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Purdah And The Vulnerabilities Among The Widowed Garments Workers: A Gender Perspective

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Abstract- Vulnerability has long been accepted as an important factor to introduce the garments of widows as excluded, subjugated, under privileged and underpowered. It affects the ability of the survivors to recover from multidimensional impacts. In this paper the main target is to disclose the real scenario of vulnerable widows and the overall purdah impact on them because purdah terminated the vulnerability of these women in a massive way. The vulnerability is not only an outcome of localized and individual dimensions like age, gender, and marital status but that they have deeper relations with national and global powers who perpetuate institutionalized discrimination in such systems and how they are unable to give those group of women to give these assistance to live with dignity. In that case the widow become more vulnerable; feel lack of insecurity and valueless in the society. Here in this paper the research is divided into three parts- (a) first of all, the relationship between Vulnerability and Widows (b) secondly, the relationship between exclusion and widowhood and (c) finally, The relationship among exclusion, poverty and widowhood.

Keywords: *purdah, vulnerability, social exclusion, vulnerability, widowhood.*

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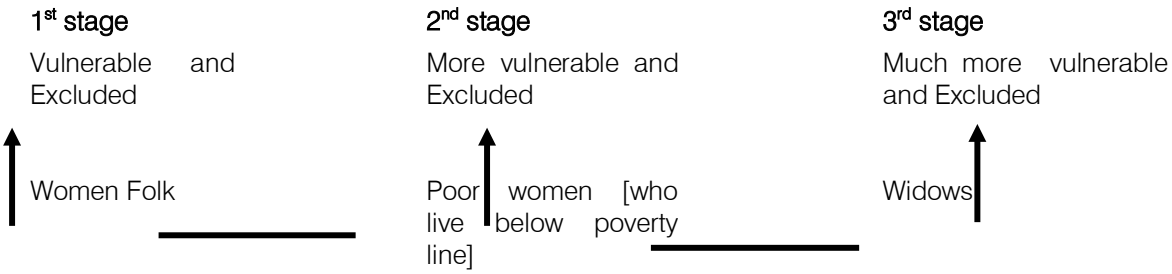
I. Introduction

Bangladesh is one of the poorest countries in the world, and half of its people are women. More than 85% of workers in the garments sectors are women. Globalization has helped to be employed many more women in the industrial and manufacturing sectors as wage laborers.

The present study is an attempt to assess the overall vulnerable situation and impacts of *Purdah* on the women who already lost their husbands and engaged themselves in the Ready-made garments sector (RMG) in Bangladesh. Because after widowhood women become identity less. Though there are many excluded social and economic groups in urban Bangladesh, the women garment workers are termed as one of the most potential excluded groups, especially the widow poor women who are excluded mostly in comparison to other socio-economic groups. The nature of vulnerabilities is presented in the following way.

II. Stages of Vulnerability



As a mother, a woman helps in shaping the personality of her children and help in building the nation. As a housewife she contributes a household level like the productive human capital. Apart from these, women herself represents a unit of human capital, and for that reason capable of making an effective contribution to the economy and society.

In Bangladesh, the destitute female -headed household members belong to the most vulnerable poor group, at present, about 23 percent of our households are female-headed and this increasing number of female- headed households has led to an environment of the feminization of poverty. About 0.48 million households of the total 3.45 million female-headed households in the country belong to the Vulnerable Group Development (VGD) programmer 'S [S.SR, VOL-1, (1999)][1].

Therefore, the present study aimed at to unearth the nature of overall vulnerability (economic, social, environmental, sexual, and psychological) of widows and the impact of *Purdah* on their daily livelihoods. This study also tried to analyze the nature of discrimination of

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[1] *SSR, VOL- 1, 1999: Women and Development in Bangladesh*

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widows workers in getting their actual labor rights and related facilities in the work environment.

Nazmir Nur Begum, Pay or Purdah: women and Income Earning in Bangladesh studies in Development and Social Change. Massy University, Palmerston, North New Zealand 1987. Showed that rural woman folk is discriminated against more than the urban women. Their discrimination started since they are born in this society. The traditional society emphasized on the religious education (Quran), religious norms, rules, patience, and sacrifices in accordance for women. When any girl in a traditional society reaches in puberty she has to observe *Purdah* and started to lessen her freedom inside and outside of the household level. Najmir Nur Begum (1987) described two issues in her paper. One is socio-economic forces or pays another one is cultural religious forces or purdah. The study reveals that to cope with the burgeoning problems of everyday life women and their guardians are obliged to seek compromise with the deals of purdah.

