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SPECIAL SECTION

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Domestic workers' agency against workplace sexual harassment: The role of social norms in Bangladesh

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Summary

Motivation: There are 1.3 million domestic workers in Bangladesh; the precarious and private nature of domestic work makes them vulnerable to sexual harassment. Prevalent social norms that regulate sexuality and notions of family honour lead to victim blaming and normalization of male aggression. We contribute to the literature on social norms and women's agency by exploring how they tackle sexual harassment.

Purpose: We explore the connection between social norms and gendered agency in tackling workplace sexual harassment. We ask: how do young female domestic workers in Dhaka protect themselves from workplace sexual harassment? What insights do these strategies offer to strengthen women's voice and agency against sexual harassment?

Methods and approach: Using a case-study approach based on interviews, focus group discussions (FGDs), and participatory exercises with domestic workers, we explore when, how, and where domestic workers raise their voice against incidents of harassment.

Findings: Our findings show that, while most of the workers interviewed expect to face some form of sexual harassment at work, very few lodge formal complaints. They use a range of informal strategies or small manoeuvres to minimize risks. The decision by domestic workers to voice their concerns with family members, community actors, and employers is influenced by their alternative employment options, the damage to their and their family's reputation, and the support they may expect to receive from these actors. The class position and gender of the domestic worker influence these interactions.

Policy implications: Based on our findings, we argue that prevalent social norms on sexuality, the precarious nature of domestic work, and the private nature of the home as a workplace, constrain domestic workers' agency, and their protection strategies remain largely individualized. Strengthening agency requires going beyond legal reform and involves creating an alternative public discourse on women's sexuality, developing links between domestic workers with local community organizations and networks, and changing the perceptions of actors responsible for providing protection.

KEYWORDS
agency, Bangladesh, domestic workers, social norms, voice, workplace sexual harassment

1 | INTRODUCTION

Worldwide, 4% of working women are domestic workers compared to 1% of men (WIEGO, n.d.). In other words, women constitute 75% of all domestic workers, making it a female-dominated sector in the informal economy. In the hierarchy of occupations in the informal economy, which are stratified by class, gender, and other social identities, domestic work is one of the most precarious occupations. It is low paid, and in most countries lacks job security and organized structures, as well as legal measures to protect workers' rights. The precarious nature of the work, which is performed in intimate private settings, make domestic workers vulnerable to various forms of abuse, including workplace sexual harassment. Domestic work in Bangladesh contains these features of precarity and the risk of various forms of abuse.

Violence against women is widespread in Bangladesh. According to a 2015 survey undertaken by the Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics (BBS), the workplace was the second most common location where women experienced physical violence (21.9%) and sexual violence (32.8%) (BBS, 2016). These estimates are likely to be lower than the reality. According to a recent study with 5,000 women, about 87% admitted to having experienced sexual harassment at least once in their lives and 36% having experienced it on public transport (87% Bangladeshi women harassed, 2022). Studies show many female domestic workers have experienced workplace sexual harassment, including rape (Moum, 2016). Since Bangladesh lacks laws that address workplace sexual harassment, and most domestic workers have no collective representation, domestic workers have limited ability to counter sexual harassment by using formal mechanisms. In this context, we ask: how do young female domestic workers in Dhaka protect themselves from workplace sexual harassment? What insights do these strategies offer that may strengthen women's voice and agency to tackle workplace sexual harassment?

These are important questions. First, domestic work remains one of the key options for poor and unskilled migrant women to be economically active in the informal sector in Bangladesh. Studies on women's economic participation in Bangladesh largely focus on microfinance programmes and the ready-made garment (RMG) sector. There is limited academic research on domestic work. Understanding what may help enhance women's agency to counter the risk of workplace sexual harassment contributes to identifying ways of creating safer work environments in contexts where there are limited alternative economic opportunities. Second, prevalent social norms in Bangladesh that regulate women's sexuality dictate that women should not leave their home in search of employment. Unpacking how women protect themselves from workplace sexual harassment requires examining how women navigate restrictive social norms that blame the woman for such incidents and normalize male aggression. An examination of the protection strategies used by domestic workers deepens our understanding of the connection between social norms and gendered agency.

How social norms influence women's agency is a growing area of concern in development, where much of the literature has focused on norms influencing reproductive decisions or economic agency (Galvan & García-Peñalosa, 2018; Muñoz Boudet et al., 2013). We contribute new data to this growing body of work through our analysis of how social norms intersect with women's subject positions, material conditions, and intersectional disadvantages and shape their agency. We found that social norms that govern the sexual attitudes and behaviour of women and of men shaped how the domestic workers we interviewed perceived incidents of workplace sexual harassment. Most of them expected to experience some form of workplace sexual harassment and tolerated minor infringements on their person by the men of the employing household. Norms also shaped the range of informal strategies used by the workers to minimize vulnerability. These mostly involved small manoeuvres to reduce the risk harassment without directly challenging the perpetrator. Our examination of these small manoeuvres or indirect expressions of agency enabled us to go beyond constructing domestic workers as passive. Domestic workers' decision to voice their concerns and with whom to raise the issue—family members, mistress of the house, or formal actors—are influenced by a few factors. These include their alternative employment options, the damage to their and their family's reputation, which has implications on their marriage or prospects of marriage, and the kind of support they may expect to receive from these actors. The assessments made by workers about the latter two factors

were also shaped by social norms. The workers' interactions with these actors are mediated by their respective age, gender, and class positions, and the views these actors hold on why harassment occurs. In other words, whether these actors blamed the women or acknowledged their vulnerability in a highly unequal power relationship. Very few of the workers lodge formal complaints with the police, but some used informal channels to seek help.

Based on the above findings we argue that prevalent social norms on sexuality, the intimate nature of the workplace, and the precarity of domestic work constrain domestic workers' agency, hence their protection strategies remain individualized. Strengthening agency requires going beyond legal reform and involves creating an alternative public discourse on women's sexuality, developing links between domestic workers with local community organizations and networks, and changing the perceptions of actors responsible for providing protection.

The article is structured as follows. Section 2 discusses the relevant literature, followed by Section 3 detailing the methodology. Section 4 presents the Bangladesh context. Section 5 sets out our findings—exploring the role of social norms and the precarious nature of the work restricting women's agency; the strategies used by individual women for self-protection, when women seek external help, and the impacts of these actions. Policy implications and conclusions on what the findings mean for understanding women's agency are presented in Section 6.

2 | SOCIAL NORMS, WORKPLACE SEXUAL HARASSMENT, AND WOMEN'S AGENCY

Social norms are identified as important drivers shaping development outcomes (Galvan & García-Peñalosa, 2018; Muñoz Boudet et al., 2013). Social norms, including gender norms, define what is acceptable and appropriate action for men and women in a given group or society (Cislaghi & Heise, 2019). These norms are embedded in various social institutions, including at the workplace, and are learnt through socialization processes and reproduced through everyday social interactions (Cislaghi & Heise, 2019). Social norms shape notions of masculinity and femininity—the gender roles and attitudes and beliefs about how men and women should "perform gender" (Butler, 1990) in their everyday interactions. How men and women embody sexuality in the workplace and their comportment, dress, and attitudes about the presence of the opposite sex are shaped by norms regarding [women's] mobility and presence in public space, sexual purity, and chastity.

These norms shape the ideas of both men and women about the kinds of behaviour that are identified as sexual harassment, and also influence how women react to these incidents, and whether they seek redressal (Oosterom et al., 2022). The influence of regressive social norms that limit women's roles and mobility, and control sexuality, creates an environment in the workplace where women are blamed for male sexual aggression. In a "classic patriarchy" like Bangladesh (Kabeer, 1994), characterized by gender segregation, women's economic dependency, and control over women's sexuality and extra-household relations, women face harassment if they are perceived to have violated established gender norms by participating in the workplace or entering male-dominated public spaces, or if women are perceived to have transgressed codes regarding dress and comportment.

Workplace sexual harassment is defined by the International Labour Organization (ILO) as "a range of unacceptable behaviours and practices" that "aim at, result in, or are likely to result in physical, psychological, sexual or economic harm" (Olney, 2019). The ILO Convention on Violence and Harassment No. 190 (ILO, 2019a) and its Recommendation R206 (ILO, 2019b) identifies violence and harassment in the workplace as a violation of human rights. While this official definition covers a wide range of behaviour, social norms shape what kinds of behaviour individuals perceive as workplace sexual harassment and what is deemed appropriate for women to talk openly about at the workplace. Studies show that, in many countries, cultural norms, fear, or shame limit what women workers may say about their experiences of sexual harassment (ILO, 2019c; Lima et al., 2020; Loukaitou-Sideris, 2014; Mazumder & Pokhael, 2019).

In the literature on women's empowerment, women's agency is defined as the ability to make strategic life choices and take action to ensure desired outcomes (Agarwal, 2010; Kabeer, 1999). Making choices and taking

action to challenge workplace sexual harassment counts as a strategic life choice. Apart from social norms, the precarity of the work, particularly low wages and lack of social safety nets, may constrain women's agency—both their choices and actions—when they encounter workplace sexual harassment. The risk of job loss and lack of trust in formal institutions may also contribute to women keeping silent or choosing to use informal strategies to contain risks. Women working in the informal economy lack material and social resources to fall back on and have limited alternative opportunities for employment. These create pressure on women to tolerate abuse and harassment at work (Regis et al., 2019) or to leave work (Lippel, 2018; Naved et al., 2018).

While these structures of constraints limit women's agency, women are not passive agents. Feminist scholarship shows that women's agency is often "a mixture of subjection, conformity and resistance" (Rao, 2015, p. 412). Women's choice and agency are shaped by their intersectional disadvantages, gender ideologies of appropriate behaviour, material conditions, and women's affective relationships with other family members (Kabeer, 2021a; Reader, 2007; Sangari, 2002). In contexts where there are no formal support structures, women's agency is often indirect (Reader, 2007), containing a series of small manoeuvres that manages the risk they face without disrupting existing power structures. We locate our study with domestic workers within the feminist tradition that provides "a fine-grained analysis of women's agency" (Rao, 2015, p. 412) and investigate the complex ways domestic workers deal with workplace sexual harassment within contexts of economic precarity and a patriarchal gender–class order.

