



WOW // Work and
Opportunities
for Women

The Double Day

Exploring unpaid work and care for female garment workers in Bangladesh

**The Work and Opportunities for Women (WOW)
Programme in partnership with Primark**

July 2020

1. Executive Summary

Women have been central to the Bangladesh garment workforce over recent decades, using the opportunity to financially support their families.

However, many women are still expected to undertake most household chores and childcare. They often struggle to shoulder both long hours at work and unpaid work and care responsibilities. Unpaid work and care refers to unpaid time spent on activities within a household for its members including care of persons, housework and voluntary community work.

The WOW programme, in partnership with Primark, visited garment workers in communities and factories in Bangladesh in 2019. WOW's research found that the women they interviewed are working a "double day", spending an average of 7 hours on unpaid work, including child care and domestic work, in addition to their shift in the garment factory. The men interviewed spent considerably less time, with up to 2.5 hours spent on unpaid work and care activities. WOW also found that where men do help their wives, they often face backlash from their community.

When working at the factory, women reported constantly worrying about their children and thinking about the tasks they need to complete when they return home. Research found that women struggle with fatigue and health problems as a result of the number of hours they work on paid and unpaid work and care. Women said that due to work absences, they lose their good reputation at work and risk losing their job or missing out on promotions to better positions. Factory management observed that women have significant mental load and as a result struggle to focus at work.

Whilst studies are increasingly drawing links between employee wellbeing, productivity and business performance, many companies still see it as risky to invest in supporting their workforce to balance the unpaid work and care load for future business benefits. Research found that balancing workload, presenteeism and absenteeism are all issues for women that result from excessive unpaid work and care and also negatively affect garment factories.

Limited support services are available for women workers and they mainly rely on family to take care of their children. Some larger factories provide other benefits such as financial support for schooling and grocery cards on credit. These have had positive impact on workers.

To tackle the unequal burden of unpaid work and care we need to recognise, reduce, and redistribute the care load for women. A number of actors have an important role to play including government, men and boys, and the private sector.

Key opportunities exist for brands to recognise unpaid work and care through:

- Raising unpaid work and care as an issue in factories and sharing learning with suppliers;
- Co-investing in initiatives at factory-level to support women; and
- Collaborating with other brands and exploring industry-wide initiatives that address unpaid work and care issues.

The recommendations below identify specific opportunities for garment brands and buyers and their suppliers to support women.

Recognise

- Consider adopting policies that recognise women's disproportionate unpaid care burden such as providing flexible attendance and leave
- Reduce targets for pregnant women and breastfeeding mothers
- Provide specific days for workers to attend doctor's appointments
- Introduce a relief team in factories when workers are absent
- Review factory production planning to give increased notice of overtime

Reduce

- Introduce factory cards where employees can buy groceries on credit from grocery shops on factory premises
- Introduce digital wage payment for workers
- Provide healthcare clinics within factory infirmaries and partner with local healthcare providers to run clinics in communities where workers live
- Support improved living conditions for workers where women and men can undertake cooking, cleaning and caring in a safe dignified space.

Redistribute

- Hold workshops with men to support more gender equitable attitudes and encourage greater task-sharing between men and women
- Provide access to affordable and quality childcare
- Provide access to affordable and quality schooling for workers' children

This report was prepared by WOW in partnership with Primark. WOW is the UK Government's flagship women's economic empowerment programme. The objective of WOW is that women have access to improved economic opportunities through business interventions in supply chains and economic development programmes. The five-year programme aims to enhance the economic empowerment of 300,000 women working in global value chains. It will achieve this goal by supporting businesses, organisations and programmes that are ready and willing to act on women's economic empowerment; enabling players across the supply chain ecosystem to drive change; and influencing the UK and global agenda on women's economic empowerment.

WOW is delivered by a consortium of global experts at the cutting edge of women's economic empowerment research, programme design, and delivery – including PwC, BSR, CARE International, the University of Manchester, and Social Development Direct.

Introduction

Increasing evidence suggests that addressing the unequal and heavy share of unpaid work and care done by women globally can increase their participation in paid work and education, their leisure time, health, and freedom. It can also positively impact productivity and employee engagement, supply chain reliability, attraction and retention of employees and workforce performance and engagement.¹

This briefing paper provides insights into the burden of unequal unpaid work and care for women working in the garment industry in Bangladesh. It presents an overview of some of the current research on unpaid care in the garment sector and shares findings from research with garment workers in Bangladesh in 2019.

