

# “I WISH I WOULD NEVER HAVE TO WAKE UP AGAIN”:

Material conditions and psychological well-being of Bangladeshi women garment workers in Jordan



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*A Feminist Participatory Action Research Project*



**Global Alliance Against Traffic in Women**

# **“I wish I would never have to wake up again”:**

**Material conditions and psychological well-being of Bangladeshi women garment workers in Jordan**

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Data Collection: A team of women migrant worker

(Upon request from the workers their identity has been kept anonymous.)

Photo Credit: Arthur Ancion

This research report is part of a multi-country Feminist Participatory Research Project implemented by The Global Alliance Against Traffic in Women (GAATW) in partnership with colleagues in South, South East and West Asia. GAATW gratefully acknowledges the financial support of Women’s Fund Asia to carry out this project.

GAATW and the Research Partners stand by the process and findings from the researches. Views and Opinions expressed in this report do not necessarily reflect the views of Women’s Fund Asia.

## **About GAATW's Feminist Participatory Action Research Project on Safe and Fair Migration in Asia**

In 2018-2019, the International Secretariat of the Global Alliance Against Traffic in Women (GAATW-IS), in collaboration with eleven organisations across nine countries in Asia carried out a Feminist Participatory Action Research (FPAR) focusing on 'Safe and Fair Migration: A feminist perspective on women's rights to mobility and work'.

In our study, FPAR is used as a framework and approach to capturing women migrants' complex realities and perspectives on labor and migration. What distinguishes FPAR from conventional research is that it is deliberately women-centered and participant driven, the knowledge comes from the women (community) and owned by them, and based on their lived experiences, the research participants propose solutions so the research results become a tool to collectively organize advocacy actions. Therefore, this is an outcome of deconstructing the dominant understanding of safe migration and fair migration and reshaping the concepts from a feminist perspective. We believe our approach of building knowledge from ground up and creating evidence base will add value in addressing the structural causes of power disparities that affect women's migration and mobility.

Our research community ranges across South, Southeast, and West Asia offering views from both countries of origin and destination, as well as adding the perspective of internal migration from rural to urban areas. Three distinguished sectors of work are covered in this study including domestic work, garment industry, and entertainment work.

The lead researcher groups who facilitated discussions with women migrants include Anti-Racism Movement (Lebanon), Cambodian Alliance of Trade Unions (Cambodia), International Domestic Workers Federation (Lebanon), Karmojibi Nari (Bangladesh), Legal Resources Center for Gender Justice and Human Rights (Indonesia), MAP Foundation (Thailand), Sandigan (Kuwait), Self Employed Women's Association (India), Society for Labour and Development (India), Women Forum for Women in Nepal (Nepal), and an independent researcher based in Jordan.

*"Two people will shout as much as they can. But ten people are louder than two."*

Borrowing from one of our FPAR research participants' words, we hope each piece of our collective study will help amplify women migrant workers' voice to bring about structural change for a safe and fair migration that works for women.

GAATW-IS gratefully acknowledges the support of Women's Fund Asia in conducting this research project. A consolidated regional report and the country research briefs are available on the GAATW ([www.gaatw.org](http://www.gaatw.org)) website.

## FOREWORD TO THE 'SAFE AND FAIR' RESEARCH SERIES

In the past several decades neoliberal globalisation, increasing inequality between and within countries, conflict, climate change and environmental degradation have prompted unprecedented levels of migration. We are seeing a major trend towards increasing internal migration and urbanisation within countries – by 2050, the global population living in urban areas is expected to reach 66 per cent. Meanwhile there are around 250 million international migrants worldwide, of whom half are women. In some destination countries, demographic, labour market and economic changes (the privatisation of public services, aging societies, women's increasing participation in the workforce) have created a demand for care and service sector work, with an expectation that this demand will be filled by low-wage female workers, in the domestic, care, manufacturing and entertainment sectors. In origin countries, climate change, economic restructuring and industrialisation have led to the loss of traditional livelihoods, agricultural decline, environmental degradation, wage stagnation and a growth in precarious work – resulting in gross inequalities, and creating push factors for women to seek alternative income generating activities, including through migrating for work.

While these structural changes play a huge role in shaping “push and pull factors” for migration, it needs to be acknowledged that women are not merely passive agents in their migration, but that for many, migration is a way of asserting agency and finding freedom from patriarchal societal norms. Many women choose to migrate in order to see the world and gain new experiences, find economic opportunities, to be able to support families and to exercise autonomy and social independence. Despite the many risks and the challenges in accessing information about migration processes and opportunities, women continue to migrate all over the world, including from marginalised communities and rural villages. However, there is a lack of recognition of migration as a right, and of women workers as independent economic actors. States' labour migration policies are broadly missing a human rights and gender-transformative approach to migration and work.

Activists on the left have long critiqued the exploitative nature of some cross-border labour migration schemes that employ workers on poverty wages in substandard conditions, while outsourcing the costs of social reproduction to countries of origin. In the past 20 years, feminists, including GAATW, have tried to bring attention to the particular discrimination and risks created for women migrants by laws and policies governing, and failing to govern, labour migration. Although such initiatives have tried to stress women's perspectives, the conversation about migration has sometimes backfired and produced unintended consequences. Governments of origin and destination countries have in some instances responded not by making migration protective of human rights, but by curbing it through restrictions on women's mobility on the basis of age, marital status, pregnancy and maternal status, and category of work, especially for low-wage workers, and increasing border controls. Much of this is done with the supposed aim of 'protecting' women from trafficking and exploitation; however, what these protectionist restrictions have done is open up a market for clandestine and debt-financed migration, creating or exacerbating the very vulnerability, violence, and exploitation they were intended to prevent. While non-governmental organisations (NGOs) have tried to bring issues of human rights to the table, they have, perhaps unintentionally, contributed to the repressive government agendas. Some anti-trafficking NGOs perpetuate narratives and images of migrant women as victims, and

infantilising women by portraying them as inherently vulnerable and in need of protection. As a feminist alliance, GAATW sees its role as supporting the empowerment of migrant women to move and work safely and with dignity. This feminist participatory action research project is our collective effort to deconstruct and reshape a narrative of labour migration that is safe and fair for women workers, especially those in the most marginalised segments of society. We hope that this study serves as evidence to fight for the rights of migrant workers and amplify women's voices in the local, regional, and international migration agenda.

## A THANK YOU NOTE TO ALL THOSE WHO MADE THE RESEARCH IN JORDAN POSSIBLE

Working with women migrant workers from my own country has been an extremely valuable journey for me. My work and my volunteering in Jordan had brought me in close contact with the women workers in the garment sector. But applying FPAR methodology to systematically explore their everyday realities with them, was a completely different experience for all of us. The research was conducted during May 2018- May 2019. Conducting FGDs and in-person and via-phone in-depth interviews in Bangla, recording and translating them, checking with them numerous times to avoid misinterpretation, trying to organize their lived experiences into a readable report and finally preparing the summary of findings which GAATW colleagues can share with the women workers, have kept me busy for a year. But it was not a lonely journey for me, the women workers were my fellow travelers.

I would therefore like to thank all the workers whose support helped me in conducting the research smoothly, especially the Bangladeshi women migrant workers who shared their experiences generously with the hope of seeing some positive changes. In order to protect their livelihoods and their families, they must remain anonymous. Special thanks to the research assistant who herself is a worker and her team, who volunteered to conduct the interviews. All of this work was done during their precious and hard-earned free time, which they selflessly sacrificed for this project. The report before you would not have been accomplished successfully without their support.

I cannot express enough thanks to The AL Hassan Workers' Center and The General Trade Union of Workers in Textile, Garment and Clothing Industries for supporting me with organizing the FGDs.

In addition, the GAATW research team was an invaluable resource for this work, from providing the space to develop the initial research concept, through giving advice on the process, to editing and commenting on the final report.

I hope that this research will prove the value and importance of the FPAR approach to readers – there is a lot of research being done on migrants these days, but not enough research *with* migrants. In an environment that still restricts women's choices in many ways, this is particularly problematic for women migrant workers. Most importantly, my hope – and that of the workers – is that their voices will be heard and will trigger an honest and constructive consideration of their concerns by the stakeholders involved in this industry.

Nadia Afrin  
Lead Researcher  
Geneva, August 2019

## ACRONYMS

BDT – Bangladeshi Taka  
BWJ – Better Work Jordan  
CBA – Collective Bargaining Agreement  
CCTV – Closed Circuit Television  
FGD – Focus Group Discussion  
FPAR – Feminist Participatory Action Research  
GAATW – Global Alliance Against Traffic in Women  
IFC – International Finance Corporation  
ILO – International Labour Organisation  
JOD – Jordanian Dinar  
MW – Migrant Worker  
NGO – non-governmental organization  
OSH – Occupational Safety and Health  
QIZ – Qualified Industrial Zone  
SSL – Social Security Law  
UFC – Unified Contract  
UN – United Nations  
USD – United States Dollar  
WC – Workers’ Center  
WHO – World Health Organisation  
WMW – Women Migrant Worker

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## INTRODUCTION

Labour migration in the South Asia – Middle East corridor has seen a significant increase in recent years, fuelled by the existing wage disparities between sending and receiving countries. This has provided opportunities for many migrant workers, including women, to obtain employment, attempt to make a better future for themselves and their families and to aspire to a measure of social and economic independence. Nevertheless, these migration experiences have also been marked by a host of rights violations. Attempts to better regulate migration have often come up against significant resistance from governments, employers, and from the complex recruitment system itself. Relatively more comprehensive regulation has been attempted in recent years in the garment sector, with labour migration between South Asia and Jordan in particular serving as a testing ground for better work and economic conditions. In this context, there has been an increase in international discourse on “safe and fair” migration, “fair recruitment” and other similar concepts.

The present study facilitated and supported by GAATW attempts to interrogate how “safe” and “fair” current migration channels are from the perspective of women migrant workers (WMWs), which is often neglected in global policy discourse. Therefore, the analysis focuses on their own assessment of their safety and well-being, including in its material (wages), physical and psychological dimensions. Particular emphasis was placed on the interrelation between workers’ psychological state and other components of their migration experience. However, it is important to note that this is not a clinical study. Rather, it seeks to adopt a broad and inclusive definition of psychological well-being and to interpret its meaning through the eyes of the participants themselves, based on their own experiences and interpretations.

Psychological well-being is generally defined as having two different facets: (1) 'subjective well-being' (or 'hedonic' well-being), the subjective feeling of a person's happiness; and (2) 'Eudaimonic well-being', a collection of six factors that influence a person's positive mental state: self-acceptance; environmental mastery; positive relationships with others; personal growth; purpose in life; and autonomy.<sup>1</sup>

The World Health Organization (WHO) has defined mental health as a state of well-being in which an individual realizes his or her own potential, can cope with the normal stresses of life, can work productively and fruitfully, and is able to make a contribution to her or his community. Mental health thus describes a level of psychological well-being, and not just the absence of disease or infirmity, in line with the organisation's definition of health in general.<sup>2</sup>

In relation to a person's work environment, the WHO has recognised various risk factors for mental health, including "high and unrelenting workload", "harassment and bullying", "inadequate health and safety policies", "poor communication and management practices", "inflexible working hours," etc.<sup>3</sup> These risk factors are widespread in the Jordanian garment industry and were shown through the analysis in this research to have adverse psychological effects on the participants.

As has been noted elsewhere, "[c]ultural differences, various types of assessment and competing professional theories all affect how 'mental health' is defined", and it is therefore advisable to adopt "a more inclusive definition of mental health [that] will not focus solely on (the absence of) mental health problems but [on] a positive state of psychological well-being."<sup>4</sup> This approach is in line with the aims of this study. While not denying the usefulness of targeted mental health interventions in individual cases, where these are medically indicated, its larger concern is with highlighting the linkages between a number of structural factors outlined below and the overall psychological well-being of WMWs in the sector, and to recommend holistic solutions involving a range of different stakeholders.

## Migrant Workers in the Jordanian Garment Sector

The garment industry in Jordan has accelerated its growth since the mid-1990s when Jordan and the US signed the Qualifying Industrial Zone (QIZ) agreement. According to the agreement, garments produced in the QIZs can enter the US duty-free. Subsequently, a free trade agreement was signed in 2010 allowing garments produced in Jordan to have easier access to the US market. Garments are the leading exports from Jordan, now making up nearly 20 per cent of the country's gross domestic product. The sector employs over 70,000 workers with more than two thirds being migrant workers. It is heavily female-dominated with women making up almost 75 per cent of employees<sup>5</sup>. The largest group of migrant workers – 52 per cent – is from Bangladesh.

Historically Jordan has been at a crossroads of regional migration. Since 1973, Jordanians began to emigrate to the Gulf States when oil prices peaked. To fill the shortages in the national work force in

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<sup>1</sup> Ryff, C. D. (1989). Happiness is everything, or is it? Explorations on the meaning of psychological well-being. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 57(6), 1069-1081.

<sup>2</sup> World Health Organization (WHO) (1948). *Constitution of the World Health Organization*, preamble.

<sup>3</sup> World Health Organisation (WHO). Mental health in the workplace. Available online at [https://www.who.int/mental\\_health/in\\_the\\_workplace/en/](https://www.who.int/mental_health/in_the_workplace/en/) Accessed 13 April, 2019.

<sup>4</sup> Leka, S. and Jain, A. (2017). Mental Health in the Workplace in Europe. *EU Compass for Action on Mental Health and Wellbeing* Consensus Paper. Brussels: European Union, p. 5.

<sup>5</sup> Better Work Jordan (2018). *Annual Report 2018: An Industry And Compliance Review : Jordan*. Amman: BWJ, p.11.

the agrarian, construction and service sectors, lower-skilled and semi-skilled migrant workers have been brought to Jordan as ‘replacement migrants’.

The steady flows of remittances by Jordanians from the Gulf States reached as high as 25 per cent of Jordan’s GDPs in the 1980s. However, due to the decrease in oil prices, Arab workers in the Gulf were gradually replaced in the 1980s by Asians, who were cheaper to employ, and as a result, many Jordanians returned, causing Jordan’s “rentier economy” to collapse. This resulted in a reformation of the economy, and in an agreement with the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank reforms such as trade liberalisation, financial deregulation and privatisation were implemented. Nevertheless, Jordan still faces low productivity and unemployment among its nationals.<sup>6</sup>

While migrant workers are considered fundamental to Jordan's labour market, high levels of unemployment of Jordan nationals (18.7% in 2018<sup>7</sup> – with a labour market participation rate of only 14% among women<sup>8</sup>) have made the large number of foreign workers a controversial and highly debated issue<sup>9</sup>. In 2007, Jordan adopted a protectionist policy which was aimed at reducing unemployment rates among nationals by replacing foreign workers. As an additional measure, the government has been promoting the setting up of ‘satellite units’ of garment factories in rural areas to further promote jobs for Jordanians, especially women. This has included time-bound subsidies for salaries and social security contributions. However, success has been mixed, and not all of the 21 satellite units that were set up were operational as of 2017.<sup>10</sup> However, the stigma surrounding low-skilled activities discouraged Jordanian nationals from filling these positions. This resulted in employers continuing to favour foreign workers, which has caused resentment among certain sections of the Jordanian population, as unemployment has remained high.<sup>11</sup>

The vast majority of garment migrant workers in Jordan come from South Asia, most notably Bangladesh. An ILO report on recruitment experiences of South Asian migrant workers in Jordan’s garment industry (2018) found that Bangladeshi women’s main motives for choosing Jordan as a destination are recommendations from social networks that included women who had previously been employed in the Jordanian garment sector, and lower recruitment fees than to other destination countries.<sup>12</sup> Given that there is already a large ready-made garment industry in Bangladesh providing easy access to employment for lower-skilled women, some women who chose migration to Jordan already had prior experience in the sector in Bangladesh. However, our research showed that this is by no means the rule, and that even those with prior experience may be often not be familiar with the specific work processes in Jordan.

The minimum wage in the garment sector is JD 220 (USD 310).<sup>13</sup> However, for migrant workers, accommodation and food costs are deducted from the wages, leaving them with a net income of JD 125 (USD 176). Also, the living conditions vary greatly between factories, as our research showed.

Jobs in the garment industry do not require higher levels of education. They are low-paid, with long working hours. Workers and civil society organisations have raised the issue of poor living and working

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<sup>6</sup> Bel-Air, F.D. (2016). Migration Profile: Jordan. Florence: European University Institute, Migration Policy Centre.

<sup>7</sup> Government of Jordan, Department of Statistics. Unemployment for Jordanians. Available online at <http://dosweb.dos.gov.jo/> Accessed 17 March 2019.

<sup>8</sup> 2017 data: see BWJ 2018, p. 11.

<sup>9</sup> [http://www.migrationpolicycentre.eu/docs/migration\\_profiles/Jordan.pdf](http://www.migrationpolicycentre.eu/docs/migration_profiles/Jordan.pdf)

<sup>10</sup> Better Work Jordan (BWJ) (2018). *Annual Report 2018: An Industry And Compliance Review: Jordan*. Amman: BWJ, p.11.

<sup>11</sup> Bel-Air, F.D. (2016). Migration Profile: Jordan. Florence: European University Institute, Migration Policy Centre.

<sup>12</sup> International Labour Organisation (ILO) (2018). *Recruitment experiences of South Asian migrant workers in Jordan’s garment industry*. Geneva: ILO, p.5

<sup>13</sup> According to the Tripartite Committee Decision of 2017

conditions, as well as the lack of bargaining power for workers and the need for workers' representation. According to a study conducted by Better Work Jordan in 2012<sup>14</sup>, garment factory work in Jordan is viewed as having a very low social status among Jordanians. The garment sector in Jordan was until recently included in the forced labour list of the US Department of Labor for many years, and was only removed in 2016.<sup>15</sup> Other than low wages and the common view that employers do not respect workers' rights or abide by labour laws, women workers in particular are also often stigmatised by social prejudice which leads to the perception that they have 'lax morals'.

## Policy and regulatory context

Jordan lacks a national policy on labour migration. Immigration is considered temporary and responds to the economic needs of the country, protecting the industry and its workers from foreign competition. The central piece of regulation governing migrant workers' entry and stay in Jordan are the Law No. 24 on Residence and Foreigners' Affairs. This law also includes the provisions of the *kafala* or sponsorship system that is applicable to foreign workers in all economic sectors, including apparel and domestic work.<sup>16</sup>

The *kafala* system applies across the Arab world and has been sharply criticized by human rights groups for sustaining structural exploitation of workers and denying them the ability to travel or change jobs. This criticism has led to some nations reforming the system, with countries like Bahrain introducing flexible visas that stop workers from being under a single sponsor, according to the International Labour Organization (ILO). However, the *kafala* system does not govern all migrant workers in Jordan. Although technically speaking, those working in the special economic and trade zones are exempted from the *kafala* system, in practice they can change employers *only* in cases where either (1) the factory that employs them shuts down, or (2) a migrant worker lodges a formal complaint with the Recruiting and Hiring Migrant Workers Committee under the Ministry of Labour (MoL), seeking reassignment to another employer; this committee will then investigate their request, and may grant a change of employers. However, our research showed that migrant workers do not know about this procedure. Working contracts in the garment work sector are generally signed for three years although resident permits are issued for a period of one year and must be renewed annually. It is the employer's (sponsor) responsibility to do so. As the renewal of the residency permit is in the hands of the employer, workers' freedom of movement and freedom to leave the job under any circumstances is severely restricted.

The recruitment framework in Jordan's garment industry differs from other sectors of work. The garment factory employers may recruit migrant workers directly or through private employment agencies in countries of origin. With this, the recruitment process of Bangladeshis has improved in recent years through the establishment of standardized procedures between the governments. Unlike several years ago, most of the workers who arrive in Jordan to work in the garment factories go through the process put in place by the Bangladesh Overseas Employment and Services Limited (BOESL)<sup>17</sup> which in principle ensures zero recruitment fees. Nevertheless, their migration is not free

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<sup>14</sup> Better Work Jordan (BWJ) (2012). *Employment of Jordanians in the Garment Industry: Challenges and Prospects*. Amman: BWJ.

<sup>15</sup> BWJ, 'Jordan's garment sector removed from US forced labour listing', available online at <https://betterwork.org/blog/2016/10/15/jordans-garment-sector-removed-from-us-forced-labour-listing/>. Accessed 17 March 2019.

<sup>16</sup> International Labour Organisation (ILO) (2017). *Migrant domestic and garment workers in Jordan: A baseline analysis of trafficking in persons and related laws and policies* Geneva: ILO, p.3.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid. p.8

of charge, since they do have to pay service charges to BOESL. Although there are still instances of deception, the level is much lower compared to the domestic work sector, for instance.

Jordan is also one of the few countries in the Middle East to allow workers to organize and collectively bargain though restrictions remain. Each of the 17 sectors in the country identified by the Tripartite Commission for which unionization is allowed (garments being one of them) permit only one union, and this union has to be led by a Jordanian national. Thus, migrant workers are permitted to join an existing union, but may not form their own union or stand for elective office.<sup>18</sup>

Another recent improvement for migrant garment workers is the newly drafted Collective Bargaining Agreement (CBA) signed in 2013 between employers and the trade union and the subsequent creation of a unified contract for all migrant workers approved in 2015. The CBA regulates work hours, wages and bonuses, and mandates equal treatment of all workers, improved occupational safety and health at both factories and dorms, annual seniority bonuses for all workers regardless of their nationalities, among other provision. The unified contract for migrant workers which is one of the main components of the CBA is designed to help end the practice of some migrant garment workers signing one contract in their home country, and then a different contract when they arrive in Jordan. Also, this contract aims to provide workers with a clearer understanding of their working conditions.