We identify the following three components that are needed for women to exercise agency and openly challenge workplace sexual harassment. First, being aware about one's rights at the workplace and questioning notions of female sexuality that place the blame on women. Second, being able to articulate or voice one's experience of harassment and ask for protection, support, and redressal. Lastly, taking action to gain support for reducing vulnerability. The ability to voice and act is facilitated by the existing formal rules and mechanisms in the workplace to tackle workplace sexual harassment; support from family, friends, and colleagues; and the presence of organized bodies to represent women's interests in the workplace. The absence of these mechanisms and support lead women to resort to using informal strategies to mitigate the risks of harassment and exercise "indirect agency" rather than directly confronting the perpetrator. These covert forms of agency include small manoeuvres such as avoiding specific locations at the workplace, restricting mobility and working hours to when other women will be present, covering up their bodies, etc. (Oosterom et al., 2022). In fact, studies on sexual harassment at universities show that women choose to use informal strategies, such as warning other women about the perpetrator, limiting their movement or presence in certain public spaces, and deploying other non-confrontational measures. The use of these indirect forms of agency indicates that, while women may recognize the injustice of workplace sexual harassment, they may determine that the cost of taking direct action against harassment may be too high. Occupations, such as domestic work, where individuals work in isolation and in private spaces of the home, may make it even harder for women to exercise agency. The presence of collective organizations, such as trade unions, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), and women's organizations, are critical for women to be able to mobilize and demand redressal. However, the agency of informal women workers is limited given "the dispersed nature of their activities, the irregularity of their earnings, their location at the intersection of multiple inequalities, the social and self-devaluation of their work and, very frequently, their lack of awareness of any rights they might enjoy," all of which make the possibility for organizing for their rights unlikely (Kabeer, 2021b, p. 5).

3 | METHODOLOGY

We used a case-study approach and a range of methods to collect data. This included a desk-based review of existing literature on domestic workers and sexual harassment, two types of participatory visual methods used during focus group discussions (FGDs), and in-depth interviews with domestic workers. We selected the Kallyanpur area, a large, low-income housing area in greater Mirpur, in Dhaka city. Mirpur is a large middle-class residential area which contains informal settlements where workers in the informal economy reside. Data was collected

during July and August 2021 and workers were approached through an NGO operating in the study area which works with domestic workers. Not all interviewees were members of this NGO. The study participants were aged between 18 and 24 years, currently working as "live-out" domestic workers. Almost all had migrated to Dhaka, except for two. All had completed primary education or studied at the secondary level. Apart from two, all interviewees were married. The first visual method used was a "safety audit" where 10–12 participants mapped places, timings, and the nature of workplace sexual harassment. This enabled participants to point out places where they feel uncomfortable and discuss the forms of behaviour which they considered as harassment. The second visual method was a "body mapping" exercise, where 10–12 participants drew the body of a woman to discuss the kinds of harassment they face and the parts of their body that were vulnerable to harassment. These activities were an effective way to minimize the discomfort young women felt in openly discussing sexual harassment. From the participants involved in these activities, we purposively selected 20 domestic workers who had themselves experienced some form of sexual harassment and were willing to be interviewed. We used safeguarding and distress protocols to minimize distress and arranged for counselling when needed for the interviewees. The in-depth interviews were anonymized and transcribed. All qualitative data was entered into NVivo for analysis.

4 | THE BANGLADESH CONTEXT

4.1 | Precariousness of domestic work in Bangladesh

It is difficult to obtain an accurate estimate of the number of domestic workers in Bangladesh. According to Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics (BBS, 2017), there are 1.3 million domestic workers in the country, of whom around 80% are female. Other international and non-government agencies estimate that the sector is larger. In 2006, the ILO (2006) placed the total number of domestic workers at 4 million, and in 2016 the Bangladesh Institute of Labour Studies (2016) estimated that there were 1.7 million domestic workers in Dhaka alone. About a third of women participate in the labour force (BBS, 2017), mainly in the agricultural sector. There are about 3.2 million women in the RMG industry (Matsuura & Teng, 2020), the largest sector employing women in urban areas. The engagement of a large number of women in domestic work makes it an important sector for female employment.

In Bangladesh, most domestic workers have migrated from poor rural areas to towns and cities in search of work. They may be "tied" or live-in workers who reside in their employer's house and work full time in tasks that range from cooking and cleaning to taking care of elderly family members and children (Ashraf et al., 2019). Workers may also be "untied" or live-out workers living in their own accommodation in low-income neighbourhoods or slums and work for an agreed number of hours a day for more than one employer (Hossain et al., 2015). Approximately, 85% of domestic workers live below the poverty line, suggesting not only that they earn less than the poverty line measure around 5,000 Bangladeshi taka (BDT) per month, but that their joint household earnings are also below the poverty line (WIEGO, 2020).

While domestic work in Bangladesh embodies all the key characteristics that define precarious work, workers also face a distinct form of precarity as the work entails providing personal services for families within the intimate domain of the household. Most domestic workers are from a poorer social class than their employers and are reliant on their employer(s) for economic and social security. Domestic workers are "outsiders" within the intimate family space who are not completely trusted but the nature of work requires them to be in close contact and proximity of the family. The "workplace" or the "home" is governed by relations of servitude and subjugation. The class, age, and gender hierarchies along with the precarious and isolated nature of the work renders these workers more vulnerable. In fact, the workers are susceptible to exploitative work conditions and to intimidation, verbal abuse, physical abuse (slapping, hairpulling), sexual assault, and other forms of abuse, including rape (Hossain et al., 2015).

