

Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights of Female Garment Workers in Bangladesh: A Cohort Profile

| Ruchira Tabassum Naved¹, Mahfuz Al Mamun¹, Jannatul Ferdous Antu¹, Aloka Talukder¹, Sultan Mahmud¹, Kaniz Fatema¹

¹icddr,b

Background

- Ensuring Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights (SRHR) is vital for health, human rights and social and economic development.
- Female Garment Workers (FGWs) are one of the largest groups of women employed in the formal sector in Bangladesh.
- Little is known about the state of SRHR of Bangladeshi FGWs and how it evolves over time.
- Limited existing evidence suggests that, FGWs do not necessarily fare better in SRHR than their non-working peers [1-3].
- The current study was designed to address some of these gaps.

Objectives

- To **assess the state of SRHR** of the FGWs relating to Family Planning (FP), teenage pregnancy, unintended pregnancy, abortion, and violence.
- To **explore the factors underlying** the current situation.
- To **document changes in SRHR** over a 24-month period.

Methods

Study design:

Mixed-method longitudinal fixed cohort.

However, this current write-up focused only on the quantitative study.

Study sites:

Korail, Mirpur and Tongi slums covered by icddr,b's Urban Health and Demographic Surveillance System (U-HDSS).



Sample size and Sampling:

778 at enrolment

- A list of eligible FGWs were obtained from the U-HDSS and then validated through household visits to create a sampling frame.
- All the eligible FGWs were then approached to enrol in the cohort.

Eligibility criteria for FGWs at enrolment:

Inclusion criteria

Employment status: Currently working in the RMG sector

Age: 15-27 yrs

Marital status: Currently married

Exclusion criteria

Has a plan for out-migration within the next two years

Duration of cohort follow up:

24 months, data collected at 6-month intervals

Cohort tracking:

Quarterly follow-up phone calls to update contact information

Data analysis

Analyses presented here include 551 FGWs who completed enrolment, 1y and 2y follow-ups

Data collection period:



Cohort Characteristics

Socio-demographic characteristics of FGWs at enrolment (Table 1)

- 10% of the participants were adolescents.
- Educational attainment was generally low (mean: 6 years).
- 69% were married before age 18, and 30% before age 15.
- The average duration of marriage for them was 7 years.
- 25% had no child, while 56% had one child.
- Two-thirds of the sample resided in nuclear families.

Table 1. Background characteristics of FGWs aged 15-27 years at enrolment, 2022, n=551

Characteristics	Mean / %
Mean age, year (range)	23 (16-27)
Age, year, %	
16-19	10
20-24	55
25-27	36
Mean education, year (range)	6 (0-15)
Age at first marriage, year, %	
< 15	21
15-17	48
≥ 18	31
Mean duration of marriage, year (range)	7 (0-15)
Duration of marriage, year, %	
<5	30
5-10	57
>10	13
Mean number of children (range)	0.9 (0-3)
Number of children, %	
0	25
1	56
2-3	19
Type of family, nuclear, %	68

Employment-related characteristics of the FGWs at enrolment (Table 2)

- 39% of FGWs worked in a single garment factory and the rest worked in multiple factories.
- Half had worked in the garment sector for more than 5 years.
- Only 1% had trade union membership.

Table 2. FGWs' work-related characteristics, enrolment, n=551

Characteristics	Mean / %
Mean number of garment factories worked in (range)	2 (1-7)
Total number of garment factories worked in, %	
1	39
2	35
3-7	26
Mean years of employment in garment sector (range)	5 (0-17)
Duration of employment in garment sector, year, %	
0-2	24
3-5	28
>5	49
Member of a trade union, %	1

Background characteristics of husbands of FGWs (Table 3)

- The husbands were about five years older than the FGWs.
- The spouses had similar educational attainment.
- 41% of the husbands were employed in the garment sector.

