

INVESTIGATING THE CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES OF FEMALE EMPLOYEES AT HAWASSA INDUSTRIAL PARK GARMENT SECTOR, SOUTHERN-ETHIOPIA

Nigussie Haileyesus¹, Tadesse Gobosho², Alemayehu Gebru^{2*}

¹School of Social Work, Jigjiga University, Ethiopia

²School of Social Work, Jimma University, Ethiopia

Abstract

The purpose of the study was to identify the major challenges and opportunities among female operators. The study employed a qualitative phenomenological research design and phenomenological research strategy to explore the lived experiences of female employees. The participants in this study were selected based on the non-probability purposive selection technique. In addition, the data sources were primary and secondary. The number of participants was determined by data saturation; accordingly, 30 participants were involved in the study. The data were collected through in-depth interviews, key informant interviews and observation. It was analyzed by employing a thematic analysis method. To assure the trustworthiness of the data, triangulation, member checking, and peer debriefing were utilized. The finding revealed that women have an important role to play in improving the productivity of companies. Thousands of female operators got permanent jobs, became economically independent, attended their education and engaged in traditional savings. Conversely, there are many barriers for female operators in the garment sector. Their living conditions have not been improved; they are socially marginalized; their villages are poor and far from their workplace; the absence of a labor union, limited skill in assembling clothes, economic dependency, unwanted pregnancy and sexual and verbal harassment were the major challenges identified in this study. A very little effort has been made to address the problems experienced by female operators in the study area.

Keywords

Challenges, employees, female, garment sector, Hawassa industrial park, opportunities.

1. Introduction

1.1. Background and Justification

Industrial Parks (IPs) are one of the most significant variables supporting positive economic improvement. IP is an built on a unique strategy that integrates diverse functions, including work design, service provision, training and production, within a single industrial area. These functions are expected to generate high economic revenue and employment opportunities. Industrial parks serve as hubs for industrial production and services, bringing together businesses and industries in a shared space that fosters collaboration and innovation (Vidová, 2010, p. 41). In addition, as described by Gereffi (Mihretu & Llobet, 2017), textile and clothing manufacture is viewed as a significant impetus for creating countries' industrialization and it has assumed a significant role as a

* Correspondening author: Alemayehu Gebru, gebrualemayehu@gmail.com

springboard for financial advancement. Textile manufacturing is able to keep its costs low because it doesn't have to spend a lot of money on fixed expenses and it is one of the first industries to be started in countries that are trying to industrialize.

Moreover, at a global level, women employed in the textile industry have a moderately significant level of education, but not as high as men do. Therefore men are involved in skilled positions while women are stuck in lower work classifications. Considerably in the wake of controlling for abilities, male laborers still get 30% higher wages and almost 50% of the female workers are utilized on a provisional or the subcontracted premise, while most men involve permanent salaried positions. Men are accordingly bound to be officially utilized, paid more and work in higher expertise tasks. Females are bound to be casually utilized, get less non-fiscal advantages and work at the lower expertise and worth included areas of the textile and clothing esteem chain; accordingly, women do not get extra social advantages to which they ought to be entitled (United Nations Conference on Trade and Development; Keane & Velde, 2008).

In addition, sexual abuse has been prevalent in workplaces where young female workers are involved, such as in the IPs garment sector. Sexual harassment encompasses any behavior of a sexual nature, including rape or sexual assault, unwanted pressure for sexual favors, deliberate touching or making sexual comments (Hersch, 2015).

According to a study conducted by Riaduzzaman (2017) in the Bangladesh garment sector, salary jobs within the industry have had a significant positive impact on the living standards of female workers. Wage employment in the garment industry has shown to positively impact the social status of women in various aspects of their lives, including marital relationships, fertility and equal participation in decision-making regarding domestic chores.

Furthermore, Zhang *et al.* (2018) stated that today's IPs in Ethiopia are a continuing marvel and have contributed significantly to the country's economic advancement. IPs contributed by increasing government revenue, improving export items, attracting foreign direct investment and outside trade. Furthermore, clothing factories, in particular, are playing an unexpected role in creating a plethora of job opportunities for young female laborers. However, Sikhdar *et al.* (2014) stated that a common problem faced by women workers in the garment industry is the lack of proper housing. Nevertheless, Seckin *et al.* (2013) identified that women employees are challenged with long working days and hours, which is incompatible with the wages they receive.

