PTSD Among Working Women in a Developing Country

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Key Implications

- Mental health conditions are highly prevalent among female factory workers.
- Mental illnesses have serious consequences on female factory workers' well being, quality of life, and working lives.
- The resources of dealing with mental health among female factory workers needs to be improved.

Background

Despite the heightened attention on and emerging evidence of mental health condition in developed countries, very limited studies in developing countries have been conducted on post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) prevalence. Mental health status of the population is often ignored or under-diagnosed there, and awareness among healthcare providers on this issue is also very low. Despite being a highly prevalent health issue, there have been few studies looking at the association between traumatic events and the development of PTSD in low-income countries. Women in Bangladesh, one of the largest developing countries in the world, like many other developing countries suffer from a number of socioeconomic and health issues, such as few social protections and higher economic insecurity, causing a high risk of PTSD among working-age women. Mental health status of working women in developing countries has largely been ignored even though most Western companies and consumers continue to benefit immensely from this cheap workforce.

Focus of Study

The goals of this study were to (1) determine the prevalence of PTSD, (2) identify types and number of traumas related to screening positive for PTSD, and (3) determine other sociodemographic risk factors and health/medical conditions that may be correlated with PTSD among garment-factory workers and a comparable working population in Bangladesh.

Research Design

The participants were recruited at garment factories and others who were invited to come to the Centre for the Rehabilitation of the Paralyzed – a large local non-governmental organization. The comparison group was made up of tailors, beauticians, housekeepers, shopkeepers, and secretaries. Each participant took a survey containing components about demographic and health conditions, Chronic Pain Scale, Life Events Checklist, Post-traumatic Stress Disorder Checklist-Specific, and Patient Health Questionnaire 9. The logistic regression model was applied to investigate the influence of risk factors on PTSD.
Key Findings

Among 607 subjects, 52% (N = 310) were garment workers, who were younger, had more dependents, earned less, were employed for shorter tenure, worked fewer days a week, more likely to have only primary school education, were more likely to be married and were working full-time. The three most commonly reported traumatic events were natural disasters, fire/explosions, and exposure to sudden accidental death. Averagely, a participant encountered 3.2 traumatic events. A total of 108 participants was admitted to be exposed to a traumatic event, and 17.79% of them screened positive for PTSD. Among participants with PTSD, most of them experienced and witnessed natural disasters, fire/explosion, and physical assault. Moreover, participants with PTSD suffered 4.9 traumatic events significantly higher than those without PTSD. In the multivariate analysis, only transportation accident and physical assault were positively associated with PTSD. The study also shows that PTSD was more likely among participants with younger age, lower income, no education, longer duration of chronic pain, no headaches, no heart diseases, and among those working in non-garment industries and experienced more traumatic events. In multivariate analysis, PTSD was found to be significantly associated with age, income, chronic pain and number of traumatic events.

Mental health status of working women in developing countries has largely been ignored even though most Western companies continue to benefit immensely from this cheap workforce.

Discussion

This study reveals that PTSD is a highly prevalent health condition in working women in Bangladesh with about 17% screening positive out of those who reported experiencing a traumatic event in life. Previous studies have shown that the prevalence of PTSD in the general population of high-income countries, such as the US, ranges from 3.5% to 7%. Our data demonstrate a prevalence similar to the high-risk population of US. This similarity in prevalence of PTSD working women may likely be due to the number of traumatic events experienced by the study population and psychosocial vulnerabilities. Our findings are valuable for healthcare providers, health advocates, worker groups and employers to further examine the mental health issues of working women. The reported sexual assault was only 3% in this population, which is likely to be an underestimate because women in this society and culture are unlikely to discuss sexual trauma. This greatly highlights the importance of building awareness among healthcare providers around the impact of traumas on working women of lower socioeconomic status in developing countries. The study concludes that mental health conditions are highly prevalent among working women in developing countries, which impact their well-being, quality of life, and working lives. These conditions including PTSD are likely under-recognized in many countries where few resources are allocated for health surveillance. It would be in the best interest for the Western companies, donor and aid agencies, and consumer groups to provide more resource and evidence support to improve the mental health along with physical health of these working women.

Learn More About This Brief

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The Study:

The Brief: