

**A Gendered Analysis of the Ready-Made Garments (RMG) Sector of
Bangladesh: A Paradox of Empowerment and Dis-empowerment**

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Abstract

Neoliberal globalization is a gendered process. Transnational production in its search for “cheap, docile, and dexterous” labor has led to the expansion of the Bangladeshi export-led garment industry, which in turn has resulted in the feminization of labor. While the increase in number of poor women workers entering the formal economy of Bangladesh may give the impression of empowerment, I argue that the disadvantages associated with employment in the garments sector creates a paradox of empowerment and dis-empowerment. Does economic opportunity inevitably lead to the empowerment of all women? In this thesis I will examine the gendered processes of neoliberal globalization and their impact on women workers in the garment industry.

Keywords: gender, empowerment, neoliberal globalization, garments sector, patriarchy, Bangladesh.

Introduction

Neoliberal globalization, according to Harvey, is "a theory of political economic practices that human well-being can be best advanced in economic arrangements that promote private property ownership, free markets and free trade, whereby the role of the state is to create and preserve institutional framework and conditions that will facilitate such practices".¹ Neoliberal globalization has been incorporated into the governing ideologies of markets in most regions of the world, having been initiated by Reagan and Thatcher in the United States and Britain. But neoliberalism does not operate in exactly the same way on the ground everywhere. It interacts with local institutions, cultural norms and political frameworks in specific ways.² Most discussions on global inequality highlight the disparities between the Global North and Global South. However, such discourses often steal focus from the inequalities that persist within regions as neoliberalism intensifies gender, class and racial inequalities. Neoliberal globalization has created not only a distinction between the Global North and the Global South but has also resulted in a regional divide within the Global South.³ This divide has been termed "uneven development", which denotes asymmetrical and exploitative relations between classes, companies, and countries, all of which are understood to be endemic, not transitory, features of capitalist development. When referring to the sub-national scale of cities and regions, uneven development signifies an out-of-equilibrium economy, characterized by the dynamic coexistence of regionalized growth and localized decline, by "slash and burn" logics of political-economic colonization and abandonment, by unequal interactions and asymmetrical power relations between cores and peripheries, and by qualitatively variegated forms of disconnection to the

¹ Harvey, David. *A brief history of neoliberalism*. Oxford University Press, USA, 2007.

² Ibid.

³ Lindio-McGovern, Ligaya, and Isidor Wallimann. *Globalization and Third World Women: Exploitation, Coping and Resistance*. Routledge, 2016.

matrix of transnational economic development.⁴ An important example of this is the circulation of cheap and disposable waged reproductive labor necessary for the maintenance of productive labor, which under neoliberal rule serves capitalism. In the case of Bangladesh, the growth of the garment industry has resulted from global relocation of capital as well as availability of a cheap labor force, particularly female labor. In addition, many feminist scholars such as Salzinger have demonstrated that neoliberal globalization is inherently a gendered and racialized process. In transnational production, the creation and allocation of labor power is organized around gender, and this has consequences for the way production works in general, above and beyond its implications for workers themselves. Salzinger argues that, managerial decisions about the legitimate, possible and desirable uses of labor are structured through their gendered senses of self, other and object. Decisions about what can conceivably be asked and expected of a worker are both enabled and limited by managers' sense of who workers are, and this sense is fully imbued with gendered understandings and assumptions.⁵ In other contexts, feminist labor historians and sociologists have shown persuasively that gender shapes the way that employers put their economic interests into practice. These scholars demonstrate that rational economic practice is partially constituted by gender and that employers view productivity and labor control through a gendered lens.⁶ Gendered and racialized discourses of work are integral to an understanding of the dynamics of hiring practices I talk about this in more details in the following section.

⁴ Peck, Jamie. "Uneven regional development." *International Encyclopedia of Geography: People, the Earth, Environment and Technology: People, the Earth, Environment and Technology* (2016): 1-13.

⁵ Salzinger, Leslie. "From gender as object to gender as verb: Rethinking how global restructuring happens." *Critical Sociology* 30, no. 1 (2004): 43-62.

⁶ Caraway, Teri L. "The political economy of feminization: From "cheap labor" to gendered discourses of work." *Politics & Gender* 1, no. 3 (2005): 399-429.

In this thesis I will examine the gendered impacts of neoliberal globalization on poor women workers in the garment industry.

Development Discourses on the Global South

Throughout the thesis I draw on the work of various feminist scholars who have worked with the concepts of empowerment, agency, the Third World, neoliberal globalization and its gender, class and race related implications. Naila Kabeer for instance has argued that, with the expansion of export-oriented manufacturing in many low-income countries and labor-surplus economies, many women have an opportunity to enter the labor market through feminized employment strategies, which causes a sharp rise in women's employment.⁷ Generally, feminization of the workforce entails mass entry of women into the formal labor force.⁸ As multinational corporations (MNCs) relocate their firms to developing countries, women have gained increased access to industrial jobs. Scholars such as Fernandez Kelly has argued that the increase in the feminized workforce has happened as a result of searching for cheap labor and this has led to labor exploitation.⁹ On the contrary, some scholars, such as Marchand and Runyan have argued that economic views of feminization undermine the influence of gendered discourses about labor. They have claimed that global manufacturing industries' preference for female workers does not merely happen as a result of searching for cheap labor; rather, gendered discourses of labor are the main influencing factor for feminization of the labor force.¹⁰ The gendered discourses of labor refer to the gender-biased beliefs that provide distinct forms of labor for men and women. These beliefs justify labor exploitation and gender discrimination at

⁷ Barrientos, F., & Kabeer, N. (2004). The gender dimension of the globalization of production. Working paper No. 17. Geneva: International Labor Organization.

⁸ Momen, M. (2006). Empowering whom? Garment workers in Bangladesh. *Empowerment: A Journal of Women for Women*, 13, 23–38.

⁹ Fernandez-Kelly, M. P. (1997). Maquiladoras: The view from the inside. In N. Visvanathan, L. Dugan L. Nisnof & N. Wiegiersma (Eds.), *The women gender and development reader* (pp. 203– 15). London: Zed Books.

¹⁰ Marchand, M. H., & Runyan, A. S. (Eds.). (2000). *Gender and global restructuring: Shifting, sites, and resistances*. London: Routledge.

the workplace. Gendered discourses of work not only illuminate processes of job allocation and reallocation at the firm level but also provide a means of connecting shop-floor gender divisions of labor with broader gendered patterns of industrialization.¹¹ As Mohanty has argued, “naturalized assumptions about work and the worker are crucial to understanding the sexual politics of globalization”.¹² Most if not all these discourses are surrounding the so called Third World, hence I look at Arturo Escobar's central thesis which states that there is no universal model of economic and social development that can be objectively applied to the diverse local cultures of the societies misleadingly grouped under the heading of the Third World.¹³ Indeed, Escobar argues that the construct of the Third World is an ethnocentric invention of the post-World War II West; and development is an equally flawed "regime of representation" crafted by the West to impose its power-driven interests on non-Western people.¹⁴ Mohanty, on the other hand, criticizes homogeneous perspectives and presuppositions in some of the Western feminist texts that focus on women in the Third World. She argues that the universal categorization of a large group of women in non-Western countries is mostly done through constructed monolithic terms and classifications. This approach is keen, she argues, to label women in the Third World countries as “poor, uneducated, tradition-bound, and victimized,” thus overlooking the complexity, diversity, and multiplicity of women in the non-Western world.¹⁵ Mohanty challenges the notions that over-categorize non-Western women without considering the class, ethnic, and racial contexts to which they belong. Mohanty further critiques the concept of “global

¹¹ Caraway, Teri L. "The political economy of feminization: From “cheap labor” to gendered discourses of work." *Politics & Gender* 1, no. 3 (2005): 399-429.

¹² Mohanty, Chandra Talpade. 1997. “Women Workers and Capitalist Scripts: Ideologies of Domination, Common Interests, and the Politics of Solidarity.” In *Feminist Genealogies, Colonial Legacies, Democratic Futures*, ed. M. Jacqui Alexander and Chandra Talpade Mohanty. New York: Routledge, 3–29.

¹³ Escobar, Arturo. *Encountering development: The making and unmaking of the Third World*. Vol. 1. Princeton University Press, 2011.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵ Mohanty, Chandra. "Under Western eyes: Feminist scholarship and colonial discourses." *Feminist review* 30, no. 1 (1988): 61-88.

sisterhood” in terms of common experiences and goals, and the notion of women’s similar oppression due to gender alone under patriarchal dominance. This racialized Western methodology of over-simplification of “facts” does not appeal to Mohanty. Instead of “global sisterhood”, the idea of “solidarity” grabs her attention. Mohanty suggests that it is imperative to be mindful of the hegemony of the Western scholarly establishment when producing and disseminating texts that emphasize monolithic terms such as “Third World women.” Otherwise we give way to yet another form of discursive colonization that not only overlooks pluralism but also impedes the cause of women.¹⁶ Thus, it is noteworthy to mention here that when I use the terms "women" or "Third World women" throughout this thesis I do not intend to homogenize or categorize Third World women by their 'problems' or 'achievements.'¹⁷ Mohanty’s work further highlights how the colonial states and imperial rule of the nineteenth century has institutionalized sexual, racial and class regulations.¹⁸ Institutionally, colonial rule operated by setting up visible, rigid, and hierarchical distinctions between the colonizers and the colonized. The physical and symbolic separation was deemed necessary to maintain social status and authority over colonized subjects. According to Mohanty, racism in the context of colonialism and imperialism “works by erasing the economic, political, and historical exigencies which necessitate the essentialist discourse of race as a way to legitimize imperialism.”¹⁹ Therefore, the colonial state not only constructed hegemonic masculinity (a masculinity defined in relation to “native women” as well as “native men”), but also transformed existing patriarchies and class hierarchies. Aihwa Ong has traced the introduction of new relations of production and exchange from the days of British

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Mohanty, Chandra Talpade. "Under Western eyes: Feminist scholarship and colonial discourses." *Boundary 2* (1984): 333-358.

¹⁸ Mohanty, Chandra Talpade. "Introduction: Cartographies of struggle: Third World women and the politics of feminism." *Third world women and the politics of feminism* (1991): 1-47.

¹⁹ Ibid, 18.

colonial administration. In her study of Malaysian women factory workers, she has delineated the role of contemporary Malaysian state as the manager of different structures of power where multinational corporate investments were incorporated into ideological state apparatuses that policed the new Malay working-class women.²⁰ These women are subject to racist, sexist stereotypes such as “sewing is a women’s job” and “third world women are more docile and obedient”.²¹ Therefore, it is essential to analyze the sexualization and racialization of women’s work in multinational factories, and relating this to women’s own ideas of their work and daily life.

Nazli Kibria examined the difference in social class by conducting a survey on varying income controls in different garments factories of Bangladesh and interviewed 34 female sewing machine operators with similar salary levels.²² Within the sample size were women who belonged to different socioeconomic backgrounds, namely, working-class backgrounds (relatively low levels of income, schooling, and involvement in manual jobs in the informal sector of family members), lower-middle class status (relative economic prosperity, as indicated by their levels of education and household income), and poor rural backgrounds (migrated to the city from impoverished families in villages with the specific intent of working in garment factories). The results of her study showed that lower-middle class women retained control over their wages whereas working class women relinquished control to men. As per Kibria’s analysis these divergent patterns stemmed from differences in socioeconomic status, which colored the ways in which men viewed implications of women’s income earning for their own authority in

²⁰ Ong, Aihwa. *Spirits of resistance and capitalist discipline: Factory women in Malaysia*. Suny Press, 2010.

²¹ Mohanty, Chandra Talpade. "Introduction: Cartographies of struggle: Third World women and the politics of feminism." *Third world women and the politics of feminism* (1991): 1-47.

²² Kibria, Nazli. "Culture, social class, and income control in the lives of women garment workers in Bangladesh." *Gender & Society* 9, no. 3 (1995): 289-309.

the family. Seizing control of women's income was a gesture that affirmed their economic headship. By not taking her income they affirmed an understanding of women's income as peripheral and inessential to the household.²³

An Overview of Garments Industry in light of a Patriarchal Society

Bangladesh has made significant strides over the past three decades to bring about gender equality, particularly in the case of the participation of women in the economy. As a historically male-dominated society that has treated women unequally, new economic opportunities in the 1970s and 1980s opened the door for women to move outside the home. This has helped break down the patriarchal norm that regarded them as a burden with little to no inherent value. Economic opportunity has importantly challenged the assumptions surrounding their ability to provide on the same level as male breadwinners. However, women in Bangladesh still face obstacles and inequalities from the entrenched patriarchal structures in society. They are often still subject to control by their male relatives (and later their spouse).²⁴ As a result, poor Bangladeshi women are socialized into a world that simultaneously attempts to empower them while keeping them silenced.

The readymade garments (RMG) industry in Bangladesh arose in the early 1970s, just after the country's independence.²⁵ Suffering from a weak economy, the RMG sector was hailed as one of the few ways for the country to develop economically, providing jobs to alleviate unemployment.²⁶ Initially, the domestic market was unable to carry the RMG industry. However, the Multifiber Arrangement (MFA) of 1974 set off a global relocation of garment production facilities from high-wage to low-wage countries, spurred by companies seeking to control the

²³ Ibid, 18.

²⁴ Khosla, Nidhi. *The ready-made garments industry in Bangladesh*, (2009), 289.

²⁵ Rashid, Mohammed. *Rise of readymade garments industry in Bangladesh*, (2006), 1.

²⁶ Ibid: 3.

rising prices of clothing.²⁷ Bangladesh was one of the few countries able to rapidly capitalize on the Arrangement. Since 2009, approximately 76 percent of the country's export earnings come from the RMG industry.²⁸ As of 2018, that number rose to 83.5 percent.²⁹

The MFA was initially intended to protect domestic textile industries in developed countries like the USA, imposing quota restrictions on the largest garment exporters in Hong Kong, South Korea, Taiwan, and others.³⁰ However, Bangladesh enjoyed quota-free access as a smaller and less developed exporter. Combined with the cheap labor readily available in the country, these two factors helped propel the country's RMG industry into global prominence. Women have played a critical role in the rise of the RMG industry. They comprise the backbone of the labor within the industry as it has proven to be one of the few avenues of economic independence available to poor women. In 2018, it was estimated that the industry employed some 40 million workers – the overwhelming majority of them poor, rural women.³¹ This continues the trend that began in the mid-1980s, which saw the Bangladeshi labor force expand by a rate of roughly 16 percent yearly.³²

During the immediate postcolonial era, women were almost absent in the formal sector of the economy. But as the subsistence agriculture eroded and there was an increased access to government employment women became a small but growing part of the labor force. The emergence of export production in the early 1980s continued this trend as rural women as well as urban, lower-middle class women became a growing portion of the labor force.³³ The employment of women was an innovation of the nascent Bangladeshi industrialist. Initially, the

²⁷ Khosla, *Rise*, 291.

²⁸ Ahmed, Jasmin, and Tamima Hussain. *Industrial safety in the readymade garment sector* (2009), 3.

²⁹ Ovi, Ibrahim. *RMG exports saw 8.76% growth*, (2018).

³⁰ Rashid, *Rise*, 292.

³¹ Ovi, *8.76% growth*.

³² Mahmud, Simeen. *Is Bangladesh experiencing a "feminization" of the labor force?* (2003), 2.

³³ Feldman, Shelley. "Exploring theories of patriarchy: A perspective from contemporary Bangladesh." *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 26, no. 4 (2001): 1097-1127.

recruits were not the poorest of the poor; they were women of the rural middle class. In the context of a rural society "rural middle class" means that these families may live in pukka (brick) houses and have land, but they are cash poor. Varying degrees of poverty exist within the family itself.³⁴

The rural middle-class women of Bangladesh have in the past been excluded from taking part in social, political and economic activities by means of institutions such as the purdah (veil). However, the rise of the RMG industry has provided women with opportunities to work outside the home for wages. Economic opportunity is frequently associated with empowerment among feminist scholars.³⁵ It is clear from the situation in Bangladesh that women were rapidly able to access newfound abilities to acquire employment and move in the public sphere.

Since the 1980s, this has had the effect of transforming traditional gender roles and social structures, which have historically confined women to the home. Although not without conflict – often in the form of disapproval by male relatives – women have found some form of socio-economic empowerment through employment in the RMG industry.³⁶ It is worth noting that many Bangladeshi women themselves believe in the claim that they are becoming socioeconomically empowered through RMG employment. They report the opportunity to receive higher and possibly more regular wages in the industry than in other alternatives open to them.³⁷ This change likewise coincided with an increased emphasis on girls' education, plus campaigns to improve women's health and reduce fertility.³⁸ As a result, the social exclusion of women has receded considerably as they have been socioeconomically empowered to some

³⁴ Ahmed, Fauzia Erfan. "The rise of the Bangladesh garment industry: Globalization, women workers, and voice." *NWSA journal* (2004): 34-45.

³⁵ Abdin, Joynal. *Women empowerment in Bangladesh*, (2008), 1.

³⁶ Khosla, Rise, 296.

³⁷ Kibria, Nazli. "Becoming a Garments Worker: The Mobilization of Women into the Garments Factories of Bangladesh." UNRISD Occasional Paper, 1998.

³⁸ Abdin, *Women*, 3.

extent, and Bangladesh is challenging some conventional patriarchal roles and expectations for women.

However, it is also evident that the socio-economic gains achieved by women through employment are overshadowed by exploitative practices such as low wages, irregular payments, gender discrimination, harassment, job insecurity, and hazardous work environments.³⁹ Despite the gains in the public sphere, the structures that support male dominance remain firmly entrenched both in the home and in the economy. Therefore, even though women have accessed new levels of economic freedom, they are still bound by a structure of constraint that inhibits their ability to achieve true empowerment.⁴⁰ Notably, the perceived image of women being caretakers and homemakers remain unimpacted despite their ability to provide for their families and become contributing members of society.