The Ethiopian government has set a goal to become a middle-income country by 2025 and is currently working on implementing a modern strategy to boost the economy and create more job opportunities. This includes efforts to promote business growth and development (GTP, 2010). Yechalework (2019) explained that the development of IPs in Ethiopia is mainly associated with job creation. In Ethiopia as in many developing counties IPs are seen as potential sectors to minimize unemployment problems

As per the ILO report, in developing nations, working conditions in the manufacturing sector is poor and underneath standard. Laborers by large, specifically, females are compelled to work under conditions without trade unions, medical coverage, low payments, the sudden end of agreements, unwarranted work and laborers are exposed to provocation and different types of sickness (2016).

There are few studies on IP in Ethiopia. Tsige stated that the government has made a decision to consolidate certain manufacturing activities in an effort to increase efficiency. As a result, the textile and garment factories have become a crucial component

of the economy and the government has been prioritizing them in recent years. And it leads to the creation of jobs each year (2016). Bethlem (2009) conducted a comprehensive study on the opportunities, challenges and position of female floriculture workers. The study revealed that female floristry workers encounter numerous hurdles, including inadequate training, job insecurity, meager compensation and excessive overtime. With the growing significance of women's contribution to the global economy, they are also playing an active role in the garment industry. Tsige (2016) has done a study on the major challenges and opportunities of realizing the right of employees in the Bole Lemi Industrial Zone garment factory by examining the working conditions of employees and the relevant protection workers' rights. The finding identified that the working conditions of the study area are described by long working hours without break, the poor arrangement of security quantifies set up and poor treatment of laborers and wages. Hence, there is a gap in the study; Tsige focused on addressing the rights of employees (from a human rights perspective) in the sector. Moreover, Selamawit (2019) conducted a study on workers' housing conditions at Hawassa IPs and found that the living area is overcrowded and the absence of security is evident. Hence, she focused on the general employees not on female employees specifically. Fesseha and Bizuayehu (2019) conducted their study on the performance of IPs in Ethiopia by referring to Bole Lemi, Eastern and HIP garment and also Selam (2017) carried out her study on challenges and contribution of the industrial park for Ethiopian development.

Consequently, this shows that there are still no studies that have been conducted on the major challenges and opportunities faced by female workers in the study area. Since Ethiopia has accomplished fast development in the IPs and concurrently, the IPs is a new area of investment, looking into the issues exhibited is not very well considered.

Hence, the present study has been conducted to address the existing gap on understanding the IP garment sector worker's challenges and opportunities.

1.2 Research Questions

To achieve the main purpose of the study, the following research questions were posed and addressed.

- What are the challenges faced by female employees in the HIP garment sector?
- What are the opportunities that female employees have in the HIP garment sector?
- What are the efforts made to tackle the challenges faced by female employees by concerned bodies in the study area?

1.3 Theoretical framework

Women all over the world are oppressed, abused, marginalized, and disenfranchised because of their gender. Since ancient times, feminism has always existed, but its organized form was seen in England around the 17th century. During the second wave of feminism, which gave rise to various political ideologies such as liberal feminism, Marxist feminism, socialist feminism, radical feminism and eco-feminism, they were raised to protest the sexist ways of men in the private lives of women. Liberal feminists emphasized equal rights and benefits for h men and women. Radical feminists believe that patriarchy is at the root of women's oppression. Marxist feminists believe that capitalism and patriarchy are the main causes of women's oppression. It analyzed only through a class paradigm and that housework must be valued in society. Socialist

feminists emphasize socialism, which requires consideration of both class and gender factors. Later, during the third wave of global recognition, some new ideologies emerged to fight for social justice, such as cultural feminism, black feminism and postmodern feminism. The main motto of feminism is to create a just society, protect freedom and liberty, create a classless and gender neutral society (Council of Europe, n.d.). We selected postmodern theory and practices as a theoretical framework, because it recognize differences, making room for all to contribute and have a view from everywhere and eliminate the practice of positing one way or one understanding as representing or being truth (Wolff, 2007). Therefore, postmodern feminism allows us to see the situations of female employees in the garment sector from diverse perspectives. Thus, the researchers are guided with postmodern feminist's perspective to scrutinize the situations of the female employees in the HIP garment sectors.

