

THE EXPLOITATION OF FEMALE WORKERS BEHIND THE RISE OF THE FAST FASHION INDUSTRY

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Abstract

The rapid development of the fashion industry alongside technological advancements has given rise to the phenomenon of fast fashion the massive, rapid, and low-cost production and distribution of clothing to meet consumer demand for the latest fashion trends. However, behind its convenience, fast fashion carries serious consequences for women, particularly female workers who face exploitation in the form of low wages, excessive working hours, and exposure to hazardous chemicals. Using literature review as the primary method, this article aims to describe the exploitation of female workers as a result of fast fashion. The literature review is based on nine articles, analyzed thematically around the exploitation of female workers amid the rise of the fast fashion industry. Based on the findings from the literature reviewed, the authors divide the discussion into four aspects to identify the forms of oppression experienced by female workers due to fast fashion practices: working conditions, wage inequality, sexual violence and harassment, and the burden of women's dual roles. This literature review therefore contributes to the development of a gender-based analytical framework for exploitation within the global textile industry, while reinforcing the urgency of gender-responsive labor protection policies for female workers.

Keywords: *Exploitation of Female Workers; Fast fashion Industry; Protection Of Female Workers*

Abstrak

Perkembangan industri fashion yang pesat seiring kemajuan teknologi telah melahirkan fenomena fast fashion, yakni produksi dan distribusi pakaian secara masif, cepat, dan murah untuk memenuhi permintaan konsumen terhadap tren mode terbaru. Namun, dibalik kemudahannya, fast fashion membawa dampak serius terhadap perempuan, khususnya buruh perempuan yang menghadapi eksploitasi dalam bentuk upah rendah, jam kerja berlebihan, dan paparan bahan kimia berbahaya. Dengan menggunakan kajian literatur sebagai metode utama, artikel ini bertujuan untuk mendeskripsikan gambaran mengenai eksploitasi buruh perempuan akibat fast fashion. Kajian literatur didasarkan pada 9 artikel, dianalisis berdasarkan tematik eksploitasi buruh perempuan di balik maraknya industri fast fashion. Hasil temuan yang didapat literatur yang penulis gunakan, penulis membagi menjadi empat aspek untuk mengidentifikasi gambaran penindasan buruh perempuan akibat praktik fast fashion, yaitu kondisi kerja, ketimpangan upah, kekerasan dan pelecehan seksual, dan beban peran ganda perempuan. Oleh karena itu, literature review ini berkontribusi pada pengembangan kerangka analisis eksploitasi berbasis gender dalam konteks industri tekstil global, serta memperkuat urgensi kebijakan perlindungan pekerja perempuan yang berperspektif gender.

Kata kunci: Eksploitasi buruh Perempuan; Industri Fast fashion; Perlindungan Pekerja Perempuan

INTRODUCTION

When we buy clothes, we rarely think about the people behind them or the people who make them. Behind the ever-expanding fashion industry lies a troubling reality, especially for female workers. Women dominate the global garment workforce, accounting for 80% of all workers in this industry (Phizacklea, 2022). In absolute terms of the approximately 65 million garment workers in the Asia-Pacific region, more than 35 million are workers receive the least protection. Female workers are the group most vulnerable to exploitation and discrimination in the workplace, particularly in the

fashion industry. Even when performing the same work, female workers face wage disparities, they often receive lower wages than male workers, both in the formal and informal sectors (Ahnmaddien & Sa'dia, 2020). In addition, female workers must also contend with unfair and inadequate working conditions and environments, such as an unproductive work environment, long working hours without adequate compensation, and health risks due to exposure to hazardous chemicals.