Recent events in Bangladeshi garment industry elucidate this point. The 2013 Rana Plaza Disaster – widely known as the Dhaka garment factory collapse – killed 1,100 people, over half of which were poor working women.⁴¹ After the disaster, it was discovered that emergency exits had been locked, fire exits did not exist, and that the factory owners had ignored warnings not to use the building after cracks appeared in the walls.⁴² Later inspections of other factories in Dhaka and around Bangladesh revealed that some 900 facilities exhibited similar conditions or failed to meet compliance standards and needed to be shut down.⁴³ Not only was this one of the worst systemic failures of industry in Bangladesh, but nothing like it has ever been seen in any industry

³⁹ Salway, Sarah, Sonia, Jesmin, and Shahana Rahman. Women's employment in urban Bangladesh, (2005), 320.

⁴⁰ Folbre, Nancy, *Measuring Care*, (2006), 184.

⁴¹ Thomas, Dana, *Why won't we learn from the survivors of the Rana Plaza Disaster?*, (2018).

⁴² *Ibid.*

⁴³ *Ibid.*

within the country.⁴⁴ This suggests a tacit perception that cheap female labor is also disposable, resulting in the blatant disregard for life that had tragic consequences.

This thesis, therefore, argues that although poor women garment workers have gained some room to maneuver in Bangladeshi society – thereby seeming to have attained empowerment in a patriarchal environment, this empowerment is an illusion at best and a paradox at worst. In contrast to the appearance of empowerment, the downsides of working in the RMG industry combined with the violence of the entrenched patriarchal structures are ultimately disempowering for women, overshadowing their social and financial freedom. This thesis does not seek to negate the bulk of analysis and data showing that Bangladeshi women have experienced positive changes in their lives through employment in the RMG industry. I acknowledge that employment in the RMG industry has delivered several benefits, especially to rural middle-class Bangladeshi women. Instead, I build a case describing how the negatives outweigh the positives in the case of the RMG industry, going so far as to exploit women under the guise of empowerment. In this thesis I have attempted to answer the question, does economic opportunity inevitably lead to empowerment for all women?

Methodology

Growing up in Bangladesh, for almost 10 years I observed the women garment workers dressed up in salwar kameez, carrying lunch boxes, chitchatting in groups, and walking in lines going to their factories for work while I was on my way to school. We employed domestic maids, these young girls who migrated from the villages in search of paid work, cleaned our house for a few years meanwhile forming networks that led them to work in the RMG sector. I had always wondered what it was like to work in these factories. I had the opportunity to visit a factory during an internship and I was simply stunned to see the number of women in the sewing

⁴⁴ Ibid.

lines. It was a huge shop floor filled with women sitting behind their sewing machines while on the other side more women were folding the clothes that were ready to dispatch. Before the Rana Plaza and few other factory disasters a lot of these factories were located right in the middle of the city in poor dilapidated buildings and sometimes, I would pass these buildings late at night and still see that the lights were on and workers were working inside. After the tragic Rana Plaza incident occurred, my interest in the conditions of work in this industry grew. When I had the opportunity to choose a research topic for my MA thesis, I felt that I had to work with these factory women workers in Bangladesh to fuel my intellectual curiosity. As a young woman who grew up in Dhaka city, and has experienced the gender inequality that is albeit subtle but persistent in the service industry, I wanted to research the gendered aspect of work in the export-oriented industry.

In this thesis I will look at the prevailing theories on empowerment and gender related structural violence. I have chosen to pay particular attention to authors writing specifically on the case of Bangladesh to ground my analysis in as much cultural context as possible. From here, I will consider more deeply the unique cultural and economic implications of the RMG sector in Bangladeshi society. By considering both global and local influences and the connections between them, I will then examine the image of the garment worker both as she is seen by the world, by traditional Bangladeshi society, and by herself. I will further consider the interplay of this image with the social factors that influence and inhibit empowerment – paying particular attention to how it creates a paradox for poor Bangladeshi women working in the garments sector. Finally, I will offer alternatives to employment in this industry that do empower women without the influence and restraints of male domination.

I have mostly used secondary literature in my research because I was unable to establish contact with factories that would allow me to conduct interviews. In doing my research I struggled to find up to date feminist literature specific to the garment sector in Bangladesh. Most theoretical work conducted in this topic are somewhat dated, which leads me to believe that the information obtained is still relevant; as in not much has changed in this industry. However, I have included recent data and numbers where necessary.

I met with some women factory workers in Bangladesh. I visited a garment factory in Savar, Bangladesh (this is the export processing zone just on the outskirts of the capital, Dhaka where majority of the factories are located) with the help of a close family contact who happened to know a garments factory owner. I had the chance to speak to 6 women workers individually. This factory was seemingly 'one of the good ones' in a neat building which looked a lot less stuffy and was well lit and spread out over a large compound. One of the supervisors insisted on being in the room where I was speaking to the workers, which made it quite difficult to gauge the honesty of the answers as many of them kept looking at the supervisor before answering my question. They appeared to be very formal when speaking to me. However, I did manage to get some relevant information from them. This allowed me to contextualize and build on the secondary literature I analyzed—enabling me to understand the personal motivations behind poor women seeking employment in this sector

Outline of the Thesis

In the following chapters I will carefully delineate the various factors resulting in the creation of the ideal 'feminized' worker and examine the different scholarly definitions of empowerment in an attempt to answer my main research question: does economic opportunity inevitably lead to empowerment for all women? In chapter 1, I compare various definitions of

empowerment and examine them in the context of power. I further explain the patriarchal landscape of Bangladesh to closely look at the status of empowerment in the RMG sector. In chapter 2, I discuss how neoliberal globalization has resulted in a gendered labor market which in turn has created the ‘ideal’ garment worker who is not only a woman but also conforms to normative definitions of ‘femininity’ such as being “docile, dexterous and nimble fingered”. I argue that multinational corporations take advantage of such pre-existing patriarchal gender roles to exploit the poor rural women of Bangladesh in the name of cheap labor. In chapter 3, I explicitly discuss the advantages and disadvantages of working in the garments sector for poor rural women workers. I further define the concept of structural violence and explain how this exists not only in the workplace but also in the household and argue that although working in the garments industry is socially and financially empowering to women, the presence of structural violence cancels out the advantages and thus creates a paradox. In chapter 4, I create a juxtaposition of other employment opportunities available to the rural middle-class women of Bangladesh. I critique another flourishing sector, namely the microfinance industry, and argue that RMG work seems more lucrative and is an economically safer choice for these women. Finally, in the conclusion, I summarize my arguments and take a closer look at the future of the RMG sector in Bangladesh in terms of its workers.

Chapter 1: Defining Empowerment

Introduction

The term 'empowerment' is a difficult one to clearly define. Any strategy that deals with empowerment, women's empowerment in particular, must be able to identify and overcome the causes of the lack of power that lie behind it. While the term 'women's empowerment' is now in widespread use in development circles, it is still a recent development concept and remains relatively undefined.

A central question often asked by scholars interested in empowerment is that, what are the causes of the subordination or oppression of a specific powerless group, in this case, Third World Women? One approach to thinking about women's powerlessness focuses on patriarchy as an overarching gender system that determines women's roles and relationships. A second approach focuses on a single domain of Third World women's powerlessness, the most common being the household or the workplace, giving rise to a focus on women's reproductive or productive roles respectively. A third approach assumes that women of the Global South experience subordination or powerlessness in multiple domains (either simultaneously or sequentially). All these approaches assume that women from developing countries experience powerlessness in (and through the action of) multiple social, political, and economic institutions (not just the household).⁴⁵ Apart from the patriarchal system, women also lack empowerment from interlocking systems of oppression around the world, including racism, sexism, capitalism, and imperialism, among others. Mies argues that, "the subordination and exploitation of women, nature and colonies are the precondition for the capital accumulation."⁴⁶ She equates the 'underdevelopment' of colonies by the metropolises to the 'housewifization of women's labor,

⁴⁵ Carr, Marilyn, Martha Chen, and Renana Jhabvala. "Speaking out." New Delhi, India: Vistaar (1996)

⁴⁶ Mies, Maria. *Patriarchy and accumulation on a world scale: Women in the international division of labour*. Zed Books Ltd., 2014.

both in capitalist as well as socialist societies. Therefore, the real issue is that when women everywhere are defined as dependent housewives, they are integrated worldwide into the accumulation process, both as consumers as well as a source of cheap labor.⁴⁷

The Ready-Made Garments (RMG) industry of Bangladesh and its employment of poor Third World Women is a great example of the accumulation of cheap labor to fuel neoliberal globalization. The invention of the Third World Woman as a category to be “intervened” on and “empowered” by western experts and technological intervention through global development discourse and practice has influenced both governmental and nongovernmental development initiatives in countries of the Global South including Bangladesh.⁴⁸ Mohanty argues that Western liberal feminists treat women from developing countries as a homogenous group, when in fact, the Third World woman presents a diverse group with different interests, desires, and needs across cultures.⁴⁹ In Bangladesh, poor women oppressed by local patriarchal religious and cultural practices are supposedly uplifted by their integration into global capitalist development initiatives, like the garments industry or NGOs. Since neoliberal globalization is less constrained by state, territorial, or national claims and priorities, power can easily move between communities, nations, multilateral agencies, new global institutions, and transnational corporations through economic relations that integrate financial and labor markets, as well as various forms of production.⁵⁰ As Feldman argues, transnational production is decentralized, flexible, and informal, often including the unprotected and unorganized sectors. Therefore, the hegemonic rhetoric is that neoliberal globalization has facilitated the integration of social and

⁴⁷ Ibid

⁴⁸ Escobar, Arturo. "Imagining a post-development era." *Power of development* (1995): 211-227.

⁴⁹ Mohanty, Chandra Talpade. "Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourses." *Boundary*, 1984: 333-58.

⁵⁰ Feldman, Shelley. "Exploring theories of patriarchy: A perspective from contemporary Bangladesh." *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 26, no. 4 (2001): 1097-1127.

economic systems around the world. This integration has revolutionized women's participation in the labor force and their emergence into public spaces as economic agents.⁵¹ Women's empowerment thus promotes sustainable development through the full participation of men and women in social, political, and economic activities.

On the one hand, the garment factory symbolizes economic and sexual exploitation, on the other hand it is also a place where new kinship structures emerge among women, and between men and women, reflecting the fluidity and multiplicities of power structures. Because of such apparent contradictions, Feldman has argued for a more nuanced understanding of the emergence of the "female garment worker" in the context of the growing economy in Bangladesh. She argues that neoliberal politics have transformed the definition of gender empowerment around the world. Neoliberal globalization is constituted through complex and contradictory histories and trajectories of women's lives and not simply in response to external realities such as international donor and state-driven Structural Adjustment Programs (SAPs). Women are actors and determine the way neoliberal globalization is enacted rather than being simply "impacted" or acted on by its economic flows.⁵² The Ready-made Garment Sector (RMG) sector has enabled women to renegotiate and challenge those structures, as they have the 'power to' formulate, and act on choices that define the parameters of their lives.

The RMG sector has placed women further along the disempowered to the empowered continuum. In this chapter I demonstrate that, empowerment is a process of change rather than simply being an end goal. I argue that, the RMG sector has enabled women to renegotiate and challenge the gendered structures and parameters, as they have the 'power to' formulate, and act on choices that define the parameters of their lives.

⁵¹ Ibid.

⁵² Ibid.

I will further discuss different forms of power that govern the lives of women under neoliberal globalization, specifically in the context of a third world patriarchal society and closely analyze the different definitions of empowerment under the same light by centering the lives of poor women workers in the garments sector of Bangladesh. I argue that RMG workers in Bangladesh have experienced a new form of empowerment even though the negotiating structures that constrain their lives are not completely transformed.

What is Empowerment?

Defining Power

The meaning of the term ‘empowerment’, in either a development or a gender context, is not very precise. The term may be used merely to imply some unspecified recognition of the need for changes in the distribution of power. Some of the confusion about empowerment arises because the root concept of power itself is self-disputed. Therefore, before moving on to define empowerment it is important to establish the different ways power can be understood.

Some definitions of power focus, with various degrees of subtlety, on the ability of one person or group to get another person or group to do something against their will. Such power is described as ‘zero-sum,’ which means that one person acquiring more power causes someone else to have less of it.⁵³ Naila Kabeer defines power as the ability to make choices. However, to be relevant to the analysis of power, the notion of choice needs to imply the possibility of alternatives, the ability to have chosen otherwise.⁵⁴

Power also is not embodied within a specific body; rather, it turns the subject into an object. It is constituted in a network of social relationships among subjects who are, to at least a minimal extent, free to act. For example, individuals internalize societal norms on sexuality and

⁵³ Rowlands, Joanna. *Questioning empowerment*. Oxford: Oxfam, 1997: 9-10

⁵⁴ Kabeer, Naila. "Resources, agency, achievements: Reflections on the measurement of women's empowerment." *Development and change* 30, no. 3 (1999): 437

monitor their beliefs and behavior to conform and self-scrutinize their responses.⁵⁵ Therefore, the different forms of power sums up to: ‘power over’, which is the controlling power, that may be responded to with compliance, resistance or manipulation; ‘power to’ which is productive power that creates new possibilities and actions without domination; ‘power from within’ which can be ‘the spiritual strength and uniqueness that resides in each one of us and makes us truly human.’⁵⁶

Definitions of empowerment

Jo Rowlands explores the various uses of the concept of empowerment within the theoretical framework of women, gender, and development. Using the conventional definition of ‘power over,’ Rowlands describes empowerment as bringing people who are outside the decision-making process into it. This puts a strong emphasis on participation in political structures and formal decision-making and, economic sphere, and the ability to obtain an income that enables participation in economic decision-making. Individuals are empowered when they can maximize the opportunities available to them without constraints. Within the generative ‘power to’ and ‘power within’, interpretations of power, empowerment is concerned with the processes by which people become aware of their interests and how these relate to the interests of others, in order for both to participate from a position of greater strength in decision-making and actually to influence such decisions. Feminist definitions of power lead to a still broader understanding of empowerment, since they go beyond formal and institutional definitions of power, and incorporate the idea of “the personal is political.” From a feminist perspective, interpreting ‘power over’ entails understanding the dynamics of oppression and internalized oppression of women. Empowerment is thus more than participation in decision-making; it must also include the processes that lead people to perceive themselves as able and entitled to make

⁵⁵ Foucault, Michel. "The subject and power." *Critical inquiry* 8, no. 4 (1982): 777-795.

⁵⁶ Rowlands, Joanna. *Questioning empowerment*. Oxford: Oxfam, 1997: 13

decisions. The feminist understanding of empowerment includes ‘power to’ and ‘power from within’. It involves giving scope to the full range of human abilities and potential.⁵⁷

Naila Kabeer regards empowerment as a concept with theoretical and practical potential rather than being an empty slogan. She deconstructed the notion of power in order to consider empowerment. According to Kabeer, “the multidimensional nature of power suggests that empowerment strategies for women must build on ‘the power within’ as a necessary adjunct to improving their ability to control resources, to determine agendas and make decisions.”⁵⁸ Power from within needs ‘experiential recognition and analysis’ of issues to do with women’s own subordination and how it is maintained, and such power cannot be given but has to be self-generated.⁵⁹ Kabeer’s work emphasizes the importance of self-respect, and the sense of agency in the empowerment processes and the building of organizational capacity through conscious processes, support for leadership development, and the strengthening of networks. According to Kabeer’s analysis, the understanding of choice and the process of empowerment comprise three interrelated components: resources, agency, and achievements.⁶⁰ Resources encompass human, economic, and social resources that enhance one’s ability to make choices: the condition under which empowerment is likely to occur. She builds on Anthony Giddens’s structuration theory to argue that the distribution of resources tends to be embedded within those who have the “authoritative resources”, which is the ability to define priorities and enforce claims. Rules and norms can also enable or disable social resources and serve to demarcate boundaries.⁶¹

Srilatha Batliwala, on the other hand, has made a detailed analysis of women’s

⁵⁷ Ibid. 14

⁵⁸ Kabeer, Naila. *Reversed realities: Gender hierarchies in development thought*. Verso, 1994: 229

⁵⁹ Ibid.

⁶⁰ Kabeer, Naila. "Resources, agency, achievements: Reflections on the measurement of women's empowerment." *Development and change* 30, no. 3 (1999): 435-464.

⁶¹ Ibid.

empowerment programmes in South Asia, looking at integrated rural development (IRD) economic interventions, awareness-building, and organizing of women) and research, training, and resource support. She noted that in some programmes empowerment and development are used interchangeably. It is often assumed that power comes through economic strength. It may do, but often it does not, depending on specific configuration of social relations determined by gender, class, race, among other axes of difference that influence women's lives. Economic activities do not always improve women's situation, and often add extra burdens. This has been termed as 'triple burden' by development feminists where women often cope with housework, childcare, subsistence food production, in addition to an expanding involvement in paid employment.⁶² Often development work is still done 'for' women, and an exclusive focus on economic activities does not encourage women to look at their gender roles or other aspects of their lives.⁶³ Batliwala takes empowerment to mean, in part, the "exercise of informed choice within an expanding framework of information, knowledge, and analysis...a process which must enable women to discover new possibilities, new options, and a growing repertoire of choices."⁶⁴ She points out that empowerment is a process that involves a redistribution of power, particularly within the household. She highlights 'the widespread fear that women's empowerment is against men', and argues that "women's empowerment if it is a real success, does mean the loss of men's traditional power and control over women in the households: control of her body and her physical mobility; the right to abdicate from all responsibility for housework and the care of children; the right to physically abuse or violate her; the right to spend family income on personal pleasures (and vices); the right to abandon her or take other wives; the right to make

⁶² Momsen, Janet. *Women and development in the Third World*. Routledge, 2008.

⁶³ Batliwala, Srilatha, A. P. John, S. R. Schuler, S. M. Hashemi, C. Smith, C. McElnay, C. Pyper et al. "The meaning of womens empowerment: new concepts from action." *Family planning news* 11, no. 1 (1995): 127-38.