As the social status of women in our country is determined by male guardians and his income level, the women folk are also subject to her husband's subordination and pride. Even when any widowed or divorced women want to participate in income earning activities sometimes for society's negative or ill attitudes, they are compelled to maintain *Purdah* which is another barrier on the way of their economic earning activities and self-sufficiency. As widowed and divorced women are unable to participate in gainful economic activities or unable to express themselves easily for maintaining *Purdah*, lagged behind regarding social security, economic sustainability, and cultural equity. Even the separated and divorced women are higher in percentage for not getting a better opportunity and income earning activities. The researchers have identified one main reason behind the low percentage of participation of unmarried and married women in income earning activities - that is *Purdah* restrictions on them.

Iqbal Detho[2], The former secretary general for Amnesty International in Pakistan: Child Rights or Customs viewed in his article that *Purdah* is nothing but harmful traditional practices. That is the killing of women's soul in the name of honor or 'honor killings'. The author explored in his study that *Purdah* put restrictions on the behavior of women and on their movements. He also manifested that *Purdah* is socially constructed judgments by the male-elite and it's a way of understanding of the dominant force.

A.M. Sultana[1] Influence of Purdah (veil) on Education and Employment of Women in Rural Communities European Journal of Social Sciences – Volume11,

Number 2 (2009) explored in her research paper titled "(veil) on Education and Employment of women in rural Communities" that the relationship between the use of p*urdah* access to education and employment of rural women. Bangladesh the use of *Purdah* has a vast impact on women's access to education and employment because the former is seen to impede on women's freedom and mobility. Due to the practice of '*Purdah*' women are prohibited from going into the public, and they are mostly restricted to the home.

a) Specific Objectives

To extend the possible financial support to them in the context of strong Purdah norms.

The Broad objective of the study is to explore the nature of vulnerability of widowed/ the garment victims and also at apparently preventing them to be part of gainful income generating opportunities for maintaining their livelihoods.

III. Methodology of the Study

My present study is in qualitative in nature. There are four main aspects of the research methodology: design, sampling, data collection, the data analysis..Qualitative research relies much less on instruments, making the procedures all-important. The data collection is usually done by the researcher self. Qualitative research reports usually provide a very general idea of how the data was collected but provide few specifics. These reports rarely indicate what questions were posed in the interviews-indeed the questions often vary from one interviewee to the other, making a report of the questions impractical. The reports also rarely indicate what potentially important events were not observed because of various constraints.

In this article the data analysis of qualitative research is generally inductive, interactive, and iterative. Here I used mainly the following methods for data collection.

They are: 1. Case study 2. Primary sources 3. Secondary sources (BILS Library (Bangladesh Institute of Labour Studies), Trade Union Office of Topkhana Road., BCWS of Rampora, Dhaka University Central Library, Seminar of Sociology Department, Dhaka University, BGMEA Department's Health, Safety, Compliance and Women sections) 4. Unpublished Reports 5. Researcher's observation.

It usually involves the identification of categories, themes, relations among both, and the cross verification of tentative answers to descriptive, associational, and causal questions. The analysis is

[2] *Iqbal Detho, the former secretary general for Amnesty International in Pakistan; Pakistan : Child rights or customs.*

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often described or implied in the discussion of the findings.

Sampling Procedure: Purposive

The Operational view of Purdah

- *Purdah* Deny women of any opportunity to participate in the public sphere.
- *Purdah* Subordinate the self- interest of women
- *Purdah* Creates a conflict of interest among men and women
- *Purdah* Creates social isolation for women
- *Purdah* Social organizational and cultural prerequisites for women.
- *Purdah* Ideologically determined role for women.
- *Purdah* Structural barrier for women.
- *Purdah* Determined the division of labor.
- *Purdah* Code of honor & shame.
- *Purdah* Determined by Kinship & Social Stratification
- *Purdah* Controlled Ritualistically & traditionally the women folk
- *Purdah* Physically segregated the women folk
- *Purdah* Gender specific discrimination, subordination for women
- *Purdah* Related to honor, attention, respect, and modesty
- *Purdah* Restricts women's personal, social, cultural, psychological, sexual,political, emotional & Economic development and activities.
- *Purdah* In many societies it is a customary practice not necessarily religious
- *Purdah* Destroy the mental nourishment and creativity of Women
- *Purdah* Hinders women's rights, gender equality & sexuality.

The Operational Definition of Vulnerability

- Vulnerability means disasters.
- Vulnerability means not only natural disasters but also man-made disasters.
- Women can be vulnerable because of insecurity, sexual harassment or domestic violence in relation to natural hazards or because of political and economic exploitation and victimization.
- Vulnerability means exclusion.
  Vulnerability means the code of exploitation by others.

IV. Widowhood Exclusion and Pverty

Widowhood, Exclusion, and Poverty these three terms are very interrelated. In December 1997, the Social Exclusion Unit (SEU) was set up. The aims of the unit are to develop co-ordinate policies to address social exclusion, described as "Joined-up policies for a joined up problem". Social exclusion presented as a multi faceted problem. It is related to poverty, especially understandings of poverty which go beyond low income and address the multiple dimensions of deprivation.