Despite the existence of the CBA, there are still numerous cases of non-compliance with the rules. For example, during the 2017 reporting period, almost 40% of all garment factories registered with Better Work Jordan did not fully comply with Jordanian labour law, according to official reporting alone.<sup>19</sup> Common infractions included the lack of translation of contracts into the workers' languages, as well as not explaining their terms and conditions. In addition, around 72% of factories did not implement one or more of the requirements of the CBA, including the need to inform workers of its existence.<sup>20</sup> Better Work Jordan, a partnership between the International Labour Organization (ILO) and the International Finance Corporation (IFC), was launched in February 2008 at the request of the government of Jordan. Its aim was to make the national garment industry more competitive for the international export market by assuring the effective application of national labour laws and regulations, as well as international labour standards. This is being pursued through providing advice to factories, coupled with regular assessments of their compliance with applicable laws and standards. It is mandatory for all garment factories to participate in the Better Work programme.<sup>21</sup>

## Role of civil society

Although Jordan has an active civil society carrying out humanitarian and awareness-raising functions, local actors are kept in check in many ways and are unable to significantly alter or intervene in the policy-making in the migration realm, especially with regard to the refugee question.<sup>22</sup>

However, there are notable groups that advocate for migrant workers' rights and those who fight for the advancement of labour rights for the migrants and refugees. Although these groups do not explicitly use the language of 'social justice', their work and movement portray their commitment towards rectifying social injustice meted out to the marginalized segments of Jordanian society.

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<sup>18</sup> Ibid.; see Jordanian Labour Law No. 8 of 196 and its Amendments, Article 98 (d) and (e), as well as related Tripartite Commission decisions, available on the website of the MoL.

<sup>19</sup> Better Work Jordan (BWJ) (2018). *Annual Report 2018: An Industry And Compliance Review: Jordan*. Amman: BWJ, p. 27.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., p.23.

<sup>21</sup> Better Work Jordan (BWJ) (2010). *Garment Industry 1st Compliance Synthesis Report*. Amman: BWJ.

<sup>22</sup> Bel-Air, F.D. (2016). *Migration Profile: Jordan*. Florence: European University Institute, Migration Policy Centre, p. 11.

One of the key issues that came under Jordanian NGO's spotlight is migrants' labor rights violation at the workplace. Some of the persisting exploitation includes limited freedom of association, discrimination in employment, illegal recruitment practices, and poor dormitory conditions. As the vast majority of workers in the garment factory are women migrants, there are also specific issues of gender-based discrimination at the work place. For example, restrictions were imposed on women workers mobility in and out of the dormitory citing workers' safety as the main reason<sup>23</sup>. It is also observed that garment factories prefer women workers due to the perceived notion that women cause fewer problems because they are less inclined to go on a strike or to file complaints according to an interview by Jordan-based human rights' NGO Tamkeen. This social construction of women's dispositions as submissive plays a role in perpetuating the silencing regarding gender-based violence.

However, advocacy messages around migrant garment workers in Jordan remain largely gender-neutral despite the fact that women workers' specific issues are well known. For instance, there have been a number of claims raised by NGOs on the substandard and unsafe dormitories without elaborating the different levels of lack of safety which is felt by women workers opposed their male colleagues.

## SIGNIFICANCE OF THE RESEARCH & RESEARCH QUESTIONS

During informal interactions with women migrant workers (WMWs) in Jordan, the lead researcher and research coordinator had frequently come across accounts of severe psychological distress among the workers. Women workers had shared many stories about how their work stress, worry about the families they had left behind in Bangladesh, the stigma that marred their social status at home, and their future, created tension and induced feelings of sadness and anxiety. Several cases of suicides had also been reported in different factories. This created additional concern about the psychological well-being of the workers, and an urge to find out more about the conditions that generated stress, especially issues like their migration status and working conditions.

The study asked participants about their experiences of migrant work. This included questions about whether and how their migration provided them with material benefits, whether the returns were sufficient in their view, and whether the conditions guaranteed their physical safety. Through these questions, the research sought to understand the impact of migrant work on the psychological well-being of workers as this was the core concern of the research.

The significance of the research is underscored by the following reasons:

First, the volume of migration between South Asia-Middle East corridor is sizeable, and Jordan's novel approach to migrant worker employment in the garment sector is being viewed as a 'model' for improving the management of migration more broadly. Thus, whatever happens here in terms of the treatment of migrant workers (MWs) is likely to have implications for labour migration in other sectors and in the way that sending and receiving countries are approaching this topic.

Second, despite the existence of many laws and regulations, major rights violations issues have persisted, which points to their ineffectiveness. There is a lack of awareness among workers, employers and other stakeholders. Although reports have shown steady improvements regarding

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<sup>23</sup> Better Work Jordan (BWJ) (2016). *Annual Report 2016: An Industry And Compliance Review: Jordan*. Amman: BWJ.



employers' compliance with standards and the resulting living and working conditions overall, we still found discrepancies with the experiences of significant numbers of MWs. Therefore, our study shows that compliance with existing standards does not easily translate into all workers having their rights adequately protected. Many of them were facing similar issues, which highlighted implementation gaps and prompted questions as to how these could best be addressed.

Third, there is no research on the psychological well-being of WMWs in Jordan. We have also seen that existing regulations have so far applied a very narrow focus in their concept of "health" which often does not include psychological well-being, or account for cultural differences, and is oriented primarily towards maintaining workers' consistent production output rather than ensuring their comprehensive well-being (see below). Related to this, and as evidenced by our research, the link between working conditions and health conditions is often ignored in practice.

A fourth issue is that the garment sector is dominated by women workers. Entrenched patterns of gender discrimination have traditionally made these workers more vulnerable to exploitation, including through numerous instances of sexual and other forms of harassment, much of which have gone underreported.

The objectives of the study were to:

- Create a 'safe space' for women garment workers from Bangladesh in order to enable them to identify and voice their feelings of distress, tension and unhappiness and thereby provide an opening into the issue of psychological wellbeing
- Suggest activities and services to better respond to psychological issues that resulted from 'unfair' and 'unsafe' conditions of migration from Bangladesh and work in Jordan

To achieve the research objective, the following research questions were asked:

- What were the particular vulnerabilities in mobility and work that Bangladeshi women migrant workers were exposed to due to their female identity?
- What are the mental health related issues that have emerged from these vulnerabilities which impacted women's experience on safe and fair migration?
- What are the coping strategies of migrant women or how do they deal with these challenges?

## RESEARCH FRAMEWORK AND METHODOLOGY

GAATW was keen to include Jordan among the research sites and based on their long term engagement with women migrating from Bangladesh they wanted to listen to the lived experiences of Bangladeshi women at destination sites. In early 2018, GAATW invited Al Hasan Workers Centre to participate in the research. After some discussion it was decided that the Workers Centre will not be able to join as a research partner although the space can be used for FGDs and interviews. It was agreed that an independent researcher will carry out the research tasks.

Data collection in Jordan began in May 2018, proceeding in several stages and finishing in May 2019. Five focus group discussions (FGDs) with a total of 75 participants and in-depth Interviews with 30 workers were conducted in three Qualified Industrial Zones (QIZs) in the North of the country, where the garment industry is concentrated – Al Hassan, Al Tajmouat, and Al Dulayl. Participants were

selected randomly from workers employed in different factories throughout these zones. Of the FGD participants 57 were female, while there was also one FGD with 4 male participants. Of the 30 individual interviews, 29 were conducted with female workers and one with a male worker. In total, 86 women and 5 men participated.

The research adopted a **feminist** approach by prioritising outreach to women workers, and by inquiring about both male and female perspective on gender-specific challenges in migration. This was done using both FGDs and individual interviews, all conducted by female researchers to establish trust and confidentiality. The research team employed women volunteers to organise the FGDs to build an environment of trust with the women participants. The research coordinator, lead researcher and the research assistant were all women. The questionnaires were designed in a way that tried to open up deliberate spaces for reflection on gender-specific issues in the women's migration experience. Included in the interviews with male workers were questions designed to encourage them to reflect on their perspectives on the migration and related experiences of their female colleagues.

The **participatory** character of the research was emphasised in the interactive character of the FGDs, organised by women volunteers (workers), involving friends and colleagues. The General Trade Union of Workers in Textile, Garment and Clothing Industries supported the research team in organising interviews and FGDs in the other zones.

While participation had been an explicit goal of the methodology from the beginning, the form and extent of it developed organically during the research process. When the first FGD was organized with WMWs, there was a very enthusiastic response from the participants. After the lead researcher and research assistant managed to establish a relationship of trust with the group, there was a very open discussion of workers' feelings, the challenges they had encountered, and their ideas about "fairness" in the process. After the feminist approach to the research had been explained, workers became even more motivated to share, and they actively started making suggestions about elements they would like to see reflected in the research. In this way, issues such as the question about WMWs' experience of pre-departure medical tests, which many had perceived as discriminatory and unfair, were taken up in the questionnaires. In addition, they also highlighted the importance of inquiring about instances of harassment including sexual harassment in the workplace – an issue which gained prominence from the second FGD onwards. Furthermore, the link between working conditions and psychological well-being was brought up repeatedly as an issue during the discussions, and helped shape the way in which the research was designed – in the questionnaires, as a topic of discussion in other FGDs, and the overall report itself.

From the first FGD, 6-7 women workers volunteered to actively participate in the research by conducting interviews with fellow WMWs, organising other FGDs, and providing more detailed background information for the research when required.

Three of them remained actively involved throughout the research, interviewing workers in different zones. This shows the extent of the involvement of WMWs and the level of empowerment that was achieved by the project.





The research was designed to enable follow-up **action** to benefit the participants. Empowered through their shared experiences and the confidence and knowledge gained in the course of the research, they were expected to be better equipped to confront the management when facing rights violations, and to more effectively claim their right to be free from abuse and harassment at work. Other follow-up elements included the formation of women's groups for sharing experiences, supporting each other, seeking help, and publicising information.

## CHALLENGES

Many of the topics discussed in the research touched upon the personal experiences of the workers, so great care had to be taken to establish trust and maintain confidentiality. This presented certain difficulties for the researchers, since interviews could not be conducted at work, and even in dorms, the research had to be closely guarded from dorm supervisors<sup>24</sup> to avoid negative repercussions. *“We had to be very careful with the research. Sometimes when I would write things down, the dorm leader would inquire what I was writing. Since she was from a different nationality and could not read Bangla, I told her we are teaching writing to the workers who are illiterate.”* The research took place in an environment in which many workers were afraid of their employers to the extent that they initially hesitated to share anything – even positive aspects of their lives – as they felt they were not supposed to talk about their experiences.