The vast majority of domestic workers are not unionized and do not have the bargaining power or collective support to negotiate better working conditions (WIEGO, 2020) or act as a political force to exert pressure on the

state (McKay et al., 2012). Within the country, the National Domestic Women Workers Union (NDWWU) was set up as an unregistered, membership-based trade union in 2000 (Ghosh, 2021). It claims to have close to 20,000 members and is affiliated with the International Domestic Workers' Federation (IDWF). The Domestic Workers' Rights Network (DWRN), a network-based organization, was established in 2006 with the aim of mobilizing domestic workers and ensuring their inclusion in policy-level change (WIEGO, 2020). However, these unions have limited presence in the policy space.

Bangladesh has signed the Convention Concerning Decent Work for Domestic Workers (C189) but has yet to ratify it. Legally, domestic workers are also vulnerable, as they do not fall within the purview of the Bangladesh Labour Act (2013). This means that their working conditions are not regulated, and that they have no access to social security, skills training, or the right to take their grievances to labour courts (Ahmed, 2012). Workplace sexual harassment does not feature in the text of the Labour Act. The government approved the 2015 Domestic Workers' Protection and Welfare Policy (MoLE, 2015), which was a result of the advocacy by DWRN and its allies. This policy has 16 provisions with respect to safe work conditions, access to social assistance, child labour, and assigns specific responsibilities to employers, workers, and the government. The policy lacks any effective means of enforcement, however, and has so far been used only in a few instances to publicly shame the perpetrators in the most severe cases of abuse (Ghosh, 2021).

There is no specific law in Bangladesh that addresses workplace sexual harassment. The Chancery Law database that summarised the High Court directive on sexual harassment issued in 2009 defines sexual harassment as "intimidation, bullying or coercion of a sexual nature, or the unwelcome or inappropriate promise of rewards in exchange for sexual favours" (Chancery Law Chronicle, n.d.). The directive also recognizes that sexual harassment may include a range of behaviour, from mild transgressions to abuse and assault, and is a form of employment discrimination. The directive tasked the government with enacting a law on sexual harassment and the relevant public authorities, universities, and employers' associations to form committees in their respective organizations to investigate complaints and develop procedures based on guidelines provided (Chancery Law Chronicle, n.d.). After almost 15 years, the government and many employers have yet to comply.

4.2 | Social norms, sexuality, and women's economic engagement in Bangladesh

Gender norms in Bangladesh are not restricted to intra-household power dynamics, but shape women's agency whether exercised in private, public, or specifically work spaces. Bangladesh is a "classic patriarchy" (Kabeer, 1994) marked by gender segregation and control over women's labour, sexuality, and extra-household relations. In a Muslim-majority context like Bangladesh, control over women's sexuality is a core concern and lays the foundation of gender relations. Loss of control over women's sexuality is tantamount to their own family's loss of honour. One method of control is by instilling in girls, from adolescence, an acute feeling of shame about their own body and sexuality, and the burden of responsibility to uphold their family's honour. Purdah is invoked to conceal sexuality either literally by covering the body and ideologically as a state of mind, revealed in modest attire and appropriate behaviour towards men (Rashid & Michaud, 2000; Simmons, 1996). These feelings of shame and modesty are reinforced through restrictions on women's mobility and in their interactions with men outside the family (Naved et al., 2022). Deviation from these norms brings shame and may ruin girls' good marriage prospects (Blanchet, 1996; Caldwell et al., 1998). Appropriate dress, modest behaviour, limiting interactions with non-marriage and socialization, but also in relation to work.

The norms of shame and honour effectively discourage women from seeking work that is outside the home (e.g. Abdullah & Zeidenstein, 1982; Amin, 1997). The fact of women working in public (male) spaces is not only seen as a transgression of purdah but also symbolic of the failure of Bangladeshi men as breadwinners, unable to keep their women away from the male gaze (Siddiqi, 2000; Siddiqi & Ashraf, 2017). This has been offered as one explanation for the hostility and sexual harassment experienced by female garment workers, who were the earliest

in disrupting the codes of gendered conduct in Dhaka city (Siddiqi, 2003). The onus of sexual harassment and violence is largely placed on the women who leave the confines of their home, seeking a livelihood. The prevalent social norms also assume that women must protect their honour by behaving in such a way at the workplace that their modesty is not questioned, and the honour of their family is not jeopardized. This translates into women being largely silent and keeping incidents of harassment a secret. It also removes the responsibility of male aggression from the men and normalizes harassment if women are perceived to have violated codes of appropriate behaviour.

5 | PRECARITY, NORMS, AND GENDERED AGENCY

Workplace sexual harassment experienced by domestic workers in Bangladesh take many different forms. What domestic workers decide to do when they experience it is influenced by notions about shame and honour, their economic condition, and subject positions. In this section, we present findings on types of sexual harassment domestic workers experience and how precarity and norms act as barriers to domestic workers exercising voice. We then move on to analyse what factors influence workers' agency and the small manoeuvres they deploy to mitigate risks of workplace sexual harassment and when and from whom they seek help.

5.1 | Types of harassment and insecurity due to precarity and isolated nature of domestic work

During the participatory visual exercises, about a third of the domestic workers shared their own experiences while others shared the experiences of other domestic workers they knew. They listed physical, verbal, and sexual abuse as broad categories. Both physical abuse (slapping, hair pulling, beatings) and verbal abuse (disrespectful and demeaning language) have been experienced by all our interviewees at some point. The fact that all our participants reported experiencing abuse indicates the asymmetrical power relations between them and their employers and that the domestic workers are in an environment where their agency to protect themselves from violence is limited, apart from leaving the job.

