

LIVING CONDITIONS, TRANSPORTATION NEEDS & CHALLENGES

A STUDY OF WOMEN FACTORY WORKERS IN YANGON, MYANMAR



RESEARCH HIGHLIGHTS

- Over 400,000 workers are employed in the garment sector in Myanmar and more than 90 percent of these workers are women.
- The government has failed to stipulate laws and regulations for monitoring and controlling factory-provided transportation services and basic infrastructure and pricing in the housing zones.
- Among the four types of housing available for factory workers in Yangon—private-rental housing, factory-provided housing, NGO shelter, and squatter housing—near the industrial zone, the private-rental housing is the most common type used by this population. Factory-provided housing is found to be least reliable by women factory workers.
- Most factories provide transportation to their workers, although the quality of the service is substandard and many workers cannot access it easily. The safety of women workers travelling to and from the factory is impacted by the poor quality of the vehicles and the poor skills and attitude of the ferry drivers.
- The government, factory owners and labor organizations as three key stakeholders, have important roles to play in addressing and mitigating the issues faced by these factory workers and improve their socioeconomic conditions and wellbeing.

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Many developing and emerging countries have attained economic growth by offering attractive investment opportunities for foreign direct investment (FDI) (Myint & Rasiah, 2012). The abundance of labor in developing countries has also been an attractive factor for labor-intensive export-oriented industries and labor-intensive manufacturers have relocated their factories to the Global South for its low production and labor costs (Kusakabe & Melo, 2019). As a result, “the labor-intensive export-oriented industries such as garment factories have become key pillars in developing and emerging countries’ economic development plans” (ibid., p. 4).

Approximately 80 percent of the garment sector workforce is represented by women across the world (ILO, 2018a). Under the Multi-Fiber Agreement (MFA), Myanmar capitalized on the opportunity to enter the global garment produc-

The choice among private-rental housing is determined by household earnings and budget. Overall, the quality of private-rental housing is sub-standard and many lacking basic infrastructure and amenities like electricity, clean air, clean water, and even natural light as well as issues of neighborhood safety and privacy.

tion network by attracting foreign capital (Myint & Rasiah, 2012). The government liberalized its foreign investment and trade sectors. According to the Myanmar Garment Manufacturers Association (MGMA) membership list, approximately 50 percent of the registered garment factories in Myanmar are foreign-owned or joint ventures between Myanmar and foreign companies (Kusakabe & Melo, 2019).

The garment industry in Myanmar has created significant employment opportunities for young people, especially women, from both rural and sub-urban areas. In fact, over 400,000 workers are

employed in the garment sector in Myanmar and more than 90 percent of these workers are women (ILO, 2018b). Employers prefer recruiting young unmarried women from rural and agricultural backgrounds, categorized as unskilled labor, and thus also easily replaceable (Mack, 2004).

These women workers in Myanmar face unsafe and poor working conditions, including low wages and violence at the workplace (Kusakabe & Melo, 2019). Wages in Myanmar's garment sector were the lowest among garment exporting countries in 2004 and continue to be at the lower end (Myint and Rasiah, 2012). Along with poor working conditions in the factories lack of proper accommodation is another major obstacle facing migrant women workers, especially in urban areas (Absar, 2002). Previous research has found that since women tend to be employed in low pay and low status jobs, they are immediately disadvantaged in their ability to independently gain access to housing (Munro & Smith, 1995). Further, job opportunities are usually affected by the location of housing (ibid.). Women are at a greater disadvantage than men with regard to geographical linkages between housing and labor markets, especially if they have limited access to private transport and have greater domestic responsibilities (ibid.).

Research indicates that the lack of proper ac-

commodation is a common problem for women garment factory workers, especially migrants, a majority of who live in slum areas (Ali & Islam, 2017; Sikdar, Sarkar, & Sadeka, 2014). Garment factory workers from rural areas cannot access a good standard of living, especially for housing, because of the higher cost of living in the city compared to the rural areas and because they have to save money for remittance (Chansamphors, 2008). "Migrants are often excluded from mainstream housing distribution or other formal housing arrangements, which can lead to challenges in terms of safety, security, basic infrastructure and services" (Kusakabe et al., 2018, pp. 1-2). Similarly, transportation to and from the workplace is an important factor which determines women's participation in economic activities and in the labor market. Women are more likely to value the safety, security and flexibility of the factory-provided transportation services rather than the travel time and its costs (Lecompte & Bocarejo, 2017).

A review of the existing government policies indicate that the government failed to adequately provide for basic infrastructures such as water supply, electricity, road, waste management, and drainage and sanitation in the new town development plan. Similarly, the government has no specific

guidelines or regulations on the provision of housings/dormitories for workers within the factory compound or near the industrial zones in the industrial zone development policy. Thus



Methodology

- This study uses the qualitative data collection and data analysis methods.
- In-depth interviews.
- Key informant interviews.

Respondents

- IDI with 45 migrant women working in garment factories in the Hlaing Thar Yar Industrial Zone of Yangon.
- KII with Government officials, parliament members, factory owners, private-rental housing owners, and NGO representatives.

although Myanmar has enacted laws to protect labor rights—Factories Act 1951 (amended in 2016), The Leave and Holidays Act, 1951 (amended in 2016), Labor Organization Law (No. 7 of 2011), The Minimum Wage Act, 2013 (amended in 2018), etc.—the implementation and enforcement of these rules and regulations in the garment factories is found lacking.

The Study

This study investigates the living conditions and transportation use of women factory workers in Yangon, Myanmar. It focuses on:

- The different types of housing available; accessibility and safety issues with regard to housing
- Different types of transportation available to and from the workplace; accessibility and safety issues with regard to transportation



Housing

Data indicates that the following four are the currently available types of housing used by the women factory workers. Of these four, private-rental housing was the most commonly used. Conversely, none of the women garment factory workers in our study currently live in the factory-provided dormitories because their employers have not provided housing for workers. Moreover, respondents find this housing type least reliable as factory workers who have factory-provided housing can easily be removed if they fail to follow the rules and regulations of the factory.

Private-rental housing

This is the most common type of housing among the women garment factory workers because of the low rent. In this study, 42 out of 45 women factory workers live in this type of housing, which includes wooden or bamboo bungalows, one-story wooden dormitories, and two-story wooden or concrete dormitories. Single women factory workers live in the dormitory-type of private-rental housing and share the room with their parents, relatives or friends. Most single women factory workers with a low family income (between 300,000 kyats and 400,000 kyats per month) live in the wooden dormitory-type of housing, while some single women factory workers with a high family income (above 500,000 kyats per month) live in the concrete dormitory-type housing.

“We earn about 300,000-350,000 kyats per month...I live in a one-story wooden dormitory and my room is about 6 feet wide and 10 feet long. My cousin sister and I live in this room. Boys also live here...the rental fee is 40,000 kyats per month and 20,000 kyats for each of us.”



The price is convenient for us and many of our relatives live in this hostel.”

(21-year-old single woman factory worker)

The bungalow-type of private-rental housing is the most common type of housing for married women factory workers with a high family income. In this study 15 of the 17 married women factory workers currently live in this type of housing.

“Our family income is about 700,000-800,000 kyats...Our house is a wooden bungalow; it is 50,000 kyats per month. I don't know the exact size of my house, but it is not too big. We, six people, live in this house. Anyway, we can live privately with our family and it is more convenient for our married life.”

(26-year-old married woman factory worker)

However, the quality of these private-rental housings is lower than the minimum standard

of housing; they lacked electricity, clean air, clean water, and even access to natural light in some cases. Moreover, the private-rental housing and its environment failed to serve the privacy and security of women factory workers. Overall, most of the women garment factory workers are living in low-quality housing in unsecure environments.