⁶⁴ Ibid

unilateral decisions which affect the whole family; and the countless other ways in which poor men- and indeed men of every class- have unjustly confined women.”⁶⁵ She goes on to say that the process of women’s empowerment will also liberate men; they will be relieved of all gender-based stereotypes, just like women.

Status of Women’s Empowerment in Bangladesh

In 2017, Bangladesh topped South Asia in terms of gender equality by ranking 47 out of 144 countries in the Global Gender Gap Ranking 2017, closing the gender gap by 72 percent.⁶⁶ The most striking changes have been seen with respect to girls’ education. Bangladesh closed the gender gap in enrolment at primary and higher education institutions by the end of the 1990s, ahead of the MDG targets and many comparator countries.⁶⁷ While Bangladesh has increased the number of girls enrolled in schools compared to other countries, the quality and attainment of education for boys and girls are absolutely low and the closure of the gender gap in basic education may reflect stagnating educational access among the ‘boys left behind’.⁶⁸ In contrast to their striking gains in human development and new economic opportunities, and despite the two top political leaders being women, Bangladeshi women have fared far less well with respect to their political participation at the center than that in neighboring countries

The larger social backdrop to the above changes in women’s lives was that of the dislocation of gender norms associated with the war in 1971 and the post-conflict period. This period was catastrophic for many hundreds of thousands of families, so much so that the destruction of old certainties and customs may well have primed gender relations for the rapid

⁶⁵ Ibid.

⁶⁶ <http://reports.weforum.org/global-gender-gap-report-2017/dataexplorer/#economy=BGD>

⁶⁷ Chowdhury, A. Mushtaque R., Samir R. Nath, and Rasheda K. Choudhury. "Enrolment at primary level: Gender difference disappears in Bangladesh." *International Journal of Educational Development* 22, no. 2 (2002): 191-203.

⁶⁸ Rahman, Rushidan Islam, and Naoko Otobe. "The dynamics of the labour market and employment in Bangladesh: A focus on gender dimensions." *ILO Employment Strategy Papers* 13 (2005).

social and economic change that followed. The assurances of male protection under the ‘patriarchal bargain’ became shakier in this period. Women themselves had been prominent within the nationalist struggle – a formative experience for important sections of the women’s movement. Yet the most significant state response was to rewrite the patriarchal bargain as one between (victimized) women and the state through the ‘birangona’ programme intended to socially rehabilitate the women raped during the war by declaring war heroines and arranging marriages for them.⁶⁹

Amin argues that the necessity of marriage amidst a ‘powerful perception of insecurity and risk of sexual violation of girls living in households without a male guardian’⁷⁰ coupled with the demands of dowry leave the poorest women vulnerable to marriages in which there is ‘no obligation on the part of the man to support his wife’.⁷¹ Dowry violence, including murders, immolations, suicide, and other forms of violence has become categorized as a specific policy problem in the popular media and within the official discourse.

A final aspect of the wider social backdrop against which women’s lives are being lived in 21st century Bangladesh is the feminization of public space, a much-commented on change exemplified by the visible urban fact of young women garments workers en masse en route to work. It helps to create a more gender-equitable cultural norm by normalizing women’s public mobility and access to public institutions. It is by no means the case that the social restrictions on women’s public mobility have been removed, but there is a clear change: women and girls have a wider menu of options and more room for maneuver around appropriate female behavior than

⁶⁹ Kabeer, Naila. "The quest for national identity: Women, Islam and the state in Bangladesh." In *Women, Islam and the state*, pp. 115-143. Palgrave Macmillan, London, 1991.

⁷⁰ Amin, S. (1997) ‘The Poverty-Purdah trap in Rural Bangladesh: Implications for Women’s Role in the Family’, *Development and Change* 28: 230.

⁷¹ Ibid.

in the past.⁷²

Status of Women's Empowerment in the Garments Sector

Due to the gender role given to women in Bangladesh, women participate in the productive economy (activities that make a living) and the reproductive economy (unpaid activities that reproduce, on a daily and intergenerational basis, the labor force in the productive economy).⁷³ As it is assumed women are supplementary earners and can thus be paid at a minimum wage level, the RMG has failed to consider the extra costs incurred by women due to their gender role. Until 2013, wages paid to female garment workers only met 12% of the national living wage, despite 8 to 10% inflation rates.⁷⁴ This is significant since the state adoption of Structural Adjustment Programmes in 1974, welfare safety nets and general costs towards household reproduction is not provided for by the state.⁷⁵ Despite the rise in the minimum wage in 2013, this still falls short of the estimated monthly living wage rate of \$359.⁷⁶ Hence, without adequate wages to cover living costs, the extent to which women experience empowerment is limited. Even though women earn wages, which may allow them to live independently, low wages limit the extent to which they can rely on their income. Apart from economic terms, empowerment also involves the interaction of other factors, including social, political, and cultural aspects.

Gender Pay Gap

The consistent gender wage gap further serves to limit the empowerment process

⁷² Hossain, Naomi. "Women's empowerment revisited: From individual to collective power among the export sector workers of Bangladesh." *IDS Working Papers* 2012, no. 389 (2012): 1-40.

⁷³ Rai, Shirin M., and Georgina Waylen. "Domesticating (and de-patriarchalizing) the development agenda: a need for greater household (and family) engagement in gender-related policy interventions?." In *New Frontiers in Feminist Political Economy*, pp. 85-113. Routledge, 2013.

⁷⁴ Campaign, Clean Clothes. "Still Waiting: Six months after history's deadliest appeal industry disaster, workers continue to fight for reparations." (2013).

⁷⁵ Feldman, Shelley. "Historicizing garment manufacturing in Bangladesh: gender, generation, and new regulatory regimes." *Journal of International Women's Studies* 11, no. 1 (2009): 268-288.

⁷⁶ Asian Floor Wage Alliance. (2014) Living Wage versus Minimum Wage. [Online].

as women are still placed in inferior positions vis-à-vis men. In Steven Kapos' study for the ILO, by using an occupational wage survey conducted by the Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics, he found that women earn an average of 21% less per hour than men. In addition, differences in age, educational background, industry, occupation, and geographic location yields an estimated gender wage gap of 15.9%, but including the effects of industrial and occupational segregation increases the overall wage gap by 7%.⁷⁷ This wage gap is partly due to the dual employment strategy, but also a result of a variety of other factors including: faster growth in the female labor force vis-à-vis the male labor force due to the favoring of female employment; higher female unemployment and underemployment rates; higher poverty rates among female wage workers' households, which reduces their relative bargaining power; as well as occupational segregation along gender lines. Although this study is not unique to the Ready-made Garment Sector (RMG) sector, it does serve to highlight how the surplus female labor, in the context of occupational segregation (a sexual division of labor whereby women are appropriated jobs due to their gender role) tends to depress female wages.⁷⁸ This is significant, as occupational segregation exists in the RMG sector. Likewise, the labor market is a "bearer of gender" and the persistence in gender wage gap illustrates that women are unable to transform the structures of constraint, as their very gender places them at a disadvantage vis-à-vis men, as it serves to limit the very jobs they can do. The increase in the supply of labor from female workers exceeds the market demand, which leads to lower wages compared to male colleagues.

Purdah, Sexual Identity and Social Stigma

By challenging social norms and the status quo, RMG workers do experience new forms of empowerment, as they are negotiating structures that constrain their lives, even if those

⁷⁷ Kapos, Steven. "The gender wage gap in Bangladesh." *ILO Asia-Pacific working paper series* (2008).

⁷⁸ Ibid: 20

structures are not completely transformed. Purdah (veil) is a tradition in Bangladesh that denotes the set of religious and cultural rules that control sexuality by minimizing interactions between persons of the opposite sex. Women observe purdah through a variety of ways, such as women wearing scarves over their heads and bodies according to cultural and religious beliefs.⁷⁹ Purdah has served to keep women financially dependent on men, and even placed them subordinate to them, as it serves to isolate women and defines socially acceptable behavior from female members of society.⁸⁰ Subsequently, as women take up work in the RMG sector, they are working close to men on a daily basis, which causes a shift in the definition of how the purdah is observed. In Kabeer's ethnographic research of garment workers in Dhaka, women interviewed stated, "the best purdah is the burkha within oneself, the burkha of the mind".⁸¹ Kabeer argues that the purdah system secludes women from public employment, but the number of female workers in factory production in Bangladesh has significantly increased within a short period. For instance, women became liberated, and the public was allowed to see them out of purdah in the workplace. What is apparent, therefore, is a renegotiation of the gendered structures of constraints, as women are challenging traditional identities attributed to them by the patriarchal norms of society and their gender role within it.

It is important to note however that, the practices of purdah can vary depending on the categories of women such as rural vs urban, and also in subcategories such as urban working-class women and urban middle-class women. In rural areas girls rigidly start observing purdah as soon as they reach puberty. Rural women must leave their homes in a burqaah. In urban areas

⁷⁹ Amin, Sajeda, Ian Diamond, Ruchira T. Naved, and Margaret Newby. "Transition to adulthood of female garment-factory workers in Bangladesh." *Studies in family planning* (1998): 185-200.

⁸⁰ Khosla, Nidhi. "The ready-made garments industry in Bangladesh: A means to reducing gender-based social exclusion of women?." *Journal of International Women's Studies* 11, no. 1 (2009): 289-303.

⁸¹ Kabeer, Naila. "Cultural dopes or rational fools? Women and labour supply in the Bangladesh garment industry." *The European Journal of Development Research* 3, no. 1 (1991): 150.

lifestyles vary across different categories of women. For instance, the lifestyle of urban working-class women is not very different from that of rural women. The majority of urban working-class women are new migrants to cities and they maintain close rural ties. Therefore, an urban working-class woman may not observe strict purdah as compared to rural women but they do not repudiate the concept of purdah either. Urban middle-class women on the other hand, are slightly separated from the traditional customs and thus may not observe strict purdah.⁸²

New Spaces and New Relationships

As women are exposed to new relationships outside of the patriarchal structures, it has fostered new forms of agency wherein women claim their ability to formulate and act upon strategic life choices that lead to a transformative significance of collective power. As previously mentioned, collective bargaining through union activity has been prohibited in the RMG sector, and where trade unions do exist, they are male-dominated, as patriarchal patterns of the wider society are reproduced.⁸³ On the other hand, the production of fictive kinship (social ties that are based neither on blood ties nor by marriage) has helped younger women gain confidence within themselves, through the creation of relationships with co-workers. Chowdhury supports this, as she argues that new fictive kinship structures do not necessarily subvert patriarchal relationships, but they do create new relationship patterns of the urban space.⁸⁴ New relationship patterns of urban space are significant with regard to women's living situation. Although most workers live with their relatives, some women are now deciding to share a room with other workers.⁸⁵ Even

⁸² Jahan, Rounaq. "Women in Bangladesh." *Women Cross-culturally: Change and Challenge*, ed. Ruby Rohrlich-Leavitt (*The Hague: Mouton, 1975*) (1973): 5-30.

⁸³ Kabeer, Naila, and Simeen Mahmud. "Rags, riches and women workers: export-oriented garment manufacturing in Bangladesh." *Chains of fortune: Linking women producers and workers with global markets* (2004): 133-164.

⁸⁴ Chowdhury, Elora Halim. "Feminism and its 'other': representing the 'new woman' of Bangladesh." *Gender, Place & Culture* 17, no. 3 (2010): 301-318.

⁸⁵ Dannecker, Petra. "Collective action, organisation building, and leadership: Women workers in the garment sector in Bangladesh." *Gender & Development* 8, no. 3 (2000): 31-39.

though structures of constraints are not completely transformed, they have been challenged, as the transformative significance of women deciding to live with each other, is a clear break from traditional patrilocal residence patterns. The RMG sector has encouraged women to exercise 'power with' others to define life's parameters.

Control over one's life

The RMG sector has increased the socio-economic autonomy of young women, and in consequence, has improved their self-esteem and, thus, their sense of agency. Despite the social stigma attached to garments work, for young and often single women, the new identities that women are forging through RMG holds certain attractions. Earning an income increases their purchasing power, representing a certain measure of socio-economic independence. Mary Mills describes this as a "new autonomy," as women are participating in new patterns of consumption that are linked to globally orientated standards of modernity.⁸⁶ Women also help their husbands in meeting family expenses to improve the quality of life.

Intra-household gender dynamics of decision-making

The fact that gendered structures of constraints are being challenged, but remain, is further shown through the intra-household dynamics of married couples. Working in the RMG sector does not automatically signal an increase in control over resources, as even though women may earn an income, it does not mean they have an influence on how that income is spent. Through Kabeer's ethnographic study of households in Dhaka, she found two main ways of decision-making: household income management and independent income management.⁸⁷ Hanufa, who lived with her husband, and a young daughter, personified the independent income

⁸⁶ Mills, Mary Beth. "Gender and inequality in the global labor force." *Annual Review of Anthropology* 32, no. 1 (2003): 41-62.

⁸⁷ Kabeer, Naila. "Women, wages and intra-household power relations in urban Bangladesh." *Development and Change* 28, no. 2 (1997): 261-302.

management system. Hanufa was the main breadwinner in a “conflictual marriage”, as her entry into the RMG sector had been precipitated by the erratic and inadequate nature of her husband’s earnings. He had opposed her entry into the sector because it would make her “immoral”. Her income was spent on household consumption while he retained his income for personal consumption. Even though Hanufa managed the household income, she would often conceal her overtime earnings.⁸⁸ What can be observed is James Scott’s concept of a hidden transcript of everyday forms of resistance. Those in weaker positions are unable to resist in direct and outward forms. Instead, resistance occurs on an everyday level, located in expressions of dissent.⁸⁹ As Hanufa resorts to secrecy by hiding her income, in the context of unequal power relations, she is using what Scott refers to as a weapon of the weak.⁹⁰ This example demonstrates that even though women may not have control over their income due to the unequal power relations within marriage, the RMG sector has enabled women to challenge the structure of constraints through expressions of dissent. In contrast, in a variety of cases, the increased economic value of women has given them greater bargaining power to exercise control in decision-making, without resorting to secrecy. For example, Manju, who was married to a garments worker, stated, “When one earns, one’s value goes up”.⁹¹ This shows that the RMG sector has improved women’s position within the household, which in turn correlates to their bargaining power.

Social Reproduction

The continued pressures of structure of constraints are apparent through the sexual

⁸⁸ Ibid.

⁸⁹ Scott, J.C. (1985) *Weapons of the Weak: Everyday Forms of Peasant Resistance*. Yale: Yale University Press.

⁹⁰ Kabeer, Naila. "Women, wages and intra-household power relations in urban Bangladesh." *Development and Change* 28, no. 2 (1997): 286

⁹¹ Ibid: 271

division of labor within households, as even though women can challenge certain aspects of the structures that constrain them, they still operate within them. As women participate in the reproductive economy, entry into RMG sector has intensified their workload, as women are forced to work a “double shift”,⁹² leading to what Naila Kabeer defines as “time poverty”,⁹³ as it has been assumed that women’s capacity to work is elastic.⁹⁴ The resistance on the part of husbands to undertake unpaid household activities is partly because they are aiming to uphold the patriarchal order. Kabeer argues that men are protecting the remaining vestiges of heterosexual masculine identity because sharing domestic work while women become breadwinners contradicts social norms.⁹⁵ Even though this analysis adopts a satirical tone, it does highlight that men are upholding the status quo in order to maintain their unequal share of power within their relationships with women. Therefore, while women engage in paid employment, they are also taking responsibility of the household, upbringing their children, providing food at the table, thus carrying the ‘triple burden’ mentioned earlier.

Entry into garments' work does not liberate women of structures of constraint, as their assumed responsibility of the reproductive economy shows that they are unable to transform their gender roles. The patriarchal dictates of cultural and religious systems constrain the gender roles of women in both public and private life in Bangladesh.

Conclusion

RMG employment opportunities empowered female workers in Bangladesh even though

⁹² Hossain, N. (2012) Women’s Empowerment Revisited: from Individual to Collective Power among the Export Sector Workers of Bangladesh. Brighton: Institute of Development Studies: 57

⁹³ Kabeer, N. (2012) Women’s Economic empowerment and Inclusive growth: labour markets and enterprise development. London: DFID.

⁹⁴ Elson, D. (2014) Economic Crisis from the 1980s to the 2010s: A gender analysis. In: Rai, S. and Waylen. ed. New Frontiers in Feminist Political Economy. London: Routledge, pp. 189-212

⁹⁵ Kabeer, N. (2014) The Rise of the Female Breadwinner: Reconfigurations of marriage, motherhood and masculinity the global economy. In: Rai, S. and Waylen. ed. New Frontiers in Feminist Political Economy. London: Routledge, pp.62-84.

the negotiating structures that constrain their lives have not significantly changed to promote gender equality in public and private life. Women's RMG employment marked a dramatic shift in aspects of gender relations in Bangladesh, particularly due to the significant increase in the number of female workers in factories. Despite the hard and exploitative nature of garments work, women and girls have gained autonomy and greater bargaining power within households. The direct effects on women workers' lives have been varied. However, the increase in the number of female workers empowered women to make independent economic choices. Neoliberal globalization has partly improved the poor women's position in the family and public life due to an increase in social and economic participation in Bangladesh. This chapter has examined the various aspects (both public and private) of the lives of low wage female workers in production factories.

