



Strategies of Subjective Well-Being: Experiences of Married Female Garment Workers in Bangladesh

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ABSTRACT

The garment industry has been strongly contributing to the national economy and development by creating many employment opportunities in Bangladesh. Among the employees, the majority is female, and one-fourth of them are married. In this research, married female garment indicates the married female garment workers who have children. Their current wages and income, housing conditions, and other basic needs are insufficient. Literature shows that they face many problems in fulfilling their own and family needs. In contrast, they feel happy or satisfied (subjectively well). Likewise, the literature does not identify how female garment workers keep themselves subjectively well. Therefore, the main research question of the study was, what strategies make the female garment workers subjectively well despite the problems? The study was done with a qualitative approach. The sustainable livelihood approach was followed to identify the subjective well-being strategies. 12 married female garment workers were selected from the Gazipur district in Bangladesh for in-depth interviews. The results of the study show that married female workers use various strategies for subjective well-being for instance, borrowing, sharing, and bartering; good relationships with seniors; keeping photos of children in their wallets/ID cards; sharing with families and children; keeping themselves busy; having faith in religions; urban freedom. This is a good indication that the participants are subjectively well but they are taking various strategies. It is high time to increase the facilities of the married female garment workers by which they can be subjectively well without any strategies.

Keywords: Garment industry, married female garment workers, well-being, subjective well-being.

1. Introduction

Bangladesh, as an emerging country, is still fighting against poverty, unemployment, corruption, pollution, and other social problems. It is a country with one of the highest population densities, where 49.4% of them are women (UNFPA, 2020). The total labor force of the country is 62.1 million, of which 30.64 percent is female (19.06 million), this rate is increasing day by day (BBS, 2019). The economy of Bangladesh is increasingly developing due to foreign remittances and the garment industry. At present, the total number of garment industries is approximately 5000, and more than 4 million workers are employed, where 83% of those are women (BGMEA, 2024). Among them, 60% are unmarried and 40% are married (War on Wants, 2018). Between 20 and 30 percent of married female workers have children (War on want, 2011). They face various problems in the garment industry and at home. Their minimum wages increased to 12500 BDT in 2023 (US\$105) including all facilities. Workers, especially married female workers with children who are sacrificing themselves for the betterment of the country's garment sectors, live under the poverty line (Islam et al., 2017). It is estimated that the minimum living cost for a single person in the Gazipur district is 15,630 BDT (\$177) if they live in average places and eat only minimum amounts of calories, the total cost calculated is more than of their earnings (Khan et al., 2016). Besides, who have family members living with them and sustaining more than three people living in the city area, including children, is something difficult to do continuously with such financial limitations (Naved et al., 2018). Due to their low wages, they cannot afford nutritious meals or comfortable clothes (Bhuiyan, 2012; Rahman and Rahman, 2020). Their children do not get a proper education (Rahman and Nasrin, 2016).

The garment industry always pressures the workers to work more, which also increases the vulnerability of their children (Begum et al., 2010). They feel tension thinking about what their children might be doing alone while they work (Naved et al., 2018). After coming back home from the garment industry, they become busy with household work without being able to rest, which can impact on their physical and mental health (Mahmud et al., 2018). Most of them have no helping hand or someone who will manage their family and children (Mahmud, 2020). It is tough for female workers to maintain their lives besides their jobs in the garment industry (Farhana et al., 2015). The current situation of the female garment workers in Bangladesh seemed so miserable that it could not bring satisfaction and happiness to them. Interestingly, most female garment workers feel happy or satisfied (subjectively well) with their present situations (Naved et al., 2018). This opposes to the many studies and theories that mention subjective well-being depends on objective well-being indicators- for example, good income, wages, jobs, and housing are responsible for bringing people happiness (Heady & Wooden, 2004; OECD, 2013), or subjective well-being in most developing countries (Diener & Biswas, 2002). The findings of the literature revealed a contradictory enigma, where, although the female garment workers with children faced various problems, they felt happy. It means, some strategies or techniques make them happy

despite the problem in current situations. There was a large confusion between the current situation and the subjective well-being of married female garment workers. No research has been conducted on 'what techniques or strategies made them subjectively well' and their subjective views have not yet been evaluated which is the missing point and literature gap in Bangladesh's perspective. In this case, the literature of Bangladesh's perspective needed to look for a new knowledge paradigm on this issue. This paradigm would explore the techniques or strategies for the subjective well-being of married female garment workers. Considering the above issues, the main objective of the study was to identify the subjective well-being strategies of female garment workers in Bangladesh.

