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## Historicizing Garment Manufacturing in Bangladesh: Gender, Generation, and New Regulatory Regimes

Shelley Feldman<sup>1</sup>

### Abstract

The contemporary Bangladesh economy is marked by sustained increases in women's paid employment, a rise that began in the 1980s with complex and contradictory effects on the lives of women and communities. Today this increase in the numbers of employed women recasts gender relations and the gender and social contract, with wage employment leading to new sources of mobility and social, economic, and political freedoms for women, but also to contestation over rights and security, and, in some cases, to declines in women's welfare. In this paper, I offer a window on the relationship between macro-economic changes in the Bangladesh political economy, the meso-institutional changes created by policy reform, and changes in women's labor market relations. I highlight emergent relations of regulation as they create, organize, and control women's social behavior and normative practice. As I will suggest, the emergent gender division of wage employment in Bangladesh unsettles the causality presumed when changes in economic and cultural organization build on an already available pool of surplus labor that can straightforwardly lead to changes in women's behavior. Three themes animate this discussion. One theme emphasizes the contradictory effects that incorporation into export production has for women; they are simultaneously emancipatory and highly exploitative. Second, I note that neoliberal reforms articulate differently in particular places making it crucial to draw attention to *how* specific antecedent labor force practices, ideologies, and policies contribute to constructing a female labor force. Finally, I suggest that women are increasingly viewed as disposable and redundant even as their labor is becoming central to imaginings of family maintenance and sustainability.

*Keywords:* women's labor, export production, historical perspective

### Introduction

The contemporary Bangladesh economy is marked by sustained increases in women's paid employment, a rise that began in the 1980s with complex and contradictory effects on the lives of women and communities. The significant shift in the numbers of women from the domestic to the market economy, from the home to the "workplace," and from definitions of self as wives and mothers to workers, wives, and mothers alters the institutions and relations of social life – the household, family, workplace, and community; the meanings we give to these social contexts; and the ways in which institutional and cultural changes are represented both by and for Bangladeshi

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women. These new cultures of production and community are constituted by and imbricated in recasting gender relations and the gender and social contract, and in the creation of new opportunities as well as new obligations for women. In some cases, wage employment has led to new sources of mobility and social, economic, and political freedoms for women, but it also has led to contestation over their rights and security, and, in some cases, to declines in women's welfare.

In this paper, I offer a window on the relationship between these macro-economic changes in the Bangladesh political economy, the meso-institutional changes created by policy reform, and changes in women's labor market relations. I am concerned with how processes of restructuring, in concert with women's demands for and increased dependence on wage employment, reshape the cultural and economic contours of daily sustenance. This concern includes attention to emergent relations of rule and moral regulation as they create, organize, and control social behavior and normative practice. As I will suggest, emergent relations of moral regulation recast the gender contract and gendered proscriptions of appropriate behavior as well as the patterns of negotiation and resistance that contribute to the instantiation of a new gender division of wage employment. Framing the problem thusly unsettles the causality presumed when changes in economic and cultural organization and the rise of export production are assumed to build on an already available pool of surplus labor that can straightforwardly lead to changes in women's behavior.

Three themes animate this paper. One is the well-documented finding that the consequences of women's incorporation into export production are contradictory as they are simultaneously emancipatory and highly exploitative. Second, and building on this contradiction, I examine the ways in which women as well as women's labor are viewed as disposable and redundant even as it is becoming central to imaginings of family maintenance and sustainability. Finally, I address the ways in which popular understandings of neoliberal reform as a generalized phenomenon fails to account for how such reforms are instantiated in particular places. As I will show, it is crucial to draw attention to *how* specific antecedent practices, ideologies, and policies concerning labor force participation, and the labor market prior to export production contributes to constructing a female labor force.

The paper is organized in three sections. First, I briefly outline the development choices made by Bangladesh that guided the commitment to increase employment through export production. Second, I examine the conditions of women's work in the country to highlight both changes and continuities in employment and public recognition over time. In this section I focus particularly on how women workers perceive their new opportunities and shed light on the strategies they used to negotiate initial employment, move up the mobility ladder, and respond to their own and their family's needs. I close by drawing on Pearson's (1998) critical essay, "Nimble Fingers Revisited: Reflections on Women and Third World Industrialization in the Late Twentieth Century," to argue that studies of women in export production generally assume the availability of a female labor force and thus do not account for how women, and historically specific gender relations and normative practices are constitutive of global production rather than its mere effects or outcomes.

### **Bangladesh as World Competitor: Neoliberal Reform and Industrialization**

The period of neoliberal reform is characterized by broad economic and social restructuring globally that has significantly increased women's participation in wage employment (Standing 1989; Pearson 1998) and casualized and informalized the labor market. These changes have been enabled by a deepening of capital movements both within and between countries, the elimination of barriers to trade and investment, and by shifts in national production from primary products to manufactured exports. In Bangladesh, the demand for structural reform and privatization by the International Monetary Fund, with the support of the World Bank, was a pressure the country faced immediately after the 1971 war. By the later 1970s and early 1980s, there began a dramatic increase in the volume of manufactured exports and a relative decline in that of primary products. In 1982, shifts in East Asian production regimes and pressure on Bangladesh to service its debt combined with demands from an emergent class of entrepreneurs to set the context for the passage of a New Industrialization Policy (NIP).<sup>2</sup> The policy stimulated what was a stagnant industrial sector and enhanced the terms for foreign investment that eventually led to increasing employment opportunities, including and particularly for women. The creation of a low-wage sector in garment manufacturing was framed by the need to meet a growing demand for work in the context of a labor surplus generated by a changing agrarian sector. Importantly, at this time, women were not among those demanding employment nor could most imagine doing so, and there was no reserve army of female labor ready and willing to secure newly found employment opportunities. In fact, as Rhee (1990: 337) notes, Desh Garment Company, owned by Noorul Quader, a former member of the civil service, in collaboration with Daewoo visited South Korea and was so amazed by the numbers of women employees that he encouraged the government to support allowing female trainees to work in the garment sector.