Even though a semi-structured interview template was used, most of the interviews were very in-depth and qualitative, turning into life stories over the course of several sessions. Therefore, and because the issues being researched were quite complex, in several cases, multiple follow-ups were necessary, which took additional time and effort. Some of the participants had also returned to Bangladesh in the meantime, so follow-up was not possible in all cases.

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<sup>24</sup> Dorm supervisors are employed by factories to take care of the dormitories, and to supervise workers in the dorm. They do not work in the factories.

Since the lead researcher had to work remotely during the second half of the project, coordination with the research assistant was occasionally difficult. The research assistant was a migrant garment worker herself, who enthusiastically contributed to the project, even if she did not have any prior experience in conducting research. Although some of the required skills had to be fostered as part of the project itself, this worked out very well due to her enormous dedication to the work, her talent in connecting with her co-workers and her ability to build close working relationships.

It was difficult to collect detailed individual information on all FGD participants regarding their age, origin, and occupational background in the same way as was done for the individual interviews. This was due to time limitations, as the discussions focused more on qualitative details about the groups' migration experience.

Embassies and employers could not be interviewed as initially planned. Even though specific questionnaires were developed for both purposes, it was not possible to carry out the interviews due to lack of resources.

## FINDINGS & ANALYSIS

Unless otherwise specified, the findings are based on results from both the FGDs and individual interviews. The reason for this lies in the prominent role that FGDs played in the research process.

As a research tool, the FGDs in this project contributed not only to shaping the research design and preparing for the individual interviews. They also yielded many substantive insights into the issues that the WMWs were facing. In general, there is a strong correlation between the outcomes of the FGDs and those of the individual interviews. However, in some cases, the FGD setting helped to bring out particular concerns as part of the group dynamics that were difficult to raise in the one-on-one setting of an interview. A prominent example of this was the topic of sexual harassment.

### Profile of the research participants

All of the participants in the in-depth interview were from a low socio-economic background, based on their income, education and occupation. In terms of their marital status, half (15) were married, a quarter were divorced or separated (7), and another quarter were single (7). One was widowed. Their age ranged from 17-40 years; the majority were in their early 20s. For almost all of them, their migration to Jordan represented the first time they had left their country, in many cases the first time they had left home and their families. Seven out of 30 interviewees had migrated when they were underage; the FGDs also contained several underage workers.<sup>25</sup> This indicates that women and girls

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<sup>25</sup> According to Jordanian labour law, juvenile work is permitted for those aged 16-18; however, the Ministry of Labour in a 2011 decision under Article 74 of the Labour Law barred 8 categories of work from employing anyone under the age of 18 due to medical, physical or biological risk; this includes cotton and textiles; according to a recent ILO report, recruitment of migrant workers is prohibited under the age of 18: see International Labour Organisation (ILO) (2018). *Recruitment Experiences of South Asian Migrant Workers in Jordan's Garment Industry*. Geneva: ILO, p.19, n.16.

are migrating at a very young age, and also that they are able to obtain documents that do not accurately reflect their age, mostly with the help of middle men.

Relatively few participants, including 11 out of 30 individual interviewees, had worked in the garment industry in Bangladesh before. All of them were driven by a need to avert pressing economic distress, which they found they would not be able to do had they stayed in Bangladesh.

All of them were in a difficult financial situation (including lack of assets, and having taken loans), and felt that migration was the only option to overcome their crisis. Some reported being responsible for supporting the education of other family members, supporting their husbands' migration, and for arranging their own dowry when they were single, which were additional motivations to migrate. As one of the respondents said, *"I migrated to arrange the money for my marriage. In our area, you need at least 1 lakh (BDT 100,000, c. USD 1,200) even to be married to a 'van driver' (pedal-driven rickshaw for transporting goods). If you want a 'good husband', you need at least 3 lakh (BDT 300,000, c. USD 3,600). If the man is good-looking, you have to give even more. So I need to save money to get a good husband."*

All of the participants (with one exception) were the main breadwinners of their families. Nevertheless, suspicion and disapproval from family members and neighbours before their migration was reported by the majority of the women – both individually and in the FGDs – as going abroad was considered "immoral" and "dangerous" for women in many places and circumstances.

Only very few had received any specific skills training related to the tasks they were expected to fulfil at the new place of employment. In general, all of them received some kind of skills training (except those with prior experience working in garment factories in Bangladesh), usually involving very basic sewing skills using simple machines, which were different from the ones being used in Jordan, as reported by workers. Some mentioned that this training was arranged by middle men in their own facilities, and none were sure whether their training had been arranged by the government. This reflects their lack of knowledge and information, and the dependence on middle men for most of their preparations, which were often inadequate. Among the 29 in-depth female interviewees, seven had no formal education, seven had attended primary school, 14 had studied from 6-10<sup>th</sup> grade, and one had completed the 12<sup>th</sup> grade. The male interviewee had completed the 5<sup>th</sup> grade.

## Key Findings

### *1: Empowering Aspects of Migration*

It was apparent from the interviews that, for some WMWs, their migration experience provided them with an opportunity to exercise more autonomy over their life decisions. Coming from mostly rural areas in Bangladesh, this can be seen as a major change in their lives, which earlier used to be determined largely by conservative social structures that significantly restricted their choices – including career and family choices, use of resources, access to formal education and other types of knowledge, etc. It was mostly male family members who had the last word on decisions affecting them, both in their own families and among their in-laws. Therefore, living and working on their own in a foreign country represented a big departure, which they often perceived as liberating. Although this aspect of being untethered to familiar social structures did not come without its own challenges

– including during the initial migration phase, when many of them felt disconnected and unsupported in a new environment (see below) – respondents highlighted several positive aspects of their migration experience that they perceived as empowering, such as:

**Financial independence:** The ability to earn their own money, in and of itself, and to be responsible for managing their own resources, was seen as a positive experience by many, and one which they felt they could not have had access to had they stayed at home. While earning was a necessity especially for those who were the main breadwinners for their families, having the assurance that they could indeed manage to earn and support their loved ones did give them a sense of purpose and accomplishment. As one of the interviewees said, *“My mother was severely ill. Through my work here in Jordan, I was able to make sure she got proper treatment. It makes me feel good that now I have my own money that I can spend for my family. I couldn’t do that before in Bangladesh.”* Some participants also were able to use their earnings towards making their economic future at home more secure, for example by purchasing small amounts of land. *“I have bought a small piece of land in a hilly area back home [the cheapest kind of land available in Bangladesh]. I used it to start a small garden of fruits and vegetables, which we now can sell in the local market.”* Their income also meant improved access to nutritious food. As one of them said, *“I have freedom here that I never had in Bangladesh. I can also afford better food here, unlike at home – things like meat, milk, and fruit.”*

Nevertheless, it is important to mention that independence came with important constraints. Firstly, the fact that all of them were financially responsible for families back home, and often times not just to support their day to day expenses, but also to pay back loans, either for their own migration, or for that of other family members. This created serious pressure and limited the sense of financial independence they gained through earning their own incomes in Jordan. They were restricted by these responsibilities to live a life of significant hardship and modest means in Jordan. Secondly, and connected to this, all of them felt that the wages they received were too low to meet their expenses, including necessities for themselves, such as adequate food and medical care (see below). As such, the potential to save and plan for their own and their families’ wellbeing, as many of them had intended, was severely limited. After accounting for their own regular expenses, most were left with anywhere from JD 35 (USD 49) (without overtime) to 100 (USD 141) (with overtime) per month to save or send home (see also below in the section on ‘wages’).

**Skills acquisition:** Many of the women interviewed expressed appreciation for the opportunity to acquire new skills and experiences abroad. This included some skills immediately related to their jobs in the factory (in fact, the prevailing view of this was that many of these skills were self-taught and forced upon them in an environment characterised by extreme workload pressure), but also related to the factory environment more generally, such as learning other languages (a little English and Arabic, as well as languages spoken by co-workers, such as Sinhalese, Hindi and Nepali) and exposure to a multi-cultural environment.

In addition, some of them had access to learning other skills through the Workers’ Center in the Al Hassan Industrial Zone, which offered computer classes, exercise options, and English classes (more on this below).

**Peer learning:** Connected to this, many women also stressed the positive impact of being able to pass on these skills to others, when they became volunteer instructors themselves at the Workers’ Center. This was a new experience for them, which made them feel valued and appreciated by their peers,

and thus had a positive impact not only on their own learning and development, but also contributed to their self-worth and feeling of autonomy.

Social autonomy: As stated by workers, the conservative social background of many of the migrant women had restricted them from being able to make independent decisions in Bangladesh. This also included their ability to establish social ties without the approval of their families. By contrast, in Jordan, many of them depended on establishing such ties on their own to help them cope with their often difficult situation. Interviewees mentioned that these experiences helped them escape from some of the stress they had been feeling previously in Bangladesh as a result of social pressures.

Some of the women also used this new-found autonomy to engage in relationships with male co-workers, which some of them experienced as a significant help in dealing with the pressures of their situation (although experiences varied and were not always viewed positively by their peers – see below).

## *2: Rights Violations and Adverse Conditions*

The research uncovered many rights violations occurring at different times in the migration journey of a worker.

### Pre-Departure Experiences

At the recruitment stage, WMWs reported having been taken advantage of financially by middle men—they were often charged excessive rates for services provided, either because they were not aware of the official cost involved in migration, and/or because they were forced to pay extra for services due to their lack of knowledge of the system (such as passport applications, medical tests, transportation), or because they were illiterate and needed assistance even for simple procedures. All of these factors increased the risk of WMWs paying a high price for their migration.

Migrant garment workers in Bangladesh are recruited through an official process, which involves a public advertisement of vacancies through the government recruiting agency BOESL, as well as service charges in the amount of BDT 17,750 (+ 1,000 for medical test + 220 for the fingerprint process for manpower clearance). However, there is still a heavy reliance on middle men to make this system work, since potential migrants are often not able to access the advertisements or make any of the necessary preparations on their own. Thus, applicants are usually taken to their interviews and aptitude test (for which their very basic training serves as preparation) by middle men, and also rely on them for facilitating the issuance of their documents. This is despite the fact that BOESL advertisements contain disclaimers that they themselves do not employ any agents or sub-agents, and warning applicants not to pay any fees in excess of the official requirements.

