

Invisible Scars: Female Ready-made Garment Workers' Gendered Exploitation

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This paper provides a first-hand account of the reasons underpinning the exploitation of Ready-Made Garments (RMG) workers in Bangalore by integrating their lived experiences at work and beyond with the supply chain, dysfunctional labor laws and lack of trade union mobilization. These rural Indian women migrant workers discover that it is no better than the past of poverty and caste-oppression. Their gendered experience is exacerbated by sexual and verbal abuse in an industry in which there is either extreme work pressure or no work at all, the pandemic has further worsened their poverty. Their agency is muzzled and dissent is silenced and the state, civil society trade unions and RMG exporters have singularly and cumulatively failed the woman RMG worker in Bangalore.

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Introduction

This empirical paper provides an integrated narrative of many nameless and faceless women workers in the ready-made garments industry in Bangalore. It is an intensive study of the ready-made garments (RMG) workers in their natural work setting. The extrinsic and intrinsic causes that exploit her through widespread harassment at work, intensify her mental, physical, and economic burdens at home is brought out by the study. The focus area of study is Bangalore a major hub of the RMG industry, which is a significant contributor to India's economy. The units we studied and analyzed were full production cycle organizations employing more than 500 workers. The study has two primary research objectives.

1. This quantitative and qualitative study aims to understand the cumulative impact of the combined interplay of economic, socio-cultural, legal, and political factors on the RMG women workers in Bangalore. We also study the nature of supervisory control in the RMG industry and how it contributes to the marginalization of women workers

2. This study assesses the impact of various labor laws, collective mobilization, and social audits on the RMG women workers and to examine whether the trade union mobilization of women RMG workers was successful or not.

The Context

The RMG industry acts as a driver of economic growth in India within the basket of textiles India produces. India is a preferred destination because of cheap labor and decent manufacturing infrastructure. Bangalore is a production export hub of several RMG factories.

Bangalore's RMG factories have been classified into structured and unstructured production units for analytical convenience. Structured factories are those units that had a proper factory working time and proper production schedule and mostly possess the bulk of the critical processes of the garment production chain. Most importantly, there is some semblance of a fixed-term employment contract. Large well-known manufacturing firms transact directly with overseas brands. They produce for Europe, USA etc. and multiple market segments in India and subcontract production to other firms. Structured firms also encompass subcontractor firms manufacturing for them or exporting directly to overseas buyers. They also produce for the domestic market for large brands exclusively for the retail buyers.

The unstructured garment production-units are, generally scattered with

low or poor amenities for workers. They are widespread and exposed to various inequities associated with the employment of women workers wherein production is often put out to small factories, homes, and sheds. The infrastructure and technology are suboptimal comprising about 100-250 sewing machines, and the production process is very labor intensive. Workers in these units work for 12-14 hours a day with hardly any regulatory controls. They produce part or whole of the readymade garments for the larger structured RMG factories or cater to the local market.

The competitive RMG industry in Bangalore does not consider the interests of women workers because they are not at the center of the value chain owing to the business model adopted by the owners of the garment factories. The tightly structured value chain of fast-fashion (Thomas, 2019) results in work intensification. Secondly; globally, the RMG industry is capital intensive (Thomas & Johny, 2018), and this business model is rapidly changing to customer demand. It is an industry dependent on seasons and clothing trends. The global apparel market is somewhat fashion specific, seasonal, specific in its timing and situation. Correspondingly, the Indian-RMG industry is a buyer-driven commodity chain. Buyers seek cost savings and are always prospecting for countries having more significant labor arbitrage advantages. The corona pandemic coerced the buyers to possess a huge piled up inventory because of the collapse of demand (Tashjian, 2020) both on the online and offline sales make her or him reluctant

to offer advance concession in credit or payment terms to suppliers in developing countries. A combination of extraneous factors such as order cancellation and invocation of force-majeure results in financial-insolvency of the structured and unstructured firms.

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This high-volume business has wafer-thin margins and short order lead-times causing unpredictable cost-escalations. The periodicity of payment of wages to workers alternates between, compliance by coerces big primary exporting factories to neglect by smaller subcontractor supplier firms and unstructured-factories, wherein wage theft (ILO, 2015 :78) and theft of social security benefits comprising unauthorized employer's wage and benefit deductions are widely prevalent. Worker costs are a minuscule of the overall cost of the garment production costs.