Factory-provided dormitory

The second type of available housing for women garment factory workers is the factory-provided dormitory. These types of housings are usually provided by the factory owners within the factory compound. However, a limited number of factory workers can access this type of housing because only few factory owners provide this accommodation to their workers. None of the women garment factory workers in this study use this type of accommodation.

NGO shelter

Thone Pan Hla Organization, a non-profit organization which focuses on the welfare of women factory workers, provides this third type of accommodation. Newly arrived single women workers and other single women workers who face housing difficulties in Yangon can contact this organization to live in their shelter. The organization currently houses 15 single women factory workers on the upper floor of their training center in Hlaing Thar Yar Township. Two of the respondents live in this shelter. However, the shelter is not free of charge; the residents have to pay 13,000 kyats per month per person. The shelter was also perceived to be more safe and secure than the other types of housings since it is occupied by single women workers only. One of the residents of the shelter, a 22-year-old single woman, says:

“This is two-story concrete building and the room is hall-type. About 15 people (girls) live in this hostel...It cost 13,000 kyats per month, including electricity and water. No additional cost to live here, Thone Pan Hla provides even the dish-washing liquid. And I feel safe because we are all women.”



Squatter housing

This is the last type of housing for women garment factory workers. By building a bamboo/wooden hut in a slum area illegally as a squatter, anyone can access this type of housing. Being part of a social network in the squatter area makes it easy to have squatter housing. However, squatter housing can be easily destroyed and removed by the government any time. One respondent, a 19-year-old single woman factory worker, says:

“I live in squatter housing with my grandmother. The house was built by her. She has lived here since 2009. Many of my grandmother’s friends also lived here and they asked my grandmother to move here. This is how my grandmother got this place. Last year, she also received a slip for landownership to resettle. The government gives one slip per household. The government can remove us any time but we can live here for now.”

Finally, irrespective of the type, the overall poor physical conditions of available housing are harmful to the health of women garment factory workers, especially in the long term. Added to that, the poor social environment of housing adds to their security risk and lack of wellbeing. Although most of the women garment factory workers are not satisfied on their current housing situations, they have few choices available in or-

der to be able to save more and be able to move back to their hometowns with adequate savings in the future.

Transportation

In the study area of Hlaing Thar Yar Industrial Zone in Yangon, most garment factories provide transportation to their workers (buses and trucks; called “ferry” by workers). However, the government has failed to stipulate the laws and regulations to monitor and control the factory-provided transportation service. As a result, accessing this transportation service and safety are a challenge for the women factory workers.

Accessibility

Most women factory workers’ housing is at a distance from the main road. Since workers access the factory-provided transportation service on the main road, they have to walk a considerable distance from their house to the main road, which, on average, takes 15 to 20 minutes. In this study, 38 out of 45 women factory workers reported that the distance between their housing and the ferry gate affected their ability to access factory-provided transport.

“It is not convenient because the ferry

doesn't pick us up in front of the hostel and I need to walk 15 minutes in the morning to the ferry gate and 20 minutes in the evening."

(39-year-old single woman factory worker)

"I don't want to mention how difficult it is to catch the ferry in the morning. I quickly wash my face, brush my teeth and change my clothes and run to the ferry gate. It takes about 15 minutes."

(22-year-old single woman factory worker)

For married women factory workers with children, the problem of distance and accessibility is more challenging, and some end up using other modes of transport at their own cost. A 26-year-old married woman factory worker says:

"Somedays I can't wake up early because I don't sleep well at night if my son gets sick or if he doesn't sleep at night and is crying...The ferry doesn't wait for me. So, I usually don't take the ferry in the morning and I go to the factory by foot or by bus or by bicycle, mostly by foot. But I take the ferry in the evening."