With regard to the pre-departure orientation, organised by the government (BOESL), this was reportedly very short (30 minutes to one hour), and only covered basic information on their average salary including overtime, and some pieces of paternalistic advice such as, “be nice in the factory.” All of them said they were too stressed to concentrate on the information shared, because the orientation was conducted at the last moment, and in a great hurry, and also because they were concerned about leaving behind their families and going to a new place.

Three of the participants in the individual interviews came from Dhaka and the rest from other districts. The women from Dhaka paid relatively lower recruitment fees (official government fees). Some of the Dhaka-based workers had taken the initiative themselves and obtained correct information. The FGDs also showed that fees still varied greatly according to workers' knowledge and access to information. From these groups, it appeared that those without any relative or trusted person who could provide them with details about the process still paid higher fees – sometimes in excess of BDT 70,000 – even if they lived in Dhaka. By contrast, respondents from rural areas unanimously said that it was impossible for them to get information without the help of middle men, and that this led to higher migration costs for them. While some of them expressed their gratitude for the help they had received, they nevertheless said that the large discrepancies in fees paid were not fair.

Since many of them did not have personal or family savings or access to other assets, they were forced to take loans to finance their migration costs. Interest rates on such loans were reportedly in the range of 11-16%. It was clear that migration costs varied greatly between migrants – a few were able to use the above-mentioned government-sponsored system, which facilitates migration at a fixed rate but many of them (14 out of 30 individual interviewees, and most of the FGD participants) paid significantly more, between BDT 50,000 – 120,000 (USD 600 – 1,400). At the same time, respondents were also aware of some factories in Jordan covering the recruitment costs of their workers in full through arrangements with BOESL. This is usually done either through direct payments from the factory to BOESL at the time of selecting the workers or more frequently through reimbursement of the workers for their fees after their arrival. It is important to note, however, that these payments only cover the official government fees of BDT 17,750, often leaving workers to pay significant additional fees to middle men on their own. This contributed to their sense of a lack of fairness in recruitment procedures. As one participant said, *“Some of my colleagues paid nothing and I paid one lakh, this is not fair.”*

Most of the women reported having been left alone without guidance during transit, at least after they had reached the departure airport. Often their tickets did not include food (or the food was unfamiliar), they did not have access to water or any support in dealing with their new unfamiliar environment on flights, during layovers, and upon arrival. As one participant recounted, *“When I was in the plane on my way to Jordan, I was in a batch of 50 people. Because we were thirsty, we drank water from the toilet. We didn't know how to ask for water. The travel was a nightmare for us. We starved during the journey and we got sick.”*

### Working Conditions and Their Impact on Physical and Psychological Health

As mentioned in the introduction, the working environment generally contains a number of risk factors for workers' mental health. More specifically, there have been studies to show how a stressful working environment can negatively impact psychological well-being, which might include the triggering of suicidal thoughts and actions.<sup>26</sup> The occupational environment is generally recognised to have both positive and negative effects. Adverse conditions in this environment which are of particular relevance for WMWs in our study include: Work characteristics – which are mechanical, fast-paced and repetitive for WMWs; interpersonal conflict, especially expressed through unequal hierarchical relationships (see “discrimination” section below) psychological job stress, caused by high demand,

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<sup>26</sup> A good overview of related research is given in: Woo, J.-M. and Postolache, T.T. (2008). The impact of work environment on mood disorders and suicide: Evidence and implications. *International journal on disability and human development*. IJDHD vol. 7,2 (2008): 185-200.



coupled with low control, and a pronounced effort-reward imbalance – which was reported by all participants; and job insecurity, including frequent threats of dismissal, often linked to allegations of underperformance.

These conditions – which are moderated by a number of factors such as personality, gender, age, family, and social support – can produce stress reactions, including depression and insomnia, which can evolve into clinical illnesses such as Major Depressive Disorder (MDD) and Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), as well as physical illnesses such as cardiovascular disease and ulcers; they also can produce vocational symptoms, including accidents. Under certain conditions, these can lead to “work-related fatal outcomes”, including suicide and death by medical cause (e.g. sudden cardiac arrest).<sup>27</sup> At work, most WMWs were exposed to harsh conditions, where their labour was extracted to the maximum possible extent, resulting in exhaustion, frequent illness, and anxiety. The picture of working conditions which emerged from the research was one of extreme workloads, coupled with an unsympathetic management that disregarded the effects of this pressure on the workers. Instead, new arrivals were slotted into their work positions and expected to be able to perform the tasks assigned to them without any significant instruction or acclimatisation period, and were immediately expected to produce high outputs, including working overtime to meet production targets. When this inevitably led to stress and difficulties in meeting these targets on the part of workers, the default response from line supervisors, in-charges and managers,<sup>28</sup> was often to berate workers and abuse them verbally, rather than to address the root causes of their problems.

Reports of physical abuse and extreme overwork, which supervisors were unable to manage sustainably, appeared several times in interviews.

The research also uncovered an unfortunate but distinct pattern of gender- and ethnically based discrimination at the workplace. Bangladeshi WMWs, who frequently have to work under the supervision of men and women of other nationalities, reported specific and very harsh verbal abuse which included disrespecting their character as women and as Bangladeshis, putting them in a lower category and abusing them on the basis of their origin (see also examples below). Efforts to address this phenomenon were often not met with success.

In our study, most participants said that their overall health condition had suffered as a result of their work. Frequent complaints included headaches, back pain, and fatigue. These symptoms can be traced back to the pace and intensity of the work itself, which is physically demanding and often leaves insufficient time for rest-breaks.

The production process in garment factories is organised in a very hierarchical and rigid way. The vast majority of workers, including those who participated in this study, are machine operators, and are seated in narrow lines along the factory floor, up to about 1,000 per floor in the larger factories. Each of them is tasked with sewing a particular piece of a garment, which is then assembled and prepared for shipping. They are the lowest rung in the factory hierarchy, and their performance is consistently monitored by supervisors who are in charge of a particular line of machine operators. The repetitive, fast-paced nature of this work, coupled with the constant supervision, produce an environment in which workers are meant to function like pieces of the machinery they are required to handle, their

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<sup>27</sup> Ibid.

<sup>28</sup> The management in the sector is generally structured as follows: Individual workers in a line report to line supervisors; supervisors report to line-in-charges or floor-in-charges; these in-charges report to floor or production managers; workers most frequently have contact with the first two categories.

working routine geared towards maximum efficiency. However, this demand for flawless functioning not only makes workers feel like they are replaceable at a moment's notice (see the section on "discrimination" below) it can also come into conflict with their character and needs as human beings, especially at times when production targets are very high.

Workers are generally paid a monthly wage, independent of production targets (although very few factories also pay by piece rate). These targets fluctuate based on demand from buyers and translate into varying daily and sometimes hourly targets for the workers. Thus, during periods of increased demand, workers are expected to work the normal eight hours, plus two to four hours overtime; in some cases, even longer work days are common, and they are not always paid for additional overtime – participants reported instances where workers were not paid for overtime beyond 2 hours in some cases, and beyond 4 hours in other cases.

This situation creates pressure at two different levels: Line supervisors, who are answerable to the management, also experience rising anxieties which makes them adopt an even stricter attitude towards workers, for example by coercing them to skip lunch breaks, or questioning their need to go to the toilet. Secondly, the workers themselves have already internalized this pressure to such an extent that it leads them to modify their behaviour so as not to give occasion for being reprimanded. Thus, workers may forgo basic requirements at a cost to their health. As one worker said, *"I don't want to waste my time in the toilet, so I don't drink any water all day. It's the only way I can meet the high targets."* Some workers also resorted to skipping lunch breaks because of the immense workload.

Employees of smaller factories mostly subcontracted to supplement the production of larger units<sup>29</sup>, faced the additional problem of frequently having to work with expired work and residence permits, and having their passports held by the employer, which significantly increased their vulnerability.

Working conditions and associated pressures were made worse by the widespread verbal abuse from line supervisors, in-charges and managers. All of the FGD participants, as well as 20 out of 30 individual interviewees stated that such abuse occurred regularly when workers were not able to meet production targets, and even for minor mistakes. The language used to reprimand them was very humiliating and offensive, and often had grave psychological consequences. *"They told me, 'You can eat, you can sleep, but you can't work?! Have you come here to show your pretty face?'"*, said one. *"They say, 'Fuck your mother, have you come here to fuck? You slut!'"* said another, and, *"This is not your father's factory!"* Workers were also routinely threatened with being dismissed and sent back to Bangladesh, if they did not meet expectations, with statements such as, *"Bangladeshis are cheap! If I send back one, I can get back ten!"*

In addition to this, several cases of physical abuse were also reported. This included pushing around, slapping, and punching the face. As one worker said, *"When I made a mistake, the supervisor took me to the floor-in-charge to complain. He got very upset with me and punched me in my face. Physical abuse has happened to my colleagues as well, especially during peak season. It happens when we have higher targets."*

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<sup>29</sup> These sub-contracting factories do not have their own direct buyers. Therefore, even though they are subject to Better Work inspections and reporting, there is no incentive for buyers to check on their compliance with the agreed regulatory framework, which makes these factories much less likely to follow the rules.



Linked to this, and more significantly, virtually all participants reported other symptoms related to the stress and anxiety caused by these working conditions and the abuse described above. Also contributing to their stress are factors such as financial insecurity (including their low salaries and pending loans in Bangladesh), and worries about their families back home, from whom they are forced to be separated, often for many years. This isolation sometimes causes conflicts with their husbands, children and other family members, leading to additional stress. Several participants said, *“The hardest part was to leave my children behind,”* and *“I constantly worry about them.”*

The results of this stress included ailments such as insomnia, constant headaches, heart palpitations, and intense feelings of fear. One of the workers said, *“I don’t want to get up in the morning and go to work. I wish I would never have to wake up again.”* Another one said, *“I feel worthless. I don’t deserve all this abuse and discrimination.”* 19 out of 29 female individual interviewees and the majority of FGD participants mentioned they were constantly stressed and anxious about reaching production targets and being the object of verbal and physical abuse from supervisors, as well as about their future.

In some cases, the anxiety produced by these conditions reached life-threatening levels. Out of 29 female participants in individual interviews, seven mentioned that they had experienced suicidal thoughts because of different kinds of abuse and work pressure. In one of these cases, a serious relationship issue contributed to these factors.

Several cases of co-workers’ suicides were brought up in the FGDs. According to participants, these were triggered by a combination of factors, including verbal abuse by managers, work pressure, problems in personal relationships, anxiety about the situation back home, and financial worries.

This illustrates the grave effects of exploitative working conditions and isolation, coupled with inadequate management skills and a lack of attention to the well-being of workers.

### Access to Health Care

As described above, many WMWs experience health issues as a result of the harsh working conditions. However, their health concerns are often disregarded by employers. Workers were discouraged from seeking treatment for illnesses, and when they did, treatment was superficial and geared towards getting them back to work as soon as possible, which often exacerbated their condition.