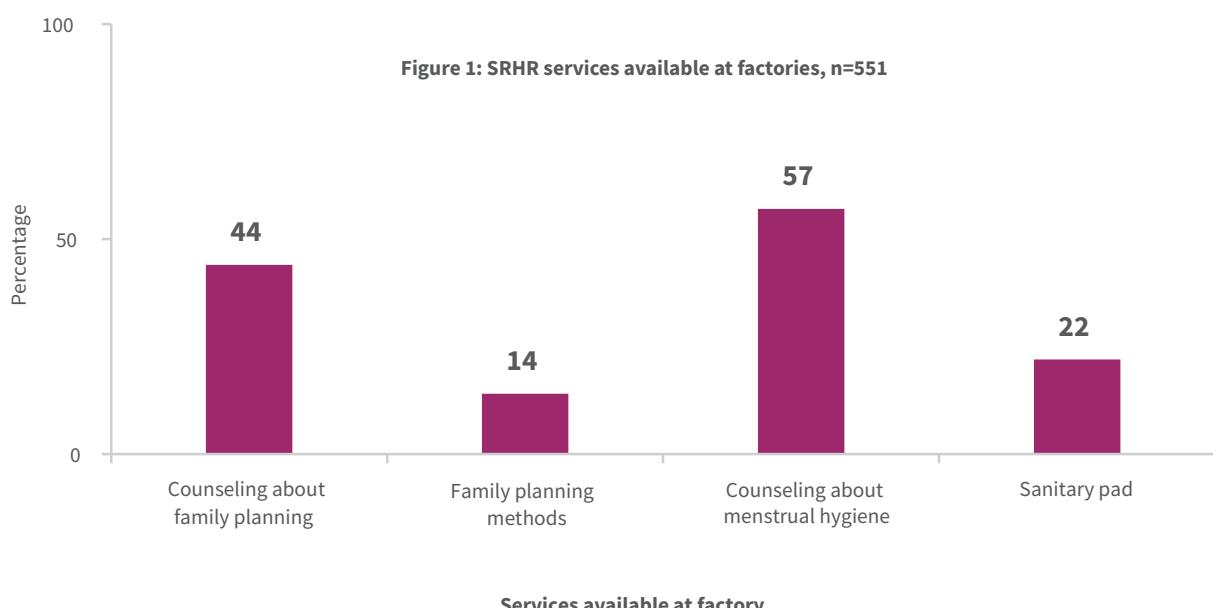
Table 3. Background characteristics of husbands of FGWs, n=551

Characteristics	Mean / %
Mean age, year (range)	28 (18-40)
Age, year, %	
< 25	18
25-29	49
≥ 30	33
Mean education, year (range)	6 (0-17)
Level of education, year, %	
No education	17
1-5	37
6-10	40
≥ 11	7
Husband's occupation, %	
Unemployed	3
Garment worker	41
Day labour	19
Private service	10
Others	28

SRHR services available at factories at enrolment (Figure 1)

According to FGWs' reports:

- Counselling about FP was available in 44% factories and 14% made FP methods available to their workers.
- Counselling on menstrual hygiene management was available in 57% factories and sanitary pads were available in 22% factories.

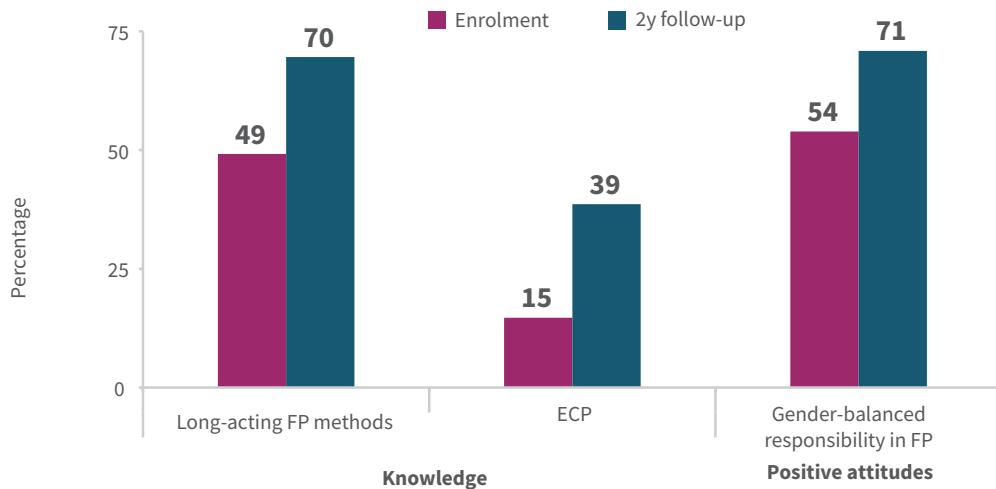


Key Findings

Changes in FGWs' knowledge and attitudes regarding Family Planning (FP) (Figure 2)

- FGWs' Knowledge of long-acting FP increased from 49% at enrolment to 70% at the 2-year follow-up.
- Knowledge regarding emergency contraceptive pills increased from 15% at enrolment to 39% at 2-year follow-up.
- Gender equitable attitudes regarding FP increased from 54% at enrolment to 71% at the 2-year follow-up.

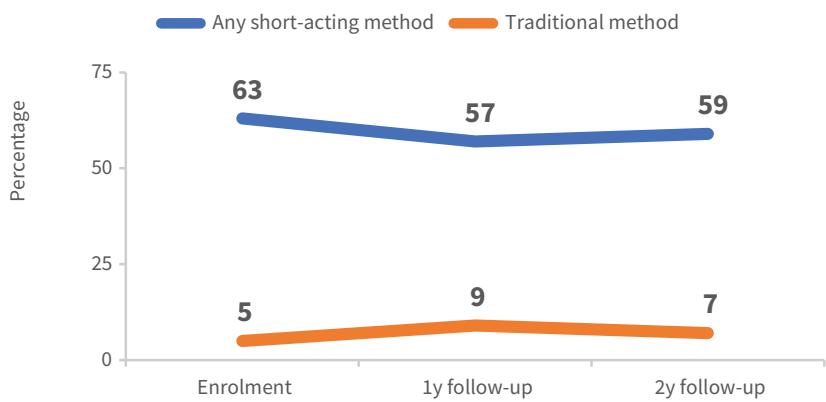
Figure 2. FGWs' knowledge and attitudes regarding FP, n=551



Changes in FGWs' current use of FP (Figure 3)

A slight decline in current use of short-acting method and a slight increase in traditional method was observed over time.

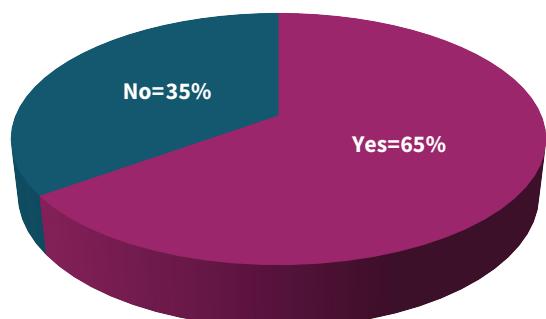
Figure 3. Current use of FP methods among FGWs, n=551



Prevalence of teenage pregnancy, cross sectional data from enrolment (Figure 4)

Teenage pregnancy was highly prevalent (65%) among FGWs.

