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Ways of Spouse Support in Garment Workers' Workplace Resistance: A Qualitative Study

Md. Mynul Islam * and Kyoko Kusakabe

Gender and Development Studies (GDS) Program, Department of Development and Sustainability, School of Environment, Resources and Development, Asian Institute of Technology, P.O. Box 4, Klong Luang, Pathumthani 12120, Thailand; kyokok@ait.ac.th

* Correspondence: islam.mdmynul87@gmail.com

Abstract: This qualitative study aimed to explore the different ways of spouse support for garment workers in Dhaka city. Data were collected through in-depth interviews with male and female workers and their spouses and key informant interviews with relevant stakeholders to explore the different ways of support. The results highlight that male and female workers receive different ways of support for their ways in workplace resistance; therefore, male and female workers cannot participate in their workplace resistance in the same way. In terms of large collective resistance activities, husbands and wives support their spouses' decisions to participate. Such agreement is important for workers to receive financial and other supports during the protest. However, not all female workers can participate inside and outside large groups of collective resistance as can male workers. Some female workers need to convince their husbands in order to participate inside and outside large groups of collective resistance, because husbands are serious about adherence to purdah. Such restrictions from husbands make it difficult for female workers who are in a dilemma between pressure from coworkers and from their husbands. In terms of small groups of collective resistance and individual resistance, women are more engaged than men, since men, being the main breadwinner in the family, cannot risk their jobs through such resistance.

Keywords: spouse support; garment worker; workplace resistance; Bangladesh



Citation: Islam, Md. Mynul, and Kyoko Kusakabe. 2024. Ways of Spouse Support in Garment Workers' Workplace Resistance: A Qualitative Study. *Social Sciences* 13: 230. <https://doi.org/10.3390/socsci13050230>

Academic Editor: Antonio Bova

Received: 10 February 2024

Revised: 19 March 2024

Accepted: 26 March 2024

Published: 24 April 2024



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1. Introduction

In Bangladesh, the ready-made garment (RMG) industry is one of the most significant catalysts for the national economy and for socioeconomic and human development. As of year 2021, these garment factories employed 4.22 million garment workers (ACD 2021). Among the workers, almost 80 percent are female workers (Islam et al. 2016). Though the garment industry has created a huge job opportunity for men and women, still it is far from providing a decent work opportunity (Hossain et al. 2018; Moazzem and Arfanuzzaman 2018). Garment workers protest every year in order to highlight their salary-related problems: (a) irregular payment of monthly salary and (b) minimum wage is not satisfactory. The frequency of protests has increased since COVID-19 started in Bangladesh in March 2020 as employers often did not pay these workers' salaries on time. Workers are also unsatisfied with their minimum salary because it is insufficient for them to survive in Dhaka city. In order to highlight their salary-related problems, most of the protests are in the form of factory occupancy and street demonstrations.

There have been many studies that analyzed these workers' resistance—militant protest, factory occupancy, hunger strike, and street demonstration to protest exploitation and inhuman working conditions (Ashraf and Prentice 2019; Choudhury and Rahman 2017; Tanjeem 2021; Siddiqi 2015). Individual resistance like confrontation with the manager against ill-treatment and insults was also observed (Mohiuddin 2007). Networking and cooperation with coworkers (Choudhury and Rahman 2017; Korczynski 2016) and engaging

in workers' associations/federations/trade unions play a significant role in raising the concerns of the garment workers (Ashraf and Prentice 2019; Hossain et al. 2018; Khanna 2011; Kim 2011). Furthermore, global brands pressure is also helpful for the workers. In 2017, to participate in the Dhaka Apparel summit, different global brands were pressured to release all the arrested workers and workers' organizers due to their workplace resistance activities (Ashraf and Prentice 2019). Voluntary legal support by different agencies also plays a significant role in the workers' resistance activities (Mohiuddin 2007).