The New Industrialization Policy parallels the restructuring of the industrial sector elsewhere in response to three other important changes during this period. The first was the quota system levied against Hong Kong, Singapore, South Korea, and Taiwan that led entrepreneurs from these countries to seek alternative production sites and forge partnerships with entrepreneurs from countries without quota limits. The second was the rise in ethnic violence in Sri Lanka<sup>3</sup> that led investors to find more secure production sites in South Asia, and the third was the rising cost of production in East Asia. In response, the Bangladesh Government set in place tax holidays, and credit and trade reform, including the development of an export enclave that could rapidly be organized and, unlike export processing zones, it did not require the availability of an isolated arena limited to export production. The enclave enabled entrepreneurs to build or rent bonded warehouses in Dhaka and Chittagong, the two largest cities in the country, and initiate production almost immediately. It also saved the Government from the need to invest immediately in the provisioning of roads, power, and building facilities for an autonomous export processing zone. Eventually, in 1993, the Bangladesh Export Processing Zone Authority (BEPZA) was established to monitor work conditions, wages,

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<sup>2</sup> In 1979, Desh Garment Company began a, collaborated with Daewoo to establish export garment manufacturing in Bangladesh (Feldman, Field notes, interview with Noorul Quader, 1984; Rhee 1990).

<sup>3</sup> Sri Lanka's educated and skilled female labor force coupled with English as a commonly spoken language initially privileged it as a site for investment.

and benefits and sustain conditions attractive to foreign investors, including a blanket ban on trade union activity that was legitimated under the Industrial Relations Ordinance. Under this Ordinance, collective bargaining was limited to workers in the private sector only where unions were available to represent them.<sup>4</sup>

With the rapid transfer of production from South Korea, entrepreneurs and bureaucrats in Bangladesh were able to take advantage of opportunities to open garment factories under various arrangements with South Korean partners who supplied machinery, fabric, and other production needs. Moreover, Bangladesh did not have a credible international reputation and thus were able to benefit from the reputation and contacts that were enjoyed by their South Korean counterparts. Important to note, too, is that Bangladesh did not have an industrial culture as middle and upper class men would either join the civil service or military, or become doctors and engineers. Thus, few had business experience, a point that helps to explain why bureaucrats were among the first to develop exchanges with foreign capital; they represented elite families in the country, were among a relatively few to have strong international and domestic contacts, were educated, and had access to investment capital. In combination, Bangladesh, with its low wages, limited enforcement of wage and labor standards, and the potential of its inexperienced women, offered the government, its entrepreneurs, as well as foreign investors an opportunity to participate in what Frobel, Heinrichs, and Krey (1980) termed *The New International Division of Labour*. In other words, Bangladesh joined the ranks of other dependent economies committed to export production although at first it did not have a skilled and steady supply of export workers to meet the global demand for garments.

In concert with this dramatic change in opportunity, however, women were recruited into the emergent export garment sector in large numbers, particularly for the low-end garment production. Today, women account for more than 85 percent of the export workers in garment manufacturing where 1998-1999 earnings reached 4,020 million dollars. This constituted 75.7 percent of the total export earnings for that year (Rahman 1999 in Paul-Mazumdar and Begum 2000)<sup>5</sup>. In 1994, the unit labor cost per shirt was \$0.11 for Bangladesh, with its closest competitor, India, at \$0.26, Pakistan at \$0.43, and Sri Lanka at \$.79. In 1997, Bangladesh was the sixth largest exporter to the U.S., and only a few years earlier she ranked fifth among exporters to the European Union for T-shirts and shirts (Quddus and Rashid 2000:229).<sup>6</sup> But, where did this new labor force come from? How can we explain the dramatic rise of women in the labor market beginning with the NIP? To address these questions we engage the assumptions identified by Ruth Pearson (1988: 450-451) more than a decade ago: “the analysis of the new international division of labour has ignored the complexities and contradictions of producing the desired social relations of production involved in creating a new sector of waged labor.” But, as she continues, unlike prior interpretations, we now acknowledge “that either capital or the State might need to intervene to deliver the suitable labor required.” In other words, even under conditions of growing poverty and declining

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<sup>4</sup> Among the world’s poorest countries, with annual per capita income of less than \$300, and with more than 35 percent of the country’s estimated 130 million living in poverty, worker rights in export production remain among the most limited.

<sup>5</sup> Importantly, the end of the MFA continues to challenge Bangladesh’s primary source of export earnings and the households and families that depend on it.

<sup>6</sup> Figures for 2001 find that Bangladesh exported 924 million garments a year to the US (NLC 2001).

subsistence, labor is not available for incorporation into the market in a straightforward and direct way.<sup>7</sup> Instead, not only must labor be disciplined and technically trained to meet the requirements of an emerging labor market but, in some instances, the regulatory gender regime has to be constituted through negotiation by women workers and entrepreneurs as each creatively manipulates and transforms normative meanings and practices. It is precisely this kind of negotiation that is entailed in constructing a labor market where there is no ready and available labor force upon which entrepreneurs can draw.

### **Antecedents to Expanding Women's Employment**

The dramatic expansion of women's labor force participation in garment manufacturing did not completely unsettle what some have referred to as traditional modes of women's behavior (Feldman and McCarthy 1983; White 1992; Kibria 1995; Balk 1997). Rather, the rise of export production followed a series of interventions made first, during the period of "modernization" (1971-1975) when women were viewed as child-bearers whose fertility required control, and second, by the expansion of training and credit to women that began through government initiatives and continued and expanded through a growing nongovernmental organization (NGO) sector. Together, this targeting of women increased their opportunities as participants in public settings, created opportunities for exchange among women, and altered the discourse shaping their behavior. Terms like participation and empowerment, while yet to be generalized, offered a new way for women to think about themselves and their desires. Yet, and significantly, in studies of gender relations in export production, this history is generally ignored and thus leaves unexplored the circumstances, politics, and processes of women's incorporation into global networks that were enabled by the reforms and transformations that were instantiated in the neoliberal reform agendas of the period.