Unpaid work and care is an important asset to every country's economy, providing the stability and wellbeing of individuals and their families. This may be provided by households, communities, the market or the state. Unpaid work and care can be defined as "all unpaid services provided within a household for its members, including care of persons, housework and voluntary community work. These activities are considered work, because theoretically one could pay a third person to perform them."² Activities include cooking, cleaning, washing, shopping, fetching water or firewood, caring for children, elderly and ill people. Whilst crucial to the economy, unpaid work and care is not viewed as a market related activity that counts towards GDP, even if it supports current and future generations of workers.³

It is also a significant barrier to women's engagement in economic activity and economic empowerment since women shoulder the majority of it.

Globally, women spend over three times more time doing unpaid work and care than men. In Asia and the Pacific this rises to over four times with men spending the lowest share of unpaid care work of all regions.⁴ Socially prescribed roles in many countries mean unpaid work and care is viewed as women's responsibility and thus undermines their opportunities to engage in the labour force, or where women do engage in paid activities, creates a 'double burden' of work for them.⁵ This unpaid work and care is largely invisible, often not viewed as work, although this perspective is increasingly critiqued by economists taking a gender perspective.⁶ Unpaid work and care has been widely recognised by governments and the United Nations (UN) as a global priority. The UN Sustainable Development Goal 5 target on unpaid work and care highlights the importance of both public and private investments including the provision of public services, infrastructure and social protection policies and the promotion of shared responsibility within the household and the family as nationally appropriate.⁷ Growing evidence on the issue has resulted in some companies taking practical steps to address unpaid work and care in their value chain such as supportive workplace policies.

¹ Oxfam, Unilever, 2019, Business briefing on Unpaid Care and Domestic Work: Why unpaid care by women and girls matters to business and how companies can address it

² https://www.oecd.org/dev/development-gender/Unpaid_care_work.pdf

³ Elson, D. 1995. Male Bias in the Development Process

⁴ https://www.ilo.org/asia/media-centre/news/WCMS_633284/lang--en/index.htm

⁵ Folbre, N. 1994. Who Pays for the Kids?: Gender and the Structures of Constraint

⁶ Himmelwite, S. 2002. Making Visible the Hidden Economy: The Case for Gender-Impact Analysis of Economic Policy

⁷ <https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/sdg5>

Experts focussed on unpaid work and care⁸ have developed the 3R framework summarising key steps needed by governments, businesses, and civil society organisations to tackle the unequal burden of unpaid work and care through:

Recognising the time that is spent on unpaid work and care, its value, and improving data and information on the scope of unpaid work and care and its distribution within households.

Reducing the number of hours spent on unpaid work and care by improving access to time-saving technologies and infrastructure.

Redistributing unpaid work and care equitably amongst women, men, households and communities, with the government and the private sector also playing a greater role.



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⁸ Elson, 2017. Recognize, Reduce and Redistribute Unpaid Care Work: How to Close the Gender Gap

Unpaid care work of female garment workers: a review of the literature

Women form a significant proportion of the workforce in Bangladesh. Over the past 30 years, work in garment factories has provided many women with income, particularly from rural areas despite Bangladesh having deeply entrenched gender norms shaped by patriarchy and the subordinate role of women.⁹ Traditionally women are confined to the private sphere of the home where they execute unpaid care work, whereas men have the role of breadwinner in the public sphere. Paid work in garments has provided increased economic opportunities for women workers. However, studies have mixed conclusions regarding to what extent jobs in the sector support women's empowerment.

Recent decades have seen a declining proportion of women employed in Bangladeshi garments relative to men resulting in part from a change in the balance of export production from woven (labour intensive) to knitted garments (more mechanised).¹⁰ Over the same period the garment export sector has expanded significantly, leading to an absolute increase in the number of workers. Despite the changing gender ratio, the total number of women workers employed has increased. It is now estimated that the number of garment workers has reached 4 million, 60% of whom are female.¹¹

Whilst work in garment factories continues to provide economic opportunities for increasing numbers of women in Bangladesh, working hours tend to be long and women often struggle to balance their paid and unpaid work, not always returning to the garment sector after having children.

Understanding how unpaid work and care impacts female garment workers and businesses in Bangladesh is critical to the sector's sustainability. Whilst traditionally women working in garments may have worked for several years before getting married and having children, it has now become more acceptable for women to continue working in garments after having children, bringing new challenges to the sector with unpaid work and care. Many women choose to leave their children in the village when working in garment factories as they do not have the support or services to care for their children in Dhaka.¹² One study finds that the increasing number of female migrants taking up garment factory work has had significant negative impact on their children left in the village due to being away from parents.¹³

Unpaid work and care is one area of women's empowerment where limited evidence exists on the disproportionate time spent by women and the ensuing impact on paid work and business. Studies outside of garments highlight that men do much less unpaid work and care than women which limits women's economic productivity and access to markets.¹⁴ The Dhaka low Income area GeNder, Inclusion, and poverTY (DIGNITY) survey analyses data from 1,300 urban households in low-income areas of Dhaka City and shows that on average:

- Women spend more than 5 hours per day on childcare and domestic work
- Men spend less than 30 minutes per day on the same activities.

This was found to impact significantly on their ability to engage in the labour force.¹⁵ The division of labour is expected to be similar for garment workers and their families.

⁹ Kabeer (2000) op. cit. ; Kabeer and Mahmud (2004) op. cit.

¹⁰ Paul-Majumder, Begum, 2000

¹¹ Staritz, 2011

¹² Huq, 2013

¹³ Naved et al, 2011

¹⁴ <http://powerproject.actionaid.org>

¹⁵ Hill, R., Kotikula, A., & Raza, W.A., 2019

A recent study by Griffith University found that garment workers' health problems are exacerbated by the double burden of unpaid work and care. Health problems included back and joint pain, chronic headaches and fatigue, eye pain, and breathing difficulties.¹⁶ All female garment workers interviewed said that although the factory work gave them the opportunity to earn money, it meant that their workload doubled as they still need to do all the household work. They stated that "they do not receive enough support and care from their husbands...they feel pressure to do all the household work to make their husbands happy".

Studies highlight a significant lack of good quality, affordable childcare and maternity leave provision in garments despite the benefits these bring. Evidence shows that access to reliable, affordable and good-quality childcare enables women's access to more and better jobs, improves children's development outcomes, and improves business and economic growth.¹⁷

Whilst the Bangladesh Labour Act requires businesses with more than 40 female employees to offer childcare options to their employees' children under the age of six in garment factories, uptake is generally low with workers preferring to leave children in the care of relatives. Garment factories often view factory-based childcare as simply a matter of compliance and so the quality of childcare is often substandard.¹⁸ A recent study by the Fair Labour Association found that maternity compliance in Bangladesh factories is low with most women workers surveyed not knowing their legal rights for paid maternity leave and many factories not adhering to national legal requirements for paid maternity leave or on-site childcare facilities.¹⁹



Photo © BSR

¹⁶ Akhter et al, 2019. Sewing shirts with injured fingers and tears: exploring the experience of female garment workers' health problems in Bangladesh

¹⁷ IFC, 2019. Tackling Childcare: The business benefits and challenges of employer-supported childcare in Bangladesh

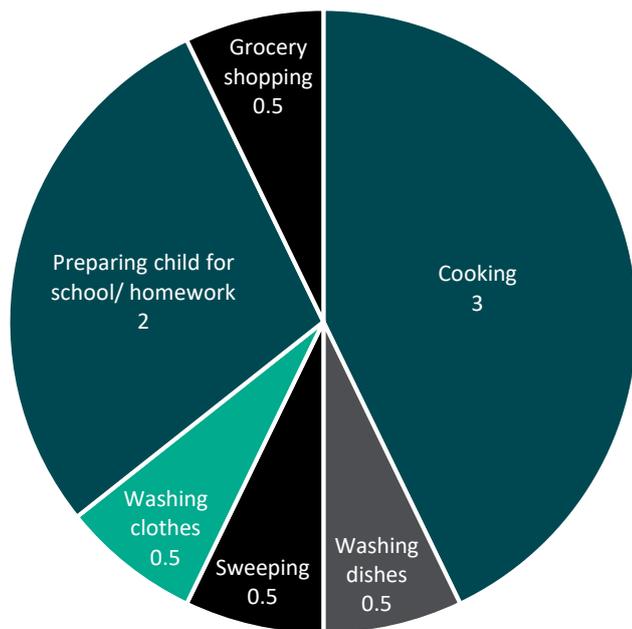
¹⁸ UNICEF, 2015

¹⁹ https://www.just-style.com/news/bangladesh-maternity-compliance-low-in-rmg-sector_id137360.aspx