2. Materials and Methods

The study is conducted at the Hawassa Industrial Park (HIP) which is located 273 km south of Addis Ababa. The study area is surrounded by Lake Hawassa from the west and Oromia national regional state from the north. A qualitative-phenomenological research design has been used to undertake this study. This research strategy helps to explore the lived experiences of the participants in the garment sector (Manen as cited in Creswell & Poth, 2016).

The units of analysis of the study were female employees and they were included based on their availability during data collection time. Participants were selected based on convenience and data saturation point was used for participant size determination (Neuman & Robson, 2014). Accordingly, thirty participants were involved in this study.

In-depth and key informant interviews, FGDs, as well as observations have been utilized to collect the data. Ten in-depth and four key informant interviews and two FGDs (eight members in each group) participants engaged in the study. Participants in in-depth interviews and FGDs are female employees in the garment sector of HIP and key informants are the administrators of the HIPs, Hawassa city social and labor affairs and women, children and youth affairs bureaus. Accordingly, interview and FGDs guidelines and observation checklist have been developed beforehand with the local language, Amharic and Sidaamu affo. The interviews lasted 45 minutes to one hour long. The audio recording captured their spoken words while the field notes documented their non-verbal cues and observations made by the researchers.

Thematic analysis technique has been employed in transcribing, over reading, coding, categorizing and searching for patterns of major and sub-themes (Flick, 2013). So, we have transcribed the data from the local language to English and triangulated it with analytic memo and observed data. The trustworthiness of the findings was enhanced by triangulating data from different sources and using member checking during data collection time.

Participants were informed about the purpose of the study after meticulous trustful rapport and their consent was secured. The findings are presented in an aggregate manner. And coding, as well as pseudonym, has been applied to keep the information confidential.

3. Results

The triangulated findings from interviews, FGDs and observation have generated sixteen major themes in relation to the challenges, opportunities and efforts made to overcome the challenges by concerned bodies. Hence, the following major themes have been presented sequentially: societal marginalization, economic dependency and unwanted pregnancy, limited skills, sexual abuse, housing problems, communication gaps and overtime, absence of labour union, leave and break time, the inadequacy of safety materials, job opportunity and developed self-esteem, work habits and saving, skills and technology, awareness rising, establishing labour union and mediation, employing and assigning guards at unsafe areas, building houses for the employees.

3.1. Challenges Encountered by HIP Garment Sector

Societal marginalization: FGD-1 participants stated that marginalization is one of the major challenges that the female operators faced. Similarly, KI: 3 explained, literally translated as *“The local community neglects particularly female workers (operators); the local community holds a biased view towards female operators who work night shifts, assuming that they stay out late and return home at midnight. This judgment is unfair and unfounded”*.

IDI: III stated, *“I have come to the realization that our community members do not initiate contact with us nor do they encourage their children to participate in events with us”*. Besides, FGD-1 participants described that sometimes the owner of the house refuses to rent his/her house to industrial park workers, especially for female operators. IDI: I discussed that the community has lost trust in industrial park workers because the local community believes that their payment is very poor and they can not afford to rent housings. Also, IDI: III stated:

I have been working here for the last three years, and it is not new to me that people have negative attitudes towards industrial park workers. Before I was employed here, I already knew the issue, but I do not have elsewhere to work rather than the Industrial Park. After I started my work, I knew that the local people are isolating and holding negative attitudes towards female employees for nothing; the reality is completely different from what the outside community thinks and I am working under different challenges.

Therefore, social marginalization remains a major challenge facing industrial workers, particularly female operators and the problem is getting worse eventually.