As Mezzadri (2012: 52) speaks the variability of payments within production lines "varied tremendously, particularly from firm to firm and based on experience". "Primary export units generally, offer higher wages. In all primary and secondary units, women workers are classified and paid based on their skill and experience and are paid lesser wages than men. (ILO Report, 2018). Furthermore, paid either 'poverty wages'

(Jenkins, 2013) or dependent on unreliable 'piece-rate pay (Jenkins, 2013; Anner, 2019), these workers become indebted by borrowing at usurious rates from money lenders or their subcontractors.

Literature Review

The literature underpins the complex interlinkages between unstructured and structured RMG production units and the diversity of patterns of labor recruitment and employment variability in manufacturing patterns and exports within and across garment hubs in India. The RMG woman worker in the factory is foregrounded in an unequal gender regime (Acker, 1992; 1994) of Indian patriarchy. She emerges and dissolves in the intersectional never-ending whirlpool of poverty and caste discrimination, physical, emotional and sexual abuse. Her subsistence and survival predate identification of her rights as a woman. She goes on seamlessly without thought about her role cooking, cleaning, and working disregarding her being. Marginalization as a concept is laid out first to guide the discussion of this paper. Her marginalization is created by the pressure exerted by the unpredictable global supply chain on the manufacturer and the exploitation caused by intensive labor process with no safeguards and authoritarian supervision.

1. Marginalization as an Unrelenting Process & Reality

The progressive material and emotional marginalization of women clothing works is not merely a manifest outcome

or a mere statistic. As a dynamic process, her maltreatment results from the accumulation of several contextual and subjective episodic situations and impressions and insults by her superiors at the workplace. Understanding marginalization is "...the method of transition abstraction to concrete engagement with the lived experiences of life on the margins." (Joseph, 2019 :1948).

Marginalization proceeds silently and unannounced and progressive. Marginalization as a multidimensional process is real in its outcome and as an unrelenting process dehumanizingly impoverishes and silently obliterates her or him from living memory (Joseph, 2019:1856). Studies by Anner (2019), Mezzadri (2019), DeNeve (2014a), Jenkins (2013) and Kumar (2019) all point out to how surplus value is squeezed out of Ready-made garment workers in the diverse interconnected national and international value chain of the RMG industry and accelerate the downward spiral of marginalization of the female RMG worker.

2. The Exploitive Value Chain

The RMG industry in Bangalore comprises large structured primary exporting units which directly export to big brands. Bangalore is characterized by "the use of more stable and continuous employment relations is coherent with the industrial requirements of a more standardized and unrelenting tailored production cycle" (Mezzadri, 2019: 80-92). These structured firms either produce or outsource to unstructured firms of invis-

ible marginalized workers, including young children in and around Bangalore. About 70% of the work is done in-house and roughly 30% is outsourced for economies of scale. RMG are produced throughout this production network, at different price ranges for various market segments and quality benchmarks, Subcontracting is mostly done based on uncodified trust, timeliness, and past credibility of the manufacturer (Harris, 2002 :7).

Supporting the structured firms, the unstructured subcontracted labor-intensive production units embedded within the industry with unreasonable production targets work together to drive the worker further down into poverty. Thus, the complex hierarchical web of unequal suppliers in the garment industry has inbuilt self-regulatory mechanisms of neutering dissent.

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Male and female workers and their supervisors are at the mercy of buyers and brands who are in a position of substantial monopsonist power in a highly composite production process. (Mezzadri, 2017:108,158). The make or break strategy for the producer implies that any failed transaction means unused inventory and unfulfilled or rejected sales because of IPR constraints. Shipment deadlines produce enormous stress and squeeze the entire garment supply chain,

which may fall short and hence require additional hands. The demand fluctuations are incredibly variable, leading to either work-intensification or sudden joblessness for the workers.

This tightly inter-linked RMG value chain depends on a seamless labor process. She is battered and emotionally scarred both at work and at home as our data will subsequently illustrate.

3. Work Intensification & RMG Workers' Exploitation

Working conditions progressively degrade from the notional normalcy of social compliance audit-worthy factories of primary exporters to appalling levels of neglect within the unstructured factories. Moreover, within any RMG factory supervisors' "Control is direct, and structures of management reflect the social hierarchy beyond the factory walls." (Jenkins & Blyton, 2017: 99)

Everywhere in the factory male supervisors undermine women workers' self-respect and dignity (Mezzadri, 2017, 89). Furthermore, women have to choose between acute job insecurity and wage theft and verbal and sexual exploitation (Hearson, ILR Report, 2009: 55). At another factory supplying for Walmart, Tesco, and Carrefour, one worker described verbal abuse as a "regular daily matter." Another worker described being slapped by supervisors; one even had her head banged on a table. Anner (2019:722) on Bangalore RMG workers says- "We are like sugarcane to them (the factory owners). Once they squeeze

out all the liquid, they throw us out." Additionally, he (:45) also highlights the grim living conditions of migrant workers who find themselves further alienated."