It can be argued that whenever one embarks upon measuring whether a person or a group is being empowered, the analysis is limited as the criterion by which one judges empowerment is extremely subjective. This chapter has explored the issues specific to Bangladeshi women and has found that the process of empowerment relates to their patriarchal gender roles, and it is not measurable in economic terms alone. Gender roles serve to be a structure of constraint as it serves to perpetuate unequal power relations between men and women. As gendered structures of constraint have not transformed, the process of empowerment is limited as there has not been a complete change in the unequal power relations between men and women. This is evident in public and private lives of female garment workers. In the public sphere, women's gender serves to constrain them in a variety of ways. Due to male breadwinner bias, women are the assumed supplementary earners and are brought into a sector that does not pay them enough money to

cover the costs of living, which affects their role in the reproductive economy.⁹⁶ It is assumed that women are flexible to work the long and erratic hours, which are often underpaid, which bears costs to their health. Due to their gender role, it is assumed that women are docile and unlikely to unionize. This has meant that as the state prioritizes the needs of multinationals instead of garment workers, they are forced to work in deplorable conditions and without any means to keep stakeholders accountable to improve those conditions, as the right of freedom of association being repressed. Due to their inferior position vis-à-vis men and their gender role, women are paid less and are confined to certain jobs. Hence, the comparative advantage of being able to supply cheap and flexible labor, serves to disadvantage women.⁹⁷ This illustrates how women's gender serves to constrict the process of empowerment, as women are brought into new forms of exploitation at work, which limits their ability to formulate and act on choices with a transformative significance.

Nevertheless, as women's inferior position in society shapes their life experiences and their conditions, the RMG has enabled the women workers to not only transform the structure of constraint, but to challenge them. In the public sphere, this is exemplified through women's upward mobility and the opportunity to be in a leadership position at work. The transformative significance of this is highlighted by the fact that the status quo of male leadership is being challenged, as women are in a position higher to men. Gendered structures of constraint are being challenged, as the cultural constraint of purdah is being renegotiated. RMG work has given its female workers the 'power to' make strategic life choices over their religious practice, as well as the 'power within' themselves to create meaning behind their actions. Even though this is faced with resistance and has meant that women are exposed to new form of sexual harassment,

⁹⁶ Souplet-Wilson, Solene. "Made in Bangladesh: A critical analysis of the empowerment dynamics related to female workers in the Bangladeshi Ready-Made-Garment sector." *POLIS Journal* (2014).

⁹⁷ Ibid:26

women's increased mobility shows a change from being confined to the household.⁹⁸

⁹⁸ Ibid:27

Chapter 2: The Construction of a Female Garment Worker in Bangladesh

Introduction

The latest period of neoliberal globalization, the late 1960s/early 1970s to the present, has involved several major trends, as capitalist processes and ideologies spread throughout the world. It has brought both opportunities and problems. The effects are often gendered. Neoliberal globalization has occurred unevenly and countries have been integrated into the global economy to very different degrees. In this chapter I will examine how the spread of neoliberal globalization in its search for cheap labor has led to the expansion of the Bangladeshi export-led garment industry which in turn has resulted in the feminization of labor. I will further investigate how gender is specifically produced in these factories by analyzing the gender-race-class relations that contribute in the creation of the 'Third World cheap labor' and also discuss the mobilization of women to enter the garment industry and the reasons why they do so.

Neoliberal globalization is fueled by the search for "docile, dexterous and cheap" labor, and Third World women are understood as "cheap labor".⁹⁹ This image of the so called Third World worker as cheap labor has been constructed since colonial rule. Dorothy Smith has defined the 'ruling apparatus' as a complex system of management, government, administration, intelligentsia, as well as textually mediated discourses that results in particular places, and peoples to become subjects to an abstracted and universalized system of ruling mediated by texts.¹⁰⁰ Mohanty argues that the colonial state legislates racial, sexual, class/caste ideologies in this very process of abstraction.¹⁰¹ According to Mohanty, British colonial ruler defined authority

⁹⁹ Salzinger, Leslie. "Making Fantasies Real Producing Women and Men on the Maquila Shop Floor." *NACLA Report on the Americas* 34, no. 5 (2001): 13-19.

¹⁰⁰ Smith, Dorothy E. *The everyday world as problematic: A feminist sociology*. University of Toronto Press, 1987.

¹⁰¹ Mohanty, Chandra Talpade. *Cartographies of struggle*. Indiana University Press, 1991.

and legitimacy through the difference rather than commonality of rulers and "natives." This, in turn, consolidated a particular, historically specific notion of the imperial ruler as a white, masculine, self-disciplined protector of women and morals.¹⁰² As Helen Callaway (1987) states in her study of European women in colonial Nigeria, white women did not travel to the colonies until much later, and they too were seen as "subordinate and unnecessary appendages" not as rulers. The British colonial state established a particular form of rule through the bureaucratization of gender and race specifically in terms of the institution of colonial service. This particular ruling apparatus made certain relations and behaviors visible, for instance, the boundaries of the relations between white men in the colonial bureaucracy and "native" men and women, and the behavior of imperial rulers who seemed to "rule without actually exerting power."¹⁰³ The colonial state not only constructed hegemonic masculinities as a form of state rule, but also transformed existing patriarchies and class/caste hierarchies. Harrison examines some of the intersections of multinational capital, work, and third world women's location by analyzing women in the urban informal economy in Jamaica. During the course of Jamaica's history, the exploitation of the masses had been legitimized and rationalized by a system of ideas and symbols which elaborated the allegedly inherent and functional inferiority of Africans as a distinct racial grouping and as bearers of a peculiar, "cultureless" culture. Racist ideology and institutional arrangements have historically supported and permitted the exploitation of Afro-Jamaicans as a labor force, the violation of black and brown women as objects of sexual indulgence, and the political alienation and repression of the island's majority.¹⁰⁴ Transnational factories relocate in search of cheap labor, and find a home in countries with unstable political

¹⁰² Ibid.

¹⁰³ Callaway, Helen. *Gender, culture and empire: European women in colonial Nigeria*. Springer, 1986.

¹⁰⁴ Harrison, Faye V. "Women in Jamaica's urban informal economy: Insights from a Kingston slum." *Nieuwe West-Indische Gids/New West Indian Guide* 62, no. 3/4 (1988): 103-128.

regimes, low levels of unionization, and high unemployment. As Mohanty highlights, what is significant about this particular situation is that it is young third world women who overwhelmingly constitute the labor force. And it is these women who embody and personify the intersection of sexual, class, and racial ideologies. Therefore, colonization has constructed “race” in ways that people of color who are racialized are considered bearers of “inferior labor.”¹⁰⁵ As Marchand and Runyan (2000) have argued global manufacturing industries’ preference for female workers does not merely happen as a result of searching for cheap labor; rather, gendered discourses of labor are the main influencing factor for feminization of the labor force.¹⁰⁶

In this chapter I argue that neoliberal globalization has resulted in a gendered ready-made garments industry in patriarchal Bangladesh. I examine why and how poor women, especially poor rural women migrate to the city to work in the RMG sector.

Why Third World Women?

As transnational corporations set up their factories in the Global South such as Bangladesh, the lives of women and their households become intimately tied to the vicissitudes of the global economy because women, rather than men, are the preferred choice of labor. This preference is not only because women tend to settle for lower wages but it is a consequence of gender discourses that construct women as physically and emotionally better suited to tedious, repetitive work.¹⁰⁷ This has led to a feminization and racialization of labor worldwide. In the garment industry of Bangladesh, tasks are allocated largely on the basis of sex. All the workers in the sewing section are women, while almost all those in the cutting, ironing, and finishing

¹⁰⁵ Mohanty, Chandra Talpade. "Introduction: Cartographies of struggle: Third World women and the politics of feminism." *Third world women and the politics of feminism* (1991): 1-47.

¹⁰⁶ Marchand, Marianne H., and Anne Sisson Runyan. *Gender and global restructuring: Sightings, sites and resistances*. Routledge, 2010.

¹⁰⁷ Mullings, Beverley. "Women Rule? Globalization and the feminization of managerial and professional workspaces in the Caribbean.:¿ Las mujeres mandan? Globalización y la Feminización de los espacios gerenciales y profesionales en el Caribe." *Gender, Place & Culture* 12, no. 1 (2005): 1-27.

sections are men.¹⁰⁸ Jamaly (1996), interviewed owners and managers of garment factories and asked them why they prefer to employ women for sewing. Most felt that sewing is traditionally done by women, and men would not like to do it. Some maintained that women are easier to manage, and less likely to be involved in union activities and disrupt production. Melissa Wright (2006) explores this phenomenon using the example of Mexican maquiladoras. She explores binary opposite categorizations such as male/female, valuable/disposable, and first world/third world, and how the associated discourses of gender and race converge in the making of the “typical Mexican woman” as essentially “untrainable.” Not only is this woman naturally suited to detailed, repetitive tasks like assembling, but her culture makes her obedient, silent, without ambition, and incapable of learning and seeing beyond her nose. Her body thus becomes part of an arrangement in which her hands, legs, and eyes are nothing more than empty tools animated by male supervisory brains.¹⁰⁹

Through these examples, Wright shows how female workers quickly become disposable since they are merely perceived as following orders from male supervisors—reaching the point where they are “not worth keeping anymore”—in a jarring process that includes long hours of repetitive tasks, physical and emotional wearing out, and control of the most intimate aspects of women's daily lives. As such, Wright provides particular versions of a more generalized condition of female worthlessness and disposability;¹¹⁰ a careful story of capitalist uneven development and how it works through the negotiation of particular identities that are contingent upon time and place. Therefore, discourses that construct women as more docile (disciplined) and productive (dexterous and nimble) than men often fail to recognize that the

¹⁰⁸ Jamaly, Rumana, and Ebel Wickramanayake. "Women workers in the garment industry in Dhaka, Bangladesh." *Development in Practice* (1996): 156-161.

¹⁰⁹ Wright, Melissa W. *Disposable women and other myths of global capitalism*. Taylor & Francis, 2006

¹¹⁰ *Ibid*:126

high levels of women's participation in these types of work are a reflection of larger systems of gender (and racial) oppression that leave them with few alternatives other than export factory work.¹¹¹

At this point, it is important to state that race and class play a crucial role in the incorporation and devaluation of women's labor in globalized spaces of production. Scholars have argued that the global feminization of labor has come with a loss of power among the working class as a whole.¹¹² The images of docile Third World women stand in contrast to those of "liberated" White, Western women who are seen as free, independent, and unrepressed. Thus, it is not only gender that informs how we value the labor of Third World Women. Racialized labor systems are gendered, creating a complex intersection of race-class-gender divisions among workers. White women also face a gendered division of labor, but although both groups of women are concentrated in "women's work," racialization has created a gulf between them such that the jobs, pay, and conditions of work for women of color are among the worst that any group of workers must endure. They are often compelled to pursue a narrow set of jobs, typically involving reproductive or service work, or arduous and repetitive assembly labor.¹¹³

Defining Patriarchy and its role in constructing the garment worker

In Bangladesh the social construction of gender has determined the role of women for decades. Therefore, the stereotype, essentially dictated by gender norms, has made women subordinate to men and thus gender taboos have built the foundation of a patriarchal society. This is clearly evident in the organization of family where sons inherit majority of property,

¹¹¹ Mies, Maria. *The lace makers of Narsapur: Indian housewives produce for the world market*. Zed Books, 1982.

¹¹² Mullings, Beverley. "Women Rule? Globalization and the feminization of managerial and professional workspaces in the Caribbean.:¿ Las mujeres mandan? Globalización y la Feminización de los espacios gerenciales y profesionales en el Caribe." *Gender, Place & Culture* 12, no. 1 (2005): 1-27.

¹¹³ Bonacich, Edna, Sabrina Alimahomed, and Jake B. Wilson. "The racialization of global labor." *American Behavioral Scientist* 52, no. 3 (2008): 342-355.

which has been termed "patrilineal" and is also reflective in the fact that daughters leave their paternal homes after marriage to live with their husbands, which has been termed "patrilocal". The term "patriarchal risk" is described as women's lifelong dependence on men, and the strong likelihood that women will face a precipitous decline in both social status and material conditions should they find themselves deprived of male protection¹¹⁴. The social construction of gender which leads to female subordination to men can thus be described as a "structure of constraint" as there is a structural distribution of patriarchal rules and norms that serve to limit women.¹¹⁵

Deniz Kandiyoti contrasts two systems of male dominance. The first, from sub-Saharan Africa, deals with women's participation in agricultural labor. The other system from the Middle East, South Asia, and East Asia deals with what Kandiyoti calls "classic patriarchy".¹¹⁶ Classic patriarchy involves women's accommodation to the sexist oppressive system.

Gender relations among agriculturalists of sub-Saharan Africa come from men commonly receiving plots of land and credit while women lack resources despite their direct contribution to the economy.¹¹⁷ When men attempt to lower the value of women's work, women protest. Kandiyoti explains, "Women have very little to gain, and a lot to lose by becoming totally dependent on husbands, and hence... resist projects that tilt the delicate balance they strive to maintain".¹¹⁸ If a husband denies his wife access to land, or devalues her work, she shows resistance and speaks up. The woman knows her work's importance and seeks to

¹¹⁴ Kabeer, Naila, Simeen Mahmud, and Sakiba Tasneem. "Does paid work provide a pathway to women's empowerment? Empirical findings from Bangladesh." (2011).

¹¹⁵ Ibid.

¹¹⁶ Kandiyoti, Deniz. "Bargaining with patriarchy." *Gender & society* 2, no. 3 (1988): 274-290.

¹¹⁷ Ibid:138

¹¹⁸ Ibid:139

maximize her autonomy instead of merely following a man's direction with the false promise of security.

On the other hand, women within "classic patriarchy" system experience subordination by men, but bargain and receive power in patrilocally extended households as mothers of their sons, as mothers-in-law over their daughters-in-law, and through general power within their kin.¹¹⁹ As brides being sold and entering a new family, they face oppression. Their access to power and mobility are stifled. These women know their limitations, but use whatever means possible to increase their well-being. Eventually these women live to be the oppressor of others. Kandiyoti talks about patriarchal bargain in developing countries. She argues that "...women strategise within a set of concrete constraints that reveal and define the blueprint..." of what she calls 'patriarchal bargain' of any given society. It may vary according to class, caste and ethnicity. She argues that the operations of the patrilocally-extended household are the main sources of classic patriarchy.¹²⁰ Bangladesh belongs to this belt of 'classic patriarchy'.¹²¹ In the case of Bangladesh, it is observed that women do not want to be controlled by patriarchal norms, want liberation for their own daughters yet they often oppress their daughters-in-law. Thus, they are not only complicit but also participate in maintaining patriarchy. Cain et al. conducted a village study in Bangladesh and found that almost a third of the widows in the village were the heads of their own households, struggling to make a living through waged work. However, the labor-market segmentation created and bolstered by patriarchy meant that their options for work were extremely restricted, and they had to accept very low and uncertain wages.¹²²

¹¹⁹ Ibid:141

¹²⁰ Kandiyoti, D. (2002) "Bargaining with Patriarchy", in Holmstrom, N. (ed.) *The Socialist Feminist Project: A Contemporary Reader in Theory and Politics*. New York: Monthly Review Press, p. 137.

¹²¹ Kabeer, Naila. "Subordination and struggle: Women in Bangladesh." *New Left Review* 168, no. 1 (1988): 95-121.

¹²² Cain, M., S. R. Khanan, and S. Nahar. 1979. "Class, Patriarchy, and Women's Work in Bangladesh." *Population and Development Review* 5:408-16.

The poor rural women of Bangladesh have traditionally been excluded from taking part in social, political and economic activities by means of institutions such as the *pardah* (veil). However, the rise of the ready-made garments industry in Bangladesh since the 1970s has provided rural women with opportunities to work outside the home for wages. This change coincided with changes such as an increased emphasis on girls' education and campaigns to improve women's health and reduce fertility. As a result of these changes, the social exclusion of women has reduced considerably. Bangladesh's garment industry has been at the heart of the country's export boom ever since the first factory opened in 1976. The industry has grown dramatically over the past 35 years, and 85 percent of its workers are women.¹²³ However, this employment of women and also men in the industry involves the manipulation of gender and gender relations, thus maintaining patriarchy inside the workplace. Joan Acker argues that organizations in general are greatly gendered and norms, values and 'ideal workers' are cloaked in an air of objectivity. By denying these gendered subtexts, organizations are predicated on a deeply embedded substructure, which perpetuates gendered differences and outcomes.¹²⁴

According to Acker, gendering occurs in five ways. One, through gender-based divisions in work, physical locations, power, labor market structures, family and state. Two, through symbols and images that reinforce gender divisions. Third, gendering occurs in interactions between men and women and among men and women, where patterns of submission and dominance, reinforce gender divisions. Fourth, these processes enhance individual gender identities in men and women. Finally, organizations, while seemingly gender neutral have a "gendered substructure" reproduced in organizational activities. Acker takes the example of job

¹²³ Manufacturers, Bangladesh Garment. "Exporters Association (BGMEA)(2015). Trade Information." (2016).

¹²⁴ Acker, Joan. "Hierarchies, jobs, bodies: A theory of gendered organizations." *Gender & society* 4, no. 2 (1990): 139-158.

evaluation as a management tool, to understand how organizations are gendered. Job evaluations are relative ranking of jobs in terms of complexity, knowledge, skill, effort, and working conditions. Job evaluations are meant to be independent of the person performing the job. Thus, the underlying assumption therefore, is that the worker is a male, or ideally someone who does not have other responsibilities of procreation, caring and nurturing.¹²⁵ The job, while appearing to be gender neutral, has an implicit assumption of gendered work, where women workers are expected to have more domestic responsibilities. Since job evaluations are also about hierarchy, it assumes that a person, who needs to divide commitments, will be most suitable for lower level jobs. Women's bodies are assumed to be dedicated to child-bearing activities and emotionality, and these assumptions are used to control and exclude them. The maintenance of the gendered hierarchy is accomplished tacitly, through arguments around reproductions, emotionality, and over-intellectualization of these roles.¹²⁶

Some postcolonial and postmodernist feminists have developed the 'dual systems theory' which is essentially a combination of Marxist and radical feminist theories. The basic argument of dual-systems theory is that both patriarchy and capitalism are present and important in the structuring of contemporary gender relations.¹²⁷ Although feminists vary in analytical ways, for instance some scholars argue that patriarchy and capitalism is fused into one system of 'capitalist patriarchy', while others say that analytically patriarchy and capitalism is different but empirically these are an interacting system, they all maintain the same opinion that dual-systems work at the root of gender inequality of the labor market.¹²⁸ On one hand, the material basis of gender inequality are maintained by the capitalist through unequal economic relations between

¹²⁵ Ibid.