Economic dependency and unwanted pregnancy: During the FGD-2 session, participants disclosed that they receive a meager payment that commences at 750 Ethiopian birrs, which is inadequate to cover their monthly expenses such as rent, food, clothing and other costs. KI: 2 stated, some female workers seek out men who can provide financial support and engage in sexual relationships with them. However, this type of relationship can cause these women to suffer from sexually transmitted diseases and unwanted pregnancies. After examining KI.1's explanation and conducting observations, it has been discovered that economic dependency can result in numerous challenges for female workers. These challenges include unwanted pregnancy, low self-esteem and other health hazards.

Participants from both FGDs said that female employees engaged in an open relationship with opposite sex. However, when they experienced unwanted pregnancy their partner will leave them and they suffer a lot. *IDI: II* said:

Seven months ago, one of my neighbors who came from a very distant area to the Industrial Park started a relationship with someone. She is engaged in such a relationship because she thought that she was going to get financial support from her sexual partner. Initially, their relationship was interesting, because he was providing her with some monetary support and she trusted him. Unfortunately, after four months of their relationship, he left her and she suffered a lot after she realized that she was pregnant. At last, she resigned from her job and unexpectedly she left her living room at midnight, and she disappeared. Still, now her family is looking for her, there are several other cases like this and it is hard.

Therefore, the findings indicated that when they become economically dependent on their partners, they become powerless; only their partners manipulate their rights and the girls become dependent.

Limited skills: The findings revealed that female employees in the garment industries had acquired limited skills on how to make a dress. *FGD-1* & *2* participants indicated that one operator can not make a single dress instead it passes through twenty different individuals in an assembly-line production. For instance, *IDI: I* said:

In the garment sector, particularly, we are striving to acquire skills, but they are not allowing us to do so since they have already systematically arranged for us how to work in line. For example, in my shade, twenty different individuals (female operators) have been arranged in a single line to make only one part of the dress at a given time. Let's say if today they ordered us to make shirts, the first operator in our line starts to sew a lapel and after finishing her part, she will pass it to the next operator, who sews the pocket part and the third operator may pipe it, and go like this until the 20th operators. Can you imagine that? If you ask each operator directly about how to make a shirt or a trouser, surprisingly, they know nothing except for a few operators.

Thus, the finding shows that female employees in the garment sector of the HIP are acquiring limited skills because of alienation, which could affect their future job opportunities. And our observation also affirmed this approach of the industrial park garment sector, which puts female employees in one line and provides them with a specific role to play in the making of cloths.

Sexual abuse: The finding indicated that female employees are experiencing sexual abuse in both physical and verbal forms. *FGD-2* participants stated that sexual abuse is likely to happen outside the industrial park when they are walking to their homes. *FGD-1* participants also confirmed that the problem occurs outside the park when they leave the park in the middle of the night at about 5 pm. In their discussion, they said that some service bus drivers are not willing to drive them home since their residence is far from the park and after a bus service has dropped them off, they usually take a walk to their home for a while. Therefore, the problem happens here. For example, *KI: 1* said:

I know of one very shocking case, concerning sexual harassment that occurred within the first year of the HIP's establishment. Two operators were living together in a single room; their living area is closer to the Industrial park and after work, they often [used to] walk to their home at about 5:00 pm. One day, on their way home at midnight (about 6:00 pm), they were suddenly kidnapped and raped by six men. The girls lay down on the ground and syncope after they were attacked, and the men who raped the girl left them on the street. I do not even want to think about what happened after they were syncope; the next day we heard the news that savages (hyena) ate them. That is the case, which is a reason for many workers to quit their jobs.

KI: 2 said that when the industrial park workers returned back to their houses, they used to walk in groups by being ten or more, therefore, at this moment, people can easily identify them and some people verbally threaten them. For example, IDI: II stated, “naming them china, china, china, Chinese mistresses and share us from your sex fee”.

From the finding, we have learned that the outside communities misjudge female workers in the Industrial Park; they believe those female employees who work in the Industrial Park have sexual relationship with Chinese who work in the park. We observed that the outside communities verbally harassed female workers while they returned to their home.