The participants listed the following types of sexual harassment, which ranged from propositions to have sex, sexual innuendos, sexually implicit gestures, leering, "flashing" (male sexual organ), touching/groping, sexual assault, and attempted rape. The workers found it easier to discuss harassment that took place in public spaces than at their workplace, which they viewed as a private matter. They pointed out that that the private and isolated nature of their work made it difficult to talk about harassment in their workplace as there are no witnesses when the incidents occur to corroborate what took place. Leering, sexual gestures, and innuendo were the most common forms of workplace sexual harassment and, while the workers felt uncomfortable in these situations, they generally tolerated this behaviour.

The workers reported that sexual propositions, innuendo, and unwanted sexual advances start with perpetrators offering compliments, sympathy, and assistance, which later escalates to "dirty talk" (*nogra bhasha*) or using sexual expletives. Sexual advances are made by isolating the worker to an area of the household, and through direct propositions or friendly gestures. For example, workers may be asked to bring a glass of water to a separate room or be asked to sit next to the perpetrator and talk about her life or may be asked for massages. In fact, asking for a massage is a common ploy rather than directly asking for sex. One of our interviewees narrated the following, highlighting the ways that perpetrators approach domestic workers:

> In the beginning, I used to sit in kitchen and eat my meal. He would sit on a chair in front of me. He would sit in a way that you could see everything…Then he would call me to massage his feet…
>
> (BD-interview-DW 17, August 26, 2021)

The domestic workers highlighted that they are suspicious of such requests as they are aware these can be codes for asking for sex. Workers reported feeling angry, upset, and stressed as they had to find ways to protect themselves and their job in these situations, without creating a scene.

Workers usually experience harassment from the husband of the mistress of the household, but also by a son or grandfather. Several reported being harassed by another employee in the household or non-family members who had access to the house. In instances where the domestic worker is harassed by a member of the household where she works, it places her in a difficult situation if this escalates to lewd behaviour such as touching, flashing, or groping. About 20% of the domestic workers who participated in the body mapping exercise also talked about how the men of the household crept into their beds at night when the mistress of the house was not at home. These incidents took place when they had previously worked as live-in domestic workers. One of the domestic workers (BD-interview-DW 03, August 14, 2021) narrated the following incident about the male head of the household entering her room and attempting to have sex with her when she was a live-in worker:

> I was at home that day… the old man came back. I went back to my room… and he came to my room. He lay down beside me. I was shocked. I asked him, "why are you lying here"…Then he touched me…
> (BD-interview-DW 03, August 14, 2021)

Most of these stories narrated by the interviewees about such attempts ended with a narrow escape from being raped, highlighting the extent of insecurity and danger domestic workers face inside the private space.

5.2 | How social norms act as barriers to voicing

Most of the domestic workers we interviewed were reluctant to voice incidents of workplace sexual harassment to their family, friends, or neighbours. Seeking help from the police or formal authorities was rarely considered. As discussed earlier, the prevalent norms regarding female sexuality require women to be modest and make women responsible for not arousing male sexual desire. These norms are connected to notions of shame and family honour which influenced a worker's decision not to mention such occurrences. It was apparent from the interview data that keeping quiet about the incident, keeping their eyes down, not making eye contact with the men, and keeping their body covered were the most common forms of response to sexual harassment.

As women are made responsible for provoking male sexual arousal, being non-responsive to male sexual advances and keeping quiet are seen as ways to discourage the man. In fact, not talking to men in public is a strategy that girls are taught from childhood, so that they can claim their innocence if a man breaks the gender segregation code. One 18-year-old domestic worker pointed out that men interpret talking to a man as encouragement:

> Everyone knows me as a good girl from my childhood. I don't talk much with men [not related] and don't mix with them. If I talk to a man…the man gets a line [will want to be familiar].
> (BD-interview-DW 14, August 19, 2021)

However, the emphasis on being silent in public spaces also means that women were unable to seek help at the workplace, in these cases people's homes, where domestic workers come to work.

The key reasons domestic workers put forward for not voicing incidents of sexual harassment were bringing shame on the family and losing their reputation as a "decent" girl, which would harm prospects of a good marriage. About 25% of the interviewees explained that if they risked discussing experiences of sexual harassment with anyone, they could become victims of gossip and other people might judge them as "bad women" and blame them for the incidents that took place. Unmarried women would not get a "good" husband, as people would doubt their

sexual purity and chastity. Marriage for women is almost universal in Bangladesh and the social pressure to secure a good marriage influences their conformity to norms of sexual purity.

These norms about women maintaining sexual chastity and not engaging in premarital or extramarital sex influenced the decisions of several rural migrant interviewees to keep silent. By deciding to work in other people's houses these women had chosen to leave the protection offered by staying in their own home. For married women, voicing incidents of sexual harassment could lead to marriage breakdown as the husband might become suspicious of the wife's character. One married woman who was working in a house where the employer's younger brother offered her cash in exchange for sex explained her decision to remain silent in the following way, "I didn't share with him [husband]. He may leave me if I share these with him" (BD-interview-DW 17, August 26, 2021).