For some women, the opportunity to secure work in newly established export enclaves, away from home, and for wages paid directly to them, required negotiating family and community norms and relations of authority. This negotiation occurred in a context that had, for more than a quarter-century, debated questions about women's physical mobility with government and NGO programs, as well as with multi- and bilateral donors. A salient moment in this process was when questions about women's fertility behavior generated interest in women's education, training, and income generating activities. Thus, by the early 1980s, Bangladesh had already experienced dramatic changes that built on development investments, however circumscribed, in creating opportunities for women that pre-dated and then were stimulated and extended by the U.N. Decade for Women (1975-1985).<sup>8</sup> Consequently, while the 1980s and 1990s were witness to a spectacular expansion of women's wage employment, there had already been varied efforts to weaken the presumed consensus about women, *purdah* (women's seclusion), and their exclusion from the wage economy. Moreover, the normativity surrounding women's place and status was never totalizing, and challenges to its

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<sup>7</sup> The concept of a "reserve army of labor" similarly elides the conditions under which people are transformed into laborers even as it suggests that the presence of a reserve army constrains worker demands and empowers employers.

<sup>8</sup> This period increased women's political recognition, and established quotas for government employment and seats in Parliament

hegemony have always been negotiated between women and their families and communities. Attention to this history is critical to any explanation of the extremely rapid rise in young women's labor force participation rates in a country that is characterized as traditional and Muslim, and where women, until the early 1980s, accounted for less than 5 percent of the labor force.<sup>9</sup>

A few significant political and institutional changes situate women's participation in contemporary patterns of economic and social restructuring. Initially, the Bretton Woods project in Bangladesh centered on expanding agriculture and introducing and extending the Green Revolution technology focused primarily on the intensive production of high yielding rice varieties. Programs for women during this period were narrowly conceived around their fertility and a commitment to reduce population growth, rather than on their contributions to agriculture and petty commodity production. In the 1950s, for example, the Comilla Program, the precursor to the Integrated Rural Development Programme (IRDP)<sup>10</sup> created rural cooperatives with training extended to rural women. The Program included not only increased access to contraception – its primary justification -- but also opportunities for women to leave the homestead and meet with other women from neighboring communities at a *thana* (district) centre (McCarthy 1967; 1977). This was among the first efforts to put women in contact with others from their own and adjacent communities where the requirement of weekly meetings initiated a slow but steady movement of women engaging and learning from each other and making use of public facilities.

In response to the devastation of the independence struggle in the early 1970s, where women played a more significant role than is generally acknowledged, NGOs established rehabilitation projects that eventually were transformed into development programs during the mid-1970s. Exemplified by the Bangladesh Rural Advancement Committee (BRAC), these early programs focused on both women's contraceptive needs and literacy and soon garnered widespread international recognition and support.<sup>11</sup> At this time as well, the World Bank supported a national IRDP Women's Programme in Population Planning and Rural Women's Cooperatives (Feldman et al 1980). These programs led to two critical consequences. One was that a growing number of women could now be seen moving about the village in numbers that were unprecedented. Second, their increased visibility included not only poor women who often secured in-kind work in the households of more wealthy villagers, but also middle class women who were employed in NGO and government programs. While first generation NGO female employees were often from middle-class urban families, they were soon replaced by rural, usually educated women, some from families who traditionally sought "to keep

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<sup>9</sup> Low rates of women's participation in the labor market underestimates those who receive in-kind or informal wages whether in agriculture, small and cottage industries, or as self-employed. Especially obvious is the exclusion of women's value-added contribution to rice production and, among those with credit, their income from investments or income-generating activities.

<sup>10</sup> In the early 1960s, under the Comilla Academy, village cooperatives were organized and met at a *thana* or *upazilla* (administrative unit combining a number of communities under a single administrative authority) headquarters to introduce women to family planning and extension programs (McCarthy 1967; 1977). The Program was the prototype for the IRDP and subsequently generalized internationally with World Bank support.

<sup>11</sup> It took until the early 1990s for the World Bank to view NGOs as partners in development. Before then NGOs were viewed by many as a challenge to the efforts of development institutions (Feldman 2003).

their women in *purdah*” as a way to ensure family status and a good marriage (Lindenbaum 1968; Papanek 1973; Feldman and McCarthy 1983). Women working in IRDP *thana* offices also were from educated rural families, those families stereotyped as among the most conservative with regard to their daughter’s mobility since it is viewed as behavior that can jeopardize forming a good marriage.

While the goals of the IRDP were modest and met the interests of only a segment of the rural population, its national reach contributed to expanding women’s visibility outside the *para* (neighborhood), and increasingly, to women working or traveling in the company of men. Discussions with IRDP members and staff revealed the creative ways in which they negotiated their status as family and community members (Feldman, Akhter and Banu 1980). Some, for example, agreed to wear their *burkha* whenever they moved outside the *bari* (household), while others wore it while walking through the village and removed it once they reached the *thana* center. This avoided the hassle or jeers of village kin, managed family status by behaving with modesty in one’s own community, yet allowed women to secure employment and enjoy the pleasures enabled by physical mobility. As some noted at the time, “I take my *purdah* with me” or, as another said, “I have inside *purdah*, I behave with modesty and wear a *burkha*” (Feldman and McCarthy 1983). These and other women made special mention of the pleasure they found in meeting with other women at the *thana* center where, as IRDP staff, they helped women from relatively small family farms to access credit, training, and income-generating opportunities that could extend their contribution to household subsistence. Like the staff, in most cases, these female cooperative members had to bargain with their husbands for the right to participate. Some women actually came to the *thana* without their husband’s permission and then used their new credit access to win his favor.

Access to credit was a strong incentive for husband’s to allow their wives to become IRDP members and was especially so given the declining security of small-scale agriculture. But, for this first generation of women cooperative members, many husbands actually controlled their wives credit while their wives retained responsibility for repayment. This meant that any expectation that women’s access to income would enhance their sense of self, power in the household, and individual autonomy did not fully materialize. But, this initial access did provide the basis for women’s increasing control of their loans and income as they negotiated ways to secure it from their husbands. In some cases, women either hid their loan or only acknowledged part of it to their husbands, or kept part of their earnings from their income generating activities.<sup>12</sup> From discussions with women members in the early 1980s, it is clear that, over time, the process of having opinions and making choices were beginning to unfold. They increasingly made demands of the program for larger loans, began to share opinions and experiences, and, having negotiated for the right to participate in these new activities, slowly gained authority within the household and community.<sup>13</sup> Such changes eventually would be recognized as central to interpretations of the bargaining household and women’s increasing status (Sen 1990; Agarwal 1997; Kabeer 2000) but also important is that these experiences signal women’s increased engagement with other women as well

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<sup>12</sup> The distinction between access to and control of income also is important in discussions of women’s autonomy, power and decision-making authority (Kibria 1995).