Housing problem: The finding revealed that almost all industrial park workers, particularly female employees who work in the garment sector are struggling with the housing problem. Since renting house near the working area is expensive, they are forced to rent a house in rural sub-districts, which is far from their workplace. IDI: I affirmed that female employees rent houses in rural areas since they can't afford houses nearby the industrial park or downtown. And the case is associated with the income that pushes them to rent sub standard houses. IDI: III said:

We are getting seven hundred and fifty to one thousand Ethiopian birrs per month, and our monthly consumption is more than our income. So, how could we rent a house near to the Industrial Park or in the center of the city? If you ask the owner of the house, they will call two thousand birr for one room; imagine our salary still is below the rent, and how you can afford it for alone. So, to solve this issue, most of us agreed to rent one room in a group and share the cost. We know this is better for us, but living in one narrow room for four to five, will bring you other health problems. We benefit from being together at the same time we are exposed to other problems.

Similarly, FGD participants agreed that the housing problem remains a major challenge for female employees that work in the garment sector since their salary is low.

Communication gap and overtime: FGD-2 participants stated that supervisors treated female employees, particularly those from rural areas differently since they can't speak Amharic language to communicate their ideas effectively. After conducting our observations, we have discovered that many female operators are hesitant to advocate for their rights. This is largely due to the fact that a significant portion of them are from rural areas, which often results in language barriers that prevent them from defending themselves. Additionally, supervisors have been known to undermine their efforts, further exacerbating the issue. KI: 2 said that several operators are recruited from southern

Ethiopia, such as *Sidama, Wolayita, Kembata, Hadiya, Daworo, Gedio*, etc. Female employees from these areas often face language barriers to communicate in Amharic or English. This leads to miscommunication among themselves and with their supervisors. It is difficult for them to understand and carry out instructions. During their first year of work, they may struggle to meet the expectations of their boss due to these communication challenges. And *IDI: IV* stated:

Our problems are the foreigners who cannot speak either Amharic or English properly and when they order us to do something, we use sign language as a person with hearing impairment instead of speaking. Therefore, most of the time, many of us do not understand what they asked to do and they become upset and even insult us when we kept silent. Because of a miscommunication, one of my friends was fired from his job and we are working in our shade in full fear.

Besides, both FGD participants argued that working overtime is not based on the interests of operators rather an obligation. *IDI: III* also stated that almost all garment sectors forced the workers to work two additional hours after the operators finished their normal work hours and many workers are getting fired when they refused to work overtime. *IDI: II* said:

I have been working at this factory for two years now and it is mandatory for us to work overtime. Even when we finish our assigned tasks, our bosses require us to work an additional two hours. This is a common practice among workers in our factory. For example, if we start work at 1:00 a.m., we have to work until 9:00 a.m., when we finish work at 9:00 a.m. they order us to work two additional hours. Although we are ready to leave, we have been instructed to work extra hours. If we decline this request, we will receive a warning and our names will be added to the blacklist.

Thus, working overtime is an obligation and many workers have already been fired because they refused to work additional hours; this is also one of the challenges identified.

Absence of labour union, leave and break time: *KII: 3* described that labor union is one of the most important associations for industrial workers because the presence of the labor union in the industrial parks will ensure the workplace right of the worker and define the duties of employees. In contrast, *KII: 2* said, “*The absence of a labor union could contribute to exploitation of the workers' rights*”. *FGD-2* participants asserted that the absence of a labor union allows the employers to exploit the female employees (operators) as they wish. *IDI: II* said:

I have been working here for the last three years since I have been employed; however, I have never heard of the labor union here in the Industrial park. The supervisors dictate our actions without regard for our concerns, and there is no one willing to listen to our distress. For example, we may request to speak with administrators, but human resources and supervisors prevent us from doing so because they are aware that we have nowhere else to turn if we resign from our job.

KII: I explained that the existence of labor union could potentially play a major role in the right of the employees, but the issue is that the labour union may side only with the employees and does not consider the interests of the companies. So that, when the workers stop working and stand against the working conditions, all operations would stop and that is why the labour union still does not set up.

As stated by the study participants, fear of objection has been found the only reason for the absence of a labour union, but the workplace right of operators is still not being respected and this is also one of the major challenges faced by female operators in the study area.