Physically and emotionally redundant garment workers from either unemployment or disutility may enjoy some freedom from the time pressure of the production line. Once the industry has extracted all its utility, these women find themselves homeless (Bremar, 2019: 36-27). Nearing the culmination of their working life, which tends to be around the age of forty to forty-five, spent-out they go back in 'retirement' to their native place. Everyday upkeep-costs in the city render survival impossible for those without adequate earning power to stay on indefinitely. Labor circulation and informalization of employment are intertwined and reinforce each other in an escalating spiral. Nonetheless, they trade overwork for inevitable acute economic hardship (ILO, 2015; Mezzadri & Majumdar, 2018).

4. Labor Laws & Garment Workers

The forty statutes applicable to workers in the country are administered in bits and pieces by many employers in the RMG segment only focusing or catering to their business model and profit margins and letting the poor workers fend for themselves. Working conditions, health, hygiene standards are provided for by the Factories Act. Collective Bargaining is clearly articulated in the Trade Union Act while the Industrial Disputes Act clearly outlines the

industrial adjudication machinery, conciliation process and various safeguards on the employment front. The Industrial Employment Standing Orders Act provides for the employment regulations and the process for initiating disciplinary proceedings; however, most of the provisions of these acts are never followed in the letter and spirit leaving the poor worker with no recourse.

5. Trade Union Mobilization & Women RMG Workers

Meanwhile, mainstream Indian trade unions do not focus on the RMG women workers. Intransigent challenges such as doubtful exaggerated impact by an external political leadership, trade union rivalries and a short-term focus on 'wage security and emoluments' (Baxi, 1987: 259) continue. Hence their narrow focus (Ramaswamy, 1983; Teitelbaum, 2011) has prevented them from igniting a larger working-class consciousness and turning to organize these marginalized RMG workers. Moreover, literature reiterates, Indian trade unions are finding it challenging to stay relevant (Saini, 2014; 2016;). There was little evidence to support extensive and successful trade union mobilization in Bangalore. When this is the larger contextual predicament of Indian trade unions in India, expecting them to rally and mobilize following (Kelly, 2012) collective mobilization thesis in the RMG industry would be a far cry. Nonetheless some initiatives such as the New Trade union initiative and Munnade (2020) have tried to mobilize woman RMG workers but our study finds that these efforts are yet to substantially

benefit our respondents. We looked at marginalization, the interconnected value chain and the profit maximizing labor process that intensifies and squeezes surplus value from the woman RMG worker, the ineffective labor laws that apply to them and how trade unions have ignored them. We therefore discover a fundamental methodological and conceptual gap in the literature (Fig. 1).

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Gap in the Literature

These multidisciplinary perspectives arise either from ethnographic fieldwork (Mezzadri, 2016; DeNeve, 2008; 2014; 2014; Kumar, 2020) and political economy. Scrace (2008) and the ILO reports (ILO, 2013) demonstrate from their individual frames of reference, how the industry's exploitative labor process marginalizes the female RMG worker. Others such as Pattenden (2016) focus on migration or the role of contractors (DeNeve, 2014b) and caste (Carswell & De Neve, 2013). Each woman RMG worker's experience and life trajectory are different and needs careful qualitative study. These combined but varied women RMG workers' individual and collective journeys emanating from their distinctive compulsions at home, caste oppression, migration patterns and workplace sexual exploitation result in collective silence. As our study illustrates, every RMG worker is an evolving bricolage of multiple circumstances, and contexts.

Fig. 1 An overview of the key literature themes



Her marginalization is a developing process of many intermingled experiences and needs utterance. She is entrapped into perpetual informal slavery where her sexualized body and labor are up for sale. Each aspect of our empirical data is interrelated with one another. Individually and collectively, they have a negative knock-on impact on RMG workers.

Hence the primary gap discerned from the five themes is a dearth of an integrated perspective in the literature that causally integrates the gendered

social context of the female RMG workers in Bangalore (both native and migrant) with work intensification, the enforcement of legal safeguards and inadequate mobilization. Our paper fills this void by showing how interlinked failures in multiple realms — gendered oppression at home and at work, structural failure at firm and state level to ensure fair working conditions, an impotent labor machinery, inadequate successful social audits, weak political mobilization, and social apathy combine to strike at the RMG woman worker

simultaneously and have an individual and collective domino impact on a woman's RMG worker.