2. Materials and methods

Methodology is the most important part of any research that concerns and guidelines the research from design to conclusion (Adams et al., 2007). The study followed the qualitative method. Considering the nature of the present research, the study argues that a qualitative approach is the most appropriate for this study.

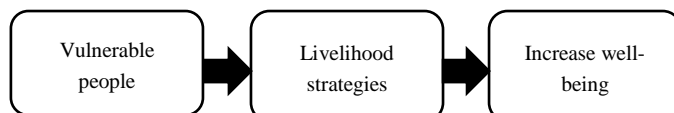


Figure 1-Summary of sustainable livelihood approach

The author selected qualitative research because it is an approach used to explore the social system, interactions, and processes. It helps to achieve an in-depth understanding of the participants (Tacchi et al., 2003). The quantitative approach does not cover these issues. The study followed the Sustainable Livelihood Approach which highlights that some livelihood strategies can make vulnerable people's well-being (figure 1). The study was carried out among married female garment workers in the Gazipur district in Bangladesh from December 2020 to February 2021. In the study, the author selected 12 married female garment workers who have children through purposive and snowball sampling techniques. For instance, Neuman and Krueger (2003) mentioned that unique cases, subjective issues, and in-depth investigations need purposive sampling with a small number of participants. In addition, 06 (03+03) employers and experts were selected for this study. Data have been collected through semi-structured interview guideline, checklist, and observation. With the permission of the interviewees, the author took field notes and the whole session was audio-recorded maintaining the code of ethics and lastly, they signed where written that they have no objection to publishing the data. Two women were always with me during data collection.

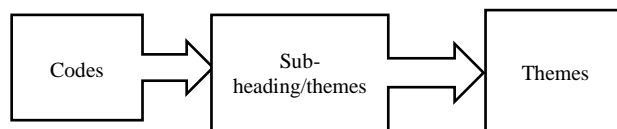


Figure 2- Selecting process of themes

All recordings were written and coded the data following the book 'the coding manual for qualitative researcher' by Saldana (2021). Later, it was finalized in themes. Burnard (1991) described a serial to create the themes which are code>sub-heading>category>theme. The results of this study have been presented thematically. The author drew a figure (figure 02) of how the themes have emerged. The ethics issues were strictly followed. The author, first, gave priority to rapport build-up and explained nicely the main objective of the study. The nonjudgmental attitude was strongly followed. A favorable atmosphere was given to all respondents to express their attitudes, feelings, and thoughts. The author followed the ethical guidelines of the Japan Society for the Promotion of Science (JSPS). It also clarifies the reliability validity, and relevance of triangulation. The research followed the Consolidated Criteria for Reporting Qualitative Studies (COREQ) to conduct and report (Tong et al., 2007). APA reference style has been used in the study.

3. Results of the interviews

Participants were asked mainly about three areas of subjective well-being strategies that are indicated in the OECD well-being framework: I- Life satisfaction strategies in the domain; II Affect and emotional well-being strategies; and III-Eudaimonia aspects of subjective well-being strategies. The results of the study were discussed under themes with the narratives of the participants. The results of KII have been given under themes within boxes that appear alongside the main text. The author categorized the results of the interviews under three themes (3.1 to 3.3) based on interview questions. All themes, sub-themes, and strategies were decorated/put under the three headings on table 01. Pseudonyms (P01-P12) were used in the narratives of the respondents to protect their anonymity. The personal information of the respondents shows that the age range of the participants is from 25 to 40 years. Most of them work in the sewing section for an average of ten and a half hours per day, receive between 10 and 12 thousand taka (Bangladeshi currency) in wages per month, and have children.

3.1 Strategies of the participants for enhancing subjective well-being in domain issues

Domain issues include income and wages, workplace, housing and health, and family management. Satisfaction in these categories is very important for subjective well-being. When female garment workers face problems in domain issues then they use various strategies. The strategies of participants have been summarized in table 1, with themes and subthemes.