Women worker’s ‘double day’ in Bangladesh garments: findings from research

Research with 112 garment workers based in Dhaka in November 2019²⁰ found that on an average day, in addition to women’s shift working in garment factories, they are spending almost as long, an average of 7 hours, on unpaid work and care for the household. Activities include cooking, washing clothes, cleaning the home, washing dishes, grocery shopping, and caring for children. Figure 1 below provides an average breakdown of unpaid work and care undertaken by a woman garment worker.

Figure 1: Average breakdown of hours of unpaid work and care done by a woman garment worker



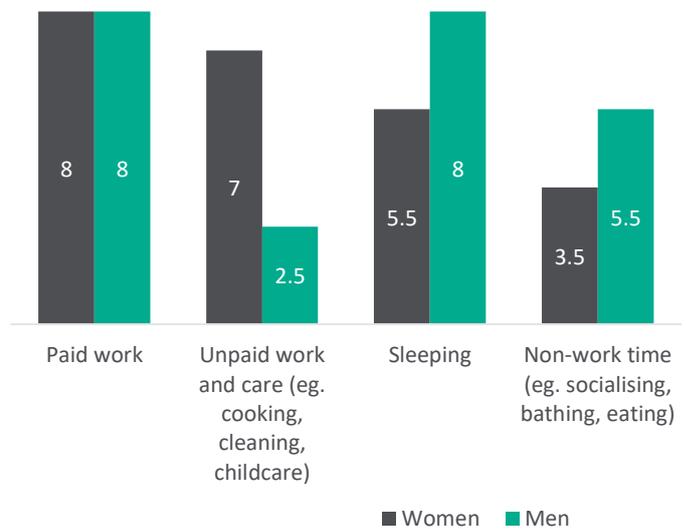
Source: Data from time use exercises with male and female workers during research in Dhaka, 2019

²⁰ See Appendix 1 for further information on research conducted
²¹ Unpaid work and care tasks undertaken by men are not daily tasks and so the average number of hours done by men is likely to be less than 2.5 hours since, for example, they do not shop for groceries every day.

The majority of women interviewed live with their husband and sometimes children. A few women live in joint families where their mother/(in-law) assists with childcare. 91% of married male workers interviewed said that wives do most of the care and household work. Husbands sometimes help with unpaid work and care however in most cases it is limited to occasionally doing the grocery shopping or watching the children at home. With little resource or support available to help women with unpaid work and care, they shoulder the majority regardless of whether they undertake paid work or not.

Male garment workers, whilst working a shift at the factory, spend up to 2.5 hours on unpaid work and care.²¹ Figure 2 below shows the average number of hours by activity in a 24-hour period for both women and men garment workers interviewed.

Figure 2: Average number of hours by activity in a 24-hour period for men and women²²



Source: Data from time use exercises with male and female workers during research in Dhaka, 2019

²² Data obtained from Focus Group Discussions using adapted Rapid Care Analysis time use exercises. These are indicative figures based on women and men’s input and discussions. Accurate time use particularly inclusion of simultaneous activities is challenging to measure.

Where men do help their wives with unpaid work and care, this runs counter to prevailing gender norms and they report being met with backlash from their community. Both male and female workers interviewed said men are considered bad husbands, and women bad wives if a husband helps his wife with household chores. One male garment worker explained how *“since I help my wife, my neighbour commented that I am a girly man because I am doing roles that are supposed to be done by women”*. However, this doesn’t seem to pose an impossible barrier for men determined to help their wives - the same man said, *“but I don’t care because I must help my wife”*.

Global evidence indicates that when more income is put into the hands of women, child nutrition, health and education improve.²³ However, these gains are attained at a cost of the double burden to women themselves.