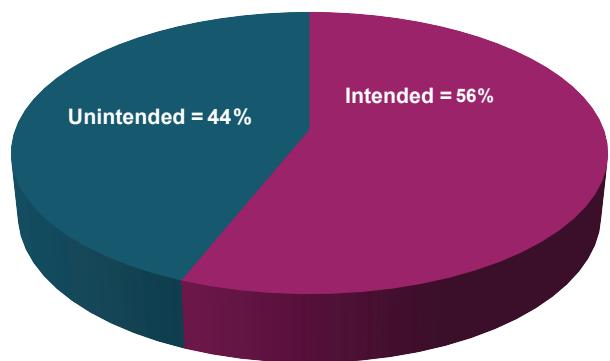
Figure 4. Prevalence of teenage pregnancy among FGWs, n=764



Prevalence of unintended pregnancy among FGWs (Figure 5)

The prevalence of unintended pregnancy among ever-pregnant FGWs was high, with 44% reporting over their lifetime.

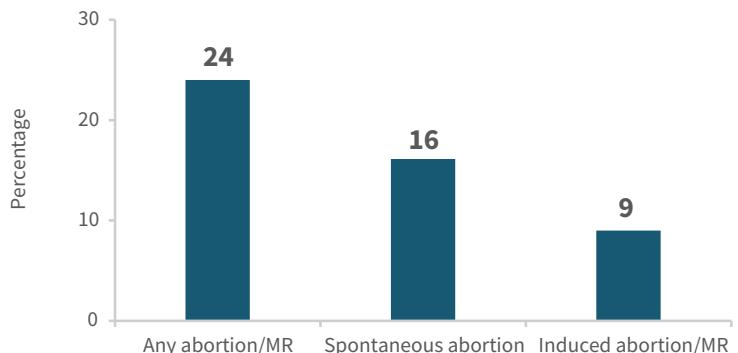
Figure 5. Prevalence of lifetime unintended pregnancy among ever pregnant FGWs, n=512



Prevalence of abortion/MR, pooled data from enrolment to 2-year follow-up (Figure 6)

- One in four FGWs reported ever having spontaneous and/or induced abortion/MR. An FGW could experience both spontaneous and induced abortion/MR
- 16% reported ever experiencing a spontaneous abortion and 9%—an induced abortion/MR.

Figure 6. Prevalence of abortion/MR among FGWs, n=551

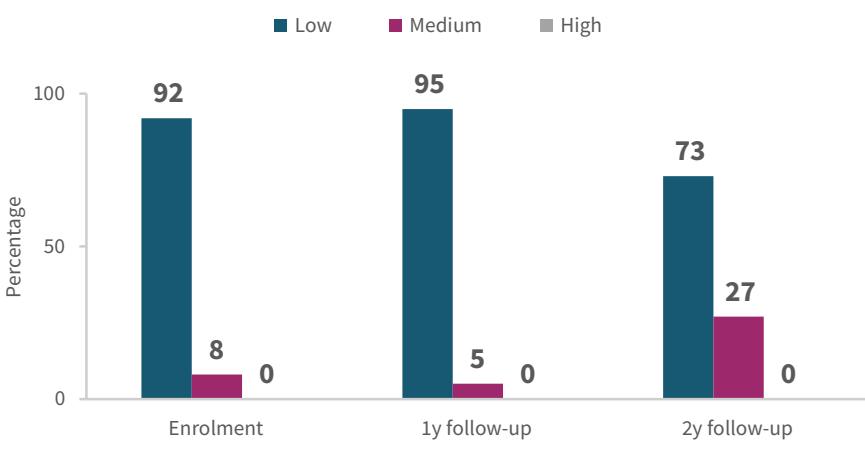


Changes in instrumental agency of FGWs' over time (Figure 7)

Instrumental agency involves the creative power to exercise one's capabilities; make one's own strategic choices; pursue one's rights, goals, and aspirations; and affect desired change in one's life.

- At enrolment, 92% of FGWs had low instrumental agency, while 8% had medium.
- By the 2-year follow-up, low agency decreased to 73% and medium agency increased to 27%.
- No FGW reported high agency at any time point.