Methodology

A significant representative sample of 200 RMG women garment workers along with in-depth qualitative interviews endeavor present the actual reality studied by our research. The rationale and process for both the studies are described. We seek an intermediate operational qualitative enquiry space premised upon-unexpected, unhurried serendipity and gradual organic data accumulation. Our filed research appraises the Bangalore female garment worker's intersectional experience of work as it stands today¹. The scope of this study necessitated the sample size to be limited to 200 women RMG workers. The sample comprised a blend of about 10 large well known exporting units and their immediate subcontracted mid-segment garment units. These were structured factories having the full production process in Bangalore.

The Fieldwork Process

Fieldwork was conducted in two phases lasting for about a month and a half from mid-November 2019 till the end

of March 2020 in Bangalore. The second author undertook fieldwork and data collection. Getting access to workers in factories was a challenge because any intervention by management would distort data transmission and put the workers' livelihoods at significant risk. Since direct worker interaction on the line was discouraged, either overt or covert ethnography of Delbridge (1998), Durand and Hatzfeld (2003) or Venkatesh (2009) in this setting was impossible. Accessing these workers through management, would create reactivity effects (Katz, 2015) and to identify them in a residential colony was akin to finding a needle in a haystack. Neither did the workers have a trade union office or a shared space where workers gather after work, unlike many manufacturing settings. Hence the fieldwork strategy deployed is as explained below.

Initially, a pilot study was conducted by administering the draft questionnaire to ten women workers during the last two weeks of November. Their responses were encouraging, which helped in finalizing our questionnaire. This questionnaire was administered to 200 RMG women workers until the end of March 2020. There was no predetermined plan or representative sample, and the respondents spontaneously guided the researcher to another respondent. They appeared, disinterested in events or situations beyond their immediate circumstances. The second author played two roles in this research endeavor - one of an academic researcher seeking to understand the RMG workers and two, of a managerial consultant. He would spend

¹ Our fieldwork predisposition acknowledges that a— "Sociological understanding involves the melded appreciation of how one's own embodied and embedded standpoint must be combined with the equally partial perspectives of others and subjected to critical appraisal in order to achieve a more comprehensive—and so more objective—account of the world"(Scott, 2020)

the latter part of every day in front of different factory gates for six days a week for about three months taking care not to repeat the same factory the next day.

Workers groups would swarm outside the factory-gates, at around 17.35 hours every day. Between 50 and 100 meters from the factory gates, there would be transport vehicles waiting for them adjoining the factory gate after they finished their vegetable purchases outside. From overcrowded factory gates the hurried women rushed out. This 15 - 20-minute window was the only available interaction interval for the researcher.

A few minutes would be sought from departing workers' group and put them at ease or intercept a shopping worker. Interacting with groups would distort perceptions and therefore should be avoided. An interested worker would then be segregated from her group and ensure that other workers would not join the respondent at any point during the interaction. Some respondents who lived nearby would wait to be picked up by their spouses. The researcher tried to establish good rapport and attempted to have an extended interaction with these respondents.

The interview methods were a dynamic combination of the questionnaire and extended unstructured interviews. The researcher used the schedule he had prepared for self-reference and asked questions based on it and recorded the responses himself. He used the former in conjunction with other unstructured

questions that arose out of a dialogue with other respondents who provided more time. The sampling method was a combination of simple random sampling and snowball sampling, explicitly focusing on individuals rather than groups. Possessing excellent communication skills, he would disarm workers and persuade one of them aside for a quiet chat. Each worker led the researcher to another worker who would stand there or arrange for his presence subsequently. Migrant workers would be met intermittently and each interaction would snowball to another migrant worker.

Access to the production line, which is mostly difficult, was facilitated because of researcher's HR background. Playing the second role of a consultant, he was able to secure access and interact with critical organizational stakeholders such as managers, supervisors in the production line and owners to understand the ground realities. During multiple field-work visits to a wide range of Bangalore RMG production lines, the researcher, would observe, attentively, the working women RMG workers.

The precedent pilot study conducted helped in finalizing the research sampling scale. Questionnaire data were analyzed after the fieldwork. The measuring tool for the questionnaire adopted was the Likert scale. It was designed to capture responses on the listed perspectives, which were validated and tested. Cronbach alpha and correlation tests were performed on all questions. We then interpreted the qualitative data, consolidated, and paraphrased the find-

ings to correlate with the literature review and hypothesis.