It is also worth noting that, at the time of the research, none of the factories were offering any psychosocial support to its workers, including migrant workers. In addition, the language barrier sometimes made it difficult for workers to explain their illnesses, since the doctors and nurses are Jordanian, the employment in the health care sector in the country being closed to foreigners.<sup>30</sup> Although some factories do employ Bangladeshi translators as staff, workers reported that the quality of interpretation was often inadequate, and they felt there were still gaps in communication.

Jordanian law is intended to cover the health needs of migrant workers. Social Security Law No. 1 of 2014 requires that employers provide various types of insurance for all workers, including migrant workers. However, the employers’ contribution for health insurance only covers work injuries and occupational diseases. Although the Social Security Law (SSL) includes lists of both occupational

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<sup>30</sup> In 2016, the Ministry of Labour identified a list of 11 occupations that are closed to foreign nationals, which includes health workers; the only exception is granted for government hospitals.

diseases and work injuries, many of the injuries and diseases witnessed during our research are either not overtly physical (e.g. loss of limbs, poisoning, etc.) or their relation to working conditions is rarely acknowledged by employers (e.g., heart conditions, insomnia, constant headaches, anxiety, etc.). Also, the SSL lists do not include any psychological illnesses and their symptoms caused by work stress.

Therefore, our research found that, in practice, virtually all health issues reported by workers were considered non-work-related, and were either treated on site by the nurse in a superficial manner (cold and flu medicine, painkillers, etc.), or, when treated at hospitals off-site, a portion of the worker's wages was deducted for expenses. Only the most serious workplace injuries were covered by the social security provision.

For example, several workers reported suffering from serious back pain caused by long hours standing or sitting at work; the routine response from factories in such cases would be to administer strong painkillers and send the workers back to work immediately following the treatment, often within one hour – rather than sending them for a comprehensive check-up and improving workplace arrangements.

In several cases, workers reported not only having to pay out of their own pocket for hospital treatment, but in addition to that they were charged with unpaid sick leave for the time they took off to seek treatment. This is in contravention of Labour Law Art. 65 as well as Unified Contract (UFC) for Migrant Workers, para. 8 (b), which clearly mention that workers have the right to 14 days of paid medical leave.

According to some respondents, it is even more difficult for them to get medical treatment in smaller factories. In one case, a woman was forced to return to Bangladesh to receive medical treatment for severe lower abdominal pain.

In addition, the research showed several cases of injuries suffered in dormitories (rather than in factories), for which some employers generally denied any responsibility – meaning that, although some treatment was provided, the affected workers were charged for it with deductions from their salary.

In fact, in some factories, routine workplace injuries were not only not covered by insurance, but workers treated for them were subject to automatic wage deductions. These included needle injuries, which cost workers 1 JD every time.

However, this varied from factory to factory. Some employers, in an effort to improve their image or satisfy requirements from particular buyers, did provide their workers with general health insurance – although this was quite rare, and none of the participants actually had access to such an arrangement.

In such an environment, many migrant workers stated that they felt discouraged from seeking medical attention in general, i.e. they would tend to avoid treatment not only for occupational safety and health (OSH)-related diseases but also for other health problems, making them more susceptible to prolonged and chronic diseases, which may reduce their overall health over time.

### 3: Gendered Violence

Based on the FGD and in-depth interviews, for some WMWs, sexual harassment started prior to departure, sometimes from offenders who included middle men. One of the women reported an instance of blackmail by a middle man against one of her colleagues, who was coerced into a physical relationship which ended in a pregnancy. The pregnancy was revealed after her arrival in Jordan and she was forced to return home. In addition, participants also said that there is a widespread social presumption that women who migrate are morally suspect *per se*, and do not adhere to accepted moral codes in Bangladesh, marking them as “prostitutes” in the eyes of their community. Several women reported having to deal with such stereotypes during the pre-departure stage and having to overcome strong objections from their own families and the wider social environment, which judged them harshly for their decision to migrate. For example, one of the workers narrated how she had to leave her home for a two-month period during her preparations for migration, taking shelter at her grandmother’s place in another town, in order to escape scrutiny from judgmental neighbours and relatives.

The mandatory pre-departure medical tests are often demeaning to women, as some of the procedures are performed by male technicians and expose the women to embarrassment and shame. For example, one WMW mentioned that, *“The x-ray guy touched me in an inappropriate way. I didn’t like it.”* Furthermore, the dignity of women is often disregarded by a lack of privacy. Due to the large numbers of applicants, the procedure for providing urine samples for pregnancy tests in particular is often rushed. Women were forced to give these samples in spaces they perceived as violating their propriety. This was reported to be especially the case during the second such test, immediately preceding their departure. As one participant said, *“The door was open, and I was so rushed I did not even have time to fasten my pant strings again before having to come out,”*.

Also, single women expressed their concern about being subjected to pregnancy tests. They perceived them as insulting, as they were not married. However, the majority of married WMWs agreed with the need for these tests, as they know they might be deported if a pregnancy is revealed after their arrival in the factory. It is to be noted, however, that neither Jordanian labour law nor the UFC for all migrant workers contain any provision requiring the termination of contracts or deportation of pregnant migrant workers. On the contrary, Articles 70 and 71 of the Jordanian labour law have clear references to the right to maternity leave for all workers. However, both the FGD participants and the individual interviewees reported that there is a practice of sending pregnant workers back home. In order to avoid this, instances of secret abortions were also reported in the interviews.

Our research also showed that once in Jordan, WMWs were routinely exposed to sexual harassment at the workplace. This ranged from inappropriate remarks by male supervisors and managers discussed earlier to physical assaults. One of the FGD participants recounted, *“Once my colleague and I didn’t go to work because of illness. Our male supervisor came to the dorm and dragged us to work. We don’t like them touching us. Nobody helps, illness doesn’t matter.”*

In most cases, these instances seemed to be particular expressions of the workplace hierarchy and power dynamics within the factory. Pressure from management to achieve ambitious production targets, especially during peak seasons, was passed on to workers through their supervisors. In their attempt to extract compliance and higher productivity from the workers, they routinely resorted to threats, intimidation and verbal abuse. In a related pattern, supervisors and managers at times even abuse their power and attempt to blackmail WMWs into relationships or into providing sexual favours.

The instances we recorded were repeated throughout the research by different workers in different factories. Only in isolated cases did workers successfully raise this issue with management. One participant explained how she was sexually harassed by her male supervisor. *“When I shared this with my roommate, she advised me to complain to the management, so I did. All I wanted was to change my supervisor. But instead of helping me, they threatened to fire me and send me back home! But I did not back down, and I kept complaining. Finally, they agreed to transfer me to another unit.”*

These cases are notoriously underreported, due to the fact that workers said they do not know where and how to report them. Some of the research respondents mentioned that there are places in the factory where they can go with their grievances. However, they were sceptical about whether complaints about this kind of harassment would be believed, and effective action would ever be taken. As participants in one of the FGDs said, *“Sexual harassment happens both in big and small factories, but we don’t know where to report it. We are afraid of losing our jobs. We also are afraid of being stigmatized by our managers and other fellow workers as ‘bad women’. We can’t trust anybody.”*

More detailed findings about workers’ perceptions of where to seek help are discussed in a later section on “Support Mechanisms”. In addition, WMWs were shown to be at risk of sexual harassment and SGBV outside of their workplaces, in the areas where they live, shop and commute. Several reported verbal and physical attacks by local men (including taxi drivers and others). The existing language barrier increased their sense of insecurity. While such harassment issues are present in all industrial zones and outside them, they are particularly acute in Ad Dulayl Industrial Zone, which unlike other industrial zones does not have an outer boundary and an entrance protected by security guards. A case of rape and murder occurred here during the last year, according to FGD participants.

#### **4: Discrimination**

In addition to the instances of gendered violence, all participants reported significant patterns of discrimination. For many, this started before their departure in Bangladesh, where WMWs are frequently discriminated against on the basis of their migration decision (see above) and the associated social stigma. Thus, even those who had secured the support of their families were often not exempt from the criticism of neighbours and acquaintances, which may adversely affect the family in their absence, as well as the women themselves after their return.

The current abusive and harsh conditions of Bangladeshi WMWs in Saudi Arabia, marked by many cases of physical and sexual harassment and abuse of domestic workers, who had been returning to Bangladesh in large numbers, have been widely reported and discussed on social media and different news channels entered into the discussion about migration among this group of women. According to the discussions, the Saudi Arabian situation had heightened the concern among families and communities in Bangladesh about the security of WMWs generally, and thus led to harsher judgment and condemnation of any woman choosing to migrate, including to other countries like Jordan. One of the participants said, *“Our government should protect the domestic workers going to Saudi Arabia. They are suffering a lot there – at the same time, we are also being judged by our families and neighbours, since we live abroad.”* Another one added, *“My husband said, ‘We know very well what you do abroad – the TV channels are showing the facts. You all turn into bad women’.”*

Also, respondents felt that women who migrate are discriminated against when compared to their male counterparts and have to answer derogatory questions from society upon their return. *“If a woman comes back without money, she must have done something bad, otherwise why didn’t she get paid? If she comes back with money, she must have done something bad, otherwise how did she get all that money?”* Compared to male migrant workers, whose migration is often a source of pride for the family, their female counterparts feel that their parents cannot be openly proud of them because of the widespread social stigma attached to women’s migration.

Among groups of Bangladeshi WMWs in Jordan, certain types of social censorship were also practiced by the women. Some of them said that their behaviour, their movements and their choices about whom to associate with and what to do in their spare time, sometimes attracted comments and disapproval from fellow women workers. Discrimination against migrants from other groups in Jordan is stratified along national lines, with Bangladeshi WMWs being stuck at the bottom of the hierarchy within factories. Even though they are by far the largest group of MWs, they also routinely receive the worst treatment from supervisors and managers. This manifests itself not only in harsh verbal abuse and pressure to meet production targets, but also in terms of other aspects of workplace culture. All respondents reported that there were fewer chances for Bangladeshis to earn promotions compared to workers of other nationalities, beyond the level of line supervisor, as most employers are from different national backgrounds including Pakistan, India, Sri Lanka, China, and Bangladesh. Combined with threats of dismissal and being prematurely returned to Bangladesh, this reinforced a sense of being treated as a disposable commodity among this particular group of workers. *“If we try to complain about anything, they tell us, ‘Bangladeshis are beggars, we can easily bring more.’”*

WMWs reported an additional source of tension and discrimination resulting from the fact that most ‘habibi’ relationships were between Bangladeshi women and Indian men, since those were the largest numbers in the Jordanian garment industry each respective category. They reported that this opened the door to abusive behaviour from Indian male workers in particular, both towards their fellow male Bangladeshi co-workers, whom they teased about their “morally corrupt” women, and towards the female Bangladeshi co-workers they were involved with, whom they put down by calling them “sluts”. Participants said this was a common issue in such relationships, and pointed out the moral hypocrisy involved: *“Why do they have a relationship with us, and then call us ‘sluts’? This is not fair.”*

There were also reports of discrimination within groups of WMWs – mostly from longer-tenured workers towards newcomers, who reported having been met either with indifference or outright hostility in some cases. However, some groups were also depicted as supportive and inclusive in interviews.