<sup>13</sup> While some village women continued to face the rebuke of family and kin, the moral ethos of the community was clearly in a process of transition.



as men outside the household compound, relationships that would help in negotiating work in export production.

NGO participation, too, was changing the contours of women's physical and social mobility as the mobilization of women as targets for improving their own welfare as well as that of their families were central animating principles. Thus, whether NGOs sought to enhance women's consciousness about social and political rights (Nijira Kori), provide functional literacy and health training (BRAC), loans (Grameen Bank Project), or access to land security and irrigation resources (Proshika),<sup>14</sup> NGOs helped to transform women's access to and engagement with others and the labor market well before the dramatic rise in the demand for women workers in the export sector. Moreover, changes in women's program participation came in the wake of other transformations of the countryside, including the erosion of subsistence agriculture, declines in land-holdings and land security, and the advent of mechanized rice milling. Such changes altered the centrality of women's labor in agricultural processing in subsistence households as indicated, for example, in the decline in *dheki* husking which provided poor women with one of the most lucrative sources of village employment even as it made less arduous the milling process (McCarthy 1979; 1981; White 1977). Such changes led increasing numbers of rural families to explore strategies of income diversification that included combining subsistence agriculture with petty trade and petty commodity production or increasing the number of household members seeking wage employment to secure household survival.

Institutionally, these changes in agricultural opportunities were paralleled by a growing government commitment to the rural non-farm sector, even though programs to expand small and cottage industry production generated few opportunities for women (Feldman 1991). What is notable about these changes is the shift from subsistence agriculture and home-based production to programs that promote petty trade and commodity production. Notable as well is the ideological shift from family based enterprises to self-employment and individual entrepreneurship. This was facilitated by the strategic incorporation and support of NGO activities by the World Bank and the multi- and bilateral donors during the early 1990s, in concert with declines in government investments in the social sectors. NGO activities, for instance, did not generally privilege agricultural activities, such as those initially prioritized by the IRDP credit program for women -- chicken raising, cow rearing, and kitchen gardens, but instead promoted loans for petty commodity production. Initially, this meant that women either had their husband's take their wares to market, or middlemen would subcontract with rural women to make fishnets or bamboo and cane baskets and mats (Feldman 1984). These women, too, began to demand rights to travel to NGO activities, making increasingly visible their presence in places previously reserved for men. In these circumstances, women were discursively recast both as credit-worthy -- excellent loan risks, able to earn income with limited capital, and increasingly engaged in market relations making them more publicly visible -- and able to contribute to household subsistence while upholding family honor.

Such early NGO efforts had a less direct impact on urban women than rural ones. But, stimulated by sustained rural poverty, the incorporation of diverse livelihood

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<sup>14</sup> These are programs that have been operating in Bangladesh since the late 1970s and have an international reputation for enhancing women's status and opportunities.

strategies, and changes in industrial policy, as well as in *habitus* (Bourdieu 1990),<sup>15</sup> urban migration became an increasing referent in constructing income diversification strategies. As family units and as individuals, people began to seek employment in the country's largest cities and regional towns. For some rural families, this was often facilitated by their having kin and connections in Dhaka where female laborers sought employment and where entrepreneurs sought to hire women for their newly formed export factories. But, in the early 1980s, this was not a straightforward matter. Instead, entrepreneurs had to negotiate their need for women workers with their knowledge that women comprised less than five percent of the labor market, had no training in manufacturing, had limited education or experience living away from their parental home, and were constrained by norms which inhibited if not forbade their labor market participation.

Conversations with 60 first generation entrepreneurs confirm the challenge faced by many young rural women and acknowledge their need to be creative in how they used their rural networks to create trust among families in their village of origin to secure a female labor force (Feldman 1984; 1993). A majority of entrepreneurs accomplished this through the creative deployment of traditional village relations. For those who maintained contact with their home village or *desh*, either by regularly accessing rice from family lands or contributing to the village by building a mosque or school for its residents, this proved especially useful as such connections were crucial in sustaining social obligations. On the one hand, such obligations generated village pride that comes with a member's success and status while benefiting from the gifts that might attend to such a relation. On the other, the relation often obligated villagers to meet the desires of the successful, high status ex-villager, now a successful urban entrepreneur or bureaucrat. In some of these circumstances, entrepreneurs responded to this perceived obligation by offering guardianship and employment to young girl's if their parents would allow them to move to Dhaka and work in the entrepreneurs' factory. These relations of obligation, in other words, enabled entrepreneurs to negotiate with families for the labor of their daughters in ways that could maintain family honor while allowing daughters to secure employment in the garment sector.

Framed in an idiom of modern sector work— air-conditioned, in the city, in the company of other women, and under the guidance of a known guardian, first generation entrepreneurs were able to build a workforce with young women from their home villages (Feldman 1984). As a consequence, factories that opened in the early 1980s could claim that the factory was an extension of the household with guardianship a critical signifier of patriarchal control and security. Some workers also used their village networks to secure accommodation in Dhaka and build friendship in what was clearly unfamiliar terrain, but most often the girls were left to fend for themselves in an environment that was unable to adequately provide for them. Reasonably priced rentals were few and of those available, there was no habit of renting to anyone but an intact and/or extended family. Moreover, other institutional resources were yet to be fully operational leaving most women without access to public transportation and easy access to markets.

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<sup>15</sup> Bourdieu (1990: 13) views *habitus* as “the *generative capacities* of dispositions, it being understood that these are acquired, socially constituted [and suggested by the] ‘creative’, active, inventive capacity... of an acting agent.” This critical reading of structuralism highlights the salience of systems of meaning and interpretation. See also his *Logic of Practice*, 1980.