The FGD participants stated that they are operating under the condition of no break, with minimal leaves. As far as the participants are concerned, the garment sectors do not consider any circumstance in which to permit the operators and there is only a rare case in which the workers are permitted. Similarly, *IDI: III* described that employers do not allow their workers even to go to their families on those public holidays which will be closed in the calendar. *IDI: I* asserted:

I have been employed at this company since 2018, which means I have been working here for two years now. We have been working continuously without taking any breaks, but sometimes we need to take a short break to refresh. When we feel the need to take a break, we usually go to the restroom and sit there for a few minutes before returning to work. Additionally, when we visit the restroom, we are issued a badge for 20 individuals. As no representative is available to advocate on our behalf, the workers may modify their schedule at their discretion, without taking our concerns into account.

Thus, according to the findings, female employees are not being provided with the necessary leave and break time, indicating a lack of proper treatment by their respective sectors. As a result, both female employees in general and pregnant women in particular are experiencing collapses and fainting at their workplaces.

Inadequacy of safety materials: The findings asserted that safety materials are very important to minimize the risks that could happen unexpectedly. *FGD-1* participants discussed that industrial workers have been facing too many risks while operating; the garment sectors do not provide their employees with sufficient safety materials. In our observation, we have noted that many workers are working without a facemask and safety gloves. The garment sectors are not provided adequate gloves, facemasks and kerchiefs to their workers, because of this, many operators in the garment sectors are challenged; even we observed that the operators' hair is covered with thread and cotton.

On top of this, workers are working under the condition of inadequate chairs to seat on it. Through non-participatory observation, we observed that one pregnant operator was working by standing and the supervisors had not given much attention to her. Besides, *FGD-2* participants explained that some of the garment sectors have no chairs for their garment operators while they are having their lunch; instead, they sit on the floor and have their lunch. Hence, data from our observation as well as FGDs revealed that many garment sectors are not equipped with safety materials and the inadequacy of safety materials remains the challenge of the garment operators.

3.2. Opportunities that Female Employees Seized

Job opportunity and developed self-esteem: The findings showed that female employees obtained permanent job opportunities despite the challenges encountered in the industrial park of the Hawassa garment sector. KII: 3 said that before the establishment of the sector, young female workers used to migrate to Arab countries; however, it is decreasing now. IDI: I also stated that the establishment of HIP potentially reduced the number of migrants to Arab countries. And FGD-1 participants confirmed that the sector has been employing a large number of female workers, which is a great opportunity to the female employees.

FGD participants affirmed that female employees have developed self-esteem after they are employed in the industrial park garment sector; because at least they could get a job, relatively little skills and wages to depend on. Similarly, IDI: II asserted, “*when I spent my day in the industrial park and back to my home, I get relief and mental satisfaction; because I feel that at least I have a job, salary and friends at the workplace*”. KII: 2 also said that after female employees are employed, they show an instant change in their behaviour, dressing styles which show their confidence and adaptation to the environment.

Work habit and saving: The finding revealed that participants have obtained the chance to improve their work habits and saving. As KII: 1 stated that the employment of female workers in the industrial park of the Hawassa garment sector helps them to develop a working habit. And KII: 3 asserted that the organization has strict management in the working culture of the employees that enforced them to abide by the law of the organization. In return for the rules and regulations of the organization, female employees have developed new working habits and that is a good opportunity for them. FGD-1 and 2 participants believed that the garment sector gives them an excellent opportunity in improving their work culture by shifting it to a new dimension.

The findings uncovered that to cope up with low income, female employees have engaged in a traditional saving association called “*Iqub*”. IDI: III said that they contribute some amounts of money on monthly basis and one of the members will get the contributed money by lottery method or based on his/her immediate needs. So, they get an opportunity to deal with their problems by engaging in insignificant traditional saving associations.

Skills and technology: FGD participants described that the garment sector gives them tremendous opportunities in improving their various skills. Such as, communication, machine operating and life skills are some of the skills to be mentioned. For instance, FGD-1 participants explained that communication skill is one of the keys to operating efficiently in the sector. IDI: I said that despite the challenges, female workers ultimately develop their communication skills. Most of them were unable to communicate effectively with their supervisors and human resources within their first month of employment, but gradually they are able to communicate successfully after they stayed longer.