In the remit of the SEU, (Social Exclusion Unit): social exclusion is described as a shorthand label for what can happen when individuals or areas suffer from a combination of linked problem such as: Unemployment, poor skills, low incomes, poor housing, high crime environment, bad health and family breakdown (SEU 1997)[3]

From the above mentioned social exclusion variables we can conclude that a widow woman is seriously affected by this indicator. Therefore, as a researcher, I can conclude that the women who lost their husbands are determined as a Excluded group by the society.

[3] *Social Exclusion unit, 1997*

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Table 1: Indicators of all Forms of Exclusion

Dimensions	Indicators
1) Economic Exclusion	1. Actualizations of job 2. Job insecurity 3. No housing settlement 4. Income less home 5. Asset and capacity poor
2) Social Exclusion	1. Breakdown of traditional households 2. Unwanted teenage pregnancies 3. Crime 4. Disaffected youth 5. Absent of parks, library. Theaters and network isolation 6. Health and sanitation 7. Infrastructure
3) Political Exclusion	1. Dis-empowerment 2. Lack of political rights 3. Low Registration of voters 4. Low level of community activity.5. Alienation 6. Lack of confidence in political process 7. Social Disturbance /Disorder.
4) Neighborhood Exclusion	1. Environmental degradation 2. Decaying structure 3. Withdraw of local services 4. A Collapse of support.
5) Individual Exclusion	1. Mental and physical ill-health 2. Educational under achievement 3. Loss of self-esteem /confidence
6) Spatial Exclusion	Concentration and Marginalization of vulnerable groups in particular places.
7) Group Exclusion	The Concentration of these negative characteristics in particular groups a. Elderly b. Disable c. Ethnic Minorities.

Overall poverty, as defined by the 1995 Copenhagen world summit on social development involves:

Lack of income and ensure sustainable livelihoods, hunger, and malnutrition, ill health, limited or lack of access to education and other basic services increased mobility and mortality from illness, homelessness and in adequate housing, unsafe environments and social discrimination and exclusion. It is also characterizes by lack of participation in decision-making and in civil, social, and cultural life. (United Nations 1995:57) From the above definitions it is clearly identified by that a woman who lost her husband is seriously affected by poverty and exclusion. That examined that widow woman is termed as a vulnerable group because of their poverty, Job insecurity, dis-empowerment, low level of community, collapse of support loss of self-esteem, mental and physical ill health, work less home and so on. Poverty results in exclusion from participation in social relationships. Poverty and social exclusion are important socio economic variables which are often taken for granted while considering vulnerability of widows. Social exclusion mainly refers to the inability of our Society to keep all groups and individuals within reach of what we expect as societies including developed countries and perhaps it is pronounced in underdeveloped countries. In our country for widowhood society mainly blamed the women they are leading an inhumane life. If there is no earning member after her husband then the family faced a lot of economic crisis.

Often for their security they have to take Purdah, but this kind of helps the ill motivators to signify their helplessness and most of the time the chance activities s of harassment increased. For maintaining Purdah it's very tough for the widow women to communicate others properly and often low paid/unpaid in their workplace, on the other hand, it is also found the widow women often forced to take Pardah by the family members, society or community. By the name of religion they did it: As a result, they never raise their voice for their rights, always face subjugated, underpowered, and finally mentally depressed.

V. Major Findings of that Study based on Secondary Information and Case Study

1. The widows in the RMG sector are living an inhuman life losing their husbands. They have no alternative way of earning source. Their Economic condition is quite terrible, and they also lost their only shelter because of poverty. They are living on the roads with their children. In that case, to meet up their children's hunger, they (widows) often take the illegal ways like prostitution, trafficking, drug selling etc. As a result. The structure of our society breaks down, and if this condition is going on, then there is no doubt that Bangladesh will known as not only a poor country also a risky country.
2. More than 85 % women constitute the labor force, but there is no safety of women in the society and also in the work place.
3. Most of the owner not compensated the women because of their any harassment or violation happened in the workplace.
4. Widows form the most vulnerable group in the society; the situation is even worse compared to that of other female and male counterparts.
5. Lack of awareness, the existence of poor law enforcement system and above all absence of trade unions are all that is to blame for this economic and environmental vulnerability of working widow women than a man. Women personal and married lives are

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more vulnerable than men. Widowed often pressurized by society and made them totally helpless, lonely, and depressed.

6. Most of the owner not compensated the widow women family if they lost their husbands because of occupational accidents.
7. The authority paying little attention for the victims' families' children responsibility. As a result, the children are engaged in any kind of risky or illegal activities and child labor is increasing.
8. To reduce the vulnerability and depression of the widows there is no effective step on behalf of Go and NGOs.