As Sajeda Amin and her colleagues (1998:189-190) share in their interviews with garment workers, “The production manager of the factory was a school friend of their father. He heard that the rickshaw puller had four daughters to bring up and suggested the idea of sending the eldest daughters, Runa and Selima, to work in Dhaka. Runa came first and lived with him and he got her a job as a helper in his factory.” But, as other women make clear, what appears as an opportunity for the family and community also carries specific obligations for young workers. As worker’s confirm, employers often use their obligation-embodied relation and authority to sexually harass them or to call on them for information about their peers, especially under the threat of union organizing or during an actual strike (Feldman 1984). In these circumstances, young and inexperienced women are vulnerable not only sexually, but also to demands for allegiance and loyalty by entrepreneurs who ask them to snitch on their peers and refrain from participation in struggles for better working conditions and rights. In short, policy shifts and new labor market relations developed over the last quarter century reveal that the incorporation of female labor in export production did not occur in an economic or social vacuum, but rather suggest that the conditions for expanding women’s employment were well-entrenched prior to the demand for “nimble fingered, docile women workers.”

### **Profiling Women’s Employment in Export Production**

Since the first garment factories opened in 1976, the export-manufacturing sector has grown dramatically: in the late 1970s there were a handful of firms operating in Dhaka and Chittagong. By 1984 the number of factories had increased to 177 and by 1992 there were more than 1100 (BGMEA). Today there are more than 3500 garment factories (Kabeer, and Mahmud 2004). While many began as joint ventures, often with capital and machinery from the Asian tigers (Hong Kong, Korea, Singapore, and Taiwan), Bangladeshi entrepreneurs now own most factories, and while many entrepreneurs are first generation industrialists, the development of the garment sector does not herald a process of independent industrialization. Instead, it is a sector deeply dependent on the import of raw materials - 97 percent of the fabric, thread, cotton, paper wrap, and buttons are imported from East Asia. Despite these dependencies, today, the sector now exports materials worth in excess of US10 billion a year<sup>16</sup> even if there remain few backward linkages to the indigenous textile sector and there has been insufficient attention to generating such linkages even after almost three decades of production.

Moreover, the Bangladesh export garment-manufacturing sector exports about \$500 million to a single U.S. buyer, Wal-Mart,<sup>17</sup> and wages has kept the sector competitive even under the current fiscal crisis. According to some experts, 200 new buying houses have sought out Bangladesh in the first five months of 2009 compared to 150 in the previous year, and IKEA, the international retailer of home textiles, has opened a Dhaka office expecting to increase sourcing from the country from €100 million to €300 million in the next few years.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> <http://bdgarments.wordpress.com/history/>; (<http://ambassadorseraj.blogspot.com/2009/09/government-rejects-bgmea-demand.html>)

<sup>17</sup> [http://www.fibre2fashion.com/news/garment-apparel-news/garment-company-news/bangladesh/newsdetails.aspx?news\\_id=76540](http://www.fibre2fashion.com/news/garment-apparel-news/garment-company-news/bangladesh/newsdetails.aspx?news_id=76540)

<sup>18</sup> [http://www.fibre2fashion.com/news/garment-apparel-news/garment-company-news/bangladesh/newsdetails.aspx?news\\_id=66409](http://www.fibre2fashion.com/news/garment-apparel-news/garment-company-news/bangladesh/newsdetails.aspx?news_id=66409)

For workers, garment manufacturing continues to provide the country's principle source of employment, offering work for more than three times the number of wage-earners in the country's second-largest sector, jute. More than 85 percent of export workers are young women between the ages of sixteen and twenty-five who number more than 2.0 million, increasing the female labor force to more than 25 million in 2009.<sup>19</sup> Women continue to work twelve to fourteen hour days, seven days a week, with just one or two days off a month. As earlier, there are mandatory twenty-four hour shifts when women are required to sleep in the factory, often behind locked doors, and go right back to work the next day. While some sources indicate that wages for sewers are 13 to 18 cents an hour, well below the legal Bangladesh minimum wage and less than half that necessary to meet their basic subsistence needs (NLC 2001), a recent, October 2009, strike demanding US\$0.35 per hour revealed that the current minimum wage in the sector is 1662 taka a month or US 11.5 cents per hour.<sup>20</sup>

The increase in women's employment is a response to trade liberalization and the belief that "it can facilitate labor-intensive, pro-poor growth capable of "including" hitherto "excluded" social groups" (Razavi and Vivian 2001:1). This claim has been critical in legitimating labor market reform but it has generated contradictory responses. Some argue that increasing women's labor force participation in export production reflects an expansion of their traditional activities but leaves the gender division of labor intact (Elson 1996). Others (Standing 1989), suggest that women are often preferred to men in the search for flexible labor under conditions of increasing global competition. This feminization of the labor force combines declining wages with increasingly repressive conditions of employment that favor as male unemployment continues to remain relatively stagnant. Others recognize that such employment enables some women to meet their survival needs and secure independence so as not to be a burden on their family (Kabeer 2000).<sup>21</sup> And, despite the horrific physical conditions of work in many export manufacturing firms, as exemplified in the 2005 Spectrum Factory building collapse which killed 64 people, injured over 70 and left hundreds jobless, followed by the 2006 fire which destroyed the four-story KTS Textile Industries in Chittagong again killing scores of mostly young and female workers, such employment is seen as crucial to social survival in an economy that offers few alternatives. For many women now engaged in garment manufacturing, the choice they make is often one between joblessness and poverty.<sup>22</sup> As Kibria (1995:289) shares from her interviews, "My father

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<sup>19</sup> Accurate numbers of workers in the sector are impossible to secure, hence the differences identified in this paper. But, this figure reveals a rapid turnover in the sector as first generation workers began more than 25 years ago. The 2009 figures come from [http://www.fibre2fashion.com/news/apparel-clothing-policy-news/newsdetails.aspx?news\\_id=78511](http://www.fibre2fashion.com/news/apparel-clothing-policy-news/newsdetails.aspx?news_id=78511)

<sup>20</sup> [http://www.fibre2fashion.com/news/apparel-clothing-policy-news/newsdetails.aspx?news\\_id=78511](http://www.fibre2fashion.com/news/apparel-clothing-policy-news/newsdetails.aspx?news_id=78511)

<sup>21</sup> To be sure, export production is the caricature arena of insecure, seasonal labor demand, contract workers, and poor factory conditions. A *New York Times* story reports that in less than 15 years, the industry has had 30 fires with 17 involving fatalities resulting from locked doors and frenzied stampedes (Bearak 2001). While there are exceptions to the squalid conditions of most factories offering models of progressive management, health clinics, day care centers, lighted lunch facilities, and good health practices, the majority are unhealthy and unsafe work environments (*The Independent* 2003).