For some women, the ferry pick-up time is too early, even though working hours begin at 8 a.m. in most factories. In this study, 14 out of 45 women factory workers do not use the factory-provided transportation service. Among them, 6 women factory workers don't take the service in the morning, but they take the ferry in the evening, while the other 8 women workers use other means of transportation (public bus, motorcycle taxi, bicycle, or walking). Although 31 women factory workers currently use factory-provided transportation, they too struggle with the early

pick-up time.

"It is not possible for me to take the ferry in the morning because the ferry time is very early (6 a.m.). So, I always walk about 30-40 minutes to the factory in the morning but I take the ferry in the evening."

(28-year-old married woman factory worker)

Safety

Personal safety when commuting to and from the factory is one of the great concern for these women garment factory workers. They have to take the ferry early morning, around 6 a.m., and late evening, around 8 p.m., and have to walk from their housing to the main road to the relevant ferry gate. With no streetlights, the women have to walk in the dark. This arises as a challenge due to the overall safety of the neighborhood where the women may face theft, violence and sexual harassment and are also at risk for trafficking. According to one private rental housing owner, the





workers' housing area in Hlaing Thar Yar Township is in an unsafe area.

“Many gangsters and robbers are near here. Drug users and human traffickers too. They wait for the women factory workers in the dark to rob phones, gold, and money. Some gangsters work in foreign countries like Thailand and Malaysia, and they rape and traffic girls. Two girls were raped and trafficked last month.”

Women find safety in numbers and walk in groups with sisters, relatives and friends. We found 28 women factory workers in this study using this strategy to protect themselves.

“Motorcycle taxi drivers jeer at me almost every day. But I think it is safe because I am not alone and I walk with my sisters. Walking alone is not safe for me; I don't dare walk alone along that street.”

(21-year-old single woman factory worker)

There are also some safety concerns relating to the physical condition of the ferry and the skills and attitude of the driver (some are drunk in the evenings; some are not well-trained).

“Sometime it is not safe for me because

the driver is very rough and drunk and drives very fast in the evening. I had an accident once, at night, because the brakes failed and the ferry hit a tree. Fortunately, no one was injured.”

(19-year-old single woman factory worker)

Our respondents did not report any sexual harassment during their commute on the ferries. Most felt safe on the ferry because fellow passengers are mostly girls and women (some ferries have no boys or men workers).

“The ferry is very crowded but I have not experienced any sexual harassment on the ferry because all are girls and women. I am safe on the ferry.”

(28-year-old single woman factory worker)

“Most of the ferry users are girls in our ferry. There are some boys, only 1 or 2, but they treat us like their sisters. So, I feel safe.”

(26-year-old married woman factory worker)

Conclusion

The findings indicate that among the four types of housings available for factory workers in Yangon near the industrial zone, the dormitory-type private-rental housing is the most common among single women factory workers. On the other hand, for most married women factory workers, the ideal type of housing is the bungalow-type of private-rental housing. However, the different housings fail to enhance the socioeconomic well-being of factory workers because of poor physical and environmental conditions.

Most factories provide transportation to their

workers, although the quality of the service is substandard. Most of the women factory workers in this study struggle to use factory-provided transportation and sometimes have to use other modes of transportation such as public bus or motorcycle taxi. Among the women factory workers, married women with young children face greater difficulties in accessing the service, especially in the mornings, because of child-care responsibilities. Most women garment factory workers are not safe walking the distance between their housing and ferry gate and have to move in groups to ensure personal safety.

The investigation of the needs and challenges

faced by the women factory workers with respect to housing and transportation indicates that there is no single solution to providing for the varied socio-economic needs and challenges faced by different women. However, the government, factory owners and labor organizations as three key stakeholders have important roles to play in addressing and mitigating the issues faced by these factory workers and improve their socioeconomic conditions and wellbeing. In other word, cooperation between the government, factory owners, and the labor organizations has the power to solve many of the basic housing and transportation challenges faced by the women garment factory workers today.

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