Although such workers' resistance activities are well studied, spouse support during resistance activities has received less attention. Resistance against employers is and requires much courage from garment factory workers. Solidarity among workers is important, but they also require support from family members to stand up against their employers. Joining a protest may have consequences for their employment, and they may need psychological support to overcome their fear. For garment workers, spouse support can shape how they are involved in their workplace resistance-related activities due to the traditional gender norms in the household, and there are gender differences in how spouse support influences workers' protest activities. Traditional gender norms treat men and women differently and dictate the levels of power that allow women and men to raise their voices and freedom (Cislaghi and Heise 2019; Petesch and Badstue 2020). As a result, due to the social, cultural practices, and expectations based on gender norms, the garment workers' resistance practices may not only depend on workplace relations or cooperation with coworkers, but also what kind of support they can obtain from their families. Most of the garment workers in Bangladesh are women, and 79.3 percent of them are married (ACD 2021). Since garment factory workers work longer hours, balancing household work and factory work is challenging (ILO 2020). To ensure their participation in collective resistance activities, spouse support for these female workers might be more significant than for male workers. Due to traditional gender norms, another significant aspect is that support towards workplace participation and resistance might not be the same. In the case of workplace participation, it might be the case that women simply working outside will increase household income, which men will also benefit from, so it is easier for men to accept. While workplace resistance is to improve the general working conditions and not only pay, it might be more difficult to convince men to support women. The connection between spouse support and workplace resistance may not be direct/visible, but the different ways of spouse support might influence the garment workers' participation in workplace resistance activities. This paper analyzes the spouse support among garment workers in their struggle against employers to improve working conditions.

Spouse support includes support based on material resources and emotions, providing feelings of security and boosting self-esteem that is significant for facing demands and challenges and coping with diverse tensions (Ocampo et al. 2018). Spouse support can also be defined as help, advice, and understanding that spouses provide for one another (Aycan and Eskin 2005). The spouse can provide support in different ways, and, therefore, this support helps to ensure positive work and nonwork outcomes (Russo et al. 2016). Spouse support can encompass emotional, instrumental, tangible, and informational forms of support (Ocampo et al. 2018).

Studies have shown that husbands' support to reduce women's burden related to household work and childcare helps the work–family balance (Erdwins et al. 2001), and household and childcare-related support is essential for working women (Alarifi and Basahal 2023). Heikkinen et al. (2014) also argue that husbands' hands-on support is helpful in women's careers. Additionally, Bures et al. (1996) and Le et al. (2023) analyze instrumental and emotional support in partners' careers to reduce work stress for men and women. In their study, Yedirir and Hamarta (2015) focus on married couples' emotional support for each other to reduce stress and anxiety, which is found to be highly correlated with marital satisfaction. Spouses' emotional support is also significant in relation to their financial problems for both men and women (Günaydin and Kayral 2023). Ferguson et al. (2016) argue that the spouse's (both husband and wife) understanding of the content

of their partner's work is crucial to the level of spousal support and argue that when a spouse shares the same social network and has work experiences, he/she can understand their spouses' needs for support. However, the literature on spouse support mainly focuses on job satisfaction, career development, and work stress, and spouse support for workplace resistance activities has not been given much attention. Unlike these studies, this paper analyzes spouse support for resistance activities. Resistance activities are different from daily work, since it does not occur daily. However, the less frequent but serious consequences of resistance activities will require different types of spouse support, since the stress that workers experience, from both employers and co-workers, will be different from normal work stress. This study fills this gap by focusing on how spouse support works for female and male workers' workplace resistance in Bangladesh.

To analyze spouse support, we followed [King et al. \(1995\)](#)'s two types of social support: instrumental support and emotional support. Instrumental support is based on behaviors and attitudes to facilitate household tasks. It includes the willingness to share household work and to relieve the individual from undue family responsibility. Emotional support is based on behaviors and attitudes about providing encouragement, understanding, attention, and guidance with supportive problem-solving ([King et al. 1995](#)). The different ways in supporting spouses may shape the garment factory workers' workplace resistance.

2. Data Collection and Method

This qualitative study was conducted in Dhaka city, Bangladesh. In Bangladesh, 98% of garment factories are in urban areas ([Arif 2020](#); [Khan et al. 2020](#)). In order to study workplace resistance, this study selected two factories based in Dhaka city (referred to as Factory A and Factory B) because these factories have workers' associations/unions¹ and are working with different international brands. In this study, we do not compare factories A and B since they are almost the same in their workplace issues and protest.

Factory A is one of the largest garment factories in Bangladesh. This factory had approximately 2500 female workers and 1000 male workers in 2022. To ensure workers' rights, it has a workers' association named "Participation Committee" or PC. Factory B is also one of the largest garment factories in Bangladesh. The factory consisted of around 3000 female workers and 1000 male workers in 2022. This factory has a Trade Union, which is also government-approved for the workers to focus on their rights, problems, and justice. The workers in both garment factories are not satisfied with their wage increases that do not match the cost-of-living increases. The delay in payment makes the situation worse for the workers. Both factories do not pay within seven working days according to the Labor Law, and both have around a month of delayed payment, which is irregular. The workers from these factories also face problems obtaining service and maternity benefits due to the irregular pay system. Workers, especially female workers, face harassment when they cannot fulfill the given target. Such labor issues lead to mass protests in these factories.

In-depth interviews (IDI) were conducted with workers from these two factories: those who were married, had worked for at least two years, were aged 20–34, and had experience in workplace resistance (such as participation in demonstrations and walkouts)². The snowball sampling method was applied since the researcher did not obtain access to the list of workers with their personal information (marital status). The age group of 20–34 was selected since, according to the [ILO \(2020\)](#) report, 60.8 percent of men and 62.7 percent of women who are working in garment factories are from this age group. Although more than a third of garment workers' spouses are working in garment factories ([ACD 2021](#)), this study selected respondents from those whose spouses are not working in garment factories. This is to avoid situations where both of them participate in the same resistance activities. The spouses are working in different sectors, for example, daily salaries—rickshaw pullers, van pullers, pitha-makers, home-based tailors, construction workers, and those who are on monthly salaries—small-factory workers, tutors, tailors, drivers, salesmen, and security guards. In order to understand how childcare needs increase the need for spouse support

in participating workplace resistance, all respondents are nuclear families with at least one small child. In slum areas, 97% of the dwellers have housing with shared kitchens and bathrooms, and only 3% have private kitchens and bathrooms (Kakon et al. 2016). In this study, all the respondents shared a kitchen with other dwellers. The number of garment workers for IDIs is given in Table 1. Nine respondents and their spouses were interviewed for each of the categories and were stopped when the researcher reached the saturation point. Interviews were conducted face-to-face while maintaining social distance. These interviews were mostly conducted after the workers' work time, at different locations such as nearby tea stalls, in front of their houses, or other places close to their workplaces. Some interviews were also conducted on days off, such as holidays. All the interviews were conducted by the first author in the Bengali language (the respondents' mother tongue). For all the respondents, consent forms were used to obtain their permission before conducting interviews.

Table 1. Number of the couples (garment workers and their spouses) for IDIs.

Garment Workers Spouse's Occupation	Female		Male	
	Earning Daily Wages	Earning Monthly Wages	Earning Daily Wages	Earning Monthly Wages
Have one child	Factory A (6) + Factory B (3) = 9	Factory A (6) + Factory B (3) = 9	Factory A (5) + Factory B (4) = 9	Factory A (5) + Factory B (4) = 9
Have more than one child	Factory A (7) + Factory B (2) = 9	Factory A (7) + Factory B (2) = 9	Factory A (5) + Factory B (4) = 9	Factory A (6) + Factory B (3) = 9

To obtain diversified information and to enrich the data analysis, this study tried to cover multiple entry points to select garment workers. Initially, two organizations working for workers' rights helped to select workers from the two factories. Workers' leaders, slum leaders (owners of the slum houses), and some local slum dwellers also helped introduce workers for interview. To ensure diversity and overcome biases, this study did not conduct more than three interviews from each of the links.

This study conducted key informant interviews with three personnel from two organizations working for the garment workers: two interviews with the workers' supervisor and in-charge levels; two interviews with workers' association leaders; two interviews with the owners of slum houses; and one interview with an academician. Data collection was conducted from December 2021 to February 2022. All the interviewees' names are pseudonyms.

For the present study, we focused on garment workers and their spouses' support for garment workers' workplace resistance. Interview transcripts were analyzed through coding in line with the interactive model by Miles and Huberman (1994). The coding analysis was performed using three main themes to understand how garment workers are obtaining instrumental and emotional support from their spouses: inside and outside large groups of collective resistance, small groups of collective resistance, and individual resistance.

3. Garment Workers' Workplace Resistance: History

The large groups of collective resistance activities are a consequence of labor law violations: wages below the legal minimum wage, irregular payment of salaries, and not receiving benefits to which they are entitled. Low and delayed payments lead to workers not being able to pay rent and food, which affects their families. Such an impoverished situation pushes workers to protest inside and outside their workplaces. The amount of time the workers spend on inside and outside demonstrations is mostly the same as the time they spend on regular work. On average, garment workers need to work around 10 h per day, though they do not have any written contracts from their workplaces. Almost every month, garment workers from both the studied factories protest, both organized and spontaneously, to highlight their problems related to salary and benefits. Sometimes, they protest outside the factory with other factory workers since their problems are the

same. Their rate of protests has increased since 2020. Ms. Shanaz Begum, a female garment worker, age 25, Factory A, has a son, and her spouse is a rickshaw puller, says:

“Today I also participated in a protest. Today is 23 December, but we have not received last month’s salary yet. The factory owner does not give us our salary on time. The factory owner informed us that he will pay us on the 28th of this month. How will we survive with children in Dhaka city? Last month, we also did a 15-day strike inside our factory”.

During the strike inside the factory, male and female workers entered the factory on time and left at 5 p.m. Every day they punch their attendance, which ensures that all workers are present in the factory, but there is no production. Sometimes, the workers, mostly male, break the machines inside the factory. Such an incidence occurs mostly when the workers are frustrated after waiting several days for the employer’s response.

When garment workers cannot obtain a response from employers while they protest inside their workplaces, they extend their protest to outside the factory to create more pressure on the employer. During protests on the street, both male and female workers protest aggressively. They usually stay on the road from morning until late afternoon. Some female workers join the outside protest a little late or need to return home early to attend to their household work or childcare. Whenever male and female workers protested on the roads, there were clashes with the police, and many workers were arrested and injured.

During their protest, both male and female workers believe they must be united and protest together. Their strong bond helps them to carry out collective protests inside and outside of their workplace. Raju Ahmed, a male garment worker, age 34, Factory B, who has two daughters and whose wife is a home-based tailor, says, “Workers are brothers and sisters”.

Occasionally, garment workers, especially female workers, protest in small groups at the workplace against inappropriate and dehumanizing behaviors from the supervisors. This study found that more female than male workers face problems in relation to harassment and insults from their supervisors. Such protests are in small groups, either carried out by workers themselves or involving the Participation Committee/Trade Union/upper-level management. The small group of collective resistance is often initiated by one victim woman worker who faced insults and two or three of her coworkers who support her. Normally, it is a spontaneous action to express their anger. But sometimes, together, they plan to stand up and confront the supervisors or in-charges to protest verbal insults. Once they confront the supervisors, the same kind of insults will not happen again. Sometimes they also stopped working in front of their supervisors. However, when the supervisors do not change their rude behavior but continuously use profanities and threaten them, the workers contact upper-level management to take action. Such protests in small groups have huge job risks.

Garment workers who have spouses on monthly salaries sometimes exhibit more individual resistance than those who have spouses on daily salaries. When their spouses have stable and secure jobs, female workers do not need to consider engaging in such small-group protests, fearing job loss. Male workers rarely are involved in such small group and individual resistance, not only because they do not receive the type of harassment like female workers, but also because they are the main income earner and their wives’ income is less secure.

4. Spouse Support and Garment Workers’ Workplace Resistance

Garment workers receive their spouses’ instrumental and emotional support to participate in their workplace resistance activities. However, male and female garment workers do not receive support from their spouses equally. Based on spouses’ instrumental and emotional support, male and female garment workers participate in their workplace resistance activities differently. Here, we analyze how spouses’ support shapes garment workers’ participation in workplace resistance.

4.1. Inside and Outside Large Groups of Collective Resistance

Most male workers can participate in large groups of collective resistance inside and outside factories. Before participating in collective resistance, male workers say that they consult with their wives and decide. Male workers can make their own decisions, but they tend to share their resistance plan and activities with their wives, as participation in resistance might affect the family. It is also convenient for husbands to inform their wives beforehand so that their employed wives can arrange their schedules accordingly. In most cases, their wives respect and encourage male workers to participate in their collective workplace resistance, since the husbands' income is the main income of the household (Table 2). Wives find it important that their husbands are paid regularly. Raisul Islam, a male garment worker, age 32, Factory A, has two daughters and his wife is a pitha-maker, says,

“She always appreciates my protest-related decision and never says no to me”.

His wife says,

“Whenever he talks about protest, I never say no and always say no problem. If he does not go, he will not get his salary on time”.

When these male workers do not obtain their salaries on time, it becomes very difficult for their wives to manage their household and childcare-related expenses. Though male workers' wives' income is not enough to cover all the household financial expenses, their wives try to make ends meet while the husbands are out protesting. Some wives on monthly salaries will even provide husbands with their daily allowances while protesting. Their wives also know that if all the workers do not protest together, they will not receive their salaries on time, and their minimum wages will not increase. If they protest together, the employer will not be able to harm workers, and employers are more likely to commit to increased pay.

Table 2. Garment workers and their spouses' income.

Garment Workers	Income (BDT)	Spouses' Occupation	Income (BDT)
Female workers with husbands who are on daily wages			
Female workers	9245–14,630	Construction/tiles workers Rickshaw pullers	No fixed income No fixed income
Female workers with husbands who are on monthly wages			
Female workers	9245–14,630	Drivers	17,000–18,000
		Small factory workers	11,000–12,000
		Security guards	12,000–13,000
		Salesman	10,000–12,000
Male workers with wives who are on daily wages			
Male workers	9245–17,510	Home-based tailors Pitha-makers	No fixed income No fixed income
Male workers with wives who are on monthly wages			
Male workers	9245–17,510	Small factory workers	8000–9000
		Tutors	3000–4000
		Tailors	6000–7000

Source: IDIs with garment workers.

Therefore, financial support from their wives makes these male workers more confident to participate in inside and outside large groups of collective resistance activities. They feel less pressure to manage financial expenses related to household and childcare responsibilities and can concentrate more on their protests. When they see their wives working harder to bear the burden of financial expenses while he is protesting, it further encourages the male workers to participate in their collective resistance activities to solve

their salary related problems. Arindom Karmoker, a male garment worker, age 34, Factory A, has one son and one daughter, and his wife is a tailor, says,

“I can go anywhere, anytime, with other workers without any tension. My wife knows and understands why I need to go there. Her struggle to manage household expenses also encourages me.”

His wife says,

“Protests have become a regular system nowadays; if the workers do not stop working or go to the streets, employers will often delay paying and increasing workers’ salaries. When all the workers go on the streets, employers do not feel good, and they have to come to talk to the workers”.

Since their wives support them financially during the protest, male workers can afford to have some pocket money that they can use for emergencies during outside workplace resistance, such as buying medicines, water, food, or pay for transportation.

Their wives express supportive attitudes to their husbands who go out to protest since they also understand fully that it is their right as garment workers, and the progress of their protest will have a significant influence on the amount of salary that they can bring back. Wives listen to what they did during the protest and show encouragement to their husbands by appreciating their decisions and resistance activities. They also receive advice from their wives in favor of large groups of collective resistance because they think it helps workers to focus on their salary-related problems. This understanding helps male workers to keep their commitment to carry out resistance activities without any household-related tensions. Some male workers’ wives also understand the leadership quality of male workers and feel good about garment workers’ role as leaders, when other workers tend to respect them and follow their instructions to solve their salary-related problems. This situation also ensures respect for their wives from other garment workers and their spouses. This emotional attachment ensures mental satisfaction for male workers to perform their large collective resistance. Morjina Akhter is a tailor and Karim Ali’s (a male garment worker, age 33, Factory A, and has two daughters) wife says,

“All the workers call him day and night; they call him leader. He knows how to deal with their problems to ensure their rights as workers. Other workers and neighbors also respect me because of him”.

For the wives, male workers going out for protest and coming back is a financial burden because of the lack of income, but in terms of time, since most household and childcare work is already being taken care of by the wives, there is not much difference in terms of time burden. In some cases, household work that male workers perform in normal times has to be carried out by their wives. Therefore, male workers do not face any obligation from their wives in order to participate in large group protests, and they can go anywhere, anytime, and their wives support helps them to be committed to their protests. Tanvir Rahman, a male garment worker, age 28, Factory B, has one son and his wife is a home-based tailor, says,

“My wife does most of the work for our son. I do not face problems with this. She also goes to the market to buy groceries or other household necessities sometimes when I cannot do this. After doing a protest all day, when I go home, I feel very tired. I have huge body aches. My wife then massages my back, legs, and hands”.

In the cases of female workers, some female workers can participate in both inside and outside workplace resistance activities with their husbands’ support. Female workers also share their resistance plan and activities with their husbands since it is easier for them to participate with their husbands’ support. Their husbands’ time burden will not change during the female workers’ protest, as household work and childcare will still be covered by female workers either during their normal working days or resistance days. However, during resistance days, their time outside the home is sometimes irregular and their husbands need to do more household and childcare work. But husbands’ support

in terms of household work remains at the helping level. Asma Begum, a female garment worker, age 34, Factory A, has one daughter and two sons, and her husband is a rickshaw puller, says,

“Mostly I do cooking, cleaning, and childcare every day. Sometimes when I cannot manage time due to our protests, my husband helps me”.

Female workers also cannot support their households while on protest; therefore, their husbands need to bear the financial burden of managing the household and covering childcare-related expenses. Husbands of female workers face financial difficulties without the wives’ income since their own income is low. However, their husbands sometimes give them money during their outside protests, if they need it for any emergency, as they can buy some medicines or take rickshaws or vans to go home. Ripa Begum, a female garment worker, age 30, Factory A, has one son and one daughter, and her husband is a driver, says,

“If possible, he gives me some money when I need to go to the streets for protest”.

Husbands’ reassurance and approval are also essential. Otherwise, they may fear what their husbands will say to them, or if other people say something problematic to their husbands and make them angry, then they may face problems after their protests. To gain the husbands’ approval and support is essential for their peace of mind. Nurun Nahar, a female garment worker, age 34, Factory A, has one daughter, and her husband is a driver, says,

“My husband always shows a positive attitude towards my decisions related to protests and does not say anything bad when I need to go to the streets with other workers”.

Her husband says,

“Others are going; she should go. She is going there for her money, not for fun, which is good for us”.

It is important that the husband understands the pressure she will have from her peers if she does not attend the protest. Husbands’ financial and emotional support ease female workers’ tension and allow them to concentrate on their resistance activities. Champa Rani (a female garment worker, age 31, Factory B, has two sons, and her husband is a construction worker) also described how her husband’s support and approval free her from worries when she participates in both protests inside and outside the factory.

“My husband understands that when all workers protest together, the employer gives their commitment regarding workers’ salaries. I can go without any fear and problems.”

Her husband says,

“The number of female workers is more, and it is their rights. If they do not go, there will be no big protest. They will also face problems from other workers”.

However, some female workers cannot participate in protest inside and outside the workplace in the same way. Their husbands have different views whether the protest takes place inside or outside the workplace based on their religious understanding. These husbands place high value on purdah, and do not allow their wives to expose themselves in public and oppose protesting on the street. Their husbands are against their wives going for protests because their husbands think women would be unable to cover their heads and breast properly with a scarf while they protest on the street together with thousands of workers. Amena Akhter, a female garment worker, age 34, Factory A, has one daughter and one son, and her spouse is a salesman, says,

“How do female workers go on the streets when their husbands say we have to always cover our head?”

Her husband says:

“It is very difficult for women to maintain their clothes during protests on the street”.

Additionally, in some cases, their husbands do not allow them to participate in protests on the streets because other people can say something bad about their characteristics. Such criticism will mean that women's honor is not respected and gives shame to the husbands. Therefore, these female workers' husbands request female workers to participate as little as possible in protests outside the factory. When they are not regularly participating in protests, female workers face problems from their coworkers because they feel that the female workers are not in solidarity with coworkers, and therefore pressure them to take part. Ayesha Begum, a female garment worker, age 27, Factory A, has one son, and her husband is a rickshaw puller, says,

"When I cannot go [to protest], they call me *Memshaheb* [aristocrat lady]. They name anyone who does not participate regularly like this".

Female workers try to convince their husbands so that they would not face blame and pressure from their coworkers. Being criticized by coworkers creates a huge psychological pressure on them. Sometimes, a female worker is able to convince her husband to allow her to take part in the large group protest, but still she can participate very little when the protest is held outside the factory.

4.2. Small Groups of Collective Resistance

Male workers decide by themselves whether to participate in small-group collective resistance or not. After their protest, they often share the incident with their wives. Male workers are always afraid that the small-groups' resistance can lead to severe consequences on their employment. Their wives' emotional support eases their tension. However, male workers' wives normally do not provide support happily and do not encourage their husbands to do this type of protest again, since it is too risky to lose their job. As male workers are the main income earners, if they face problems related to their jobs, their wives fear that they will be unable to manage the household expenditure alone. Therefore, only a few male workers with wives who are on monthly salaries can take part in small-group protests since the wives' income is stable. Arindom Karmoker, a male garment worker, age 34, Factory A, has one son and one daughter, and his wife is a tailor, says,

"After hearing about our protest, my wife said you did not do anything wrong but do not do this again."

In the case of female workers, some female workers who have husbands on monthly salaries can do small-group collective resistance activities. Female workers face problems of harassment and insults more than male workers. Feeling that their wives are facing harassment in the workplace, husbands are also offended and are supportive of protesting against such ill-treatment. However, at the same time, they do alert their wives not to protest in small groups often since it will risk their jobs. Rupban Begum, a female garment worker, age 27, Factory A, who has one daughter, and her husband is a driver, says,

"When I told my husband about our protest, he said, ok, but try to avoid this".

However, female workers who have husbands earning daily wages will not dare to engage in small-group collective protests, since they cannot risk their jobs. Mahmuda Akhter (a female garment worker, age 29, Factory A, who has 2 sons, and her husband is a van puller) says, "I am afraid of losing my work". Her husband says, "There is no benefit in doing this." While the monthly salaried husbands can afford to support the dignity of their wives, the daily-waged husbands are unable to do so, seeing practically that a small protest will not improve the situation and, on the contrary, just end up leaving women workers losing their jobs.

4.3. Individual Workplace Resistance

Individual resistance is highly risky to job loss. Oftentimes, such protest is spontaneous, and female workers opt for individual protests in response to offensive supervisor attitudes and inform their husbands afterward. Female workers with husbands earning monthly wages are more daring and sometimes opt for individual protest. Their husbands

are more understanding than those earning daily wages, since they can still financially afford their wives to lose income. But still, their husbands request them not to do this. Knowing that their husbands are not supportive of such individual protests, female workers will also not opt for individual protest but try to raise the issue during large collective resistance activities. Female workers whose husbands earn daily wages seldom become engaged in individual protests. Josna Begum, a female garment worker, age 30, Factory A, who has one daughter, and her husband is a rickshaw puller, says,

“If we do this; we may be dismissed from the job”.

Her husband says,

“We have children; what is the point of getting involved with these.”

In the case of male workers, their wives do not support individual protests since risk of job loss is high. Male workers can be dismissed from the job immediately, unlike female workers, who might be tolerated by the employer. Employers often see male workers as higher risk, and protesting male workers are blacklisted. Aminul Islam, a male garment worker, age 26, who has one daughter, Factory A, and his wife is a tutor, says,

“She knows that our employer can send our photos or names to other employers, so we will not get another work.”

His wife says,

“There are a lot of problems for male workers, so I request him not to do this often. If he loses his job, how will we manage?”

5. Discussion and Conclusions

The study explored how male and female workers participate in their workplace resistance differently based on their spouses’ emotional and financial support (Table 3). Workplace resistance activities can be a major risk for losing their job. Since it is a major household decision, whether the workers can obtain their spouses’ emotional and instrumental support influences their decision on whether to be engaged in certain protest activities.

Table 3. Summary of the main findings.

	Spouse Support Received by Male Workers	Spouse Support Received by Female Workers
Large protest inside factory	Financial support (pocket money and household and childcare related expenses)	Financial support (household and childcare-related expenses, pocket money and providing assurance in case of job loss)
	Active emotional support (respect, encourage, listen, advise, and understand)	Emotional support (encouragement, understanding, reassurance, approval)
	Household work related support (although household work is normally done by women, some work that male workers normally do are taken care of by their wives)	Household work-related support (helping household work)
Large protest outside factory (on the streets)	The same as above	The same as above, but some husbands are against female workers taking part because of purdah.
Small-group collective resistance	Wives are not supportive because of a high risk of job loss.	Husbands with monthly salary are supportive, since it is to protect the honor of their wives. Husbands with daily wages are not supportive because of a high risk of job loss.
Individual resistance	Wives are against because of a very high risk of job loss.	Husbands are not supportive because of a high risk of job loss.

Although protests are started and organized by garment factory workers, how much the workers participate, and how they feel in participating in protests is largely shaped by spouse support. Regardless of spouse support, workers might take part in the protest, but how much they can actively and comfortably take part depends on the spouse support. Hence, studying the spouse support can shed light on the struggle and conflict that workers have in the household and at the workplace.

Male and female garment workers face several dilemma and power struggle. First is the financial dilemma. Workers as well as their spouses know that they need to protest and engage in resistance actions in order to improve their wages and working conditions. Going against their employers, who have much more power than the workers, involves risks. Large protests overcome this risk, while the smaller the protest, the larger the risk. Hence, spouse support is more difficult to gain if the employment is at stake, especially when the income from garment factory work is the main income for the family, regardless of whether the worker is a woman or a man. During the days that the workers are in protest, they might incur extra expenditures, but that is not considered as a serious drawback for either women or men.

The second struggle is on gender roles. Wives of male workers are supportive of their husbands taking part, especially in large protests, since they are proud of their husbands taking leadership roles. In general, in terms of intrahousehold gender roles, it is not a cause of conflict or stress, since women are the ones who will take care of this work regardless of the protest activities. There is a potential area of intrahousehold conflict if the women come back late because of protest, and men need to step in to cover some work, but such cases are few and women would make utmost effort not to disturb this division of labor. Gender roles do not change regardless of the spouses' support to their resistance activities.

The third struggle is on *purdah*. Some men take *purdah* seriously and restrict female workers' participation in protest activities. These men are also worried that other people will comment on their wives' behavior if the wives go for public protests. Upholding honor is an important value that cannot be compromised. Therefore, such conflict is difficult to solve, and it makes it impossible for female workers to participate in public protest. The worst part for the workers is that if they do not take part in protest because of restriction from husbands, they will be subject to pressure and criticism from their fellow workers. This leaves female workers in a conflicted situation. This is difficult for female workers to manage these two pressures. At the same time, the religious values of honor can work as a supportive attitude for protest in other cases. Some men, especially those who have stable income, would support their wives to fight against insulting behaviors from supervisors for the sake of their honor.

The findings of this study extended the existing studies related to spouse support and workplace resistance. In the existing literature, spouse support and workplace resistance have not been considered together to explore how spouse support can influence workplace resistance activities. The issues related to spouse support are mostly discussed in the context of career development, job satisfaction, reducing work stress, and work–family balance. The literature shows that spouse support significantly helps men and women solve their career and work stress-related problems and ensure work–family balance (Alarifi and Basahal 2023; Bures et al. 1996; Erdwins et al. 2001; Heikkinen et al. 2014; Le et al. 2023; Yedirir and Hamarta 2015). In contrast, workplace resistance literature focuses on workers and the support from coworkers and organizations, as well as the role of leaders (Ashraf and Prentice 2019; Choudhury and Rahman 2017; Hossain et al. 2018; Khanna 2011; Kim 2011; Mohiuddin 2007; Tanjeem 2021). Spouse support has not been included in these discussions.

Our study showed that garment workers' participation in workplace resistance activities is highly influenced by their spouses' support, and the way the support is experienced is different between male and female workers. Financial concerns are the largest deciding factors for spouses to support the workers' protest or not. But for female workers, spouse

support is influenced by the concept of purdah and honor, along with the husbands' sense of having to protect their wives' dignity.

The present study explored a new insight into workers' workplace resistance by focusing on spouse support. However, this study only focused on the situation of married garment workers in the context of a particular city. The findings should not be generalized for all garment factory-based developing countries. Furthermore, the situation of unmarried garment workers, especially female workers, based on their family relations might be different. Therefore, these could be taken into consideration in future studies.

Author Contributions: Conceptualization, M.M.I. and K.K.; methodology, M.M.I. and K.K.; data collection, M.M.I.; analysis, M.M.I. and K.K.; writing original draft, M.M.I.; writing—review and editing, M.M.I. and K.K. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

Funding: This research was funded by the Bangabandhu Overseas Scholarship (Regi:/Admin-3/Bangabandhu Overseas Scholarship/3681) and the Asian Institute of Technology Fellowship (201908000139).

Institutional Review Board Statement: This study received an institutional review certificate from the Research Ethics Review Committee.

Informed Consent Statement: We used consent forms for all the participants, which mentioned their freedom and choices to participate or decline whenever they desired.

Data Availability Statement: We will not publish the data due to the respondents' protection.

Acknowledgments: We would like to thank the donors for their financial support. We would also like to thank all the respondents who shared their experiences and all the key informants for their informative data. Their thoughtful insights helped us to analyze the data.

Conflicts of Interest: The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

Notes

- ¹ Different forms of workers' associations are present in different garment factories. Trade unions are government and employers' approved workers' associations, and they are registered with the government. The Participation Committee is only an employer-approved workers' association. According to the Bangladesh Labor Act, 2006 (section: 205–208) and the amendment in 2013, it is a requirement for employers when they have more than fifty workers in their industrial settings to have a workers' Participation Committee. The Participation Committee has four different types of members: Chairman, Vice-Chairman, Member Secretary, and Member; the Trade Union has one President, one Secretary, and several general members. The number of committee members depends on the total number of workers, and all workers are considered as members in the Participation Committee and general members in the Trade Union.
- ² The education level of garment workers has not been considered in this study, since most of them are educated around primary level (grade-five), and would not have much differences (also between women and men).

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