Discrimination from supervisors towards workers was also reported, including from Bangladeshi women supervisors towards Bangladeshi women workers.

In addition, it is important to also understand the enormous pressures that supervisors themselves have to deal with, especially at the lowest managerial level. Information received in our individual interviews with three line supervisors (the lowest level in the management hierarchy) showed that their own mental health also suffered as a result of conditions in the factories. All of them reported verbal and physical abuse from their own superiors. *“They push us around and sometimes slap us when we can’t get our workers to meet the expected production targets. Because we cannot deal with this pressure, we then shout at the workers ourselves.”* Line supervisors are aware that this

situation is closely linked to the system of production in their sector. *“I want to get rid of this production world. My life is in darkness.”*

Our research showed that there are sharp gender hierarchies in Jordanian garment factories. On average, 80% of all middle and top management positions are held by men, whereas women are mostly seen in line supervisor positions, and rarely progress beyond that level.

Both individually and collectively, it was apparent that these different forms of discrimination negatively affected WMWs’ psychological well-being, since they created additional stress and anxiety that the women had to deal with, on top of their work stress and other factors.



#### Male workers’ stigmatizing perception on women migrants

Male respondents, while expressing an awareness of the specific challenges faced by women migrants in the sector, also demonstrated some of the same prejudices that are at the root of gender-based discrimination faced by their female colleagues.

Although they expressed the view that women are more vulnerable to exploitation, their conclusion from this was that, therefore, and as a rule, they should not migrate.



They also voiced the opinion that migration had a negative influence on the moral character of women. Therefore, they would not like to see their own female family members migrate and they would not consider marrying a woman who had migrated herself. *“I will never marry a woman who has worked abroad,”* one of them stated.

There was also a feeling of helplessness among the group of Bangladeshi male workers when it came to their ability to confront perpetrators of sexual harassment against Bangladeshi women. This was both because official complaints were not reported and informally as a group they were not able to do anything due to being outnumbered by employees from other countries.

Some of the interviewed male workers expressed their disapproval of the behaviour of their fellow Bangladeshi women workers, especially “uneducated women”, and those who were unmarried. In their eyes, such women were prone to objectionable behaviour, chatting with men on Facebook and becoming “bad,” including by engaging in relationships in Jordan. *“There should be a company rule – anyone found ‘doing habibi’ (engaging in a relationship) should be sent back home.”*

Related to this, some male respondents also mentioned that a discussion of contraceptives should not be included in any pre-departure orientations, as this allegedly plants “bad thoughts” in women’s minds.

## 5: Wages

According to the Tripartite Committee Decision of 2017, the minimum wage for Jordanian workers was raised to JOD 220 per month. At the same time, it was determined that migrant workers, while entitled to the same minimum wage, would receive JOD 125 in cash and the remaining JOD 95 in kind; the latter sum is intended to cover the cost for their accommodation in dormitories, as well as for the food provided by factories. Nevertheless, our research showed that MWs had to spend additional resources to meet their personal needs, including food, ranging from an amount of JOD 50-70 per month, thus putting a strain on their ability to make ends meet with their effective wages of JOD 125. One of them said, *“Our wages are not fair. We only get 125 JOD, we cannot manage with that, so we need more overtime, even though this is very stressful for us.”*

Therefore, all of them reported being essentially compelled to consistently work overtime hours, so as to be able to raise their wages from JOD 125 to 180-200 per month. This figure is reached by collecting overtime pay amounting to 125% of their regular wages (150% when working on rest days and holidays). Even with overtime pay, it was very challenging for them to ensure they had enough money left over to send home to their families to meet their needs, including livelihood support, education, servicing loans, etc. Therefore, they expressed their opinion that the wages they were able to earn in Jordan were not fair, considering the amount of work they put in, and the conditions under which they had to work, and also considering the social costs they felt they had to pay – including leaving behind their families and contending with social stigma, both before and after migration. One of the FGD participants put it this way: *“We migrate at the cost of everything. We lose our husbands or their love, we are labelled as prostitutes, our children do not get enough care. Even family members do not trust us when we can’t send the required amount of money. What do we get in return? Not even an adequate salary.”*

Workers also reported some instances of forced overtime. For example, this happens when some buyers insist on capping overtime at two hours per day; workers reported that in some factories supplying to these buyers, management therefore forces workers to punch out after this limit has been reached and continue working without pay in order to meet the target. This was reported across the board affecting several factories, including and especially larger ones. As one of the women affected remarked, *“We do not expect this injustice from a reputable factory like ours.”*

These problems are compounded by supervisors sometimes punishing workers for small mistakes at work by sending them back to their dorms and treating their enforced absence from work as unpaid leave.



Therefore, workers' control over their lives is being impaired in two different ways in relation to the overtime situation: (1) through direct force from the employer, in the form of a non-negotiable expectation to accept overtime; (2) through circumstantial force to work overtime as a result of their financial situation. This can result in reduced physical well-being (as a result of overwork), reduced psychosocial well-being (linked to the loss of autonomy), and in reduced material well-being (in cases of unpaid overtime).



## 6: Living Conditions

All MWs experienced very similar living conditions in the dormitories to which they had been assigned. Generally, 8-12 workers were sharing one room, and 15 workers shared one bathroom. There was usually a common kitchen and eating area in most of the dorms, although some small factory dorms did not provide this facility.

Concerns about inadequate heating systems were widespread. This affected the temperature inside the rooms, as well as the hot water supply, which was often found to be insufficient, especially during the cold winter months.

In addition, workers reported problems with bed bugs, which adversely affected their health and ability to rest and recuperate after a day of hard work. As one of them said, *“After working so hard all day, we cannot sleep at night because of the bed bugs. So how are we expected to work with concentration during the day?”*

The lack of privacy was another common concern. According to Ministry of Health regulations in Jordan, dormitories are permitted to accommodate no more than 12 workers per room, and no more than 15 are to share a toilet and shower. In addition, minimum spatial requirements for distance between beds are given (70 cm). Even though many factories are complying with these requirements, many workers interviewed for this research rated the resulting living conditions as very challenging, since this standard layout did not provide them with adequate amounts of privacy. Having to share bedrooms and bathrooms with many co-workers and being exposed to disputes between different colleagues were noted as negative consequences.

Workers employed by smaller factories reported that conditions were even worse in their dorms – there was no heating system, no hot water, and their rooms were even more cramped, with 12 workers living in one even smaller room, not even allowing for any room to walk. The food provided was of the worst quality and deemed inedible by workers. The factories themselves also did not provide any heating system, which was compounded by the lack of heating inside their dormitories, causing illnesses and affecting their ability to sleep and to perform at work. As one woman said, *“The dorm is terrible. We can’t bear the cold, and we cry all the time. It is very dirty, and we don’t even have hot water. Our hands freeze when we go to the toilet or try to wash our laundry. We always have a cold or chest pain. In bigger factories, workers at least have better living conditions. Even though they also have high targets, at least they can sleep at night.”*

These conditions impacted not only the physical well-being of the workers, but also had a detrimental effect on their psychological state. They reinforced the impression among workers that employers were not concerned about their well-being and regarded them as expendable.

## 7: Awareness of and Coping with their Situation

None of the workers interviewed had received any formal training or information about their rights prior to migrating, or in the workplace – neither from their recruiters, their employers, or any other entities in Jordan (see also below). When asked specifically about their awareness of rights, all except one said they don’t know anything about rights. The only participant who said otherwise offered the

following analysis of her situation: *“I know my rights as a woman and as a worker, but I have never been able to exercise them in my life – in Bangladesh because of my family situation, and here because of the factory.”*

Nevertheless, all workers showed themselves to be acutely aware of the fact that their rights were being violated, as shown in the recommendations below.

Among some of the workers, though, this awareness went along with a sense of resignation and acquiescence. One of them put it like this: *“I have come here to earn money, so I have to tolerate abuse. This is natural in the garment industry.”* “There is no love in the world of work,” said another. Several WMWs also complained about the fact that their own families in Bangladesh expected them to put up with conditions in the interest of earning remittances. *“I am a money machine,” many of them said. “At home, no one loves me, only money matters.”*

In terms of coping with their situation in Jordan, some reported that they had turned to their colleagues for support. In the absence of other alternatives, they said they had made their roommates their family. For others, the overcrowding and lack of privacy created an additional burden, and they did not like mingling with co-workers in their dorms after the work day. Some also stated that the harsh working conditions and demanding routine did not really leave space for developing meaningful friendships. *“I go to work in the morning, then I come back, I don’t have time to create any social relationships here,”* one of them said.

Participants were divided on whether talking to their families back home was a help or a hindrance. While for a few this was an important coping mechanism, others felt they could not rely on this communication channel, and it in fact caused new tensions. Therefore, they preferred talking to their roommates to discuss their stress. Some of them were aware that this in turn created an additional burden for their colleagues. *“I talk to my roommates a lot, they call me a chatterbox.”*

As described in the sections on “Empowering aspects of migration” (p. 11), “Working Conditions” (p. 15), and in the conclusions (p. 25), some women chose to engage in relationships with male co-workers, at least in part as a response to their stressful situation. However, for most of them, the results of this were mixed, and they were weary of significant downsides.

Many respondents therefore described their situation as one in which they mostly suffered in isolation: *“We cry for some time, then we try to forget, or keep the pain inside.”*

## ***8: Institutional Support Mechanisms***

In the course of our research, we tried to find out what institutions the WMWs turn to for help in dealing with their challenges. The results were quite sobering. When asked whether they had reached out to embassies, NGOs, or trade unions for support, all of the in-depth interviewees responded that they did not know anything about the services extended by these agencies. Some of the FGD participants mentioned that, even if they tried to contact the embassy, their concerns were not taken seriously. *“If we call our embassy, they don’t trust us. They say, ‘Only Bangladeshis have problems, no other nationalities complain like you’.”* In addition, they reported that, on the few occasions that embassy staff had visited factories, they seemed to have sided with management more than with the

workers. *“When the embassy people come, they are always with the management and ask how we are doing in front of them. How will we share our concerns before the management?”*

When workers were asked if they had any idea about the services of the union, they said they hardly had any knowledge about their core services. Among those who have some awareness of the union, their perception was that the union’s main role is to come to the factory when there is a strike. In addition, many of them were not familiar with the term “union”, instead referring to it as “the labour court.”