As women's chastity is paramount, workers were fearful that if they spoke to their family and neighbours about workplace sexual harassment, they could think they had gone to Dhaka to engage in premarital or extramarital sexual relations. A 25-year-old married domestic worker who was harassed by an older man in the house where she was working did not share her story with anyone or take any action because of what other people may think. She said,

> My father does not know about this incident. No one from our village knows…I hid this because if anyone knows then we will lose our honour. They will say that we do "buchkigiri" (sex work) in Dhaka.
> (BD-interview-DW 03, August 14, 2021)

Apart from the fear of becoming victims of gossip and losing good marriage prospects or risking marital breakdown, norms also influence what women can discuss in public and with whom. Discussing male sexual advances, even if unwanted, is considered improper and shameful for women. The interviewees reported that they are unable to raise matters in public as they lacked the kind of language to be able to do this. Using sexually explicit language to describe incidents would indicate that they were immodest. One 21-year-old interviewee made the following statement, "[H]ow could I [repeat what was said]?! I have shame. How can I utter those with *my* mouth" (BD-interview-DW 07, August 19, 2021). She went on to explain that she was unable to discuss incidents with the mistress of the house as it required her to discuss parts of the body that she found difficult to be explicit about. The same worker stated, "I can tell her your son grabbed my hand…but how can I tell her about they touched my body. It is better to quit work quietly."

5.3 | Precarious nature of domestic work and power hierarchies within the "house" act as barriers to voicing

As discussed earlier, the precarious nature of domestic work means that workers lack any form of protection from abuse. They lack formal contracts, legal protection, or access to social support if they lose their job. As most of the domestic workers are poor, they rely on their income for their family's welfare. Workers pointed out that one of the reasons for not asking for help from family, particularly if the level of harassment can be "tolerated," is the fear that husbands or parents would not allow them to continue working. The precarity of the job and family poverty create pressure on the worker to tolerate certain forms of harassment by the men of the household and to say nothing. One of the interviewees gave the following explanation for not telling her family: "I didn't tell them [my family]. They will ask, 'why do you work there?' I gathered some courage and went to work…If he wants to stare, let him…" (Interview, DW 10, August 19, 2021).

Apart from the precarious nature of domestic work, asymmetrical power relations between the male employer and the female domestic worker are shaped by gender, age, and class hierarchies, making it difficult for her to challenge male behaviour. These hierarchies create an unsafe work environment, where workers try to minimize the risk of harassment by avoiding the perpetrator and using various protection strategies, as explored in the next section, and not countering him as that creates a risk of being fired.

Interviewees also reported that one of the possible recourses available to them is to talk to the mistress of the house, who generally manages the domestic worker. However, the workers also pointed out that their female employers lacked any real power to rein in their spouses or other men in the household. Any direct confrontation between the mistress of the house and her husband or other men is very rare as she is economically dependent on and afraid of her husband. The workers reported that usually they are either asked to leave or asked to minimize their interactions with the perpetrator and remain silent. The following incident narrated by a domestic worker illustrates these points. It also highlights how both the domestic worker and the mistress are subjected to toxic masculinity, where the implicit threat of violence and assault constrain both women's ability to confront the husband.

> I was employed in a house where the *shaheb* [male head] worked for the police. He would touch himself in way that made me feel uncomfortable. I raised the matter with the madam [mistress of the house]. She told me that she could not do anything as he would beat us both…she helped me leave the job.
>
> (BD-interview-DW 17, August 26, 2021).

Another interviewee narrated her own experience about being sexually harassed by the husband, and afterwards being offered money by his wife, "The *apa* [mistress] of the house paid me 10,000 taka for a three-month salary. My salary was 2,500 taka for each month, so she paid me extra…" (BD-interview-DW 03, August 14, 2021). The neighbourhood woman who found this worker the job mediated with the female employer on the issue of sexual harassment. The female employer, in this case, acknowledged the issue of harassment and asked the worker to come back.

Workers also pointed out that seeking help from the mistress of the house contains the risk that their word may be doubted, and she may think the domestic worker is having an "affair" with the husband and blame them for the incident. One domestic worker offered the following explanation of the complex relationship they have with female employers and their views on a domestic worker's sexuality and the precarity of her own position.

> If the madam is a good person, then I can certainly tell but usually it does not happen. Generally, you cannot say anything to the madam. They will accuse me for what the sahib [male head] did… They will not believe me and fire me…
>
> (BD interviewee DW 08, August 19, 2021).

Most domestic workers, as a result of the barriers they face in voicing incidents of sexual harassment, decide to leave when they perceive there is a high risk of harm. One of the older and more experienced interviewees highlighted the fact that domestic workers frequently change places of employment because of the harassment they face:

> "I always think there is something when workers change houses very frequently…why should a person change houses four or five times in a row…?"
>
> (BD interviewee DW 06, August 15, 2021).

Another interviewee, a recently divorced 21-year-old domestic worker, who was repeatedly harassed at her workplace, offered the following explanation for her decision to quit, "It happened repeatedly….no one would have believed me…they would have thought I instigated it. So, I made up an excuse and quit" (BD interviewee DW 08, August 19, 2021).

A 28-year-old married worker identified leaving as a choice domestic workers made when there were no other alternatives. She asked the question, "What else can you do [other than leave]?" (BD-interview-DW 04, August 14, 2021).