In some countries, new data has provided evidence on ways in which equality in caregiving is not only beneficial for women’s empowerment and children’s well-being but also for men themselves. Research shows that involved fathers feel more emotionally connected to their partners and to their children and that they live happier, longer lives.²⁴

Whilst women working full-time is challenging traditional social norms, other norms remain embedded. Women are working a double day, expected to undertake most of the household chores and child care in addition to their factory work and struggle to balance the two. One woman explained how she struggles - *“I find it very difficult to arrive at work on time due to all the different household chores I need to complete before attending the factory”*.



Photo © CARE

²³ World Development Report 2012: Gender Equality and Development

²⁴ See State of the World’s Fathers available at <https://sowf.men-care.org>

2. Impact of the double burden on women

“I feel restless, hoping my child is not lost. Has he been taken by child traffickers? Maybe bad news is on the way”

Female garment worker

Garment work relies on shift work starting and finishing at certain times and achieving specific targets. Little flexibility is available which disproportionately impacts women as they manage their numerous daily responsibilities. As women endeavour to juggle both their paid and unpaid work, it evidently has an adverse impact on their wellbeing, productivity and progression in the workplace.

Mental load and workplace presenteeism

Research found that when women are at work, they are constantly worrying about their children or stressing about all the jobs they have to do when they get home. As a result, many women cannot concentrate properly whilst working.

One woman said *“I have a 2-year-old child who is staying in the village. I am physically here but mentally I am in the village”*. Another woman with a 7-year-old child she leaves at home in Dhaka when she is working said *“I always think of whether my son has been abducted, if he’s being taken care of properly or if he’s hanging out with the wrong crowd”*.

This finding supports a recent study across different industries in 14 countries which found that the mental load – “the task of orchestration and project management” of unpaid work and care, falls disproportionately to women and negatively impacts their wellbeing.²⁵

Many women highlighted struggling to arrive at work on time as a result of their unpaid work and care as a key issue, meaning they are sometimes late to work and miss out on their monthly attendance bonus. Women explained that when they lose their bonus, they feel extremely frustrated and find it difficult to concentrate at work and meet targets.

Women who are breastfeeding said that whilst they are provided time to breastfeed their child during working hours, it does not reduce their work pressure as they must still meet the same targets as other workers and as a result, they are anxious and stressed about taking breaks to feed their child. Women highlighted similar issues for pregnant women working in garments.

²⁵ <https://www.bcg.com/en-gb/publications/2019/lightening-mental-load-holds-women-back.aspx>

The findings on women's mental load and workplace presenteeism were also reiterated when considering the impact of unpaid work and care on business, presented in the following section.

Lack of time, fatigue and health problems

WOW research found that women must undertake many household chores such as cleaning and cooking lunch before they leave for work in the morning. Women said chores take longer since they share cooking stoves and bathrooms between many families. Some wake up as early as four o'clock in the morning in order to complete their chores and as a result are very tired from lack of sleep and constantly working. Some women said they are so tired they struggle to stay awake whilst working and don't have time to eat in the morning meaning they feel weak at work.

Despite being time poor, WOW research found that women strongly value the overtime work given by some factories since it provides them with much-needed extra income on top of their low salaries, the optimum being 7-10 days of overtime per month. When there is overtime, women are given short notice, usually informed in the morning, giving them little time to organise any childcare needed and to inform their husbands.

Women reported that they sometimes spend a long time queuing to get their salary from their bank account every month, often to find the money at the cash machine has run out. This cuts into their time needed to undertake other chores and their limited personal time.

Many women said they fall ill frequently and sometimes find it difficult to stand or sit in the same position at work. Whilst some medical facilities are available onsite, women said that they struggle to see a doctor when they need to as they cannot get a doctor's appointment on their one day off.

Progression at work

In addition to struggling to attend work on time, women explained how sometimes they are unable to come to work due to children being ill, family issues, too much household work at home or unexpected visitors. Women stated how increased absence means they lose their reputation and so risk losing their job or lose out on opportunities to progress to better positions within the factory. A number of women highlighted that whilst they joined the factory at the same time as many men, the men have been promoted and they have stayed in the same position.

3. Impact of unpaid care and work on business

Global studies are increasingly drawing links between employee wellbeing, productivity and business performance.²⁶

However, many companies still consider the risks associated with investing to support their workforce in balancing the unpaid work and care load to secure potential future business benefits.