All the names of the organizations and the workers are anonymized to avoid legal complications and to protect their livelihoods by following the standard British Sociological Association guidelines [2020] pertaining to qualitative research. The inherent assumption underpinning this study is that the selected sample size of women workers represents the organizations within the RMG industry. Our sample universe comprises regular woman RMG workers on fixed-term contracts. The data has been collected from genuine sources, and the observations and conclusions are based on the first-hand information, extensive participant observation and quantitative analysis and qualitative bracketing, thematic analysis and intensive retrospection to ensure validity and reliability.

Table 1 Case Processing Summary

		N
Cases	Valid	200
	Excluded	0
	Total	200

Table 2 Cronbach Alpha Test Results

Reliability Statistics		
Cronbach's Alpha	Cronbach's Alpha Based on Standardized Items	N of Items
0.924	0.921	15

Discussion

The data analyzed in SPSS and presented for all the 200 responses (Table 1) and the Cronbach alpha test based on

the standardized items (Table 2) indicate the reliability and validity of the research instrument.

The inter – item correlation matrix clearly highlights the connection and the linkage between the various elements and questions posed to the participants of the survey and the correlation between the various aspects covered in the study (Table 3).

As can be inferred, the Cronbach alpha value in the data shows a high degree of reliability. Each question robustly correlates to another question given in the questionnaire. As is evident, the Cronbach alpha score denotes a high level of reliability and validity of the instrument and its control on the responses. A careful examination of the dataset indicates a directional view on the proposed conclusions. The correlation matrix shows the high degree of correlation of the various factors and the data triangulation to prove the hypothesis. The quantitative data collected emanates and aligns with the objectives of the research and the inputs collected by way of the research instrument and prolonged engagement with workers by way of interactions, subsequent participant observation and interviews have ensured data triangulation.

Social Background of Labor Force

An estimation made after interacting with women respondents indicated that the social composition of the workforce encompassed approximately 35 per cent of migrant women RMG workers from outside Karnataka, from

Table 3 Inter-Item Correlation Matrix

Inter-Item Correlation Matrix															
	Q1	Q2	Q3	Q4	Q5	Q6	Q7	Q8	Q9	Q10	Q11	Q12	Q13	Q14	Q15
Q1	1	0.717	0.349	0.533	-0.036	0.593	0.478	-0.07	0.109	0.242	0.584	0.533	-0.109	-0.087	-0.043
Q2	0.717	1	0.339	0.706	0.144	0.691	0.616	0.036	0.229	0.523	0.673	0.675	-0.151	-0.071	0.019
Q3	0.349	0.339	1	0.421	0.009	0.345	0.388	-0.121	0.089	0.362	0.492	0.394	-0.026	0.073	-0.028
Q4	0.533	0.706	0.421	1	-0.044	0.885	0.53	0.075	-0.028	0.37	0.736	0.677	-0.058	-0.053	0.093
Q5	-0.036	0.144	0.009	-0.044	1	0.175	0.164	0.167	0.205	0.232	0.029	0.053	-0.047	-0.057	-0.084
Q6	0.593	0.691	0.345	0.885	0.175	1	0.549	-0.094	0.001	0.172	0.695	0.637	-0.153	-0.127	0.058
Q7	0.478	0.616	0.388	0.53	0.164	0.549	1	0.252	0.336	0.522	0.484	0.459	-0.066	-0.017	-0.173
Q8	-0.07	0.036	-0.121	0.075	0.167	-0.094	0.252	1	0.325	0.451	0.021	0.073	0.174	0.087	-0.123
Q9	0.109	0.229	0.089	-0.028	0.205	0.001	0.336	0.325	1	0.319	0.07	0.055	-0.022	-0.007	-0.062
Q10	0.242	0.523	0.362	0.37	0.232	0.172	0.522	0.451	0.319	1	0.427	0.402	0.166	0.162	-0.016
Q11	0.584	0.673	0.492	0.736	0.029	0.695	0.484	0.021	0.07	0.427	1	0.746	0.001	0.013	0.061
Q12	0.533	0.675	0.394	0.677	0.053	0.637	0.459	0.073	0.055	0.402	0.746	1	-0.139	-0.079	0.014
Q13	-0.109	-0.151	-0.026	-0.058	-0.047	-0.153	-0.066	0.174	-0.022	0.166	0.001	-0.139	1	0.714	0.187
Q14	-0.087	-0.071	0.073	-0.053	-0.057	-0.127	-0.017	0.087	-0.007	0.162	0.013	-0.079	0.714	1	0.239
Q15	-0.043	0.019	-0.028	0.093	-0.084	0.058	-0.173	-0.123	-0.062	-0.016	0.061	0.014	0.187	0.239	1