Similarly, Jordanian NGOs which sometimes take up cases of MWs were not familiar to workers interviewed.

A few of the interviewees and FGD participants in the Al Hassan Industrial Area were aware that the Workers’ Center sometimes supports workers in dispute resolution with employers. In this regard, the services of a former union representative and current WC staff were particularly appreciated.

Apart from this, the Workers’ Center also provides the potential to increase the confidence of WMWs, both in the factories and when they go back home. This could be done by creating a supportive environment for workers and creating safe spaces for WMWs in which they can exchange their experiences and receive mutual support, which has the potential to enhance their psychological well-being and help them in coping with their difficult working environment. In addition, it can also be a space for improving workers’ knowledge about their rights, as there are still restrictions on collective organizing of foreign workers in the country (see above).

In view of this potential, consideration should also be given to establishing Workers’ Centers in different locations, so that MWs employed in other locations could benefit from such services.

## CONCLUSION

Labour migration has become a way for many women to address their pressing economic needs and those of their families. Our research showed that the experience of migration had many positive effects for the women who had taken the challenging decision to leave home and work in another country. Even though they felt compelled to migrate in the first place, several also stressed their new-found autonomy and economic independence – albeit limited – as liberating and empowering aspects of their migration experience. Therefore, it is important to note the enormous achievements of these women as agents of their own fate – often battling doubts and hostility from within their own families and communities to get where they are.

At the same time, there was also a clear sense of challenges emerging from the research which were found to be linked the conditions under which these MWs are made to live and work in their new environment, violating several basic legal provisions and standards, and to the impacts of these conditions on the lives of the women.

It is clear from our research that all of the WMWs are materially dependent on these jobs. Many of them had to go into debt to finance their migration, and their families back home rely on them to send money back to survive. This alone would be enough to create a stressful situation. However, in addition, WMWs also found that it is nearly impossible to meet these financial obligations if they did

not also agree to work overtime consistently – their base salary simply is not sufficient to ensure both their subsistence in Jordan and of their families in Bangladesh. This created additional pressure, along with endangering their physical well-being, as a result of constant overwork and lack of rest periods. In addition, the working conditions themselves were not only physically stressful but also characterised by a number of abusive behavioural patterns that further induced high levels of psychological stress as well. This was aggravated by workers' perceived lack of effective remedies and complaints mechanisms, which caused a feeling of being stuck in an abusive, but ultimately unavoidable situation.

Furthermore, many workers were facing living conditions that were falling short of basic health and safety requirements, and even where these were met, the resulting living situation was nevertheless not conducive to maintaining adequate levels of physical and psychological well-being. Factors of note in this context were the significantly lower temperatures in Jordan, when compared to Bangladesh, coupled with sometimes inefficient heating, as well as the general lack of privacy even in dorms which meet required standards, which makes it difficult for workers to rest and recuperate, and to maintain their own sense of dignity.

The ways in which their environment reacted to their situation also contributed to the challenges faced by the WMWs.

Being transplanted into a completely unfamiliar environment had a noticeable effect on how the women experienced their own identity. Whereas back home, like anyone else, they played multiple roles in society – that of daughter, mother, wife, worker, for example – and these roles were reflected to them through society, in their new environment they were suddenly only perceived through the prism of work. This fixed their identity in an unnatural and restrictive way solely on their role as workers and created additional barriers when faced with any problems, whether directly related to their work, to problems back home, etc. As a result, it is natural to expect that feelings of isolation and hopelessness will increase when one's identity is being constrained in such a way, especially by actors who are also in charge of one's material conditions (through setting wage levels, dictating working hours and conditions, and in charge of living arrangements).

In such a context, the importance of social ties cannot be exaggerated. As noted above, the women's social relationships were markedly different in Jordan from what they had experienced before back home. Friendships, although they do exist, have to be developed and maintained within a stressful working environment, and in close proximity to one's peers in the dormitories. The lack of privacy and inability to shield themselves from naturally occurring social conflicts put an additional strain on such friendships. When it comes to relationships with male workers, the diverging views of participants have already been pointed out. It is important to note, however, that even among those who did forge such relationships, there was an acute awareness of going against established social norms, which added to their overall stress.

Our study established that their migration experience has had both positive and negative effects on participants' psychological well-being. Its empowering aspects – such as increased autonomy and financial independence – have played a positive role in enhancing workers' subjective well-being, in addition to positively influencing their mental state and boosting their self-acceptance. Similarly, workers' social interactions with each other to some extent helped them mitigate some of the enormous challenges they were facing. In that sense, our research shows them not only as victims of their circumstances but also as active agents addressing their situation. Nonetheless, it is also

apparent that these positive factors were often overshadowed by the clear presence of virtually all potential risk factors for mental health that are commonly associated with work environments, including, as shown above, workers' consistently high workloads, widespread harassment in the form of verbal and physical abuse, inadequate health and safety procedures and practices in the workplace, and lack of reliable communication channels and grievance redress mechanisms in factories. Coupled with the experience of being isolated from their families back home, as well as having to negotiate widely varying social norms, these factors combined to negatively affect WMWs' psychological well-being. This was evident time and again in the detailed accounts of severe stress and anxiety that the women shared.

This study has created heightened concern around these issues – highlighting the extent of this stress, how widespread it is among workers, and its detrimental impacts – and therefore the urgency for action.

It is also important to point out that the key to addressing this problem lies not in pathologising the workers' experiences and essentially blaming them for their own situation by isolating their mental health from the environment in which they are placed. Instead, a more holistic understanding of psychological well-being is required which places a premium on addressing the root causes of their situation, which, as analysed by the workers themselves, lie in their exploitative working and living conditions.

We therefore must listen to and take seriously their experiences and address the underlying causes head-on. The women themselves were very outspoken and direct in identifying the changes they deem to be most urgent for improving their situation, and which are listed below.

### **Workers' Perception of 'Safe and Fair Migration' and their Recommendations**

Research participants on the whole agreed that their migration experience had been neither particularly safe or fair. When asked to award a rating for the overall safety and fairness of their migration, on a scale of 1-10, the average rating was 4/10. Most participants rated the economic aspects of their migration slightly higher than their work experience and the treatment they had received in factories, although they were critical of this as well (see below).

Their conception of safe and fair migration was very clear and concise. Participants mentioned that safe and fair migration should encompass the whole migration cycle, starting at the pre-departure stage, and cover their work and life experience in Jordan, as well as their treatment after their return to Bangladesh. In their view, the safety and fairness of migration would therefore only be ensured once the following conditions would be met:

- More equal access to information about the migration system in Bangladesh
- Low and equal fees for all migrant workers
- Anxiety-free travel to Jordan to take up employment
- Treatment with dignity at the workplace
- Good working and living conditions
- Fair wages, commensurate with their effort and workload, as well as with the cost of their migration – both monetary and social
- Possibility for regular rest and recuperation

- For their health concerns to be taken seriously and addressed swiftly, without incurring additional personal costs
- For their employers and families to understand and value their contributions and sacrifices
- Not to be judged by others for their migration decision (both before migrating and after return)

## RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the evidence gathered in the FGDs and individual interviews, and according to WMWs' own perception of the meaning of "safe and far migration", the following recommendations emerged:

Most of the recommendations in this category stem from a clear need to change the mindset of the industry from one driven by profit motives to one which recognizes that workers' welfare is central, not only from moral and ethical considerations, but also in the interest of the longer-term sustainability of production in the sector. Our research clearly showed that the current practice of stretching workers' capacity to the maximum is not sustainable and leads to an erosion of their physical and mental health. The current system is also putting undue pressure on supervisors and in-charges, who, in the absence of proper training, are ill-equipped to deal with it and end up passing on the pressures in abusive ways to the workers.

To address this,

### Employers should:

- Ensure that existing standards for working hours, break times, off days, are followed
- Improve their planning for better work flow management to avoid understaffing during times of high demand
- Conduct regular staff training at all levels to improve workplace communication and labour relations, as well as professional management practices
- Implement all terms of the CBA effectively – especially regarding the establishment of bipartite committees and worker management committees, to improve social dialogue in the factories
- Adopt a more holistic and proactive approach to workers' health that treats workers as human beings instead of commodities – including by providing good health insurance with more comprehensive coverage, and a supportive referral system. The practice of deducting pay for treatment must be ended.
- Take efforts to understand and identify the factors that affect workers' well-being, and take preventative measures
- Establish effective grievance redress mechanisms, including by building trust with workers and providing spaces where workers can share their issues without worries
- Review existing standards on living conditions for their appropriateness, and implement improvements where necessary, taking into account feedback from workers about their situation
- Provide a living wage to workers, and review the current in-kind system
- Provide accompaniment for new workers during the transit to Jordan

#### Buyers should:

- Review their relationship with factories, taking into account their production processes and capacities, and improving advice systems for sustainable production to ensure that they safeguard workers' rights
- Encourage their suppliers to improve their capacities on communication, respecting diversity and promoting effective social dialogue in the factories through training at all levels
- Commit more resources to ensure that production is in line with international standards and respecting the rights and dignity of workers, including with regard to facilitating the payment of living wages to workers
- Share good practices from other suppliers
- If suppliers are sub-contracting, hold them accountable to the same standards

#### The Government of Bangladesh should:

- Improve information dissemination about migration, especially in rural areas – through use of social media, establishing field offices and/or staffing Union Information Centers with staff knowledgeable about migration issues
- Review the current official recruitment process, and develop a standard bilateral agreement which includes a zero tolerance policy on any kind of worker abuse
- Support workers in filing cases against exploitative middle men
- Provide comprehensive pre-departure training, which includes audio-visual information about the destination country, working and living conditions, and access to consular assistance and other support services

#### The Government of Jordan should:

- Improve monitoring of factories
- Permit and promote full freedom of association for MWs, including by ratifying ILO Convention No. 87, to facilitate their effective self-organizing in each factory
- Raise the minimum wage, and work towards establishing a living wage for workers
- Hold factories accountable for their sub-contractors
- Improve security in industrial zones

#### The Trade Union should:

- Improve its outreach to MWs – through more frequent factory visits and meetings with workers and explain their role and services
- Provide effective services to MWs through hiring liaison staff with the same national background as MW groups

#### Embassies should:

- Adopt a gender-sensitive approach to MWs' issues
- Hire and train a dedicated female staff to be in charge of WMWs' issues
- Maintain a 24-hour hotline number
- Conduct regular factory visits including confidential interaction with workers

- Report back to their home government about rights violations

The media should:

- Provide an outlet for MWs' voices in their reporting
- Share positive migration experiences to help combat stigma
- Portray the hard work and positive contributions of MWs to the country and their families