FGD-2 participants declared that the workplace is secured and protected by inspecting CCTV camera all the time. KII: 2 said that employees will not be assaulted or threatened by their colleagues or bosses since most garment sectors have a CCTV cameras monitoring system that records 24-hours day-to-day activities. FGD-1 participants also stated that the industrial park has its fire alarm system and fire brigades with three fire trucks. If something happens, the alarm is alerted immediately and the fire department will probably be handling an accident. It is, therefore, an opportunity to work in modernized industries where ones safety secured.

3.3. Efforts Made to Tackle the Challenges Faced by Female Employees

Awareness rising: As the findings show, many females in the garment sector are faced with many problems and issues that need to be addressed. KII: 3 asserted that the Hawassa City administration Women's, Children's, and Youth Affairs Office has been engaged in providing training and raising awareness on the working conditions, possible threats and their rights and responsibilities before they started their formal work. They often train any newly recruited operators and by doing so, the potential risks and challenges have been reduced. KII: 2 also mentioned that the garment sector provides awareness-raising education to the surrounding community about the sector and female employees to improve their understanding.

Establishing labour union and mediation: As per KI: 2s' explanations, the garment sector in the HIP is in the process of establishing a labor union. And the sector has been handling disputes among employees and the community through mediation with established conflict resolution committees with the members of the nearby community. KI: 1 affirmed:

Our company has been working with relevant stakeholders to establish labor unions that can act as intermediaries between the organization and female employees, as well as all communities within the organization. I am confident that implementing the proposed solution will significantly alleviate the current situation. Our team has taken steps towards legalizing the establishment by writing letters to relevant government organizations. Additionally, we have partnered with community leaders who collaborate with us on conflict resolution efforts, resulting in a reduction of challenges faced by female employees. For example, community leaders often manage cases of sexual harassment that occur when female employees are returning home.

The finding declared that the movement to establish labour unions in the organization and mediation of disputing issues by community leaders through forming committees have been lessening the challenges that female employees face in the garment sector of the HIP.

Employing and assigning guards at unsafe areas: The findings from this study discovered that HIP employed wardens to supervise unsafe road pavements when female employees return back to their homes at the nighttimes. KI: 3 mentioned that after the organization has considered seriously the cases of female employees' sexual harassment and physical abuse and hired some guardians to scrutinize the situations, things have showed high improvement. IDI: II also stated, "Due to the guardians employed to oversee the sides of the road to our home, improved the condition from its previous severity".

Building houses for the employees: The finding disclosed that HIP has developed a plan and entered into action to solve the challenges female employees faced while returning home in the evening by building houses close to their work environment. KI: 3 acknowledged that the organization has begun house construction for its employees this year as soon as the budget allocated is approved to solve the needs of housing by employees. KI: 1 also confirmed that the organization conducted a situational analysis and understood the needs of its employees. And it learned that the situation even negatively impacted the productivity of their employees and the organization's success if the workers continued suffering from the need for housing. Therefore, KI: 2 said, "It is two birds with one stone"; if the organization builds houses for female employees, the

problem of female employees concerning high house rent, sexual harassment and physical abuse on the streets will be addressed and the organization will utilize the labor of its employees efficiently.

4. Discussion

Even though major findings of this study have been congruent with previous contributions of various scholars in different corners of the world, there are newly emerged themes which are peculiar to the study area. For instance, societal marginalization towards female employees in HIP garment sector has been developed as a result of the culture of the community in relation to dressing styles and working with foreign individuals. To the surrounding community, modern dressings and working with foreigners are considered engaging in misconduct behaviour and breaking the norms of the community. Besides, female employees tried to address their economic needs by looking for asexual partner either boyfriend or husband. As per the culture of the socializing community of the participants, males are responsible and should play breadwinner roles in the household. Therefore, the participants have developed an economic dependency and this in return exposed them to an unplanned pregnancy.