states immediately beyond Karnataka's boundaries such as Orissa, UP, Bihar, Assam and the North-eastern sister states. These workers were not conversant with the local language or culture. They remain perpetual outsiders who dwell in miserable conditions huddled together in a 10-15 Feet hall. They are condescended by the locals and just survive each day. Another 40 per cent of respondents are from other parts of Karnataka especially from drought prone northern Karnataka, Andhra Pradesh, Tamil Nadu, Kerala, and Maharashtra. They tend to become conversant with the local political dynamics and caste configurations over time. Consequently, they may vaguely sense "how the wind" is blowing and try to fit in. They try to understand local identity and caste dynamics and wriggle their way by negotiating with supervisors and managers. Approximately 25 per cent are locals from in and around Bangalore and near the factory.

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This direct and invisible labor force mass migrates from the villages into the garment industry owing to failures in agriculture, seasonal crop, debt trap, rural poverty, and lack of access to minimal social infrastructure including social security. Most of the women RMG respondents were middle school dropouts or uneducated and look for daily wage

or some form of regular employment in the garment sector. Factory supervisors, primarily males, were mostly technical diploma holders, while a few might have risen from the worker ranks after putting in the years and acquiring the relevant skills of the process.

Inveigling intermediary touts visiting the village catchment areas, and the gradual word of mouth from kin and friends acted as a vital recruitment source. These intermediaries make a living on the exploitation of the women workers and were also partially responsible for them, and the workers must pay them a substantial portion of their first wage. Many women workers were generating a secondary income for their families and hence preferred the garment industry, which provided relatively immediate employment opportunities to migrating labor. Some of our female RMG worker respondents, took upon the role of being a primary breadwinner which sometimes became unavoidable when their husbands were either alcoholics, unemployed, retrenched, or diseased.

We found that the RMG industry primarily targets women who are in the 18-26 age group for their agility and dexterous fingers. These young unmarried women and migrant workers mentioned that they readily shifted jobs if some other manufacturers offered an increment of Rs. 500 over their current take-monthly wage.

RMG Workers' World of Work

Our-respondents consistently complained of deteriorating health. During

participant observation, their unhygienic conditions were evident. They had limited access to proper hygiene and bathing facilities both at home and at work. Visits to the factory could not hide the filthy Indian toilets in both subcontractor and primary exporter factories. The women had sparse access to sanitary pads and used waste cloth lying in the shop floor as substitute to sanitary napkins which attests to the deplorable health, hygiene, and economic condition of the poor women worker. There were no creches nor proper canteens. Against this environmental background we draw from multiple respondents' accounts to describe the world of work of women RMG workers.

The Difficult Labor-process of Female RMG Workers

Extended participant observations of typical production processes across factories in Bangalore, demonstrate that production involves cutting, sewing, finishing and the special-processes comprise washing, embroidery, printing, and dyeing. From that demand flows the manufacturing process; involving, cutting, sewing, finishing and special operations and then washing, printing, embroidery.

The work pace in these massive production lines was intense and hides a horrible tale of abuse. The pictures taken during fieldwork of a leading RMG exporting factory to top global- brands, in Bangalore support our observation of the tight pace and reinforces our finding that enormous delivery pressure, prevails to generate export-ready, made-to-fit for-season-dresses because missing a sea

shipment deadline would compel ruinous-dispatch by exorbitant air-freight. Seamstresses, stitch in machines under extreme duress and fearing supervisor reproach, they work unrelentingly, disguising sewing cuts and bleeding. They work in a noisy environment in big halls, several fans and sewing machines and cannot get up for toilet breaks easily. They cumulatively make a loud humming sound which over time leads to deafness. They develop injuries such as Carpel Tunnel Syndrome because of working on the same posture for several hours. Workers reported that they also inhaled toxic particulates such as cotton dust, ammonia, and aniline vapors. They endure filthy sexual expletives and risk sexual exploitation by their supervisors.

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Respondents indicate, that the seamstress's salary ranged from Rs.10,000 per month to Rs.13,500 per month in the organized, structured segment. In the unstructured subcontracted segment, it ranged from Rs.6,500 to Rs.8,500 per month for 10-12 hours of work per day. They keep switching jobs which are readily available every five to six months and on an average do not stay for than one year in an RMG firm.