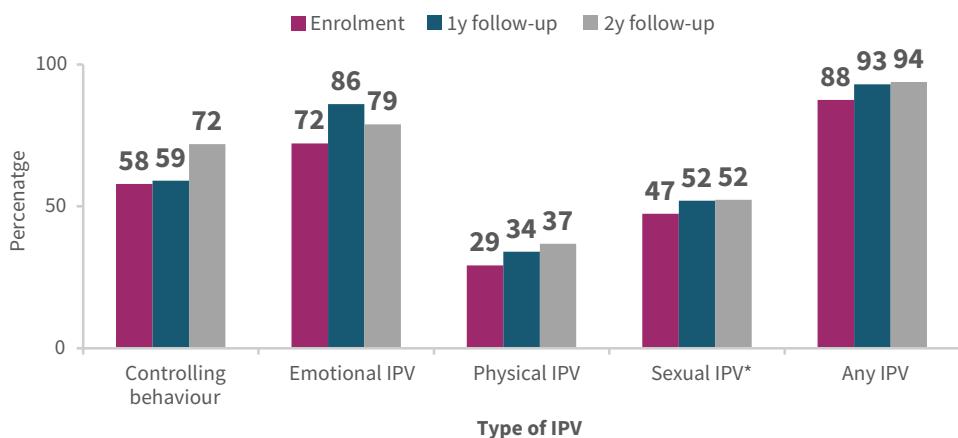
Figure 7. Instrumental agency among FGWs, n=551



Change over time in prevalence of intimate partner violence (IPV) among FGWs during the last 12 months (Figure 8)

Experience of IPV was highly prevalent among the FGWs, and all types of IPV—except sexual IPV increased significantly over a 2-year period.

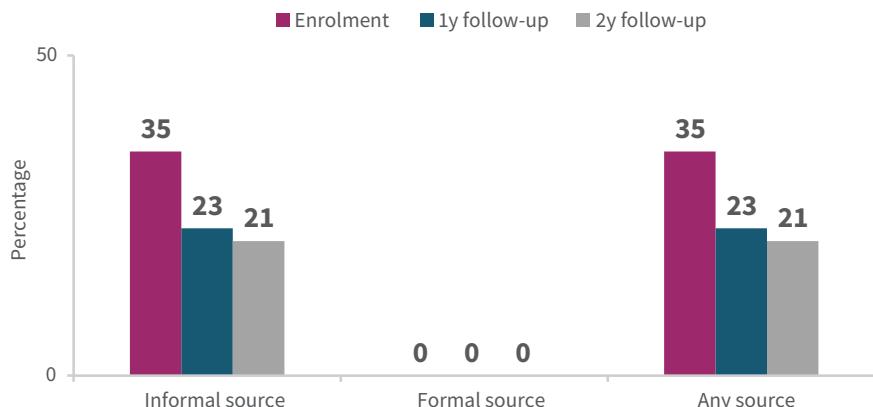
Figure 8. Prevalence of IPV among FGWs, last 12 months, n=551



Changes in help-seeking among physical and/or sexual IPV survivors over a 2-year period (Figure 9)

- About 35% of the FGWs sought help from informal sources at enrolment. However, this proportion declined to 23% at 1-year follow-up, and further declined to 21% at the 2-year follow-up.
- None of the FGWs who experienced physical and/or sexual IPV sought help from any formal source at any time point.