Alienation from their products is an experience that is known since the industrial revolution time as different literature supports this finding. In line with the findings of this study, women workers in the garment industry faced common problems, i.e. lack of proper housing, long working days and hours which is incompatible with the wages (Seckin *et al.*, 2013; Sikhdar *et al.*, 2014; Gebremichael, 2016; Zhang *et al.*, 2018). Congruent with our finding, female employees experienced sexual harassment including actual or attempted rape or sexual assault, unwanted pressure for sexual favors, turning work discussions to sexual topics, unwanted deliberate touching, etc. (Hersch, 2015).

On the other hand, the findings showed that female employees in the HIP garment sector developed working habits and were familiarized with new technologies as well as they are accustomed to traditional saving called *Iqub* from their monthly wage. Moreover, young females obtained job opportunities because of the HIP garment sector which in return gives them hope and improved their self-esteem. Congruent to this, Females are bound to be casually utilized, save money, get less non-fiscal advantages and work at the lower expertise and worth included areas of the textile and clothing esteem chain (United Nations Conference on Trade and Development, Keane & Velde, 2008). Similarly, clothing factories have provided unforeseen employment opportunities and created a large workforce for young women laborers. Thus, the feminist perspective on women in the workplace holds a significant degree of validity, as women continue to face oppression based on their gender. This necessitates the need for advocates of feminism to actively fight for women's rights and demand justice in all aspects of their lives.

5. Conclusion

In improving the efficiency of companies, female industrial workers have played an important role though they have been challenged with several determinants. Thus, female employees in HIP especially in the garment sector experienced social marginalization, economic dependency and unplanned pregnancy, alienation from their products, sexual abuse, housing problem, communication gaps and overtime work, absence of labour union, leave and break time and inadequacy of safety materials.

Although the challenges have been hindering the progress of female employees in the HIP, garment sector, there are enormous opportunities for them. For instance, they obtained job opportunities and developed self-esteem because of that. On one hand, they have been enhancing their work habit and savings from their salary for rainy days. On the other hand, they are improving their skills regarding making clothes and adopted themselves with new technologies while working in the HIP garment sector.

The HIP has conducted a situational analysis concerning the needs of its employee's particularly female employees and has taken the necessary measures to improve the situation. Accordingly, the organization provided training to the neighbouring community on the importance of female employees to alter their marginalized approach towards female employees of the organization. The organization also has been working on the establishment of a labor union to deal with the needs of the organization and employees. Besides, dispute resolution committees are formed from community leaders and manage conflicting issues. Sexual abuse on the streets when female employees go back to their homes improved after the organization assigned guards to supervise the cases. Finally, the organization has planned to build houses for its employees to solve housing problems. Further studies will require to have a holistic picture of the situations of female employees in the HIP garment sector and to bring amicable solutions.

6. Implication

Thousands of female operators have permanent jobs and are independent of their families, despite many hardships and very little effort has been made to tackle the problems faced by female operators in the study field. The practice of gender-specific social work emphasizes the reduction of gender-based disparities that have existed in the community or the workplace by facilitating equal access to work, play, education, and other roles for women. This research will pave the way for further investigation of feminist investigations in particular. Since the findings of this study revealed the potential challenges and opportunities of clothing operators as well as their working conditions, the outcome of this study may assist stakeholders in providing ideas and information to alter the negative attitude of the communities towards female industrial park operators. The study has limitations in terms of its coverage area and its findings can only be generalized to the specific study area where it was conducted.

7. Recommendations

Based on the findings of this study, we forwarded the following way outs.

- The policymakers should formulate effective policy towards Industrial park workers, particularly for female operators who work in the garment sector that clearly outline the workers' right and obligations.
- Hawassa City's Social and Labour Affairs and Women, Children and Youth Affairs Offices, as well as Ethiopian Industrial Park Development Corporation (EIPDC), should give much attention to implementing the policy regarding problems of female employees.
- HIP's organization-based policy should recognize the importance of social workers in handling the cases of agencies and employees.
- Social workers in Ethiopia should give primacy to workplace mistreatment in their practice and research.

- Researchers who have an interest in this topic should conduct a comprehensive problem-solving study.

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