¹²⁶ Ibid:153

¹²⁷ Walby, Sylvia. "Theorizing patriarchy." (1990):5

¹²⁸ Eisenstein, Zillah R. "Capitalist patriarchy and the case for socialist feminism." (1979).

male and female, and on the other hand, the patriarchal ideology works through the concept of unconscious that maintain the difference between sexes. In the garment sector case, it is often seen that men receive faster promotions and become supervisors within months of their employment in the factory even though some women may have been working from long before. Furthermore, the sex-segregation of tasks, such as women do sewing while men are mostly seen in the cutting, ironing or finishing end of the production is also emblematic of the inequality that persists within. Thus, the feminization of labor in the context of neoliberal globalization involves on the one hand, an enormous increase in the number of women workers in the formal labor force. On the other hand, it involves the "flexibilization" of labor to keep labor costs low and productivity up in the name of free trade, global competitiveness and economic efficiency.¹²⁹

Additionally, workplace patriarchy in the RMG sector is maintained by the 'prosthetic body of supervision' where the worker is just the arms, legs and body carrying out tasks instructed by the mind (the supervisor). In other words, "his skills, training, and authority are made manifest only when she performs her work."¹³⁰ This preserves the disposability of a female labor force, as well as reinforces the discourse of a lesser developed third world, feminine subject who justifies the notion that 'social development' begins in the Global North and extends via capitalist progress to the lesser developed Third World.¹³¹

Therefore, what this section has highlighted is that the social structures in Bangladesh are characterized by the institutionalization of extremely restrictive codes of behavior for women, that are often perpetuated by women themselves. While the patriarchal structure of Bangladeshi

¹²⁹ Marchand, Marianne H. "Engendering globalization in an era of transnational capital. New cross-border alliances and strategies of resistance in a post-NAFTA Mexico." (2002): 105-119.

¹³⁰ Wright, Melissa W. *Disposable women and other myths of global capitalism*. Taylor & Francis, 2006: 48

¹³¹ Ibid:49

society has in the past excluded women from gaining access to public spaces and paid work, the RMG sector has challenged such notions in creating opportunities, especially for poor rural women to join the labor force. However, as patriarchy remains entrenched in the institution of the family and in the workplace, it creates a disposable female labor force.

Why Women Enter the Garment Industry

One of the workers I had a conversation with at the garment factory in Savar, we will call her Fatema, had been working in this factory for five years. When asked why she left the previous factory she used to work in, she said that they did not have any childcare facilities for her new born at that time. Moreover, she was not pleased with management and discipline in the old factory. In this new factory, however, she was satisfied with the day care services that were available and she also seemed happy with the work environment. Another woman, had joined this factory twelve years ago and this was her first job. She started working to fight poverty, support her family and be able to educate her children. Due to a lack of proper education, factory work seemed like the only possible way for her to earn money. Most of the other women that I spoke to had similar reasons for working in the garment sector.

The poor rural women mostly join the garment industry due to both “push” factors such as poverty, marital breakdown and family conflicts as well as “pull” factors such as the desire to improve one’s social and economic standing and to save for one’s dowry.¹³² Often times families do not support their daughters or wives to work in the garments industry and hence there is often a complex process of negotiation with family members as well as defiance that characterizes the decision making process. The garment industry has significant positive implications for women workers in terms of income, improved social conditions, personal

¹³² Kibria, Nazli. "Becoming a Garments Worker: The Mobilization of Women into the Garments Factories of Bangladesh." UNRISD Occasional Paper, 1998.

decision-making and empowerment. Women from poor rural families often find work as housemaids or as laborers in the informal sector. Given the choice, they prefer not to become housemaids, doing burdensome work for very low wages: factory workers earn more and have a higher status. The garments factories have opened opportunities for women job-seekers, for whom poor education, lack of other skills, and poverty leave no better option. Even better-educated women find it hard to get work: for instance, two of the women that I spoke to had completed high school, but took unskilled work in the garment industry because they could not find other employment.

Nazli Kibria had conducted interviews of about 70 women who worked at these garment factories in 1998. Poverty and scarcity were common themes in the women's accounts of how they decided to come to the city and work in garments. Part of the decision to enter into garments was thus their assessment that such work was better than what was available to them in the village. The rural income-generating opportunities most often were agricultural wage work (e.g. threshing rice), domestic service, and various types of small-scale self-employment activities, including weaving baskets and mats, raising livestock and growing vegetables. According to the women, the major comparative benefit of garments work was financial — one could make far more money on a regular basis in garments than in other activities in the village. Besides the financial incentives, the nature of garments work and its social image seemed to hold some attractions over the more traditional forms of income generation in rural areas. Garments work, with its bureaucratic routine, was also seen as new or modern in character.¹³³

The process of becoming a garments worker is one that unfolds not only in the context of the household, but also the community in which the household is located. One of the ways in which the community can affect the garments entry process is by extending practical

¹³³ Ibid.

support for becoming a garments worker. This practical support is of various kinds: information about the availability, salaries and conditions of garments jobs; assistance in finding a job, coming to Dhaka, and finding a place to stay. For those women based in Dhaka practical support is generally extensive, due to the fact that there are currently few low-income areas in Dhaka where there are not women who are engaged in garments work. For rural migrant women workers, the practical support required for successful entry into the garments labor force is necessarily more extensive than that needed by those living with their families in the city. Relatives and fellow village folk who were already involved in the garments business typically provided the rural women with the necessary information and assistance to make the transition successfully into garments work. Such assistance is most likely in those villages with an established flow of persons into the garments industry. Where such an established flow does not exist, the process of garments entry is necessarily more complex. In a few cases garment factory owners recruited women who originated from their village areas to work for them. These owners were members of well-known, respected and prosperous families. In other cases of “pioneering” garments work, the process of garments entry begins with a trip to Dhaka for purposes other than working in garments.¹³⁴ Such phenomenon is also noticed in Mexican maquiladoras as presented by Patricia Fernandez Kelly, who disguised herself as a garment worker in Ciudad Juarez in Mexico. She too reported similar struggles when trying to find a job at the maquiladoras. One usually needs an inside connection to even be allowed to enter the factory premises for interview.¹³⁵

The experience of becoming a garments worker in Bangladesh is not only shaped by the practical support extended by the community, but also by the community’s attitudes and

¹³⁴ Ibid. 14

¹³⁵ Fernandez-Kelly, Maria Patricia. "18. MAQUILADORAS: THE VIEW FROM THE INSIDE." *The women, gender and development reader* (1997): 203.

evaluations of the meaning of garments work for women. Virtually all of those interviewed by Kibria indicated that a segment of community opinion was extremely negative in its view of women's garments work. While such unfavorable ideas were present everywhere, they appeared stronger in areas where the population of garments workers was small rather than extensive. Objections to women's garments work were framed according to socio-cultural norms.¹³⁶ That is, women garments workers were sexually loose and immoral, or at least suspected of being so, because they worked with men; they did not respect and obey their family elders. Melissa Wright also explores this phenomenon in her case study of Mexican maquiladoras where she observes that low wage women workers are reduced to disposable parts in ways that low wage men are not. Wright refers to the importance of vision where female workers are considered to be myopic while the males emerge as "those with functional eyes that can adjust to distance and, as a result, develop a vision of how they fit within the overall schema of production."¹³⁷

Among the different groups of women that the garments sector has mobilized are women from poor rural households. For these women, wage employment, whether it is brick-breaking or domestic service, is a necessity. The ability of the garments sector to recruit such women has stemmed from the relative attractions of garments work in comparison to the other types of unskilled employment available to women with low levels of education in urban areas. Besides women from poor rural households, the garments sector has also mobilized into its ranks women who would quite likely not be engaged in wage employment if jobs in garments were not available. For these women, garments work is a way to enhance personal and household economic resources. It is also a way to gain a measure of economic and social independence. Women from rural households constitute an important segment of the garments labor force. In

¹³⁶ Kibria, Nazli. "Becoming a Garments Worker: The Mobilization of Women into the Garments Factories of Bangladesh." UNRISD Occasional Paper, 1998.

¹³⁷ Wright, Melissa. *Disposable women and other myths of global capitalism*. Routledge, 2013.

many ways the mobilization of these women is the most striking, given that it involves not only a movement into the world of industrial wage work, but also into the urban environment. Single rural women who migrate to urban areas alone have traditionally been destitute and impoverished — from the lowest socio-economic strata of rural society. With the development of the garments industry, however, there is now the solo migration of rural woman from a more diverse array of socioeconomic backgrounds.¹³⁸

Conclusion

In this chapter I have established that the lingering sentiment, which echoes through much of the feminist literature on neoliberal globalization, is that development has been built on the shoulders of poor women who are perceived to be docile, submissive, who serve as a seemingly endless supply pool of cheap labor in developing countries. The only catch being that such a claim demands an assumption of the feminine as both static and universal, and that particular attributes are inherently female. It is important to note however, that gender and race are relational terms; they foreground a relationship and often a hierarchy between races and gender.¹³⁹ To support this claim Mohanty gives the example of the constructions of the white women during the period of American slavery, where white womanhood was perceived as being chaste, domesticated, and morally pure. This image had everything to do with corresponding constructions of black slave women as being promiscuous, available, plantation workers. It is thus, in the intersections of the various networks, of class, race, sexuality, and nation that positions different kinds of “women.”¹⁴⁰ I have also discussed how the colonial state has sexualized and racialized the work of Third World workers in transnational production.

¹³⁸ Ibid.

¹³⁹ Mohanty, Chandra Talpade. "Introduction: Cartographies of struggle: Third World women and the politics of feminism." *Third world women and the politics of feminism* (1991): 1-47.

¹⁴⁰ Ibid.

Transnational corporations are simply opportunistic in their exploitation of pre-existing gender roles. Therefore, it is vital to build a feminist analysis of neoliberal globalization because it is not just a matter of recognizing gender in processes of economic globalization but a feminist understanding of globalization requires substantial conceptual, analytical, and epistemological shifts. As Marchand and Runyan put it, "global restructuring entails re-workings of the boundaries between meanings of femininity and masculinity, which are intimately related to the shifting boundaries and meanings of private and public, domestic and international, local and global."¹⁴¹ In the case of Bangladesh, neoliberal globalization has created job opportunities for poor rural women and provided them with some agency (agency here being the ability to choose to work). Women have capitalized on the advantages offered by employment in this industry and found creative ways to negotiate and manage the expectations of their families with their own desires for income and autonomy. A key factor in the assessment of the contribution of the ready-made garments industry to the agency of women garments workers is that they make the choice to work themselves. They value their work and appreciate the little benefits that come with it. For example, one of the women that I spoke to said that she had joined the industry because she did not want to sit at home and do nothing. Her husband worked full time and he encouraged her to go work.

Yet sexual harassment and unequal treatment of women persists in this industry. These contradictions about the impact of the industry are deep seated in the inequalities of the society, which are unlikely to go away as a residual effect of economic changes alone.

¹⁴¹ Runyan, Anne Sisson, and Marianne H. Marchand. "Feminist approaches to global restructuring." *Gender and Global Restructuring: Sightings, Sites, and Resistances* (2000): 18

Chapter 3: The Paradox of Empowerment and Structural Violence

Introduction

So far, I have looked at the various definitions of power and empowerment, then considered the rise of the female Ready-Made Garments (RMG) worker in the context of feminist critiques of feminization and racialization of labor in relation to neoliberal globalization. I have also begun to examine who is most likely to become a garment worker, and how such women enter the industry. I will now begin to turn towards the idea of whether employment always leads to empowerment for women at every strata of society. To answer this, it is important to remember that much of the idea of women's empowerment through employment comes from western notions about who and what is a third world woman.¹⁴² According to the concept, third world women are to be uplifted through the creation of economic opportunity. As such, economic opportunity and integration into the global economy are naturally seen as a form of empowerment. Indeed, it is something that has been historically denied to some women as their position has remained firmly linked to the home.

The linkage of women to the home is a part of a patriarchal social structure that has traditionally been reinforced by the practice of *purdah*.¹⁴³ In chapter one, this was defined as the set of religious and cultural rules, which keep women separated in their own exclusive environments, social circles, and opportunities. The creation of economic opportunities outside the home has significantly challenged the social norms, particularly those that uphold *purdah*. This chapter will examine some of those effects. However, is it enough to just integrate women

¹⁴² Mohanty, Chandra et al. *Third World Women and the Politics of Feminism*, (1991), 14.

¹⁴³ Abdin, Martin, *Women Empowerment in Bangladesh*, 2008, 14.

into the seemingly modern, liberated lifestyle which western feminism advocates? Certainly not, and in this chapter the reasons why will be explored.

This chapter covers the advantages and disadvantages of employment in the RMG industry before turning to a discussion on structuralism, structural violence, and the woman's role in the reproductive economy outlined in previous chapters. Through the lens of structuralism, we see how the structure of the household and the family permeates the woman's world even as she gains physical mobility to move beyond the walls of the house into public spaces traditionally reserved for men.¹⁴⁴ In this chapter I argue that her inextricable link to the household elicits structural violence both in the home and in the workplace as men use this patriarchal structure to maintain their status quo as the primary decision-makers in society.

The Advantages of RMG Industry Employment

Employment in the RMG sector has delivered several salient outcomes for women in terms of how they are perceived and treated in Bangladesh. As they are often treated as burdens among poor families in Bangladesh, dependent on their parents and their husbands, outside employment has afforded the ability to gain a sense of agency, which many would not otherwise experience.¹⁴⁵ However, this remains a fine line to walk. As we shall see, the position of an RMG worker is full of contradictory and paradoxical ideas. On the one hand, women gain the ability to prove that they are able to provide economically for their parents, improving their status and claiming equality with their brothers in the eyes of the family.¹⁴⁶ On the other hand, those who enter the workforce are seen as turning their backs on the traditional values of family and marriage that still permeates Bangladeshi society.

¹⁴⁴ Mullings, Beverly, *Women Rule? Globalization and the Feminization of Managerial and Professional Workspaces in the Caribbean*, (2005), 358.

¹⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 27.

¹⁴⁶ Ahmed, Fauzia. *The Rise of the Bangladesh Garment Industry*, (2004), 35.

Marriage and childbirth are areas, which have been significantly affected by the rise of the garment sector. The overwhelming majority of RMG workers in Dhaka come from the poorest sectors of Bangladesh society.¹⁴⁷ For these women, who often lack formal education or the resources to search for employment, the RMG sector has proven a viable means of employment outside the home as well as an escape from the marriage institution into which they would otherwise be inducted at the earliest opportunity. Research by Paul-Majumder and Begum (2000) found that entry into the RMG industry at age 15 – the median age of marriage in poor households – typically delayed marriage and childbirth until around age 21.¹⁴⁸

The social status and respectability that comes from employment in the garments industry is unmatched with other alternative forms of employment. Dina Siddiqi quotes one of her interviewees Nazma Akter (a former child factory worker), “We are the golden girls of Bangladesh.”¹⁴⁹ Siddiqi analyses this statement as a valorization of the garments workers as ‘heroines of the nation.’ It emphasizes the social respect available to the factory worker which is otherwise not the case for poor working-class women.¹⁵⁰

In addition to changing the way marriage is negotiated, employment in the RMG sector has facilitated the “feminization of urban public space.”¹⁵¹ Women and girls are now seen in public spaces traveling en masse to and from work. This previously unheard-of concept in Bangladesh challenges religious and cultural ideas about female seclusion, encompassed by the concept of *purdah*. Women have gained newfound mobility in spaces, which would have

¹⁴⁷ Rumana, Jamaly, Wickramanayake Ebel. *Women Workers in the Garment Industry in Dhaka*, Bangladesh. (1996), 159.

¹⁴⁸ Paul-Majumder, Pratima, Begum, Anwara. *The Gender Imbalances in the Export Oriented Garment Industry in Bangladesh*. (2000), 26.

¹⁴⁹ Siddiqi, Dina M. "Do Bangladeshi factory workers need saving? Sisterhood in the post-sweatshop era." *Feminist Review* 91, no. 1 (2009): 154-174.

¹⁵⁰ *Ibid.*

¹⁵¹ Hossain, Naomi. *Women's Empowerment Revisited*, (2012), 12.

otherwise excluded them. In turn, this has helped establish a cultural norm of gender equality. It is normalized and normal to see women unaccompanied by men in public. Their ability to see and be seen as such is slowly creating a wider spectrum of opportunities for what constitutes acceptable female behavior in a traditionally Muslim society.

The visibility of women in the public space is often linked to the general trend of progress that Bangladesh has followed in the past few decades.¹⁵² Garment factories are naturally associated with this trend as they have been one of the major vehicles of economic growth for the poorest in Bangladesh. Thus, employment in the RMG sector has enabled poor women to participate in the country's economic progress rather than remain trapped and left behind in the structure of the traditional family. Like participation in public spaces, RMG work creates a crucial space for women in the future rather than continuing to exclude them in line with the status quo of traditional culture. This further assists with the normalization of women as a productive, profitable equal to their male counterparts.

The nature of factory work has also created opportunities for women to seize autonomy in regard to their own appearance. Khosla (2009) studied the way women's physical appearances have changed before and after entry into RMG work. This research found that prior to employment, the flowing and movement-restricting *saree* was common attire for women, as well as traditional Muslim clothes including the *hijab* and *niqab*. Once hired, however, girls and women needed more functional clothing; the *salwar kameez*, with its shorter skirt, tighter sleeves and more form-fitting dress allows movement and comfort.¹⁵³ Although still distinctly Bangladeshi in style, a walk through Dhaka shows that this the new way of dressing is quickly permeating more than simply the factories.

¹⁵² Feldman, Shelley. *Historicizing garment manufacturing in Bangladesh*, (2009), 7.

¹⁵³ Khosla, Nidhi. *The ready-made garments industry in Bangladesh*, (2009), 289.

