through collaboration and grassroots efforts, the coalition aims to drive systemic change and empower women across the country. The coalition consists of Bangladesh Legal Aid and Services Trust (BLAST), Naripokkho, and Christian Aid. The coalition is almost at the end of a 36-month project co-funded by the European Union and Christian Aid titled 'Promoting gender justice for women workers in the Readymade Garment sector and advocating women's safety during local commute and public spaces in Bangladesh'.

Further Reading

1. UN Women (2020). Safe Cities and Safe Public Spaces: Global Results Report
2. ILO (2019). Ending Violence and Harassment in the World of Work
3. BRAC (2018). Women's Safety in Public Spaces in Dhaka City: A Study on the Effectiveness of the Domestic Violence Act
4. ActionAid Bangladesh (2019). Promoting Rights in Schools and Workplaces
5. The Daily Star (2024). *Enhancing Safety Measures for Women in Garment Sector: Recent Developments.*
6. Dhaka Tribune (2024). *Improving Public Safety for Female Garment Workers: New Initiatives.*

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