Table 1- Summary of themes

| Themes | Sub-themes | Subjective well-being strategies |
|--|--|--|
| 3.1 Life satisfaction strategies in the domain | Wages and income well-being strategies | Going to the market at the last moment of the day. Borrowing, sharing, and bartering. |
| | Workplace well-being strategies | Good relationship with seniors. Dealing with rough behavior. |
| | Health and housing well-being strategies | Living in a low-rent house and sharing with family. Local pharmacy. |
| | Family management | Sharing childcare and household work with neighbors and family members. Sending children to live with grandparents in villages. Sending children to local religious institutions. |
| 3.2 Affect and emotional well-being strategies | Negative affects coping strategies | Keeping calm and forgetting about the negative things. Keeping photos of children in wallets/ ID cards. Sharing with families and colleagues. |
| | Positive affects well-being strategies | Comparing themselves with lower-class people. Pretending to be a person with disabilities. Keeping themselves constantly busy. Loving and having good relationships with family. Playing with children, having lots of recreation. |
| 3.3 Eudaimonia aspects | Autonomy well-being strategies | Having self-determination in life and focusing on urban freedom. |
| | Personal growth and relationship well-being strategies | Having faith in religions. Building up new relationships with neighbors and colleagues. Focusing on self-actualization rather than self-degradation. |
| | Meaning and Purpose in life well-being strategies | Feeling self-satisfaction in every sphere of their life with what they have. Feeling good and positive about oneself and accepting limitations. |

Source: The author (interview with married female garment workers who have children), OECD well-being framework was followed to emerge themes (OECD, 2013).

Wages and income well-being strategies

Income and wealth are good components of the well-being of people. If people have sufficient income, they can solve their problems which can bring well-being. In contrast, lower-income people suffer to fulfill their daily necessities. The participants of this study get low wages, income is limited, which makes it tough to maintain their own and their family's life. After all, some strategies help them balance their income and expenditure. Participant 01 uses a sharing strategy to reduce their financial costs: "Comfortable clothes are costly at present time. We use a strategy - I, my daughter-in-law, and my mother share the same clothes. My husband and my son share their clothes to reduce the clothing cost."

In addition, borrowing and bartering is another strategy. A participant borrows the necessities, including money, from neighbors and colleagues. She pays back when she receives her wages. These strategies reduce tension, which is an important indicator of subjective well-being.

“I borrow money from my colleagues when I’m in a crisis. Equally, other colleagues take from me. I also buy the rest of the goods from the local store when I’m empty-handed and give back after getting my salary. This strategy reduces my financial tension” (P02).

Being empty-handed enhances stress and tension, which is a barrier to subjective well-being. Despite the limited wages, the participants use various strategies to reduce the cost. When participants feel no tension about money, they feel subjectively well.

Workplace well-being strategies

Besides, some strategies play a role in overcoming workplace problems, such as having good behavior with seniors: “I always try to avoid any complexities. After all, I do maintain good relationships with colleagues and senior bosses. Sometimes I share my experiences with my husband, and he handles the situations” (P03).

Good behavior can normalize a critical situation. The participants use this strategy in the workplace.

Health and housing well-being strategies

Participants try to fulfill these two needs within their limited wages, through some strategies, such as living in shared housing and taking local medicine to treat their health. The low-cost house brings them relief from house rent pressure, which is important for their subjective well-being. Participants 04 mentioned their narratives: “We have borrowed two rooms. Two of my children, my husband and I live in a room and my eldest son and his wife live in another room. There’s one common toilet and one kitchen.”

It is clear that participants reduce their housing costs by living in shared rooms. Similarly, they always go to the local pharmacy to take medicine. These strategies help them to reduce the cost.

Family management

Participants have children and other family members. Most of the time, it is difficult for them to manage the family while doing their jobs. Keeping the family well is a pre-condition of subjective well-being. During work time, who will take care of their children? To keep the family well, their neighborhood, parents, and the local Madrasah (school) play a significant role. A participant shares childcare with other workers in the same situation using an alternation system. For example, she takes a one-day leave from work per week to take care of her and other 5 or 6 working women’s children. On the other weekdays when she must work, other women take leaves to take care of the children:

“I share the caring of children with my neighbors. There are many families living within a small area. Sometimes I take a leave and care of the children, including the ones of others. At the same, on other days, other women take leaves and care for all children” (P05).