Interviews with factory management found that whilst the majority considered that women were used to balancing their relevant work and home responsibilities, others recognised the amount of unpaid work and care female garment workers undertake and the possible impact of this on women themselves and for the factory.

Factories are working to improve the working environment for employees in some areas however they are yet to recognise an opportunity to provide specific support on unpaid work and care.

Balancing workload and workplace presenteeism

WOW's research indicates that, as well as having a negative effect on women themselves, women's workload and presenteeism also had an adverse effect on business.

Interviews with management suggested that when women leave their factory jobs, they usually provide the excuse that their husband will not allow them to continue working at the factory. However, some managers highlighted they believe the real reason is often because they are unable to manage their family and factory work, struggling to balance the two. Women mentioned that they often feel discouraged to take leave which could impact on their ability to manage paid work and unpaid work and care. Some managers also observed that women have significant mental load and if they have any problems with their family, they often cannot focus at work which impacts on their factory work.

²⁶ Krekel et al, 2019

Absenteeism/ unauthorised leave

Whilst factory management indicated that absentee rates are as expected at around 5%, one manager estimated that about 65% of absences are unauthorised and thus difficult to forecast, making resourcing more challenging.

Some women highlighted that it was difficult to get permission for leave from work for more than three days meaning they sometimes have no choice but to take unauthorised leave when family issues come up or they need to travel back to the village.

Other studies in garment factories have shown that women often have to take time off to care for sick children or dependent relatives. They found that when suppliers put in a relief team to replace women when they are absent, women felt less stressed, disruption to lines reduced and productivity increased, more than covering the total cost of the relief team.²⁷



Photo © Jorja Currington / CARE

²⁷ See Nike Equitable Manufacturing initiative in Barrientos, S. 2019. Gender and Work in Global Value Chains: Capturing the Gains?

4. Current support services available

Resources and services available to support garment workers are key to helping balance unpaid work and care for women. In garments, current support is limited.

Most women rely on immediate family back in their home village to take care of their children. If women do decide to bring their children to Dhaka, they usually have three options: bring their mother/ mother-in-law to help with childcare; leave them with older siblings in Dhaka; or leave them alone at home in Dhaka if they consider them old enough. No women interviewed said they pay for help with household or care work at home. Two women said they used factory provided childcare, one who paid and one who did not.

WOW found that some communities have childcare centres although the cost often deters women from using them. All factories are required to provide childcare for children under six however these are not always properly functioning. For example, in one factory the designated childcare room was used for storage. Where they do exist, uptake is limited. Some women don't know about the childcare centre at the factory whilst others expressed anxiety about bringing their children to the factory childcare in case of a fire or other incident.

Women reported that some larger factories provide additional benefits for employees. These include quality childcare at the factory, financial support or scholarships for garment workers' children to attend primary and secondary school, a dairy food allowance for children up to three, and an Oracle card where employees can buy groceries on credit from the grocery shop on factory premises. Initiatives like these have the potential for significant positive impact and reduce stress related to unpaid work and care.

5. Business opportunities to recognise, reduce and redistribute unpaid work and care

The 3R framework aimed at tackling the unequal burden of unpaid work and care recommends recognising, reducing, and redistributing the care load for women. A number of actors have an important role to play in this including government, men and boys, and the private sector.

Key opportunities exist for brands across the 3R framework to recognise unpaid work and care through:

- Raising unpaid work and care as an issue in factories and sharing learning with suppliers;
- Co-investing in initiatives at factory-level to support women; and
- Collaborating with other brands and exploring industry-wide initiatives that address unpaid work and care issues.

The recommendations below identify specific opportunities for garment brands and suppliers to support women, based on discussions with women in communities and factories in Dhaka.

Recognise unpaid work and care

It is important for brands and suppliers to understand the challenges women garment workers face in balancing paid work and unpaid work and care. They have a key role to play in recognising these challenges through provision of specific support that women need to improve their wellbeing.

Existing structures such as Worker Participation Committees and garment worker unions can be useful for both brands and suppliers in understanding the challenges women face at work. The use of time-use exercises can be an effective tool to identify such issues. However, these structures differ by factory and union and so the value of each should be considered on an individual basis.

Flexible attendance and leave: Women struggle to attend work on time and sometimes miss work due to their heavy burden of unpaid work and care. Factories could consider adopting policies that recognise women's unpaid care burden, making it easier for them to manage it without losing out on bonuses or opportunities for career progression.