Women workers are deprived of the provisions of the Maternity Benefit Act. If any women lost her husband and she is pregnant, then there is no doubt that she does not gets maternity benefit because of her widowhood which made her more helpless under empowered and powerless. There is a moral lesson "Socialization starts from the family" and if we talked about women overall condition, and then have to say "violation. Oppression, subjugation of women starts from their family" women are unpaid for their family labor. Most of the time working women are also unpaid/low paid for their labor. The widow s condition is horrible in comparison to household women and working women. In Bangladesh, such basic rights of women and working women such as gender equality, decision making, minimum wage, daily working hours overtime, weekly holiday etc. are not ensured and protected and it is a big challenge for us to ensure compensation and labor rights of women who lost their husband because of occupational accidents.

VI. Limitations

As there was no major work on that issue therefore, I faced a lot of problems to get secondary information of that issue. Moreover, Absence of related literature showing the relationship between widows and their vulnerability and the impacts of purdah on them created more challenge for me to conduct the research.

VII. Conclusions and Recommendations

No development would be possible taking the women specially widowed outside of that 'Vulnerability and Exclusion' issue. Women constituting highest percentage of the labor force in our country. In spite of this, they are paying very little attention. They are always deprived of getting basic fundamental rights as a working woman like minimum wages, health care, safety etc. Moreover, most of industries not permitted to form trade union on behalf of them. Though our country got liberation in 1971 but there is still no independence of the women. They are living as the subject to other both in the formal sector and also in the household level. Sorry to say, there is no fruitful law enforces for them. Most of the working women do not know about their safety, about the compensation for diseases or disablement arising in case of employment sectors. They are totally unskilled and ignored. The particular nature of work in the RMG sector creates various types of health hazards especially for women. Most of the women workers specially Widowed do not get any medical facilities. They identified some health problems such as: physical weakness due to heavy workload and little rest, malnutrition, headache. In that case as a researcher I identified some recommendations in order for the betterment of the widowed women. They are:

- Security system should be strengthened and be developed for the welfare of widow women.
- The government should generate safe employment opportunity in order to reduce widow women vulnerability and economic certainty.
- It is important to generate trade union for better beneficiaries of widow women.
- It is also highly important to ensure legal rights, programmes and compensations to stabilize their (widow women) positions in family and also in society.
- If any widow women are jobless then provide some vocational training from the Government and Non-Government organizations to make them empowered and skilled.
- Effective and massive public awareness programs should be initiated to stop exclusion of widow women. Some effective social, administrative and legal measure to be taken so that widow women folk are able to defend and secured themselves from such exclusion.
- Community mobilization against vulnerability of such widow women should be introduced.
- Within the community a strong monitoring system should be launched so that no criminal activities, including domestic violence remain unreported.
- The role of the government should be non partisan and impartial in giving rights and economic support to reduce their (widow women) vulnerability.
- The concerned authority should introduce some innovative and effective programs for preventing institutional crimes and violence of widow women.
- Effective and appropriate poverty reduction strategy and program should be initiated in the areas where the widow women lived so that local people's participation can be ensured. The adoption of all possible measures to prevent the widow women trafficking in the areas.
- The civil society can play positive role in controlling exclusion and reducing socio-economic vulnerability of widow women in our society. Even they can initiate a number of welfare programs with the collaboration of Go and NGOS.

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- The deprived female widow worker may be allowed to go to the court directly without the interventions of labor inspectors/directors.
- There should be provision of medical facilities for the vulnerable widow women.
- Group insurance may be introduced to provide required facilities for female headed family.
- There is no such system or mechanism for getting the maternity benefits for the employers in the work place. A central welfare fund can be created for the workers, and part of that fund can be used for the women who are pregnant and also lost their husbands because of occupational accidents.
- If any worker died because of occupational accidents, it is very difficult to identify actual identity of the worker because naturally, workers are widely scattered and change their workplace frequently. So, it is difficult to maintain their identify regularly and workers themselves are not interested to provide their identity. The result is, after death the workers wife faced/failed to get compensation or insurance money from the authority. So, at first it is important to preserve actual identity of the workers of the factory. By which, widows can get their legal rights or compensation from the authority and can less their economic vulnerability. For that case, the authority has to start different awareness raising campaign.
- Most of the time if the earning member of a family died the female one drop first then the children is engaged in risky work to meet up their needs. So, it is a highly important issue to give support of this female headed family and reduce child labor.
- Newspaper and the media should publicize the issue to give socio-economic support and benefits for the widow women who lost their husbands, so, that the relevant authorities are inspired and motivated to comply with the legal requirements in this regard.

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