What all of this amounts to is the challenging of the patriarchal structures of Bangladeshi society in ways which cannot be readily dismissed as a corrupting Western influence or the destruction of a patriarchal culture. That is not to say there has not been any pushback from men seeking to maintain the power with which the patriarchal society has endowed them. Rather, RMG work has proven to be a vessel capable of carrying the most marginalized women (those most vulnerable to the effects of *purdah*) into the future and given them a place alongside men in society. However, has this been truly effective? The patriarchal structures underpinning Bangladesh's culture have certainly not been disassembled by any means. In fact, many of the disadvantages reflect the violence that these structures visit on women even as they seek to free themselves from their exclusive spaces.

The Disadvantages of RMG Industry Employment

Despite the host of seemingly positive effects which employment in an RMG factory elicits for a woman, numerous negative side effects have also occurred. Like their counterparts in other parts of the world, women are still subject to exploitative practices such as unpaid overtime, a lack of maternity leave and harassment.¹⁵⁴ These practices all stem from the assumption that female workers are less valuable and therefore more tolerant of unfair wages or harassment. However, the disadvantages examined in this section step beyond the obvious downsides of simply being a woman at work. In Bangladesh, the precise nature of the patriarchal society creates very specific disadvantages, which are worth considering in the context of empowerment.

¹⁵⁴ Paul-Majumder, Begum, *World Bank*, 29.

Most literature on the Bangladeshi garment industry regards employment in this industry as born more from necessity than choice.¹⁵⁵ Women are subject to both *push* and *pull* factors. The former may include economic hardship, death of the male breadwinner, divorce or familial abandonment.¹⁵⁶ These are conditions that make employment a necessity, not a choice. The latter involves conditions, that the rise of the garment industry created which promised the ability of women to improve their social or economic standing.¹⁵⁷ However, for these women, entry into the garment industry is still driven by primarily financial need. This is particularly true for women from poor households even if circumstances are not necessarily forcing them into employment. However, in both cases, the result is the same: Kibria (1998) found that women who experienced either push or pull factors felt as though their freedom was still restricted even if their physical space was expanded.

The economic benefits promised by employment are often not realized, or entirely neutralized by women's participation in these dual spaces. The patriarchal assumption that the household is the natural responsibility of the woman means that female RMG workers' incomes typically go towards the household rather than their own self-improvement.¹⁵⁸ Kabeer (1997) found that as a woman's income increases, the traditional breadwinners feel less responsible for supporting the family. Therefore, while women may be earning an income, it is the husband, father or brothers who gain the ability of discretionary spending. This further increases the sense of restriction felt by women as their roles remains imposed upon them. They are not *freed* from the household so much as they are forced to participate in two economies with the resources

¹⁵⁵ Khosla, *Ready-Made*, 292.

¹⁵⁶ Kibria, Nazli. *Becoming a Garments Worker*, (1998), 41.

¹⁵⁷ Khosla, *Ready-Made*, 290.

¹⁵⁸ Kabeer, Naila. *Women, wages and intra-household power relations in urban Bangladesh*, (1997), 270.

being earned only in one. This was true whether they kept money hidden for themselves, or they handed over their paycheck to a male family member.¹⁵⁹

This problem is compounded by the fact that conventional Bangladeshi society does not see women as breadwinners.¹⁶⁰ It is assumed that they are not the sole provider of their families.¹⁶¹ In other words, their income is supplementary and this means it is not necessary for the factory owners to pay them a breadwinner's wage. As such, despite the fact that Bangladesh has significantly closed the gender wage gap in recent years, women still earn approximately 59 percent the rate of a man.¹⁶² This represents one of the clearest examples of the way patriarchal structures dampen the benefits and opportunities created by employment in the RMG industry. Even as they have found their way into new physical spaces, economic freedom has proven much harder to secure because of the social assumptions about the place of women. They may be normalizing visibility in public spaces, but *purdah* remains deeply entrenched in the form of economic restrictions.

This sense of restriction continues as women again become defined by the space that is the factory, but this time it is not through the lens of traditional society. Women must also contend with the identity, which has been created for them and embraced by the factory owners. They are forced to adopt the identity of the Third World Woman. Under this identity, Bangladeshi women are de facto uplifted and empowered through employment in the garment industry.¹⁶³ Things like where their money goes and who gains more discretionary spending in

¹⁵⁹ Ibid, 279.

¹⁶⁰ Bose, Manik, et al, *The Role of Gender Economic Activities With Special Reference to Women's Participation and Empowerment in Rural Bangladesh*, (2009), 70.

¹⁶¹ Souplet-Wilson, Solene. *Made in Bangladesh*, (2014), 28.

¹⁶² Kalam, Iftekhar, Mastak Al Amin, Mohammad. *Trends of Women's Participation in Economic Activity of Bangladesh*, (2015), 50.

¹⁶³ Escobar, Arturo. *Imagining a post-development era*, (1995), 215.

the household are overlooked in favor of the supposed physical and economic opportunities they have gained.¹⁶⁴ As mentioned in earlier chapters, Mohanty challenges a homogenization of the Third World Woman. They are not a unitary group to be described as “poor, uneducated, and victimized”.¹⁶⁵ In this sense, the identity of the Third World Woman becomes yet another restriction which ultimately disadvantages them by playing into the stereotypes and assumptions about women as breadwinners or their place in society.

Additionally, unsafe working conditions and cases of sexual harassment both in and out of the workplace prevail. Naomi Hossain (2012) notes that about 60 percent of factories still lack fire safety equipment. On top of that the long working hours and physically demanding nature of garments work results in ‘sustained exhaustion from work.’¹⁶⁶ She further highlights the sexual harassment and other forms of abuse that persists within the factories and on the routes to work. Chaudhury Zohir and Paul-Majumder (1996) have found in their survey that sexual harassment was more common during travel to and from work.¹⁶⁷ On the other hand, Siddiqi (2009) reports persistent forms of verbal and other forms of abuse targeted at female workers within factories, which was found to cause a fall in overall productivity.¹⁶⁸ In the face of such abuse and exploitation many workers resort to more passive forms of protest such as purposefully slowing down their output per hour or faking illness.¹⁶⁹

The disadvantages experienced by women via employment in the RMG sector are all due to the underlying patriarchal structures still rampant in Bangladesh. Although women have

¹⁶⁴ Bose, *Economic Activities*, (2009), 82.

¹⁶⁵ Mohanty, Chandra Talpade. "Under Western eyes: Feminist scholarship and colonial discourses." *Boundary 2* (1984): 333-358.

¹⁶⁶ Hossain, Naomi. "Women's empowerment revisited: From individual to collective power among the export sector workers of Bangladesh." *IDS Working Papers* 2012, no. 389 (2012): 1-40.

¹⁶⁷ Zohir, Salma Chaudhuri, and P. Paul-Majumder. "Garment Workers in Bangladesh: Economic." *Social and Health Condition. Dhaka, BIDS* (1996).

¹⁶⁸ Siddiqi, Dina M. "Do Bangladeshi factory workers need saving? Sisterhood in the post-sweatshop era." *Feminist Review* 91, no. 1 (2009): 154-174.

¹⁶⁹ *Ibid*, 170.

entered into and normalized their presence in new physical spaces, breaking down the barriers created by *purdah* to create a place for themselves in the future, they are still subject to many of the economic limitations created by a system which forces them into a paradoxically restrictive position. Having gained economic power, they are expected to retain their responsibilities in the reproductive economy, ultimately transferring their newfound power, if not their money directly, to their male family members. This is the root of the paradox of empowerment in Bangladesh, and it is structural violence.

Women Workers and their Agency

It is important to note that women RMG workers are aware both of their exploitation at the hands of the factory owners and global retailers, and that their factory work is essential to the health of the country's economy.¹⁷⁰ There have been some radical changes in the new roles played by the garment industry women. The female workers walk in groups to go back and forth from work, stating that it gives them a sense of fellowship. During their lunch breaks, women also sit together and exchange ideas. Women often have to work late into the night to meet quotas, but factory owners typically do not provide them with transportation for night shifts. When women do work late into the night, they form groups of twenty or more to walk home. The streets of Dhaka are unsafe at night, but by forming large groups, these women have empowered themselves to walk the streets late into the night. They have taken to the streets many times demanding higher wages, safer working conditions, and affordable housing. After the Rana Plaza collapse, 50,000 workers took to the streets to protest their low wages.¹⁷¹ In 2005, the government, in collusion with the garment factory owners, prohibited unions from canvassing in

¹⁷⁰ Karim, Lamia. "Analyzing women's empowerment: microfinance and garment labor in Bangladesh." *Fletcher F. World Aff.* 38 (2014): 153.

¹⁷¹ "Bangladesh garment workers stage biggest wage hike protest," Reuters, September 21, 2013, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-bangladesh-garment-protest/bangladesh-garment-workers-stage-biggest-wage-hike-protest-idUSBRE98K06J20130921>

and around factories. In Bangladesh, at least a third of all members of parliament have ties to the garment industry, which has made it extremely difficult to reform this sector. Workers who join unions have to keep a low profile or risk being fired. It was in this environment of intimidation and fear that a fledging union membership began to grow among some of the workers. Post-Rana Plaza, the UN and European governments have recognized that unions play a vital role in ensuring better wages, factory safety, workers' health, and other related demands. One of the positive outcomes of the Rana Plaza tragedy has been the subsequent rallying cry to protect workers and to allow them to unionize. This has emboldened the trade union movement in Bangladesh.¹⁷²

In January 2019, 50,000 garment workers occupied the streets of Dhaka in protest of the low wages they receive.¹⁷³ They were unhappy with the government's decision to raise their monthly wage to 8,000 taka (USD96), up from the previous 5,300 taka (USD63). Some groups had demanded much more, including trade unions and workers' rights organizations that campaigned for a minimum of USD193 per month. However, as a result of these protests about 5000 workers were fired.¹⁷⁴

Kalpona Akter, a former child worker in Bangladesh's garment factories, and now the founder and executive director of Bangladesh Center for Worker Solidarity (BCWS), campaigns for fair wages, garment factory safety, and the right to form labor unions and collectively bargain.¹⁷⁵ The government and factory owners have targeted her for this work, including trumping-up charges against BCWS and forcing government de-registration of the group.

¹⁷² Karim, Lamia. "Analyzing women's empowerment: microfinance and garment labor in Bangladesh." *Fletcher F. World Aff.* 38 (2014): 153.

¹⁷³ "5000 workers protesting low wages in Bangladesh garment factories have been fired." Quartz, February 1, 2019, <https://qz.com/1540275/5000-garment-workers-in-bangladesh-were-fired-after-protesting-low-wages/>

¹⁷⁴ Ibid.

¹⁷⁵ "Kalpona Akter, Bangladesh." Human Rights Watch, February 20, 2017. <https://www.hrw.org/news/2016/09/01/kalpona-akter-bangladesh#>.

International pressure from Human Rights Watch and BCWS' partner organizations has forced them to reverse course. But dangers persist. In 2012, unknown assailants killed Akter's colleague, labor union organizer Aminul Islam. No one has been apprehended for the killing.¹⁷⁶

In Bangladesh, garment workers often seek to form unions and worker associations to better protect against unfair wages, unfair treatment and lack of health and safety protections, including large-scale safety threats like building collapses. Yet they increasingly are being denied the ability to do so because of an intensifying anti-worker environment in which their efforts to form unions are suppressed. Even when they succeed in forming unions, their attempts to register them with the government often are denied, according to data compiled by the Solidarity Center.¹⁷⁷ Of the 1,031 union registration applications tracked between 2010 and 2018, the government rejected 46 percent—even though registration is meant to be a simple administrative process. Union leaders say the Registrar of Trade Unions (RTU) imposes burdensome conditions and rejects applications for reasons like lack of a union members' ID or other employer-provided documents (which is not required by law), or because the factory ID number does not match with factory records (even though it is up to management to provide correct ID numbers).¹⁷⁸

As evident from these narratives, garment workers time and again exercised their agency and continue to struggle for their rights that remain under threat due to institutionalization of structural violence in Bangladesh. In the following sections I will examine these mechanisms of structural violence in detail.

¹⁷⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷⁷ Connell, Tula. "Bangladesh Garment Workers: New Blocks to Form Unions." Solidarity Center, February 11, 2020. <https://www.solidaritycenter.org/bangladesh-garment-workers-new-blocks-to-form-unions/>.

¹⁷⁸ Ibid.

Social Structures and Structural Violence

When thinking about the way a society is organized, it is helpful to approach it from the perspective of *structuralism*, or the analysis of structures and institutions comprising society.¹⁷⁹ Structuralism involves a holistic analysis of society including relationships between individuals, institutions, organizations, and collectives.¹⁸⁰ It is from these relationships that political, social, and economic networks arise which may illuminate or explain features such as sexism, class-based biases or phenomena such as nationalism. In the case of Bangladesh, structuralism is helpful to understand the gendered division of labor as well as how and why men use the structure of the household to assert power and violence over women.

The term *structural violence* first came into use in the late 1960s by peace researcher Johan Galtung. It refers to the oppression created by societal structures which give rise to discrimination, inequality and injustice.¹⁸¹ Where structural violence exists, the advantaged and disadvantaged thrive and suffer respectively under the same conditions because the social or economic structure is oriented towards the advantaged demographic. Structural violence is an important concept in understanding why certain demographics continue to experience social or economic hardship even when it seems as though society expresses the value of *equality*. It is also the underlying feature that permeates Bangladeshi society, affecting women as they seek and engage in employment in the RMG sector.

In Bangladesh, structural violence takes the form of a patriarchal system wherein men are the primary economic, religious and cultural decision makers.¹⁸² Historically, men have controlled women by limiting their access to education, to public spaces, to social contact, to

¹⁷⁹ Ho, Kang. *Structural Violence as a Human Rights Violation*, (2007), 4.

¹⁸⁰ Ibid, 8.

¹⁸¹ Galtung, John. *Cultural Violence*, (1990), 292.

¹⁸² Ahmed, *The Rise*, 43.

money, and property ownership. Therefore, structural violence at its core involves the removal of decision-making capabilities, the granting of which was defined in chapter one as part of the definition of empowerment. Therefore, it would seem as though the introduction of women's choices such as their ability to work, what they wear, where they go, and with whom they socialize would all be a part of the empowerment process for women. These activities directly deny men the ability to make decisions on behalf of women. However, the general empowerment of women across Bangladeshi society does not appear to be happening. That suggests a structure remains in play which is severely inhibiting the ability of women to become truly *empowered*, to make decisions which ultimately exist to improve their own conditions.

Structural Violence and the Reproductive Economy

As we have seen, all of the disadvantages of entry into the RMG workforce are characterized by the elimination of decision making. Women gain the superficial ability to *choose* to enter into employment at a garment factory. Often, this occurs against the wishes of the husband or male authority in a household.¹⁸³ However, as Khosla (2009) points out, it is more often the push and pull factors resulting from a household's poverty which inspire, or force, a woman into the workplace. At its core, the decision to enter the workforce is not solely the choice of a woman. Rather, a woman's choice is driven by what the household needs. In turn, this eradicates any further choices that she may make once the money has been procured. This is illustrated by the fact that many husbands take their wives' income or simply leave the wife to use her income to support the household while they enjoy increased discretionary spending. Here, the patriarchal assumption that the household is the woman's responsibility controls and

¹⁸³ Kibria, *Becoming*, 36.

hampers the economic freedom which may otherwise be gained by her participation in the market economy.

Structural violence characterized by male decision making on behalf of women also occurs within the garment industry itself. For example, the male factory owners operate under the assumption that a woman's income is supplementary. This further assumes that the woman is supported by a male breadwinner, i.e., that she is participating in the traditional social structure in her proper place as the one who is responsible for the household. As such, Absar (2002) found that women often earn wages not sufficient to cover their own housing or food costs.¹⁸⁴ Likewise, it is common for women to be denied legal rights such as maternity leave and proper contract papers, or to find themselves subject to victims of physical, sexual or verbal harassment.¹⁸⁵ Again, the assumption that occurs is that women belong in the home and that if they were fulfilling their proper role, they would not be here.

Nonetheless, factory owners are happy to employ women because they are seen as a cheap, docile, and productive workforce on account of their gender roles.¹⁸⁶ Again, we see that patriarchal ideas about women constrain them in a way which mitigates any advantages they may gain through employment. For instance, by portraying them as hardworking but essentially untrainable, this narrative helps to justify and reinforce the practices of paying them less and treating them as disposable.¹⁸⁷ Whether or not this is realized by the factory owners, however, may be another matter entirely. Mohanty (1991) notes that the narrative of the third world woman that the west created is often imported by the companies which own the factories. As

¹⁸⁴ Absar, Samuz. *Women Garment Workers in Bangladesh*, (2002), 3033.

¹⁸⁵ Paul-Majumder, Begum, *World Bank*, 181.

¹⁸⁶ Kibria, *Becoming*, 1.

¹⁸⁷ Acker, Joan. *Hierarchies, Jobs, Bodies*, (1990), 82.

such, I argue that the idea that women may still be subject to structural violence even after they have been liberated from the confines of the household by way of outside employment.

Another important arena to consider is the distinction between Export Processing Zones (EPZ) and non-EPZ. The EPZ is heavily populated with foreign owned garments factories while the non-EPZs consist of more locally owned factories. In 2008, amendments to the EPZ Authority Act 1980 placed serious prohibitions on workers within the EPZ to unionize with workers in non-EPZ. Although workers in non-EPZs are allowed to organize, there have been very few cases where they have unionized, partly due to the state suppression of worker militancy.¹⁸⁸ However, because internationally owned factories are accountable to a different constituency than are local factories, and they are more aware of the relationship between productivity and harassment, surveillance and physical safety of workers is greater in EPZ factories.¹⁸⁹ Therefore, it is imperative to note here that the degree of agency available to workers is not consistent in all factories and is greatly dependent on locational contingencies and particularities.