However, several of the workers stated that leaving a job is not an easy decision because of economic pressures on the family and the fact that finding good placements is difficult. A 19-year-old married woman stated that she was looking for ways to leave her present employment after she experienced sexual harassment at

work but was unable to do so, "My self-respect is more important than money. That's why I am searching for new job, but I can't find it [so am continuing to work here]" (BD-interview-DW 05, August 14, 2021).

While the informal nature of the work allows the workers to leave without notice, we can see that the precarity of the work and gender, age, and class hierarchies limit their ability to voice concerns. We also see that the employers respond in contradictory ways. Some provided limited support, such as extra cash or ensuring they are present when the workers come to the house, while others dismissed their claims and blamed the workers. Their responses are also shaped by class and gender positions and relations of patronage. The decision to quit, while an expression of agency, does not reduce the risk of incidents occurring at another workplace and contributes to limiting domestic workers' ability to give voice to the issue of workplace sexual harassment.

5.4 | Expressions of individual agency: protection strategies

Given that voicing grievances is a difficult option, workers use various self-protection strategies to minimize the risk of workplace sexual harassment. These strategies consisted of a range of small manoeuvres by the workers to contain the risk of violence. Most relied on appearing modest, remaining silent, and covering their body as ways to not attract male sexual attention. A 20-year-old married domestic worker offered the following explanation for covering up, "You always cover your head and body so that nobody looks at your body or says anything bad…" (BD-interview-DW 09, August 19, 2021). This protection strategy also reveals that most of the workers had internalized the norm that women were responsible for male sexual arousal and that signalling to men that they were "modest" would reduce the risk of harassment.

In most cases, individual workers tried to minimize risk by limiting their interactions with the male members of the household whom they perceived as potential threats. They would avoid going to specific places at the house, make excuses not to be alone with the male members of the household, or ensure that the mistress was present. A 22-year-old worker explained that in one of the houses where she worked, the man had a "reputation," and she would therefore make sure that the mistress of the house was present when he was at home. She also avoided situations where she had to be alone with him (BD-interview-DW 19, August 26, 2021). Another worker mentioned taking care not to work on the days when only the husband would be at home, and on other days to limit working hours to when the mistress was present (BD-interview-DW 10, August 19, 2021).

Domestic workers who were older and had more work experience explained how they would assess the risks at a particular house and whether it was safe. A 27-year-old married worker explained the process,

> before starting a job, when we visit first, we greet the family members and at a first glance we can identify who has bad intentions…it is easy to understand from the way they talk. They [male heads] will start paying attention and eventually cross the limit.
>
> (BD-interview-DW 02, August 14, 2021).

The above informal strategies are mostly about avoidance and containing risk. Most of the workers did not feel they were able to counter sexual harassment. Few mentioned protesting.

In fact, during FGDs, only a few of the domestic workers indicated that they would raise their voice, swear at the perpetrator, or hit him if they were touched or threatened. A few of the interviewees reported they had used expletives or slapped the perpetrator when they were touched or groped in public spaces (BD interviews, DW 01, August 14, 2021; and DW 12, August 19, 2021). However, the private nature of the house as a workplace and the existing power hierarchies meant that it was difficult for the domestic workers to confront an abusive man.

5.5 | Seeking help from others

Domestic work is performed in private homes. As places of work these lack formal mechanisms through which workers can lodge complaints or seek help. Some workers rely on social and family networks for support and advice. They also sometimes seek help from employers where the perpetrator is another household employee (for example, a watchman, gardener, or liftman)[1] or someone in the apartment building or the neighbourhood. Unless the violence inflicted is extreme, very rarely do workers seek help from the "apartment committee" or the police.

While most of the interviewees were unwilling to discuss their experiences of harassment with family and neighbours (see previous section), a few did discuss these with their mother or an older female neighbour or the person who had secured the position for them at the house where they were employed. In the latter case, the domestic worker wanted the person to intervene with the employer and help her leave the position. With respect to neighbours or mothers, the workers mainly shared their experiences to secure emotional support and did not ask them to intervene on their behalf. Only two women talked about support from other domestic workers in their locality. One made the following point about informally warning others about specific employers.

> In our locality, we [the domestic workers] have good relations among ourselves and share almost everything, we get to know about these from others, which man gives you bad looks, which one asks you to do unnecessary chores, which one tries to be intimate…
>
> (BD-interview-DW 06, August 15, 2021).

Such discussions help other domestic workers to be aware of harassment in particular households. Exchanging information about abusers and warning others is a strategy women commonly used to reduce risk of harassment.

For domestic workers, if facing harassment from a non-household member (not related to the family of the employer), the main recourse was to approach the mistress of the house, who then took up the matter herself or referred it to the male members of the house for help. One 30-year-old domestic worker reported that she was harassed by the watchman of the building where she worked, and she complained to her mistress, who took the issue to her husband. She explained that male intervention in this instance led to mitigating the risks, "Uncle [the husband] went to lift and beat the watchman and threatened to sack him from the job. Later the watchman apologized to me" (BD-interview-DW 13, August 19, 2021). It should be noted that that the voicing in this instance was effective given the class positions of the husband and the watchman. This gave the husband the authority to beat and shame the watchman, who was from a lower income group. The incident also reveals the influence of patriarchal gender and class order. The male head is obligated to protect the "honour" of his female employees, and as the patron of the workers in his house he acted to protect the domestic worker.