Today, fashion trends are changing very rapidly, prompting many people to strive to keep up and seek out the latest collections from various brands. The "ready to wear" concept is currently trending among both Indonesian and global consumers due to its lower prices and ease of access (Ramadhan, 2024). Consequently, this has accelerated the marketing of apparel products to meet the trends or styles preferred by the public a phenomenon known as "Fast Fashion". Fast fashion is a highly relevant industry trend in practice. The concept of fast fashion focuses on reducing lead times encompassing the production and distribution of goods and bringing new products to market quickly and at affordable prices. Currently, this phenomenon has been widely adopted across various industries, including the fashion industry. With its affordable prices, fast fashion offers a wide variety of trendy styles, attracting more and more people to purchase them (Juliyanto & Firmansyah, 2024). The existence of the fast fashion phenomenon will have a significant impact on female workers. They will work under high-pressure conditions to meet tight deadlines and everchanging market demands. As a result, female workers often face inhumane working conditions, such as excessively long working hours, wages that do not match the workload, and threats to their health (Ting & Stagner, 2021).

The exploitation of female workers in the garment industry has been widespread since the 1990s. To this day, the growing prevalence of global fast fashion brands has only exacerbated the injustices faced by workers. In his research, Figuera (1996) demonstrated that a garment company producing clothing for the international fast fashion brand GAP committed numerous acts of injustice and violence against its workers. These violations include excessive working hours, physical and psychological abuse, and threats of dismissal if workers do not follow the orders of their superiors or supervisors (Febrilly & Siscawati, 2023). In the fast fashion phenomenon as well, women are not only treated as workers who face exploitation and oppression but are also made the primary target of consumers who are constantly exposed with the latest fashion trends. Developments in fashion consumption are often associated with women because women's consumption of fashion is an undeniable reality (Benedicta & Paramita, 2022).

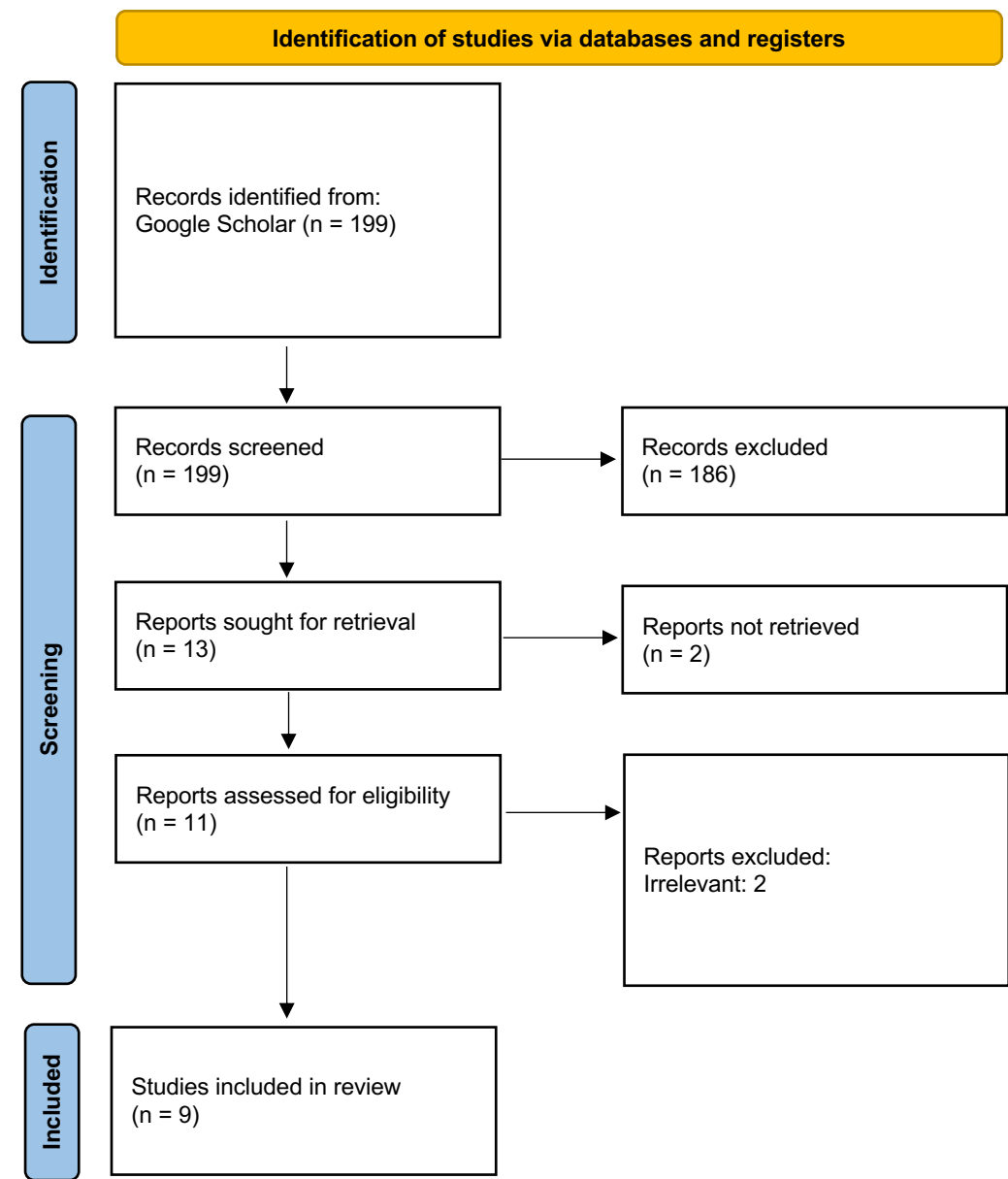
Based on this background, this study aims to describe the exploitation of female workers in the fast fashion industry. To the best of the author's knowledge, there are not yet many articles summarizing existing research findings on the exploitation of female workers in the fast fashion industry, therefore the author seeks to address this gap. This issue warrants serious attention because the exploitation of female workers not only affects individual well-being but also reflects structural inequalities within the global fashion industry. By illustrating the reality of this exploitation, this article aims to make a practical contribution by raising public awareness regarding the conditions faced by female workers behind the fashion products consumed daily, thereby fostering a collective consciousness that demands more ethical and humane industry practices. Furthermore, this paper seeks to offer insights to the government and relevant authorities to assist in formulating fair policies, particularly those concerning female workers.

METHODS

This research uses a literature review method. A literature review is a review of various previously published sources related to a research topic. These sources can include books, scientific journals, theses, dissertations, articles, and other sources related to the research topic. A literature review aims to collect and review previous research, strengthen the urgency of related research, and delve deeper into the research variables to gain new perspectives (Yam J. H, 2024). The literature found came from several countries, namely Indonesia, Canada, South Carolina, the United Kingdom, England, and Bangladesh. The process of collecting data on previous research literature used Google Scholar with the following inclusion criteria:

- 1. Search keywords consisting of "Exploitation of Female Workers," "Fast Fashion."
- 2. Research published between 2021 and 2025 to examine the development of research on the phenomenon of female labor exploitation in current fast fashion practices.
- 3. Research conducted in both Indonesian and English.
- 4. Availability of full-text access and completeness of information presented in the literature.
- 5. Explaining the phenomenon of female labor exploitation resulting from fast fashion practices.

Figure 1. Stages of the literature search





Tabel 1. Literature Review Results

No	Title, Author, & Year of Publication	Country	Method	Research Findings
1.	Safitri, (2025) Dampak Fast fashion terhadap Perempuan dan Lingkungan: Analisis Ekofeminisme	Indonesia	Descriptive Qualitative	The fast fashion industry has a significant impact on both the environment and women, a dynamic linked to the frameworks of patriarchal domination and capitalism. Wage discrimination against female workers is also a feature of fast fashion practices.
2.	Fang, (2023) <i>Environmental and Human Impacts of Fast Fashion</i>	Canada	Secondary Data Analysis	Female workers labor under poor conditions, working excessive hours for low wages. Many face harassment, gender discrimination, and physical violence in the workplace.
3.	William, (2022) <i>Appalling or Advantageous? Exploring the Impacts of Fast Fashion From Environmental, Social, and Perspectives</i>	South Carolina	Secondary Data Analysis	Many female workers experience sexual violence and harassment. They are also frequently denied maternity leave. Furthermore, female workers often receive lower wages than men, despite having the same or even heavier workloads.
4.	Siscawati & Febrilly, (2023) <i>Gender Based Violence and Global Capitalism: Everyday Experiences of Female Laborers In The Fast Fashion Garment Industry</i>	Indonesia	Qualitative	Female workers in the garment industry often face various forms of injustice and violence, such as low wages, gender discrimination, or heavy workloads.
5.	Smith, (2021) <i>Intersectional Discrimination and Exploitation Within the UK Fast Fashion Industry</i>	United Kingdom	Secondary Data Analysis	Female workers endure extreme working hours up to 24 hours with only a one-hour break receive wages below the minimum, and lack clear employment contracts.
6.	Phizacklea, (2022) <i>Unpacking the Fast Fashion Industry</i>	England	Qualitative	Approximately 80% of garment workers are women. They are required to purchase their own machines, cover operating costs, and work in unsafe social conditions. Furthermore, unequal power relations based on gender and ethnicity have emerged.
7.	Basirulla, M. D., & Tasnim, F. (2023) <i>Nature of human Rights Violations on Female Garments Workers in Bangladesh</i>	Bangladesh	Quantitative & Qualitative	Female workers face forced labor, sexual harassment, abusive treatment by supervisors, health deterioration after working, poor job security, and restrictions on the right to organize.
8.	Inderasari, E., Ulfiana, E., & Alfisyahri, K. A. N. (2023) <i>Tripled Troubles on Financial, Social, and Sexual Needs of Female Conflicts with Three Time Shifts Working at Garment Industries in Indonesia</i>	Indonesia	Qualitative	Female workers in the garment industry operate under a three-shift system, consisting of rotating morning, afternoon, and night shifts. This arrangement makes it difficult for female workers—particularly those who are married and have children—to balance their domestic responsibilities, including rest, their sex lives, and their roles within the family.
9.	Sharma, L., & Srivastava, M. (2022) <i>A Scale to Measure Organizational Stress Among Women workers in the Garment Industry</i>	India	Quantitative	Female workers experience organizational stress; this study identifies the factors causing such stress among female workers in India's garment industry, namely excessive work pressure, work systems, inadequate wages, the burden of dual roles, and a lack of social support.

In this study, data were analyzed using the thematic analysis approach developed by Braun and Clarke (2006) specifically by identifying, categorizing, and

synthesizing key findings from each piece of literature into broad themes relevant to the research focus.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

The author identifies four themes illustrating the oppression of female workers resulting from fast-fashion practices, based on the reviewed literature: working conditions, wage inequality, sexual violence and harassment, and the burden of women's dual roles. These four findings are interconnected and depict how female workers experience structural oppression across various spheres of life.

Working Conditions

The working conditions of female workers in the fast-fashion industry consistently reveal a pattern of systemic, transnational exploitation. Safitri (2025) explains that the exploitation experienced by female workers is strongly linked to the fundamental principle of capitalism—maximizing profits while minimizing costs—a dynamic evidenced by the realities behind garment production. The issue of exploiting female workers in this industry has been widespread since the 1990s. To this day, the increasing diversity of fast-fashion clothing has only exacerbated the injustices faced by these women. Such injustices include unpredictable working hours and threats from superiors for failing to comply with orders.

Female workers are required to meet the ever-growing demand for fast fashion and low-cost clothing; to cut production costs, some brands not only use low-quality materials but also strip workers of their rights to maximize profits. Many workers endure uncondusive environments, long hours, and wages that are disproportionate to their workload. In India, at certain factories fulfilling large orders—some involving child labor—workers have been forced to work continuously for 36 hours (Fang, 2023). Women are often viewed as secondary breadwinners who are easier to control and less likely to negotiate or join labor unions. The majority of these women face various forms of inequality, such as the gender wage gap, sexual harassment, and a lack of human rights protections. One manifestation of this inequality is the restriction on bathroom breaks—which increases the risk of urinary tract infections—exacerbated by a lack of soap, water, and menstrual hygiene supplies. Such situations are particularly common in countries where the fast fashion industry is a major employer, such as India, Pakistan, and Bangladesh (William, 2023).

Many female workers, particularly those from migrant communities, lack formal employment contracts, earn only £3 per hour, and labor in unhygienic, poorly ventilated, and hazardous environments. They work under the constant threat of losing their jobs. Basirulla and Tasnim (2023) report that forced labor is common in Bangladesh, involving young women who work sixteen-hour days, seven days a week. Female workers are confined within factories for 19-hour shifts—a practice that endangers them and can lead to catastrophic consequences, such as the fire at the Tazreen factory. Furthermore, the study reveals that 47% of female garment workers remain silent regarding overtime; however, in Bengali culture, silence is often interpreted as consent. Due to the restrictive environment and the fear of job loss, these women are reluctant to speak out about the forced labor they endure. Employment in the garment industry is particularly challenging for women, as they must manage numerous responsibilities—such as household chores and childcare—before and after their shifts, often necessitating emergency leave for family reasons. Additionally, female workers face monthly menstruation, which can sometimes hinder their performance in the factory.

Inderasari et al. (2023) explain that many women choose to work in the garment industry because it requires no specialized skills or high levels of education, and because they need to supplement their family income due to their husbands' low

earnings. However, these women are subjected to grueling and exhausting working conditions. They often face a three-shift system—including night shifts—that makes it difficult to fulfill their family responsibilities. Workers face fines amounting to double their wages if they skip additional work assignments; this policy discourages them from taking leave and compels them to work continuously throughout the day. Job insecurity and high production targets are major sources of stress for female workers. Irregular work schedules also contribute to stress and negatively impact their health (Sharma & Srivastava, 2022).

Overall, the working conditions for female laborers in the fast fashion industry are characterized by long hours, wages far below living standards, unsafe work environments, unrealistic production targets, and a lack of adequate legal protection. This pattern is consistently observed across various countries, from Bangladesh, India, and Indonesia to the United Kingdom. This indicates that poor working conditions are not merely a local issue but a systemic feature of the fast fashion production model, which structurally relies on the exploitation of female labor (Brown, 2021). Unless the root causes are seriously addressed, this cycle of exploitation affecting female workers will persist.

Gender and wage inequality

Fast fashion companies tend to prefer hiring female workers from developing countries at minimum wage. Driven by high consumer demand, workers must labor harder to produce garments; textile workers are often employed without receiving overtime pay. Furthermore, gender inequality in the workplace manifested in wage disparities and unequal job positions contributes to this situation (Safitri, 2025). The majority of garment workers are women employed in technical production roles, whereas men typically work in middle management or positions ranked above technical staff (Williams, 2022). This situation represents more than just a difference in roles; it reflects gender-based power dynamics that systemically relegate women to subordinate positions within the industry structure.

Female workers face extreme exploitation regarding working hours and unreasonable production targets, often being forced to complete over 1,200 garments per day without fair compensation. This occurs because men's work tends to be viewed as primary and "real," while women's work is often perceived as "unreal" or unpaid labor (Siscawati & Febrilly, 2023). In many countries, such as Bangladesh and Cambodia, female workers labor under extreme conditions. They were forced to work nearly 24-hour shifts with only a one-hour break to meet production targets. All of this was done for wages far below humane standards often just around £65 per month (Smith, 2021).

Female workers generally receive lower wages because they are not viewed as primary family breadwinners, earn less, and their work is often perceived as low-skilled. It has also been noted that manufacturers deliberately shift work from factories to workers' homes to further reduce labor costs. For manufacturers, utilizing home-based labor is highly profitable, particularly for small-scale production that does not require specialized standards; provided the work is completed on time, the manufacturer need only cut the fabric and deliver it to the workers' homes. Meanwhile, female workers must purchase their own machinery and bear all production costs, including electricity and other necessities (Phizacklea, 2022). Furthermore, research by Basirulla & Tasnim (2023) reveals gender disparities regarding leave entitlements in the garment industry: while 42% of female workers reported not receiving leave, a survey of male workers found that 70% had access to leave benefits. The primary reason female workers require emergency leave is family care; in addition to their roles as garment workers, they are mothers responsible for caring for their children.

Overall, the literature indicates that female workers in the fast-fashion industry consistently receive lower wages and occupy lower-level positions than men, despite constituting the majority of the workforce in the sector. This inequality does not stem from a lack of competence among women but rather from an industrial system that deliberately places them in positions where they are easily controlled and inexpensive to employ (Menzel & Woodruff, 2021). As long as women continue to be viewed merely as supplementary earners rather than economic pillars, low wages and unfair treatment will likely continue to be accepted as the norm within the global fast-fashion industry (Brown, 2021).

Violence and sexual harassment

Female workers often lack awareness of their rights and frequently endure harassment and physical violence, leaving them unable to resist the harsh conditions of their employment. In several garment-producing countries, vulnerability to exploitation and violence is a primary reason why women leave the workforce (Fang, 2023). The violence and harassment experienced by female workers occur not only at the physical production site but also during commutes and in employer-provided housing. These are not isolated incidents but rather recurring acts of violence against women in the fast-fashion industry, driven by short-term contracts, daily production targets, disciplinary practices, wage-related rights violations, exhausting working hours, and unsafe workplaces (William, 2023).

Female workers frequently face sexual harassment from their male colleagues and supervisors. Male coworkers or supervisors harass women in various ways; for instance, a male worker might stand beside a female worker while fixing a lecherous gaze upon her. If female workers reject unethical advances, they are initially subjected to verbal harassment and public humiliation, followed by forced extra work and false accusations reported to senior management. Furthermore, female workers have reported acts such as hair-pulling, hitting, slapping, unwanted rubbing, touching, and even kissing. Other forms of harassment include teasing, leering, whistling, standing uncomfortably close, and pinching. Interviews with female workers who had experienced sexual harassment revealed that while every woman in the workplace had been harassed by male colleagues or superiors, none had lodged complaints or resisted, fearing the loss of their jobs. Furthermore, there is the case of a female worker who began working in a garment factory at the age of 15; she recounted that a male supervisor sexually harassed her by touching her body, including her intimate areas (Basirulla & Tasnim, 2023). In addition to sexual violence, female workers also endure systemic verbal abuse as part of the pressure to meet high production targets under inhumane working conditions (Siscawati & Febrilly, 2023).

Overall, the literature indicates that violence and sexual harassment against female workers in the fast fashion industry are not merely isolated incidents but have become a normalized part of daily work life. In many garment factories where the workforce is predominantly female while supervisory and managerial roles are dominated by men, men frequently exploit their positions of power to harass women, including coercing them into sexual acts. This situation is exacerbated by economic dependency; female workers often choose to remain silent and not report the abuse they endure for fear of losing their sole source of livelihood (Akhter et al., 2019). Dreher et al. (2022) demonstrate that social pressure from workplace superiors directly contributes to the deterioration of female workers' physical and mental health. Despite the vast scale of this violence, workplace sexual harassment remains underreported because victims fear not being believed, being blamed, facing social or professional retaliation, or even encountering countersuits. In response to this issue, the International Labour Organization (ILO) adopted the Violence and Harassment Convention in June 2019 which entered into force under international law in June 2021

yet its implementation in garment-producing nations remains weak. As long as unequal power structures between men and women persist, violence and sexual harassment will continue to serve as tools to control and subordinate female workers in the fast fashion industry (Brown, 2021).

The dual-role burden of female workers

Female workers are not only engaged in industrial employment but also fulfill household roles, such as cooking, childcare, and other domestic tasks. Furthermore, they continue to perform unpaid social roles within the industrial labor system often facing wage discrimination, receiving low pay, or even going unpaid altogether (Safitri, 2025). These domestic roles are neither recognized as work nor valued. Women find themselves trapped in a cycle of exhaustion, leaving them no time to speak up or change their circumstances (Smith, 2023). Phizacklea (2022) explains that a primary reason female workers choose to work from home is the need to care for their children. Unfortunately, working from home is rarely an effective solution, as children still require full attention. This situation reflects the external pressures faced by female workers particularly mothers with young children and highlights the double burden they must bear. Women report feeling 40% more stressed than men when facing similar work pressures and environments, particularly when work-related demands intrude upon their family lives. Female workers must balance family and organizational roles, a struggle that often compromises their well-being and affects work productivity. It is this dual responsibility that drives work-family conflict, a key source of organizational stress among women (Sharma & Srivastava, 2022).

Overall, the literature review indicates that the exploitation experienced by female workers in the fast fashion industry does not end when they leave the factory. After completing long, exhausting shifts at work, these women must still return home to care for children, cook, clean, and manage a host of other domestic responsibilities. This "double burden" takes a serious toll on their physical and mental health, leading to issues such as stress, anxiety, restlessness, and even suicidal thoughts. These findings align with Dreher et al. (2022), who explain that the conflict between work and family life directly contributes to the deterioration of female workers' physical and mental well-being. This situation is exacerbated by a lack of structural support for working women. An ILO survey (2023) in Indonesia found that 79.3% of women bear this double burden, yet most are unaware that their unpaid working hours far exceed those of men. This reflects the strength of social norms that view domestic labor as a natural obligation for women rather than work deserving of recognition and valuation. Inderasari et al. (2023) further note that the night-shift system in the garment industry intensifies this conflict, forcing female workers to choose between caring for their children and facing financial penalties for declining overtime hours.

The exploitation experienced by female workers in the fast-fashion industry is interconnected across their professional, social, and personal lives. Working conditions for women in this sector are characterized by long hours, intense production pressure, low wages, and substandard environments. Wage disparities, occupational segregation between men and women, and gender-based discrimination demonstrate that women are frequently relegated to unequal roles. Furthermore, verbal, physical, and sexual violence whether in the workplace or during the commute exacerbates the vulnerability of women in this sector. Meanwhile, outside of working hours, women continue to shoulder domestic responsibilities, such as childcare and household management, which further increases their overall physical and mental burden. Consequently, addressing these issues requires serious efforts from various stakeholders, particularly fashion companies and the government.

CONCLUSION

The rapidly expanding fast fashion industry conceals a troubling reality for the female workers within it. The exploitation experienced by these women is interconnected across professional, social, and personal spheres of their lives. Through a systematic review of nine studies, this article identifies four key themes of exploitation: substandard working conditions, gender and wage inequality, sexual violence and harassment, and the burden of women's dual roles. These themes do not occur in isolation; rather, they reinforce one another within a multi-layered system of exploitation. Theoretically, this article contributes to the understanding that the exploitation of female workers in the fast fashion industry is multidimensional, necessitating a comprehensive analytical framework capable of examining how these factors shape the exploitative conditions they face. Practically, these findings aim to raise public awareness regarding the realities faced by female workers behind the fashion products consumed daily, fostering a collective consciousness that demands more responsible and gender-sensitive industry practices. Furthermore, this article seeks to provide insights for the government and relevant authorities to formulate policies protecting female workers. Companies need to implement policies that are corrective, protective, and non-discriminatory. Examples include issuing warnings to all employees to prevent sexual harassment, establishing policies regarding maternity leave rights, instituting humane and fair work policies, and prioritizing work-life balance. And The government plays a crucial role in protecting the rights of female workers, a task that can be carried out through three stages: guidance, inspection, and law enforcement. During the guidance stage, labor inspectors can provide information and education regarding labor laws and reporting mechanisms. During the inspection process, labor inspectors can assess the implementation of workers' rights and obligations such as the provision of wages, working hours, and rest periods, as well as other aspects that are frequently overlooked. If violations are discovered, enforcement actions may be taken.

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