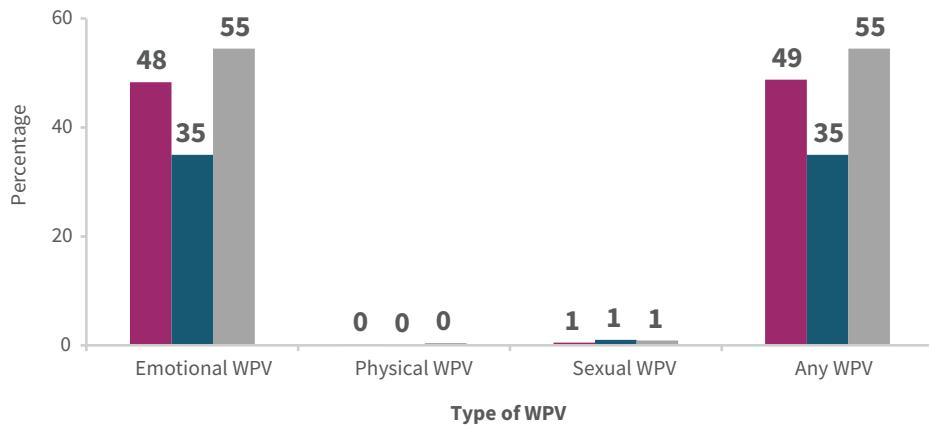
Figure 9. Help-seeking FGWs physical and/or sexual IPV survivors



Change over time in prevalence of Workplace Violence (WPV) among FGWs in the last 12 months (Figure 10)

- Nearly half of the FGWs reported experiencing emotional WPV at enrolment, and this proportion declined to 35% at the 1-year follow-up but then increased significantly, reaching 55% at 2-year follow-up.
- Reports of physical and sexual WPV among FGWs, however, were low across all the time points.

Figure 10. FGWs' experience of different types of WPV, n=551



Changes in help-seeking among WPV survivors over a 2-year period (data not shown)

At 1-year follow-up, only one-fifth of FGWs who experienced WPV reported the incident to the authority, and this proportion did not change significantly at 2-year follow-up.

Discussion

This is the first ever longitudinal cohort study of FGWs living in urban slums of Bangladesh. The findings highlight the following.

- Early marriage and early childbearing remain pervasive among FGWs with higher than the national rates [4].
- Rates of unintended pregnancy and abortion rates were also higher among FGWs compared to the national rates [4], suggesting gaps in family planning knowledge and limited access.
- FGWs face a dual burden of IPV and WPV. The prevalence of IPV in last 12 months was alarmingly high, with increases in all types of IPV except sexual IPV over the follow-up period. The rates were higher than the national rates [5].
- Help-seeking among physical and/or sexual IPV survivors were limited and lower than the national rate [5]. Only one-third of the survivors of physical and/or sexual IPV ever sought help from informal sources, which decreased over time. None of the IPV survivors sought formal support. Only one-fifth of the survivors reported incidents of WPV to the authority, with no improvement over time. This may reflect pervasive stigma, fear of retaliation, normalization of violence, and limited availability of support services.
- While factories commonly offered counselling related to menstrual hygiene management and family planning, the supply of necessary products were limited. This highlights a missed opportunity to leverage workplaces as platforms for integrated SRHR services for women who often lack access elsewhere.

Limitations

- The cohort was restricted to young FGWs aged 15–27 years at enrolment. Thus, the results are not generalizable to older FGWs.
- Relatively short duration of cohort restricted the ability to capture changes in rare events, e.g., unintended pregnancy, birth spacing, abortion.

Strengths

- Different dimensions of SRHR of FGWs were captured in this cohort, including violence.
- Repeated follow-ups allowed us to assess change in SRHR indicators over time.
- Longitudinal data enable identification of factors that cause compromised SRHR outcomes.

Recommendations

- The study highlights critical areas for intervention and policy attention.
- Factory-level services and interventions to promote SRHR must be in place. The fact that 41% of the husbands of FGWs were also garment workers reveals a window of opportunity to address SRHR targeting both female and male factory workers.
- Support services for survivors of violence must be made available to the FGWs and the barriers to accessing those services have to be addressed.
- Agency of the FGWs needs to be strengthened for accessing SRHR.

References

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Advancing Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights (AdSEARCH) by icddr,b

68, Shaheed Tajuddin Ahmed Sarani, Mohakhali, Dhaka 1212

Email: adsearch_official@icddrb.org | **Website:** adsearch.icddrb.org

[icddrb-adsearch](#) [/icddrb.adsearch](#)