<sup>22</sup> Much has been written about the labor conditions and employment relations in the sector – low wages, women kept in trainee positions for more than one year earning unlivable wages, forced requirements for

and mother can't feed me, my brothers can't feed me, my uncles can't feed me. So that is why I am working in garments, to stand on my own feet." Or, as another refrained, At first, my mother and uncle [chacha] said no, if you work in garments and live alone in Dhaka city you will lose your innocence; you will mix with men and all kinds of low people, and you will learn undesirable things from them. But then I said, how long can I eat your rice? Now there's not enough food for two meals a day, and I'm just another mouth to feed. They had no reply to what I said (Kibria 1995:303). And, as another worker shared, In my home in the village there are five of us [brothers and sisters] and my father couldn't support us. When I heard about garments work from some people in the village I asked my father about it and he said that if it was necessary I would eat just one meal a day but still I couldn't work in garments. That was how much he opposed it. But later I persuaded him to change his mind. I asked him to think about my future because if I worked in garments I would be self-sufficient and I could save some money for my married life (Kibria 1995:303).

What these comments reveal is a shift from family obligations for sustaining daily life to individual ones that corresponds and reproduces a development discourse that privileges independence and self-sufficiency. Also important to emphasize is that these sensibilities confirm a strong connection between poverty and women's employment that sets the context for an increasing openness among parents about their daughter's employment (Feldman 1993; Kibria 1995; 1998; Amin 1997; Kabeer 2000). But, is this employment sufficient to be considered a pro-poor strategy able to include hitherto excluded social groups? Is women's search for employment primarily a response to poverty? As I argue, the data on this is mixed. While for many, such work is indeed a response to absolute poverty, for others it is a source of mobility increasing the capacity of households to maintain rural middle class interests and goals. For couples with children, for example, their two incomes enable them to pay for school and for small luxuries. For others, there is the increased opportunity to contribute to the education or welfare of their siblings or family by sending remittances or gifts to them (Amin et al 1998).

For first generation workers, however, the signs of individual responsibility for one's future are already evident. To keep dowries low, it is best that families marry their daughters' as early as possible since younger brides demand smaller dowries. Some women view the securing of employment in garment manufacturing as one of the few means by which they can save for their own dowry and thereby gain some leverage in determining when and whom they marry (Kabeer 2000; [http://www.popcouncil.org/pdfs/ICRW\\_Trade-Liberalization-Marriage.pdf](http://www.popcouncil.org/pdfs/ICRW_Trade-Liberalization-Marriage.pdf)).

But, what was instantly apparent for first generation sector employees, especially those from landless households who sought work in response to poverty, their salaries were insufficient to provide for their own reproduction since most began and often remained "helpers" who earn less than Tk 250 (US\$6) per month.<sup>23</sup> Some women were

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overtime without pay, no holidays, no health and safety standards, and the frisking of women as they leave the office in search of stolen materials (Feldman 1993)

<sup>23</sup> Today helpers earn approximately Tk 625 (US\$15) and operators Tk 1307 (US\$30). Recent evidence also suggests that despite notable wage differentials by gender, the wage ratio of women's to men's manufacturing wages has improved. In 1990, women earned approximately 49 percent of male wages in the manufacturing sector; by 2000, women's wages had risen to 54 percent of men's wages (USAID 2005).

able to access financial support from their parents while others were able to limit their expenses by securing accommodation with relatives. Women from some landless households, rather than being below subsistence agricultural producers were from petty bourgeois families with diversified income sources and kin networks in Dhaka who were able to draw on families for assistance to meet their needs in Dhaka and who view women's employment as a means to improve their modern status (Feldman 1984). As Kibria (2002: 162) shares, "We own a store, and we can get by quite well with that. But after passing class 8, I decided to find a job in garments. . . My father would like to expand the store, and with my savings we can do that in the future."

Not surprising, then, are educated women workers who accept an initial position at low wages but who quickly move up the salary scale by transferring to another factory as they bargain their skills in ways that provides a vehicle for social and upward mobility. For some of these women their income is envisioned as a way to diversify family resources even as they sought a subsidy from their families in order to live in Dhaka (Feldman 1984). Their long-term expectation of self-sufficiency is revealed in their strategic use of the labor market: When I started work the factor offered me a monthly wage of Th250 [\$6]. Twenty days later I went to another factory where they offered me Tk. 800 [\$19]. Nine months later I went to a third factory where I got Tk.1,200 [\$28]. I stayed there for three or four years, but my wage increased only by Tk.100 [\$2}, and they did not always pay at the same time of the month. So I came to this factory, and I now make a total of Tk.1600 [\$37] in wages, transport expenses, and bonus (Amin 1998:192). This labor market strategy can be interpreted as acknowledging the wage labor relation as premised on competition and individuation, a relation that is manifest in how these and even poorer women recognize their increasing responsibility for their own subsistence; "I work now for my own survival" (Feldman 1984).

This strategy also unsettles initial interpretations of women's experience which tend to ignore the changes brought about by government and NGO programs in enabling new relations of negotiation between women, their families, and their communities. This suggests that *purdah*, when examined as a moral code, is more fluid and dynamic than most accounts address since women themselves redefine *purdah* as "in one's mind" rather than as a constraint on their physical mobility (McCarthy and Feldman 1983; 1984; Kabeer 1991). To be sure, prior to the 1980s economic reforms, Bangladeshi women were largely excluded from access to paid factory work. The changes offered by trade liberalization did open up opportunities for women's employment beyond that provided by income generating activities and other informal sector opportunities often supported by NGOs (the main alternative to factory work is domestic service). However, employment in the garment sector, by creating opportunities away from one's natal home and in the country's largest cities, has enabled women to better negotiate their position in society and challenge pressure to marry early, sometimes to much older men, and contest or recast norms in ways that enable them to assert their rights.