A Day in the Life of a Local RMG Worker

"I rise every day at 4.30 AM, defecate in an open space nearby, clean my

small house, feed the cattle, prepare food for my two children and get ready for the day and walk to the pickup point. Thirty to forty workers are huddled together in this minivan and travel to the factory that is an hour away. Immediately upon reaching at 8.30 AM, I am summoned for a short ten-minute briefing huddle about the target and am allocated the work plan and the production line for the day”.

“My working hours range from 8.5 to 10 hours per day. Work ends by 17.30 hours after the post-production stock-taking briefing. I reach home by 19.30 and then cook for everybody, make the children sleep and retire by 22.30 hours after completing all the household chores.” LM² (December 15th 2019). She changes job across factories which offer her a few hundred rupees more through intermediaries who take their commission. In sum, most women RMG workers reported that they are oppressed both at work and at home.

Implementation of Labor Laws

RMG manufacturers violate labor laws flagrantly. Other than ESI and PF and to some minimal extent the Factories Act, compliance of the Maternity Benefits Act, the Trade Union Act and other labor legislations remains weak either wholly or done in a half-hearted piecemeal disparate manner. Correspondingly, each of the respondents we came across, was ignorant of their rights and their employer's statutory obligations

despite enquiring about the same question several times and ways. However, working hours, weekly holidays, compensation holidays, daily hours, intervals of rest, spread over, night shifts, the prohibition of overlapping shifts, extra wages for overtime, restriction of double employment were complied with to a certain extent within the structured firms studied. We find that as the structured firms in Bangalore, go down in size and scale, away from the big branded manufacturers the compliance of the provisions of the Factories Act, 1948 were found very unsatisfactory. The Maternity Act (2017) prescribes for safeguards, however, in most cases our respondents reported that workers are not taken back after their maternity-leave and invariably forced to leave on their return with the taunts of the male supervisor.

The RMG women respondents were ignorant of the Industrial Disputes Act (1947) provisions and were unaware of most applicable labor laws. Respondents contended that during social compliance audits by international inspection agencies and NGO's sent by the suppliers; manufacturers tried their best to hide the worst parts of the workplace, and some workers were selected and coached to answer questions.

Migrant workers felt highly vulnerable and lacked the social and cultural capital to survive in an overcrowded metro like Bangalore. As prescribed in the deeply structurally flawed inter-state migrant workman-act 1979 (Labor Ministry Website, 2020) there is the absence of a licencing procedure or inspection

² Respondent name-Lakshmi Amma

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which are non-existent in the RMG industry. Since their employment is itself a sham contract, there is no passbook or any return fare payment if they want to go home.

Union Mobilization

Respondents were fragmented along caste, religion, and regional lines. Politicians manipulate the RMG worker votes on local cultural and identity issues in their constituencies.

Firstly, competing identity and role commitments and geographical and cultural barriers kept them disunited. Female RMG respondents were unaware of left-leaning trade unions such as CITU. Neither did they want to stick themselves to organically molded into EP Thompsons' (2001:4) idea of a working-class. Secondly, the RMG women respondents' who perceived vulnerability and economic insecurity have impeded their mobilization. These two factors prevented them from successfully mobilizing on the lines suggested by Kelly (2012) and identifying the root causes of their deprivation becoming a representative class in a factory.

Trade union mobilization in Bangalore has been piecemeal. Although lim-

ited attempts such as Munade and Garment and Textile Workers Union (Kumar, 2020) prevail in the RMG industry in Bangalore, our respondents indicated that they were unaware of such efforts. On rare occasions, without the help of a trade union virtually the whole RMG garment protested the then Union Labor Minister Mr Bandaru Dattatreya. The RMG workers paralyzed the streets of Bangalore against changes proposed in the withdrawal of provident fund, which resulted in police action against them. (Singh, 2014). It took such drastic action to inflict a rollback.