“It is true that we have a limited capacity of day care. There are very few female workers who get a chance to keep their children in garment’s day care.” Interview with employer

Besides, parents of the participants, who live in the village, is one of the safe-guard to take care of children. Participant 06 felt insecure about her children being raised in the cities, and as a result, she sent them to village: “I have sent my child to my parents who live in the village. Now, I have no tension, they take care of my child properly. I believe my parents will take care of my child properly.”

To sum up, participants have problems in domain issues but various strategies improve their situation. These strategies keep them tension-free, which is a pre-condition of subjective well-being.

3.2 Strategies of the participants for enhancing subjective well-being in affect issues

Affects are divided into two- positive and negative. Positive affects include positive emotions, such as the experience of happiness, joy, and contentment. Negative affect, on the other hand, captures the experience of unpleasant emotional states, such as sadness, anger, fear, and anxiety. Both are highly related to subjective well-being. Participants try to avoid the negative issues that impact their emotions and feelings. Similarly, some mechanisms help them increase their positive feelings. Table 01 summarizes the strategies related to the positive and negative affects strategies.



Picture 01: ID card of a married female garment worker

Negative affect coping

Negative affect directly impacts people's subjective well-being. Married female garment workers sometimes feel negative affect from their experiences both at home and in working places, which can hamper their happiness. Participants try to control their negative affect by taking various strategies such as keeping themselves calm in every situation and sharing with the nearest one. A participant had many experiences of stress and tension, but the sharing strategy helped her to tackle the situations: "Most of the time I felt stress and thought about suicide due to the pressure from children, the environment, and other complexities. Then I shared it with my colleagues and family. They helped me to tackle these situations" (P12).

The results of the interviews reveal that most of the participants keep a photo of their children in their wallet or ID card so that when they feel tired or upset they can look at it and imagine a brighter future for the baby, which removes their tiredness and increases happiness:

"At 9 a.m. I start working in the garment industry and finish at 8 p.m., including two break times (1 hour+15 minutes), which causes me tiredness, sickness, and makes me feel upset. To minimize my sorrow, I keep the photos of my baby on the industry's ID card. I look at the photo of my children and that removes my tiredness" (P09).

Positive affects well-being strategies

Participants used various strategies to bring positivity to their lives for instance, compared themselves with lower-class people, had very low expectations, nurtured good relationships within their family, played with children, and kept themselves constantly busy, all of which make them subjectively well. Participant P11 was one of the examples:

"At the beginning of my garment working life, I compared myself with the people who had their car and home, which worsened my depression. Now, I compare myself with the people from the lower classes who have no money to buy food or no shelter and live in an open place. This strategy keeps me stress-free."

"I saw a woman worker put her baby's photo in the ID card beside her photo. I asked her why she did it. She said, the photo of my children gives me energy and helps removing my sadness during working time". Interview with employer

Participants believe that busier workers are happier than less busy ones. As a result, a participant always keeps hers busy to avoid sadness: "I have family, colleagues, and neighbors. After coming back from the garment industry, I talk to my family and complete the household work, spend time with my family, and sometimes gossip with my neighbors. Being this busy keeps me tension-free" (P08).

In addition, loving and having good relationships with family bring positivity to life. Participant P03 maintains good relationships with family. Her parents always come forward to help them mentally: "I maintain a good relationship with my parents for my benefit. When I feel sorrow, I share it with my parents, who love me a lot. They give me mental support, which gives me energy."

Besides, a participant has two children who live with her in Gazipur, and every day she spends lots of time with them: "When I come back from the garment industry with sorrow in mind, I see my children's faces and play with them at home. Believe me, within a few minutes I feel fresh and my sorrow disappears" (P10).

3.3 Subjective well-being strategies in eudaimonia aspects of the participants

Eudaimonia includes three aspects for instance autonomy, personal relationships, and target of life. The strategies are taken to keep well these three aspects. Table 01 shows summaries of the strategies that the participants use for subjective well-being in Eudaimonia aspects.