As increasing numbers of women came from poor households, it became clear that not only would they be forced to meet their daily subsistence, but they also would no longer be able to rely on their parents to make good marriages and provide for an adequate dowry. For some women, this reimagining of their future was experienced as

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However, this increase should be interpreted cautiously as overall wages remain low, are not monitored, and, in some cases, are below the minimum set by government.

“standing on their own feet,” and recognizing that “[s]ince I am taking care of my own expenses, I have no obligation to give money to my family” (Kibria 1995:289). Such sentiments help to reframe the meaning of family obligation,<sup>24</sup> whether it is the daughter sending back money to their natal home, or parents providing a dowry for their daughters. But these changes also enable women to meet men on their own and form love rather than arranged marriages. Some women, in fact, chose to work in order to avoid an arranged marriage: “I knew my father wanted to marry me off so I went to my cousin who was a garment worker in Dhaka and had come home for a holiday and told her I wanted to go with her to Dhaka” (Amin 1998:191). Such changes challenge traditional values – even as women and entrepreneurs mold them to meet their individual needs – as there is increasing flexibility as to what constitutes women’s physical mobility, marriageability, and measures of family honor. Thus, even in the early years of export sector employment, when threats to one’s reputation limited opportunities for a majority of rural women, there was a general consensus among them that the benefits of employment far outweighed the disadvantages and would thus be worth struggling for.

Despite the overall benefits that this view suggests – personal mobility, independent decision-making, and love-marriage – women workers continue to complain about their fear of city life, treatment on the shop-floor, low wages, and challenges to their health and safety. As one woman opined, “On the first day I lost my way coming home from work. My older sister found me standing by the road, crying, and brought me home.” Or, as another said, “I hated walking to work – the rickshaws, car, and crowds on the streets scared me, and I didn’t even know the way to the bazaar” (Amin 1998:191). What these comments reveal is the difficulty women face when they migrate, often without family, and generally unable to rent accommodation as a single person (Feldman 1984).<sup>25</sup> Yet, they also show how quickly women adjust to their new environment and begin to appreciate the sense of independence that accompanies the experience of participation: “First I was afraid, now I am brave. Earlier I was shy to speak. Now I don’t feel shy. When I first went to the factory, I cried inside myself and did not want to talk to anyone. Now I like to talk to my co-workers. I understand more things than I did before. I hear many things which I did not before” (Amin 1998).

Other benefits of employment are expressed in the way women compare their lives before migration and afterward: I have been working for three years and I like it. I don’t like it at home. In the factory, everyone is working and even if there is no conversation, the day passes quite well. At home there is nothing, no hard work, only cooking and cleaning so I don’t like it there. It is quiet and lonely at home. In the factory there are more people and we are all working together (Kabeer 2000:113). Another shared a

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<sup>24</sup> To be sure, some women continue to remit money home for the education of their siblings (Amin 1998) since many see the value of education as they recognize their own inability to move out of the garment sector. Others find that women do not send remittances home not because of lack of income but because of an “attitudinal context” where “taking care of [one]self” displaces contributing to the needs of one’s natal household (Kibria 1998: 19). I would agree that there are attitudinal changes in Bangladesh corresponding to new understandings of individualism, but these alone do not explain patterns of remittances in the country.

<sup>25</sup> Important to acknowledge is that in the early 1980s Dhaka had limited infrastructural capacity. Population was growing apace while housing, roads, transportation, water, and sewage facilities were unable to keep up with the demand. Population size increased from 1.47 million in 1970; 3.24 in 1980s; 6.62 million in 1990; and 12.31 million in 2000 and is expected to increase to 18.39 million by 2010 ([http://books.mongabay.com/population\\_estimates/full/Dhaka-Bangladesh.html](http://books.mongabay.com/population_estimates/full/Dhaka-Bangladesh.html)).

similar attitude: “We can earn much more money now because these factories have opened. When we sewed from home, we could not earn enough to survive. Sometimes I did not even get 100 takas in a week, sometimes it was 150/- or 250. This was not a proper job, now I have a *chakri*” (Kabeer 2000:104). *Chakri* refers to formal, salaried work and a mark of what it means to be modern. This sentiment is also revealed in how women and their family’s connect garment work with the nationalist project: I was opposed to her working because when a women (sic) earns, it doesn’t look good. People say that she is freeing herself. People think this is bad. I thought so too. Where did she go, what did she do? I forbade her to work, but she went anyway. I used to get angry, but she went anyway. Now I don’t feel so bad about it. What harm can come of it if we behave decently? The country prospers; we get by as well (Kabeer 2000:114). But labor conditions and labor relations in the factory remain mixed, and most women report being cheated of their overtime and locked into the factory to complete orders. As one worker made clear, “They set a target of 120 pieces for you for the day, but it is not possible to do more than 80 pieces, so they make you work two or three hours of overtime. But then when you go to get your time card signed, it show ‘worked till 4:30’” (Amin 1998). Such conditions continue to plague the sector, as have charges against the use of child labor.<sup>26</sup>

Moreover, given the rapidity with which the sector grew, both Dhaka and Chittagong were cities without the physical infrastructure to enable women to find housing, travel easily to and from work, or protect them from street violence. A major crisis in transportation and housing was revealed in my first discussions with workers in 1984, “we have no place to live... no one will rent to us.” Others were more descriptive about the difficulty of securing a place to live describing how landlords offer single rooms to groups of 10 or more women at a monthly rate of Tk 200 to Tk 250 each. These accommodations usually have a single bathroom which women are forced to share with upwards of 30 others and have restricted use of water for washing, bathing, and even drinking (NLC 2000). Fifteen years later, the lack of available housing is still evident: “Landlords don’t want to rent to us” (Amin 1998:194).

In the early 1980, NGOs were considering the possibility of providing a hostel for those who migrated without kin in the city and some time later, in response to the conditions and cost of living in a mess or group space, the BGMEA sought donor support to assist them in housing projects. The latter may indeed benefit some workers but if the housing is owned by the BGMEA it may subsidize them rather than ensure that women have reasonable and adequate housing. For the majority of women who are forced to live in urban slum communities, transportation and personal safety remain key concerns.