Structural violence, therefore, permeates every space a woman occupies whether it is in the household or at work. By linking her economic activities to the household, the patriarchal social structure is able to retain control over her and mitigate any freedom or power she may gain. Her wages are tied to her position in the household. Her income is reserved for the household. Her career trajectory is limited by the assumption that she is most suited for the household, but those features which make her so are also useful for employees assigned to menial, repetitive tasks. The structural violence she is subject to within the household is therefore

¹⁸⁸ Siddiqi, Dina M. "Do Bangladeshi factory workers need saving? Sisterhood in the post-sweatshop era." *Feminist Review* 91, no. 1 (2009): 154-174.

¹⁸⁹ Ibid.

mirrored in the workplace, illuminating why many women feel just as restricted when working at a factory as they do in the house.

The Paradox of Empowerment

Gender inequality in Bangladesh derived from the structure of the patriarchal household creates structural violence and inhibits the empowerment of women. This inequality originates within the family and radiates outwards through society by the assumptions and perspectives about a woman's place in society. From assuming she is working for supplementary income to assuming she is immoral because of her physical presence in public, women are not able to achieve true empowerment through employment because everything she does occurs in the light of the household.¹⁹⁰ This creates the paradox of empowerment, where the more a woman looks for opportunities beyond the home, the more her efforts are tied to the home.

Employment in the RMG sector means that women have carved out a place for themselves in today's Bangladesh, and their very presence in public – employed, wearing the *salwar kameez* – is in itself a symbol of growth for the country. Yet, despite these efforts to challenge *purdah* and the patriarchal structures of society, women still experience structural violence through their inextricable linking to the household. In this way, the more mobility a woman gains, the more violence is exerted upon her by the men of her household consciously or unconsciously seeking to retain the status quo and therefore the more restrictions she encounters in her social and economic position even as her physical sphere of mobility increases.

Therefore, what the paradox of empowerment in Bangladesh reveals is that it is not simply enough to only have a choice. That is not empowerment. Rather, the ability to exercise choice requires resources, whether they are material, human, or social.¹⁹¹ In Bangladesh,

¹⁹⁰ Acker, *Hierarchies*, 90.

¹⁹¹ Kabeer, *Paid Work*, 437.

women's resources remain strictly controlled by the household and the decision-making capabilities of the men. If she is not handing over her paycheck to her husband, then her husband is ceding responsibility or paying for the reproductive economy, enjoying discretionary spending while she takes over what he regards as *her* responsibility. In both cases, she may have exercised the choice of employment, but she remains robbed of the resources to exercise further choice. This is compounded by additional economic restraints put on her which arise from the assumption of her context in the household: even if she kept her money for herself, it would not be enough to survive alone.

Even though women, especially poor rural women, have gained certain salient social benefits through the RMG industry, the paradox of empowerment shows how structural violence cancels out most of these positive effects, especially the economic ones. Women remain tied to the household in economically, even as they gain greater physical and social mobility in Bangladeshi society.

Conclusion

This chapter has unraveled the way that empowerment, the ability to make choices, and the woman's relationship to the structure of the patriarchal household intertwine to create a paradox which challenges the western idea that employment always equals empowerment for women. I have explored different types of power, and different types of empowerment. Empowerment seems to often be defined in terms of economic decision-making, i.e, where to spend one's money. However, one of the things that this chapter begins to highlight is that RMG industry employment *has* empowered women in certain ways. However, it has simultaneously resulted in disempowerment in other ways. Critically, women have gained and lost

empowerment on social and economic fronts through employment and the effects of their relationship to the patriarchal structure of the household.

For poor women, work in the RMG industry is an opportunity, which they may prefer over domestic work, brick-breaking or other similar jobs. It is a job associated with a higher social status. Likewise, since garment factory owners prefer to hire women for certain tasks, it has been instrumental in eliciting a shift in female mobility in the public space. Women can now be seen traveling to and from work en masse, and the presence of a woman unaccompanied in public is fully normalized. Likewise, garment factories give women an opportunity to prove their ability to provide for the family in equal measure to their brothers and male relatives, helping to improve their position in the eyes of their family as an asset rather than a burden. In this regard, the RMG industry has contributed to the gradual equality of women in Bangladesh.

However, women in Bangladesh are still subject to a great degree of structural violence and this is evident in many of the ramifications of their efforts to secure economic opportunities outside the home. They may be subject to power struggles with recalcitrant male family members. Once at the factory, they must contend with perspectives about their position in society and their worth, which lead to lower pay, harassment, and violations of their legal rights. Likewise, this chapter has shown that families are often quick to subsume a woman's income, either by taking her paycheck directly or else by leaving her to assume responsibility for the reproductive economy in the household while her husband enjoys increased discretionary spending. If she wants to keep it for herself, she is forced to hide it.¹⁹²

Therefore, as women have gained increased physical mobility, this chapter has reported that many feel restricted or even devalued for their efforts to earn a living. Paul-Majumder and Begum (2000) found that some women in lower social classes reported feeling devalued socially

¹⁹² Scott, John, *Weapons of the Weak*, 1985, 140.

due to the fact that they were forced to marry later. In the minds of these women, they had sacrificed social standing for economic opportunity. Likewise, female RMG workers are also cognizant of the fact that they earn substantially less than their male counterparts.¹⁹³ Therefore, while the job may have lifted them out of the most severe poverty, the structural violence created the assumptions of the factory owners is extremely visible and even the workers recognize that they are not necessarily economically empowered by their employment. However, as Kabeer (2002) argues, that women are neither “rational fools” nor “cultural dopes”, in fact they make decisions from a given set of choices determined by cultural, social, legal, and political factors. Her study of Bangladeshi garment workers highlights the very important point that women can exercise a degree of autonomy and ‘agency’ in their lives despite exploitative conditions.¹⁹⁴ Such forms of agency can be interpreted as the financial autonomy arising from paid work, the social respectability, ability to form informal groups (many women workers form groups to travel to and from work which give them a sense of safety), and the increase in status within the household. Furthermore, as Aihwa Ong argues in her study of Malaysian factory women workers, through subversive practices, from crying and complaining of “female problems” to requesting prayer time and falling prey to angry spirits, Ong says, women enact “an idiom of protest against labor discipline and male control in the modern industrial situation,”¹⁹⁵

Although employment may seem as a de facto element of empowerment, the case of Bangladesh shows that it clearly does not always lead to empowerment. In Bangladesh specifically, the patriarchal structure of the family and household leads to a paradox. As the women gain more physical mobility on account of their economic participation, they

¹⁹³ Paul-Majumder, Begun, *World Bank*, 190.

¹⁹⁴ Kabeer, Naila. *The power to choose: Bangladeshi women and labor market decisions in London and Dhaka*. Verso, 2002.

¹⁹⁵ Ong, Aihwa. *Spirits of resistance and capitalist discipline: Factory women in Malaysia*. Suny Press, 2010.

simultaneously lose their ability to use their new economic power to make decisions due to their inextricable link to the household. This is a form of structural violence that disempowers women even as they seek to improve their and their family's standing with additional income. For the poor rural women of Bangladesh, the ability to work directly coincides with a rise in structural violence, which cancels out the economic benefits of employment.

Chapter 4: Alternatives to the RMG Industry for Rural Bangladeshi Women

Introduction

In the previous chapters we have seen that employment in the readymade garment industry, despite any positioning by the multinationals which own them, ultimately benefit the owners of the factory far more than it does the workers. It is true that garment factories create for women an opportunity to participate in the economy of Bangladesh. Such employment has likewise worked to change the public discourse about the place of women. However, equally true is that a combination of structural violence, economic exploitation and patriarchal gender norms work to create a paradox of empowerment: a situation which appears to empower women, but which disadvantages them in the long run. Women from the lowest echelons of Bangladeshi society may now be able to seek employment outside the home but they remain subject to the structural violence inflicted upon them via patriarchy.

Having examined the nature and outcomes of female employment in the RMG industry, the many failings and shortcomings of this disguised form of exploitation beg the question as to whether alternatives to employment in the RMG industry exist. The answer is an emphatic yes, but that does not necessarily make all of such options either straightforward or obvious. In this chapter I will take a much closer look at the nature and effects of employment in these conventional avenues. Doing so will help elucidate many of the deeper reasons which push women into the RMG work in the first place and help lay the groundwork for why still other sources of income are not so lucrative overall. In short, RMG work appears attractive because many employment options traditionally available to women appear so unattractive, even when viewed without the context of seemingly better options available.

This chapter, therefore, opens with a discussion of the conventional employment options available to rural Bangladeshi women before turning to the public works (and occasionally private investment) efforts to bring skills and precious financing to rural Bangladesh, especially women. Finally, this chapter will close with a series of recommendations for helping women transition out of the RMG industry into economic opportunities that truly support and empower them.

Alternative Options Available to Women

As noted in earlier chapters, the demographic of women frequently found in garment industries *do* find employment in industries beyond that of RMGs. Many of these opportunities are types of labor frequently found in the countryside, sidestepping the skills requirements for other industries, which the rural poor on a whole generally fail to meet.¹⁹⁶ For example, the rural income-generating opportunities most often include agricultural wage work (e.g. threshing rice), domestic service, and various types of small-scale self-employment activities, including weaving baskets and mats, raising livestock and growing vegetables. Such work, while frequently low pay, are viable pathways because of their accessibility in terms of skills or knowledge women are likely to already have.¹⁹⁷

However, because of their accessibility and association with “feminized” skills, such jobs occupy a curious position in terms of opportunity and social perception. On the one hand, they represent economic opportunities, which should – and do – naturally increase the perceived value of a woman in the household.¹⁹⁸ On the other hand, such jobs remain firmly entrenched within

¹⁹⁶ Kibria, Nazli, *Becoming a Garments Worker: The Mobilization of Women into the Garments Factories of Bangladesh*. (1998), 12.

¹⁹⁷ Kabeer, Mahmud, Tasneem, *Does Paid Work Provide a Pathway to Women’s Empowerment?* (2011), 9.

¹⁹⁸ Kabeer, Naila. *Women, Wages and Intra-Household Power Relations in Urban Bangladesh*. (1997), 287.

the woman's space and thereby subject to all of the assumptions and devaluations associated with patriarchal gender roles. This was examined in previous chapters, where it was noted by researchers that, given the choice, rural women prefer not to become housemaids, doing burdensome work for very low wages; rather, factory workers earn more and have a higher status on account of the job's apparent association with modernity.¹⁹⁹ Due to its modern connotations, factory work is much harder to devalue as jobs that are considered to be "traditionally" done by women. This thereby affords some measure of respect to RMG workers, which the conventional employment opportunities cannot possibly accomplish.

Therefore, the RMG industry provides an attractive alternative to rural Bangladeshi women, not only because it promises a higher pay but also because it addresses many of the assumptions which lead to a devaluing of women's work due to patriarchy. However, as the previous chapter explained, such benefits are not always accessible or even conferred to women after they acquire employment in a garment factory. Indeed, structural violence persists in a way that the previous chapter has argued negates the effects of pursuing such seemingly higher-paying, more socially valuable employment. Likewise, the owners of such factories are not encouraged to change this system. In fact, they are incentivized to do exactly the opposite to maintain their steady supply of cheap, industrious, reliable labor. Therefore, for true empowerment via economic opportunity to occur, women need another avenue entirely – but where does an unskilled, poorly educated, rural Bangladeshi woman find such opportunity?

Alternatives to the RMG Industry & Microfinance

Outreach to the rural poor in South Asia – of which Bangladesh ranks among the poorest countries in the region – has been a subject of intense focus for both academics and NGOs since

¹⁹⁹ Feldman, Shelley, *Exploring Theories of Patriarchy*, (2001), 48.

the 1970s.²⁰⁰ Efforts have largely been met with success in Bangladesh in particular. In 1972, Bangladesh experienced poverty rates of upwards of 82 percent of the population – by 2010, that number had reduced 14 percent.²⁰¹ Much of this has been the result of private investment. Ravallion (1991) notes that the rise of factory work throughout the 1980s was instrumental in providing critical employment opportunities to the rural poor.²⁰² It is against this backdrop which employment in the RMG industry must be considered. However, it cannot obscure the reality that other efforts have produced dramatically positive results even if they have received far less attention.

The rise of microfinance is one such avenue that has had tremendous positive impacts on the economic situation of the rural poor in Bangladesh. Microfinance is defined as a type of banking service oriented towards unemployed or low-income individuals who otherwise would be unable to access traditional financial services.²⁰³ In countries of the global south, microfinance typically takes the form of very small loans through which borrowers purchase the materials and supplies necessary to establish an economic practice – in other words, to start their own businesses.²⁰⁴ These loans are paid back, ideally with minimal interest, after the individual has successfully created a stable economic opportunity. Many microfinance institutions are financed by NGOs, but in some cases also through the actions of private philanthropic organizations.²⁰⁵

In Bangladesh, microfinance and similar credit programs have been available since the early 1990s. Nearly three decades later, it is estimated that there are more than 750 registered

²⁰⁰ Ravallion, Martin, *Reaching the Rural Poor Through Public Employment*, (1991), 153.

²⁰¹ The World Bank, *Bangladesh Continues to Reduce Poverty*, (2017).

²⁰² Ravallion, *Reaching*, 158.

²⁰³ Investopedia, *Microfinance*, (2019).

²⁰⁴ Khandker, Shahidur, *Fighting Poverty with Microcredit*, 1998, 28.

²⁰⁵ *Ibid*, 32.

microfinance institutions with 17,000 branches and some 32 million members.²⁰⁶ It is further estimated that participants have received as much as \$7.2 billion in annual disbursements, with an outstanding balance of \$4.5 billion – or 3 percent of the country’s gross domestic product.²⁰⁷ Part of this ubiquity arises from the fact that Bangladeshi microfinance institutions are described as *inclusive* – that is, they work with disadvantaged populations, which still other microfinance agencies may deny.²⁰⁸ The World Bank (2017) estimates that this policy of inclusivity may be one of the biggest reasons that microfinancing has had such a positive impact on poverty in the region.²⁰⁹ Although it is one of the poorest countries in South Asia, it has also had one of the most striking reductions of poverty in the region since the 1980s.

Microfinance loans allow individuals to acquire small loans for the purpose of purchasing materials or supplies, which enable them to generate a profit and there is evidence that it does empower households on a whole to increase their income generation. Muneer and Khalily (2017) showed that between 1985 and 2015, incomes in houses that participated in microfinancing saw an income increase of 29 percent more over a course of 20 years than households which did not.²¹⁰ Likewise, areas where microfinance institutions were abundant saw a significant growth of the economy as a result of the presence of enterprises and the capital to pursue such opportunities.²¹¹ Muneer and Khalily (2017) caution, however, against reading this as de facto evidence towards the success of microfinancing, pointing to the fact that village population density determined program presence and directly influenced household participation. In other

²⁰⁶ Muneer, Farah, Khalily, Baqui, *Access to Credit and Economic Returns and Productivity of Micro Enterprises in Bangladesh*, 2017, 4.

²⁰⁷ *Ibid*, 5.

²⁰⁸ Quayes, Shakil, Khalily, Baqui. *Efficiency of Microfinance Institutions in Bangladesh*, 2014, 9.

²⁰⁹ The World Bank, *Bangladesh Continues*.

²¹⁰ Muneer, Khalili, *Access to Credit*, 22.

²¹¹ *Ibid*, 24.

words, microfinance institutions were most successful where opportunities for economic enterprise existed on account of population density and infrastructure.

In Bangladesh Grameen Bank and BRAC are two of the largest microfinance providers. In order to achieve the main objective of delivering credit the Grameen Bank and BRAC both provide various support programs including social services and social development programs along with financial discipline. As part of such initiatives the Grameen Bank sets out guidelines and codes of conduct for the borrowers promoting social and financial discipline. To develop social awareness among borrowers, BRAC provides skills training, adult literacy and primary health care etc. BRAC's social development approach is more extensive (integrated program) compared to the Grameen Bank's minimalist (credit only) approach. One of the central concerns of both the Grameen Bank and BRAC is to support the poor - making productive use of their credit and income. It should be mentioned that although there are differences between the Grameen Bank and BRAC in their approaches to loan provision, both institutions adopt a credit based poverty alleviation approach in rural Bangladesh.²¹²

Grameen Bank, which literally translates to "rural" bank, is a not-for-profit organization, owned by its borrowers. Loan amounts, which start at \$35 and average \$200, depend on the needs of the borrower and her level of credit.²¹³ Interest rates are kept relatively low and as close as possible to prevailing commercial rates. Women enter the system through a self-selected lending group of between 5 and 10 members. Participants rank their fellow group members according to financial strength and use this ranking to determine the order in which members receive their loans, with the neediest members receiving loans first. The members of

²¹² Rahman, Sayma, Pramod N. Junankar, and Girijasankar Mallik. "Factors influencing women's empowerment on microcredit borrowers: a case study in Bangladesh." *Journal of the Asia Pacific Economy* 14, no. 3 (2009): 287-303.

²¹³ Qiulin Zhang, M. P. A. "Grameen Bank: Taking Capitalism to the Poor." (2004).

the group elect a chairperson, who receives her loan only after the neediest members of the group have met the terms of their loans, including the weekly schedule for repayments. Grameen Bank maintains its own regulation system outside the purview of the Central Bank of Bangladesh and relies heavily on social pressure among the group members to keep default rates low. The members of each lending group experience great peer pressure to meet the terms of their loans, as they know everyone in the group well enough to understand the importance they place on receiving their disbursement.²¹⁴

Women and the Opportunities of Microfinance

Microfinance has proven to be a powerful income-generating tool for women in rural Bangladesh, at least according to the Grameen Bank of Bangladesh, the largest microfinance institution in Bangladesh. For these women, access to the funds to start their own enterprises to support their households has been fundamental to their economic survival. Women have shown themselves particularly industrious and responsible when it comes to microfinance, thriving even as they take on debt. The Grameen Bank of Bangladesh, which won the 2006 Nobel Peace Prize for its microfinancing program, claims that female borrowers return upwards of 98 percent of their original loan.²¹⁵ Not only are they successfully starting their own businesses but analyses have shown that their return rate outstrips that of men by 16 percent.²¹⁶

There are many theories on why this is, not the least of which is the idea that women remain naturally oriented and tied to the household, as discussed in previous chapters. Therefore, whereas additional income entering a household by way of the woman tends to increase male discretionary spending, the woman's additional income tends to be reinvested in ways, which

²¹⁴ Ibid.