Autonomy well-being strategies

An important indicator of subjective well-being is freedom. The study shows that the participants might have other problems, but they get to have the freedom that they could not have in their past rural life. The freedom makes the participant subjectively well. Two participants explained that they are very happy because they have total freedom:

“I have done some research on the female migration. The most important points of their happiness are urban freedom.” Interview with expert

“In the rural area, I had no freedom. Everything depended on my parent’s decision. I used to think that life was a jail and that I was a prisoner. Now, I have other problems, but no one can control my life. I have freedom, which makes me happy” (P07).

“If you ask me if I am happy or not, I will say that I am happy for my freedom. My past and restricted life was painful though I had other facilities, like sufficient food and good housing” (P05).

Enough food and other facilities cannot guarantee subjective well-being. The main and most important ingredient for that is freedom.

Personal growth and relationship well-being strategies

Good relationships can remove all sadness and bring happiness. The findings of the interviews reveal that the participants have the same experience. They have problems with money and other daily necessities, but they are happy because they have good relationships with family, friends, and neighbors. These are some strategies they maintain for personal growth and relationships. Participant P02 mentioned that: “I have new relationships with my neighborhood and colleagues. If I face any problem, they are the first to come, and I go to them when they have a problem.”

The participants believe that their religion is playing a role in their subjective well-being. A participant mentioned that:

“I have faith in Almighty Allah. I believe everything is happening for the well-being of the people. If I keep having patience in this critical situation, I will be rewarded better in the future and hereafter than I’d be. This belief removes my sorrow and makes me happy” (P01).

Well-being, good relationships, and faith in religions are in a frame. Good relationships and faith in religion keeps them mentally and spiritually strong, which is also necessary for their well-being.

Meaning and purpose of life well-being strategies

Everybody has a goal and purpose about where they want to reach. At the same, people know what their asset is to achieve the target. If the target is not fulfilled, then an imbalanced situation has emerged. The balance is needed for subjective well-being. The first strategy of the participants is to keep balance and self-satisfaction. They have low expectations and are satisfied with what they are getting. A participant describes her expectations and satisfaction:

“I know what I can do considering my educational qualification. In the beginning, I thought of becoming a high officer, which increased my mental stress. Later I realized that I have limited capacity and I fixed my aim considering my capabilities. Now, I am happy with what I am getting” (P08).

Eudaimonia aspects are a new matter of subjective well-being. Most of the frameworks and approaches of subjective well-being indicate life satisfaction and affect issues. I believe these two do not fully cover the whole aspects of subjective well-being. Participants used above strategies which made them subjectively well in eudaimonia aspects.

4. Discussion and conclusion

The function of this section is to elucidate and interpret the major findings of this study, and seek to answer the research question, according to the results of the study compared with other studies in this field. The study sought the strategies that make the married female garment workers subjectively well despite the problems in objective well-being indicators. The subjective well-being was categorized into life satisfaction, affect issues, and Eudaimonia aspects. The author discusses here the subjective well-being strategies of married female garment workers under these three categories.

First, life satisfaction in domain issues includes the material matters that are necessary for human life. All participants have children. Their average family consists of four members, and they live in cities together. With a limited income, it is very tough to maintain the family. For instance, the daily newspaper (Daily Star, March 2022) reported that 50 thousand taka (BDT) (US\$600) is not enough for a family to live in major cities in Bangladesh, like Dhaka and Gazipur. If, in the case of the participants, both husband and wife work, then the total income is 18000-20000 BDT (\$240). Limited income makes tough