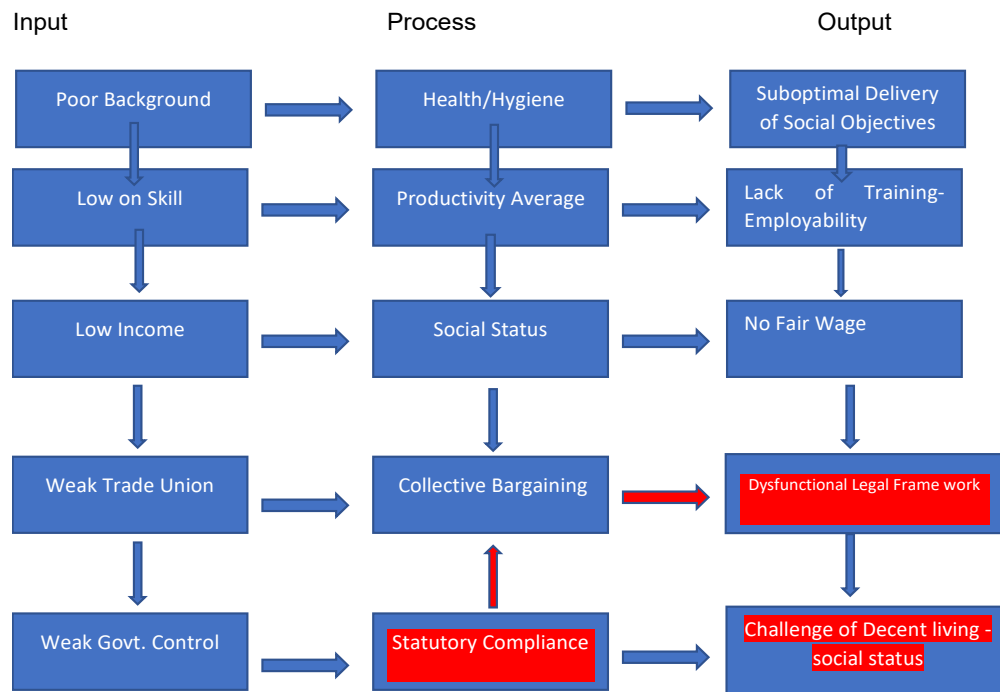
The female RMG workers are concurrently squeezed by the co-action of the forces identified through the respondents as depicted in fig. 2.

Finally, we put forth an Input Output Framework model (fig. 3) that outlines the various dimensions, elements and consequences of the action or inaction of the management and government in establishing a level playing field for the women workers in the RMG. The interpretation of the model can be described as poor background, low skill, low income, weak trade unions and weak government compliance have a bearing on health/hygiene, productivity, social status, collective bargaining and statutory compliance by companies and all resulting in suboptimal delivery of social objectives, lack of employability, low wages, dysfunctional industrial adjudication and finally resulting in poor living conditions of the worker.

Fig. 2 Eight Co-acting Causal Forces



Fig. 3 Input-Output Model - RMG Industry



Conclusions

The critical gaps observed in this study are the contradictory expectations of international buyers of reconciling their bottom lines with the robust enforcement of ILO labor standards of workers' working conditions and wages by employers. The government implementation of labor laws lies at odds with its demands to promote flexibility and competitiveness. The worker is marginalized and forgotten, and her condition is worsened by institutional apathy and structural inequities. The pandemic had only exacerbated institutionalized societal apathy and the inaccessibility of social security and welfare to the poor. One common thread in all the work places surveyed indicates the quality of work, the environment, stress and harassment are having an adverse impact on the quality of life of a garment worker. The nature of the industry its structure and the inability of the trade unions in collectively bargaining is causing growing concerns in the world of work for the women workers in RMG. The empirical evidence goes on to prove the government apathy, lack of firm strictures for violations, the foreign buyers' lack of concern in uplifting the poor workers and the like are tilting the odds in favor of the employers.

Our data indicate that the convoluted, protracted legal adjudication process and its inaccessibility to the RMG workers, especially to migrant labor, has led to a denial of justice. Geographical differences and caste-based alignments in the factory and society wrench women back to more primordial identities and together

with mutual subjective pre-judgements, prevent the transformation from a 'class in itself' to a 'class for itself' through political mobilization. Finally, an inadequate representation of these women in the trade union leadership and the state legislature or government denies them a voice to articulate their concerns. This paper has concentrated its attention on the woman RMG worker as bodily subject from whom surplus value is squeezed out and urged the exercise of the sociological imagination of bringing about a change in her life.

Limitations

The major limitation of the study was the unwillingness of the employers, industrialists and businessmen to speak about the working conditions and employment relations. Whilst, Peenya and the adjoining industrial belts were the field setting there were many large establishments or markets which have a sizeable work force and small sheds and houses where the working conditions are more severe. Inputs were primarily collected from workers outside the factory gate and not at the work place owing to the restrictions imposed by the employers on the workers and on the researchers.

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