These could include:

- Considering slightly later start times for garment workers to enable women to manage their unpaid work and care responsibilities better.
- Introducing a 1-step leave system so women can easily request and access unpaid and sick leave when they need it. Bangladeshi law stipulates that workers must receive 10 days of paid holiday plus a further 11 days leave for the Eid festival and up to 14 days of sick leave however a study by War on Want²⁸ showed that workers are granted much less than this and that many employers pressure workers into working through illness. Annual and sick leave policies should provide clear provisions for workers to take extended leave of more than a few days when necessary and should be made clear to supervisors and workers.
- Providing personal and compassionate leave allowances to workers. This is an allowance of leave days that workers can take in the case of family crises or problems.

Introducing these more flexible and accessible forms of leave could significantly reduce unauthorised absences, supporting easier production planning and improving line efficiency.

Provision for pregnant women and breastfeeding mothers:

Women who are pregnant and breastfeeding often have the same targets as other workers and so feel anxious about taking breaks to rest or feed their child during working hours. Providing easy access to breaks within adequate facilities is important to meeting their needs. Reducing targets for pregnant women and breastfeeding mothers would enable them to have enough time to look after their health and feed their child without worrying about missing targets.

Health appointments: Women struggle to attend doctor's appointments when they fall ill as they cannot get an appointment on their day off on Friday. Factories could provide specific days off for workers to visit the doctor. Allowing specific days per month for workers to attend doctor's appointments could improve worker's wellbeing and productivity and can be implemented without posing challenges to production.

Relief team: Women often take time off work to care for sick children or dependent relatives. Factories could consider putting in place a relief team which would replace workers when they were absent, relieving stress on workers whilst improving productivity.

Overtime and production planning: Whilst extremely valued by garment workers, the last-minute nature of overtime notice in factories means women struggle to juggle their unpaid work and care responsibilities. Timely factory review of production planning in order for overtime to be announced at least a day in advance would mean women are able to better manage their paid work with their unpaid work and care.

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[https://waronwant.org/sites/default/files/ignoring%20the%20Law%20-](https://waronwant.org/sites/default/files/ignoring%20the%20Law%20-%20Labour%20Rights%20Violations%20and%20the%20Bangladeshi%20Garment%20Industry.pdf)

<https://waronwant.org/sites/default/files/ignoring%20the%20Law%20-%20Labour%20Rights%20Violations%20and%20the%20Bangladeshi%20Garment%20Industry.pdf>

Reduce unpaid work and care

Improving access to time-saving infrastructure is key to reducing the amount of time spent on unpaid work and care. This could include:

Grocery credit system: Women often do grocery shopping after work and sometimes have to take loans or credit in different shops in order to buy things if finances are tight. Some factories provide an 'Oracle card' where employees can buy groceries on credit from the grocery shop on factory premises. In addition to reducing time spent on grocery shopping, this could improve nutrition and budgeting with access to credit and more reliable documentation of spending.

Digital wages: Women reported time spent queuing to get their salary out of their bank account as a key issue as money often gets depleted once it's their turn and thus cuts into their personal time. 52% of women said their salary is paid into a bank account rather than being paid cash or via mobile, 20% of whom said it's paid into their husband's account, making it even more difficult to access their money. A change to digital payment of wages has the potential to reduce time spent on receiving salaries via bank transfer and can also improve women's economic empowerment, helping them to send, save and make payments securely through their mobile.

Healthcare facilities: Women struggle to attend doctor's appointments when they fall ill as they cannot get an appointment on their day off on Friday. Solutions for businesses include:

- Providing regular healthcare clinics within factory infirmaries. While factory infirmary staff are limited in the healthcare services they can provide, infirmary spaces can be used to host regular clinics staffed by medical professionals from local medical practices and health service providers such as NGOs. Appointments are then made available to workers during working hours and break times.
- Partnering with local healthcare providers to run regular healthcare clinics during the factory off-day in the communities where the majority of workers live. Whilst not all workers live in the same areas, there are commonly 'feeder' communities to specific factories where healthcare services can be organised to be accessible during the off-day of that factory. NGOs and health service providers can help to identify communities and spaces for providing clinics.