Very few workers, however, thought that they would be able to use formal institutions such as the courts or the police. Many pointed out that, given their economic and social positions and lack of education, they were at a disadvantage compared to their employers, and that they would not get justice. A 24-year-old married domestic worker pointedly stated, "rich people have money. Do I have anything except my voice? Is my voice stronger than the money?" (BD-interview-DW 01, August 14, 2021). Another domestic worker who is 35 years old and widowed, mentioned, "[M]any don't go to police. They think—we don't have enough money how shall we file a case? Our honour is interconnected with this issue, so we shouldn't engage in legal matters"' (BD-interview-DW 15, August 26, 2021). Workers further pointed out that most incidents have no witnesses, and because they lack proof, the police or apartment building committees will not deal with matters like sexual harassment.

The domestic workers we interviewed did not belong to a union or any other associations, hence they lacked collective strength to demand recourse. Some mentioned being trained by NGOs on rights, but these did not include workplace sexual harassment. In Bangladesh the sector is not unionized, which means the workers are

[1]We use man because women are not employed in these occupations in Bangladesh.

dispersed and weak as a collective body. However, interviewees did report a few incidents where matters related to sexual harassment were dealt by neighbourhood committees or building associations. These incidents involved physical beatings or harassment of a child, which drew the attention of the building associations as complaints were lodged by other tenants. In these cases, the employers were warned and there was mediation.

What this discussion shows is that avenues for seeking formal help are limited for domestic workers. They lack access to organized bodies that can facilitate their agency, which limits their power to negotiate on safe working conditions with employers and to situate themselves as an important constituency that the state needs to engage with.

6 | CONCLUSIONS

For young female domestic workers, workplace sexual harassment creates an unsafe working environment that adversely affects their physical, emotional, and mental wellbeing. Our findings show social norms regarding sexuality, the precarious nature of domestic work, and gender, age, and class hierarchies limit workers' agency to counter workplace sexual harassment. When confronted with harassment at the workplace, individual workers either leave or rely on informal measures to minimize risks. As the workplace is in private homes, effective use of formal mechanisms also remains limited. When they do voice complaints there is relatively little support from employers. These findings raise the following questions: how do we interpret the small manoeuvres domestic workers exercise in analysing women's agency? And what kinds of policy measures are required to enable domestic workers to seek assistance when they encounter workplace sexual harassment in a context where the sector lacks legal protection?

The analysis of domestic workers' indirect agency to reduce the risk of sexual harassment shows that they are not passive when this occurs. Their responses are rational given the structural constraints they experience, along with the patriarchal gender–class order within which they function. These findings nuance our understanding of the workers' agency. The individual worker's explanations for exercising indirect agency highlights the importance of why measures to tackle workplace sexual harassment that takes place within the private home need to go beyond legal responses.

In fact, being able to name workplace sexual harassment as a violation of their rights as workers is an important step towards going beyond legal measures. At present, the domestic workers we interviewed identified the perpetrator's behaviour, particularly when this did not include physical touching or attack, as immoral but not as a violation of their human rights. They had also internalized the social norms that blame women for men's sexual arousal. Hence NGO awareness-raising programmes that target domestic workers need to focus on critically questioning these social norms and developing mechanisms that allow workers to identify the range of behaviour that falls under workplace sexual harassment.

Second, our findings show workers mainly use informal systems of support—family, neighbours, other domestic workers. They sometimes also seek support from neighbourhood committees. Open discussions organized by NGOs, communities, or labour unions for domestic workers on the strategies workers use to minimize risks and how to approach different actors are useful for learning about such strategies and securing support from different actors.

Third, most workers expressed concerns about victim blaming. In order to address the culture of victim blaming, there is a need for open dialogue and messaging to the wider public and society. Mass media programmes and social media platforms can be mechanisms of holding and transmitting these debates.

Fourth, one of the key reasons workers are vulnerable to workplace sexual harassment is because they are isolated. Unionization is one of the effective ways for ensuring workers are not dispersed and can make collective demands for securing decent working conditions, including protection from sexual harassment. Some countries have effective domestic workers' unions, such as Brazil and Bolivia, where these unions are connected to other labour associations and movements. These have helped to bring the domestic work agenda into a wider policy debate and mobilize wider support. These cases can serve as models for forming and operationalization of existing Bangladeshi organizations.

Fifth, very few workers in Bangladesh trust the formal channels and one of their key concerns is that they will not be believed in the formal justice system in the absence of witnesses. It is important to develop a code on sexual harassment for the domestic work sector, training the police and other personnel to deal with complaints and changing their attitudes by highlighting the intersectional inequalities domestic workers experience that makes it difficult to voice incidents.

Lastly, the precarious nature of domestic work makes workers vulnerable to abuse, including sexual harassment. Policy measures to formalize domestic work with stipulated work hours, leave, minimum wages, payment schedules, and access to social protection and legal services are important for reducing income poverty and strengthening the bargaining position of domestic workers. Legal recognition of domestic work as "work" under the Bangladesh Labour Act would be significant as that would expand the coverage of the law to include work conditions, wages, safety measures, and compensation is the first step to reducing vulnerability.

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This article reports analysis of primary data. The ethics of data collection and analysis were approved by the Institute of Development Studies Research Ethics Committee. Persons from whom data were collected gave their free, prior, and informed consent and their data has been kept confidential and anonymous.

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