²¹⁵ Carr, Marilyn, Chen, Martha, Jhabvala, Renana, *Speaking Out*, (2017), 12.

²¹⁶ Chakravarty, Sugato, Iqbal, Zahid, Zafar, Abu, *Are Women "Naturally" Better Credit Risks in Microcredit?* (2014), 17.

will ultimately help their household.²¹⁷ One such way is through the creation of an income-generating activity. Most other theories agree with this idea, if not so frankly stated. For instance, Chakravarty, Sugato and Zafar (2014) note that patriarchal gender roles are most likely at play because Bangladeshi women are trained at an early age to be industrious and hard-working. It is assumed they will be the caretakers of the household and the family, whereas that assumption is not made with male children.

However, not all women have been so utterly successful at reinvesting a microloan into income generating activities. Several studies have shown that microfinance is most useful in the hands of those who already have marketable skills or the ability to navigate an economy.²¹⁸ In other words, they simply need the capital to carry out these activities. For these people, microfinance is an effective tool for getting the start that they need. In this chapter I consider that women tend to be more successful in this respect because they are socialized to have many of the skills, which they use to establish a business, including budgeting, artisanship, and experience at negotiation as the main participant in household shopping. For the rest, however, microfinance can and occasionally does represent the *death trap* it is often portrayed as in the media.²¹⁹ Without the skills and the ability to start a business, many rural Bangladeshi women do succumb to using microfinance as a means to supplement their or their husband's income. In turn, they fall prey to the tendency of men who see their wives' income as an opportunity for greater discretionary spending.

According to Lamia Karim's research, in 90 percent of cases the husbands control the loans received by the wives. Therefore, in the real sense the men become the beneficiaries of

²¹⁷ Bose, Manik, et al, *The Role of Gender Economic Activities With Special Reference to Women's Participation and Empowerment in Rural Bangladesh*, (2009), 70.

²¹⁸ Carr, Chen, Jhabvala, *Speaking Out*, 30.

²¹⁹ Melik, James, *Microcredit 'Death Trap' for Bangladesh's Poor*, (2010).

microfinance. However, in the case of a loan default the microfinance institutions pressurize the woman to pay up. They use various pressure tactics such as, public shaming, repossession of their assets and in certain cases selling off the defaulter's house to raise the outstanding debt. As a result, women borrowers end up taking multiple loans and use one loan to pay off another, thus ending up in an endless 'debt cycle'. Thus, in this so-called model of "empowerment" poor rural women face great levels of social and personal stress with regards to loan repayment and find themselves in debt.²²⁰ Kabeer further points out that there is no evidence that proves the long-term benefits of microfinance. There are very few longitudinal studies that track microfinance clients over a longer time period, hence there is not enough proof to suggest that these loans are successful in helping these women out of poverty.²²¹

Barriers to Access for Women: Are They Really So Big?

At this point, it is worth examining a curious contradiction, which appears in Bangladeshi society concerning the ability of women to participate in the earning economy. There exists no legal barriers preventing women from entering the workplace, and anti-discrimination laws are officially on the books (whether or not they are enforced is another story).²²² Barriers to female employment, access to credit, and access to fair wages or working conditions are, conversely, largely social. Feldman (2001) cites disapproval (or outright refusal) from male family members as one of the greatest barriers to female participation in the workplace. This is deeply intertwined with the aforementioned concept of *purdah*, which creates distinct male and female spaces in society.

²²⁰ Karim, Lamia. "Analyzing women's empowerment: microfinance and garment labor in Bangladesh." *Fletcher F. World Aff.* 38 (2014): 153.

²²¹ Kabeer, Naila. "Is microfinance a 'magic bullet' for women's empowerment? Analysis of findings from South Asia." *Economic and Political weekly* (2005): 4709-4718.

²²² Feldman, *Exploring Theories*, 14.

More recent research suggests that this trend of male disapproval of female participation has been slowly changing over the past two decades. Specifically, a lack of capital and training now constitute a bigger barrier to enterprising activities for women than social pressure. Nonetheless, a 2016 study found that social hindrance – specifically of women by men – is the fourth greatest barrier to business startups for women in Bangladesh behind a lack of capital, training and credit.²²³ This suggests that women are attaining the social and cultural mobility necessary to become earners outside the home but they are unable to do so because of a lack of infrastructure and resources supporting them.

The Case for the RMG industry

Karim (2014) mentions that after the Rana Plaza disaster, European governments have recognized the importance of workers unions to ensure safe working environments and fair wages. Therefore, this tragedy has brought forth several protests and rallies that have led to workers being allowed to unionize and strengthen the trade union movement in Bangladesh.²²⁴ Furthermore, the empowerment that has taken place is more visible in garments workers as compared to microcredit lenders pertaining to family roles. Siddiqi has cautioned against assuming sexual passivity on the part of women workers, pointing towards many marriages and romantic relationships that arise within the factory walls.²²⁵ These marriages are evidence of a certain level of agency exercised by garment workers as they choose their life partners instead of ending up in an arranged marriage that involves the practice of dowry. Garments workers also possess greater autonomy of their finances as compared to microcredit borrowers as they earn a

²²³ Eusuf, Abu, Shahan, Asif, Khaleque, Abdul, Rana, Ebney, *The Shared Roles of the Central Bank, Commercial Banks and Women Chambers in Promoting Innovative Financing Models for Women-led SMEs*, (2017), 20.

²²⁴ Karim, Lamia. "Analyzing women's empowerment: microfinance and garment labor in Bangladesh." *Fletcher F. World Aff.* 38 (2014): 153.

²²⁵ Siddiqi, Dina M. "Do Bangladeshi factory workers need saving? Sisterhood in the post-sweatshop era." *Feminist Review* 91, no. 1 (2009): 154-174.

regular wage, and even though they may be sending money back to their families they get to keep some of it for themselves.²²⁶

The Future of the RMG Industry

As of 2016, the RMG garment sector accounted for 81 percent of the total exports sent out of Bangladesh, representing nearly 5 percent of the world market share of apparel.²²⁷ The industry has been playing a significant role in the economic growth of Bangladesh, providing much needed direct employment to nearly four million people – the vast majority of these people being women.²²⁸ In 2014, there were 5,615 RMG factories located in Bangladesh, 11 times more than what was found there a mere 10 years earlier.²²⁹ Until recently, this growth trend has not shown any signs of slowing or stopping. In fact, Ahmed (2015) finds in field research that the RMG industry is expected to achieve \$50 billion by 2021.

Despite this tremendous growth outlook, Bangladesh's RMG sector faces significant challenges in its future. A number of high profile and deadly fires have rocked the industry since 2015, resulting in more than 3,600 serious injuries or fatalities in the past four years alone.²³⁰ Likewise, the success of Bangladesh in this industry has drawn the attention of both India and Myanmar, both of which have acquired a competitive advantage by offering still lower wages.²³¹ Finally, political instability is threatening to creep into the country's economy as the increasingly desperate government attempts to crack down on terrorists through more brutal and terrifying

²²⁶ Karim, Lamia. "Analyzing women's empowerment: microfinance and garment labor in Bangladesh." *Fletcher F. World Aff.* 38 (2014): 164.

²²⁷ Ahmed, Nadia, *Achieving Garment Export Target of \$50 Billion by 2021*, (2015), 4.

²²⁸ *Ibid.*, 4.

²²⁹ *Ibid.*, 5.

²³⁰ Balchin, Neil, Calabrese, Linda, *Comparative Country Study of the Development of Textile and Garment Sectors*, (2019), 10.

²³¹ Dulal, Mia, *The Spirit of Innovative Entrepreneurship Combined With a Diligent Workforce Is the Dominant Factor Behind the Development of the Apparel Industries of Bangladesh*, 2019, 51.

measures against the population.²³² Combined, all three of these features may have the effect of causing foreign buyers and investors to shy away from continued business in the country.

Likewise, as the country continues its steep climb out of poverty, it is likely that such jobs will become less desirable as other industries develop. Despite being among the poorest countries in the region, it has also seen one of the fastest development tracks.²³³ The garment industry is susceptible, therefore, to not only the numerous socio-political dynamics arising in the country but also the economic conditions – for better or for worse. In short, the RMG industry, which relies on underpaid and overworked labor as a cornerstone to its success, is unsustainable in the continued trajectory of neoliberal globalization within Bangladesh. As neighboring countries seek to exploit Bangladesh's problems for their own profit, workers will be forced to find other ways to survive or be forced again back into the poverty from which they worked their way out.

Conclusion

The RMG industry is not a panacea for poverty in Bangladesh. Rather, it risks becoming its own trap as women especially, remain within the industry despite the changes sweeping over the country. This chapter has shown that, while there are other options available to women to engage in the economy RMG work provides them with greater agency. The RMG sector has enjoyed popularity amongst the poorest of Bangladeshi women due to its relatively high wages and the sense of respect gained. The employment opportunities traditionally available to women are low paying, back breaking, and poorly regarded by male members of society. However, due to a lack of education, skills, and in some cases ability to travel to more dense population centers,

²³² Ahmed, *Achieving Garment*, 58.

²³³ Ravallion, *Reaching*, 62.

employment opportunities for women especially remain scarce. In contrast, the RMG sector seems like a lucrative alternative to lifting a family from poverty.

On the other hand, microfinance creates a window of opportunity for the rural poor of Bangladesh to access much-needed capital and skills to start their own businesses. Microfinance's main focus is on individual entrepreneurship and in most cases separates them from the lending institutions thus leaving them at their own disposal to deal with debts or adverse family conditions. However, working in the RMG sector allows workers to form social groups with other female co-workers and collectively they can address their poor working conditions with the owners. They may also be in these groups to travel to and from work and as a result be safer from sexual harassment. Autonomy and thus empowerment are evidently greater in waged labor as compared to microfinance in terms of having more control over finances, forming better social and family relationships, and having enhanced accessibility to public spaces. Yet, as I have argued in this thesis, the RMG sector comes with its own significant problems in the way that female garment workers find themselves still beholden to structural violence created by the patriarchal social structures.

Conclusion

A significant portion of literature documents the transformative effects that the RMG industry has had on Bangladesh since its inception in the mid-1970s. Throughout this thesis, I have examined much of the leading analyses regarding how the RMG industry has affected Bangladeshi society as a whole. Scholars note that the rise of the RMG industry has correlated with the emergence of women into public spaces as economic agents.²³⁴ Changes for women socially and in their status can be tracked by the degree to which *purdah* has been challenged. Often referred to as a form of dress, *purdah* defines the way a woman is cloistered physically (through dress), socially (through movement), and financially (through dependence on her husband) within Bangladeshi society.²³⁵ By increasing the movement of women in public spaces, *purdah* has been gradually disassembled, both in the way women are seen in spaces, the way they have adopted the *salwar kameez* over the traditional *saree*,²³⁶ and the way they have entered the economic force alongside men.

Advocates of equality in the region have pointed to these signs as evidence that women in Bangladesh are becoming empowered relative to their western counterparts. However, as this thesis has shown, empowerment is exceedingly difficult to define and describe. Several working definitions exist, not the least of which have brought with them a colonialist narrative of the Third World Woman who must be *saved* by western experts and technological intervention through global development.²³⁷ As a result, linear progressive narratives of development and

²³⁴ Feldman, Shelley. "Exploring theories of patriarchy: A perspective from contemporary Bangladesh." *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 26, no. 4 (2001): 1097-1127.

²³⁵ Amin, Sajeda, Ian Diamond, Ruchira T. Naved, and Margaret Newby. "Transition to adulthood of female garment-factory workers in Bangladesh." *Studies in family planning* (1998): 185-200.

²³⁶ Khosla, Nidhi. *The ready-made garments industry in Bangladesh*, (2009), 289.

²³⁷ Escobar, Arturo. "Imagining a post-development era." *Power of development* (1995): 211-227.

global feminism have shaped the perception of women's issues in Bangladesh. In such narratives, the Third World Woman escapes patriarchal and cultural oppression through integration into capitalist initiatives, like the RMG industry.²³⁸ This narrative, however, is not without its problems. Critically, feminists like Jo Rowlands point out that individuals only truly become empowered when they can maximize the opportunities available to them without constraints – something lacking in the presiding narrative of the Third World Woman.²³⁹ Without this approach, it is too easy to focus on the seeming ways in which Bangladeshi women are empowered by the RMG industry.

In the second chapter, I took a much deeper look at the construction of the female garment worker in Bangladesh. Paying particular attention to Mohanty's criticism of the monolithic category of "third world women," I began to detangle what it meant to be *empowered* in the context of the RMG industry. This required a careful dissection of the status of poor rural migrant women within the factory itself. Crucially, tasks and positions are allocated by gender, with women frequently taking up the lowest and most repetitive tasks available.²⁴⁰ What this suggested is that social norms that relegate women to the lower echelons of society are still firmly entrenched in this new economic opportunity, even as they are regarded as *uplifted* and *empowered* by western thinkers. Following this, I turned to the concept of patriarchy in Bangladesh, finding that even as *purdah* is challenged on a visible level, it remains firmly entrenched on a structural level.

²³⁸ Feldman, *Exploring*, 1101.

²³⁹ Rowlands, Joanna. *Questioning empowerment*. Oxford: Oxfam, 1997: 12.

²⁴⁰ Jamaly, Rumana, and Ebel Wickramanayake. "Women workers in the garment industry in Dhaka, Bangladesh." *Development in Practice* (1996): 156-161.

This contradiction between the apparent empowerment and the prevalence of structural violence has had several interesting outcomes for women in Bangladesh. For one, objections to female participation in the workforce by male family members were no longer framed in patriarchal terms but terms wholly focused on women. In particular, women who chose to work outside the home often faced accusations of loose morals or promiscuity.²⁴¹ That is to say, women are sometimes defined in terms of other women wholly outside *purdah* but in the most extreme negative way. It is officially fully legal for women to participate in economic activities, and no laws enforce *purdah* like in other Muslim countries. Censure, therefore, only finds valid footing in cultural contexts where it is much harder to fight against. Likewise, once in the factory, women frequently have reported facing sexual harassment, a lack of maternity leave, unpaid overtime, and poor working conditions.²⁴² All of these reflect the assumption that female workers are less valuable than their male counterparts – an idea rooted in the traditional perception of women as economic burdens that must be unloaded by the family as soon as possible. Although illegal, events like the Rana Plaza disaster show that it is not just widespread but incredibly difficult to mitigate.

In the third chapter, I took apart these perceptions to note how structural violence cancels out many of the *advantages* that women have gained as a result of employment. Notably, household dynamics do not change once a woman has entered the workforce. If anything, husbands and brothers enjoy more discretionary spending, whereas women are forced to assume

²⁴¹ Kibria, Nazli. "Becoming a Garments Worker: The Mobilization of Women into the Garments Factories of Bangladesh." UNRISD Occasional Paper, 1998.

²⁴² Paul-Majumder, Pratima, Begum, Anwara. *The Gender Imbalances in the Export Oriented Garment Industry in Bangladesh*. (2000), 26.

the expenses of household management.²⁴³ This keeps the patriarchal structure firmly entrenched in the home, canceling out any advantages a woman might gain here too. Combined with the structural violence in the workplace, we can see how employment in the RMG industry constitutes a paradox of empowerment that keeps women trapped and unable to truly benefit from the apparent opportunity that neoliberal globalism has provided.

Drawing from the definitions of empowerment given earlier, I critiqued other opportunities available to the poor women of Bangladesh such as the microfinance industry. This comparison has proven the RMG sector to be the most lucrative option for these women. However, automation in the RMG industry of Bangladesh has made headlines in recent months. Automation is taking over many of the manual labor-intensive jobs such as sewing or preparing patterns.²⁴⁴ It is believed that such advances will inevitably lead to job cuts but create opportunities, as more skilled labor is required to manage and oversee these machines. In main stream news media automation is in fact framed as an opportunity for the entire sector.²⁴⁵ This assumes that the industry is inherently empowering and does not take into consideration the gendered roles within the factory. If the research around the topic is any indication, this does not bode well for women factory workers who are relegated to menial tasks while men are routinely assigned to the jobs requiring skilled, educated labor.

The world is quickly changing as industries find more efficient ways to do things, and much of that will involve automation. The RMG industry has been a source of economic opportunity for some of Bangladesh's poorest and most disadvantaged women – those from

²⁴³ Scott, John, *Weapons of the Weak*, 1985, 140.

²⁴⁴ Khan, Sunera, *Automation: A threat for RMG workers or an opportunity for the sector as a whole?*, 2019.

²⁴⁵ Ibid.

uneducated, rural families. However, they are also likely to be the first to be disposed of when the technological advancements become commonplace. This falls in line with research showing that factory workers largely regard the female garment worker as a cheap and disposable source of labor. In contrast, men will once again reap the primary benefits of this industry as gendered work assignments mean that they are the ones who gain the skilled positions requiring technological knowledge.

Overall, this thesis acknowledges that the RMG industry has had profound effects on Bangladeshi society, and enabled women to move more freely in public spaces. This has led to social transformation that have gradually broken down the most conservative elements of *purdah*. However, patriarchal oppression remains firmly entrenched in Bangladeshi society, manifesting in ways that ultimately negate the benefits derived from female employment in the garment industry. From stressors at home to dynamics in the workplace, the cultural assumptions that underpin *purdah* remain alive and well. However, this fact often goes obscured in popular narratives about the empowerment and liberation of the Third World Woman. The advantages of neoliberal globalization are assumed to overpower any cultural context, but in reality, they do not. This is how the RMG industry in Bangladesh creates a paradox of empowerment that keeps women trapped in a patriarchal structure.

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