Living conditions: Women reported that household chores take longer since they share cooking stoves and bathrooms between many families within their accommodation meaning they must wake up earlier and are consequently very tired. Opportunities exist for businesses to understand the issues workers are facing with their accommodation and the ensuing impact this is having on their factory work. Business solutions could include purchasing extra cooking stoves via wholesale for workers to buy as a group at a reduced price, or support direct engagement with landlords through community committees to promote the improvement of the quality and quantity of cooking and sanitation facilities for workers.

Redistribute unpaid work and care

Working to encourage redistribution of unpaid work and care equitably amongst households, communities, companies, and the government is crucial to reducing the time women spend on unpaid work and care. This could include:

Household task sharing: Whilst a lower number of married women (28%) said they were not happy with the division of household tasks, likely influenced by social norms designating these chores to the women's sphere, a much higher ratio (60%) said that if they received help from their husbands or another person, it would help them balance their paid work and unpaid work and care. This indicates that women are not content with the division of household tasks. Women also expressed that since they usually take absence if their child is ill, they would appreciate if their husbands sometimes took absence to look after the child so they were not always the ones missing work. Workshops with men and broader behaviour change communication campaigns in workplaces aimed at supporting more gender equitable attitudes and demonstrating the benefits of sharing care work with women could help to encourage greater task-sharing between men and women.

Access to quality childcare: Limited access to affordable and quality childcare means many women choose to leave their children in the village and rely on family to care for them. Access to quality childcare near to women's residence and workplace would improve women's ability to attend work on time, enable women to focus on their factory work without worrying about their children and has the potential to improve factory productivity through a more engaged workforce. Factories should provide quality childcare options within the factory but also partner with local childcare providers in workers' communities, an option often preferred by women.

Access to quality schooling: Limited access to affordable and quality schooling means many women choose to educate their children in the village and rely on family to look after them. Some factories provide the opportunity for workers' children to be educated in Dhaka through scholarships or financial support for education. This provision could have positive impact on workers' families and on production.

6. Conclusion

Whilst garment work has provided increased economic opportunities for women in Bangladesh, women garment workers are now working a double day, spending just as long completing unpaid work and care for the household as their paid work at the factory.

Limited resource and services to support women's unpaid work and care mean they bear the brunt of it. WOW research has found this impacts adversely on women's wellbeing, productivity and progression. Studies have increasingly linked employee wellbeing, productivity and business performance and this research highlights the possible impact of unpaid work and care on garment factories.

Whilst many factories are improving working environments for garment workers, there is significant opportunity in the industry to collaborate on realising key enablers to recognise, reduce and redistribute the unequal burden of unpaid work and care for women garment workers.



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Appendix 1: Research Methodology

Research took place in two communities and two factories in Dhaka in November 2019 over five days. It used a mixed-methods research design conducting:

- Focus group discussions using adapted exercises from the Rapid Care Analysis (RCA)²⁹
- Individual survey interviews with both men and women garment workers
- Individual interviews with factory management

The table below provides an overview of participants that data was collected from.

Tool piloted	Number of participants
Semi-structured interviews (management)	8
One on one Interviews/ surveys with female garment workers	25
One on one Interviews/ surveys with male garment workers	10
Focus Group Discussions adapted from RCA – women	38
Focus Group Discussions adapted from RCA – men	39
Total	120

Participants were selected for Focus Group Discussions and individual interviews by researchers to include both men and women either working in garments or who are family members of garment workers.

Women participants selected were aged between 22 and 33 years and male participants, between 22 and 45 years, both with a mixture of service length in garments, and some who had children, some without children.

Management interview participants reflected a range of individuals including chief operating officers, HR & compliance managers, welfare officers, and production managers. Triangulation of data involved discussing unpaid work and care with different groups based on gender, management and worker status. This research is a purposive sample as part of a case study, providing snap shot insights into unpaid work and care for female garment workers. It is illustrative of the issues faced by women garment workers in Bangladesh however it is not a statistically representative sample and further research is recommended.

²⁹ <https://oxfamlibrary.openrepository.com/bitstream/handle/10>

[546/620147/ml-rapid-care-analysis-toolbox-exercises-151116-en.pdf?sequence=2](https://oxfamlibrary.openrepository.com/bitstream/handle/10/546/620147/ml-rapid-care-analysis-toolbox-exercises-151116-en.pdf?sequence=2)

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