One might also find sadly surprising the increase in the number of reports of violence against women who are attacked as they walk home from work (Independent 1998; 2001). To be sure, such women are unlikely to be accosted so that they can be robbed, since their status as garment workers is usually visible in their apparel and mode of travel. Instead, one can surmise that they are accosted to rebuke them, as if the right to do so is justified by their characterization as loose women or *juki*; the name of the machine which they operate. Catcalls and other derogatory epithets highlight the commodification of women and the denigration of their contribution to national progress

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<sup>26</sup> See Kabeer (2000) who draws on Bissell and Sobhan (1996) and Bharracharya (1995) for what they reveal about the interests served by the Harkin Bill, its base its basis in American protectionism, an important argument but one that is distinct from the ethical claims against the use of child labor.



and their families, factors which contextualize their physical insecurity and their apprehension to report such incidents for fear of shame as well as blame. But, in an environment that is generally framed by the contradictions posed by the intersection of religious conservatism as anti-Western, and garment factories and NGOs as modern and progressive, garment workers face multiple challenges for which government intervention has been limited. Such experiences highlight the contingent character of meaning-making and force us to question the assumption that urban space can better protect workers from the judgments and opinions of others than rural communities (Kabeer 2000: 146). It is perhaps more appropriate to argue that the malleability of norms and customs of appropriate female behavior are always contested and as such are historical rather than spatial phenomenon. Framed thusly, we are better able to understand how rural women negotiate the boundaries of permissible behavior and how such negotiation may continue to be challenged by changing religious identifications and the increased legitimacy of religious parties. In short, and what is well confirmed in the literature, what this historical framing suggests is that garment production can be both empowering and marginalizing as women may enjoy greater autonomy, but they also face limits on their rights and worker protections as well as violence and harassment in the workplace and the community.

### **The Contingencies of Meaning-Making and Structural Reform**

Thus far I have argued that women's wage employment, while dramatically increasing with the development of export production in the early 1980s, was part of a long process of capitalization that had its roots in the 1950s with specific programs for women. I also argued that this specificity was built on the demand for women's labor where the justifications for their particular place in the social fabric were instantiated in the normative consensus about women's modesty and seclusion. With the demand for women's labor in subsistence production, for example, *purdah* operated to ensure their participation in agricultural production by limiting their physical mobility in order to control the fruits of their labor and sustain subsistence as an economic formation. Patriarchal domination was direct and supported by a normative consensus about gender appropriate behavior and deference to male authority.

As I (McCarthy and Feldman 1983) have argued elsewhere, shifts to new farming systems and new dependencies on wage work contributed to renegotiating the substance of normativity in new interpretations of *purdah*. As Kabeer (1991:148-150) also shares in conversation with workers, "the Koran would not want people to starve rather than work outside." Poverty, in this example, contributed to reinterpreting *purdah* from external control and physical seclusion to individual responsibility and personal morality." Or, as another opines, "*purdah* is in one's mind" and "I carry *purdah* with me" by being modest and covering my head. This internal expression of *purdah*, "the best *purdah* is the *burkha* within oneself, the *burkha* of the mind," reveals how women as well as communities legitimate new expressions of patriarchal control. In other words, gender inequality is rearticulated but not necessarily undermined, even as its flexibility opens opportunities for challenge. In Kibria's (1995:299) discussion of income control, this is revealed explicitly: "I stopped keeping money for myself; every time I get paid I come home and give all the money to my husband. ...After all, women have only one dream in life, to remain with their husband forever."

This articulation of the traditional gender contract is a common way that women negotiate change while building on or maintaining social and economic security. For others, however, the economic vulnerability they experience in their natal or conjugal household leads them to withhold part of their wages from their parents or husbands so as to ensure their individual security. For these women, work in export manufacturing contributes to securing their autonomy and financial independence, extending their marriage options, and rewriting the gender contract in ways that increase their economic control. In sum, the institutionalization of policy reforms and new labor market relations in Bangladesh developed over the half-century as a particular rather than a generalized phenomenon. Following Elson and Pearson's (1981) observations, it is clear that there has been an intensification of existing forms of subordination as witnessed by the increasing violence against women, particularly export workers, and changes in the gender contract altering the responsibilities as well as the capacities of families to provide for their daughter's daily life, marriage, and dowry. Finally, there has been a rearticulation composition of gender subordination exhibited in the feminization of the labor market and patriarchal relations on the factory floor. Yet, as Pearson (1998) notes in a more recent argument, early studies that focused on these attributes of women's increasing participation in industrial development, "failed to deconstruct the model of man as the standard worker and women's experience as other." In this study, I have taken this point of departure seriously and sought to elaborate the conditions of reform and the specific ways in which the recruitment and management of women in export manufacturing was enabled by the extant conditions of their social worlds to show how the incorporation of female labor did not occur in an economic or social vacuum but built on, and sought justification in, the normative imaginings and structural constraints faced by rural and increasingly urban women workers and the communities of which they are a part.

To be sure, the specific practices of recruitment and mobility within and across firms have differed across generations, class, educational background, and family form. But, importantly, the conditions for expanding women's employment included changing women's sense of self and diversifying women's skills set before the demand for "nimble fingered, docile women workers," even if they did not create what might be referred to as a reserve army of labor. Such a labor pool had yet to be created. However, one can argue that NGOs and semi-autonomous government programs have subsidized the export sector through their training and literacy programs, and by increasing opportunities for women to engage with other women, and men, in ways that prepared and disciplined them for factory work. As members of credit groups that depended on each woman's repayment to secure another loan for all groups members, women also learned the discipline required to organize budgets, develop and implement production strategies, and fit the demands of their new work activities into their ongoing family obligations. Moreover, women's increasing access to markets and public resources offered new opportunities for realizing their personal goals and interests. In these ways, gender relations and their legitimation are neither fixed nor homogeneous, nor do they simply respond to a restructuring of the political economy. Rather gender relations are negotiated through engagements with regimes of moral regulation to constitute the possible ways that export production and labor markets are *made*. These negotiations and contestations not only provide a source of labor but also the seeds for collective action and for imagining a new gender contract.

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