to keep them all well since subjective well-being depends on good income and wealth (Diener & Biswas, 2002). Thereby, they use various strategies for life-satisfaction to keep the balance between income and expenditure. For example- Borrowing money is a strategy. When they have no money, they borrow from colleagues or neighbors and repay the loan after getting their wages. Here, the participants have no tension getting money and goods during an emergency, which is important for being subjectively well. For example, (Diener & Biswas, 2002; Anderson & De, 1991) explain when people face financial crises, they should borrow money from the nearest and should buy the goods from a known store. Another important strategy was to share the living room, food, and daily necessities with family members, reducing their expenditure sharply. Adults do a partition in the living room, where they sleep on one side and their children sleep on the other. Furthermore, the adult daughters and mothers share their clothes, and adult sons and fathers do the same. Thus, the expenditure of participants is dramatically decreased. Unfavorable family and workplace increase stress and mental pressure that is a barrier to subjective well-being (Berry & Worthington, 2001). It was a very tough task for the participants to maintain families while working. The family members, neighborhoods, and local educational institutions helped them to keep a perfect balance between families and workplaces. During the first years of their children, parents of participants came to their house to give support to their children and families. A few years later, some children are sent to villages where the parents of the participants live. Some of the children continue their education in the village because the education cost in the village is lower. So, sending children to the village to live with the participants' parents can relieve the tension of caring for children. Research supports this strategy. For example, low-income women who live in cities would prefer to send their children to their parents who live in villages (Maxwell & Caldwell, 2008). Some of them are brought back to cities when they are six or seven years old and are admitted to the local educational institutions (Madrasah). The institute keeps them from morning to evening, teaching general and religious education, and also providing a meal at lunchtime. The study shows that participants who have no family in the village use sharing strategy. They, for instance, share with the neighborhood the responsibility to take care of their children. The rotation system of children's care can minimize family tension and living costs. Thus, female garment workers can get some relief from family and children's management.

The next is affect aspects, which include positive and negative issues. When the negative issues are minimized, and positive issues are increased, people are subjectively well. The study reveals that negative issues increase stress, sadness, and worry (Bodenhausen et al., 1994). The participants used various strategies, such as sharing the incidents that create stress with families and colleagues so that they can give mental support and inspiration to overcome the problems. At the same, looking at the photos of their children in their wallets and looking at them during difficult moments at work to reduce their stress and worry as indicated also in another study (Yugiana&Handayani, 2019). In addition, some strategies help to increase positive aspects- for instance, comparing themselves with lower-class people and having low expectations increase their mental satisfaction. Thinking of the children's future inspires them to go further. If they have no income, their children cannot continue their education and will not be able to get good jobs. The most important strategies are keeping themselves busy and spending time with children. Hsee et. al. (2010) reported that busier people are happier than less busy people. The study shows the participants keep themselves busy with household work and with their families. Similarly, at night, they play with their children to remove day-long tiredness and sorrow. These strategies bring positivity. Thereby, the negative issues are removed and positive aspects in life are increased.

Lastly, Eudaimonia aspects include relationships and freedom, which are highly related to subjective well-being. Participants' stories reveal that good wages, income, and familial issues sometimes cannot make people subjectively well. In this regard, the personal and social relationships are important. When the participants lived in rural areas, they had many facilities but limited freedom. Presently, these are the main barriers to women's empowerment in rural areas (Mahmud et al., 2012). In contrast, they are free to make their own decisions in urban areas. Therefore, having freedom was an extraordinary strategy for the participants to be subjectively well. Research supports the relationship between freedom and well-being. For example- freedom in the family and decision-making power can make a woman happy despite problems in other matters (Martin, 2008; Verme, 2007). Another strategy was having faith in religion. All religion provides priority to patience when facing difficulties and being satisfied and thankful in any situation. Faith in religion helps them to accept all problems and learn to be happy in any difficulties. The other strategy is feeling self-satisfaction, which provides mental satisfaction. It teaches us to accept our limitations. Thus, these strategies made the female garment workers subjectively well.

Contribution of the study

The article is one of the chapters of my Ph.D. dissertation. This is the first qualitative study on the subjective well-being about female garment workers in Bangladesh perspective. Literature moreover indicates that female garment workers face many problems, which hamper their subjective well-being. However, this study found how female garment workers keep themselves subjectively well despite the problems of objective well-being dimensions. This is new knowledge and an important contribution to this study. The study proposes that this new knowledge (strategies) would be an example of subjective well-being, which can protect the lower-position working women in other organizations, besides the garment industry in Bangladesh, and other developing countries, who get low wages and are dissatisfied with their present life.

Limitations of the study

The initial challenge was to select the participants since there were more than millions of female workers in the garment industry. This study needed a small number of samples because of qualitative study. Another issue was cultural and social limitations. Moreover, last major challenge was gender issue because the participants were females, but the author is male.

To sum up, the research mainly highlights the subjective well-being strategies of married female garment workers in Bangladesh. The author has drawn a conclusion that both positive and negative situations of the objective well-being dimensions can make people subjectively well, although the use of strategies is needed for cases of negative situations of the people. Further research should be conducted on the same issues in broad aspects, including more samples and investigating larger areas.

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