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## **Globalization, Women Factory Workers of Bangladesh and their Autonomy**

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# **Globalization, Women Factory Workers of Bangladesh and their Autonomy**

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## **Abstract**

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Feminist literature on globalization has examined the forces that motivate women to stay in factory jobs despite the horrendous pay. Bangladesh is currently the second largest readymade garment manufacturer after China. How does factory work empower women? This question became a central issue in current feminist theorizing, although this question is often absent from the discussion of global factory workers of Bangladesh. This paper expands the body of feminist knowledge by using in-depth interview data of women workers of a Bangladeshi factory. I highlight how women's income provides them relative autonomy from their family and community and empowers them.

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**Keywords:** feminism, gender, globalization, autonomy, factory work

# Globalización, Trabajadoras de Fábricas en Bangladesh y su Autonomía

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## Resumen

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La literatura feminista sobre la globalización ha examinado las fuerzas que motivan a las mujeres a permanecer en puestos de trabajo a pesar de los pésimos sueldos. Bangladesh es actualmente el segundo mayor fabricante de prendas de vestir confeccionadas después de China. ¿Cómo el trabajo en la fábrica empodera a las mujeres? Esa cuestión se ha convertido en un tema central en la teoría feminista actual, aunque esta cuestión está a menudo ausente en la discusión de los trabajadores de las fábricas en Bangladesh. Este documento amplía el cuerpo de conocimiento feminista utilizando datos de entrevistas en profundidad de mujeres trabajadoras de una fábrica de Bangladesh. Este artículo destaca cómo los ingresos de las mujeres les proporcionan autonomía relativa de su familia y comunidad y les da poder.

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**Palabras clave:** feminismo, género, globalización, autonomía, trabajo en la fábrica

**B**angladesh has dealt with major industrial disasters over the past few decades. In April 2005, seventy workers were killed when the Spectrum ready-made garment (RMG) factory collapsed ([World Socialist Website, 2006](#)). In November 2012, a fire at the Tazreen Factory killed 112 workers and injured several others. In 2013, 1,135 people were killed when a building collapsed ([The Guardian, 2013](#)). Most of the victims were women who were producing garments for global retailers, such as Wal-Mart and Disney. These companies hire contractors who order factories in Bangladesh to produce clothing made to their specifications. The retailers demand that these overseas factories produce goods at minimal cost. To fulfill these demands, the factories hire workers who work in dangerous conditions. Of these workers, 80% are women. The average monthly wage of a typical worker is less than 25 Euro – less than half the minimum wage in Bangladesh ([The Guardian, 2013](#)). According to a BBC report (2013), 60% of the buildings housing RMG factories are unsafe. Why do the RMG workers risk their lives to work for less than half of the minimum wage of Bangladesh? In this paper, I analyze the feminization of the transnational workforce and its positive impacts on the lives of women factory workers in Bangladesh. The next section addresses the existing literature on the effects of globalization on the lives of women who are left out of the hegemonic power structure of the neo-liberal state.

### **Literature Review**

Neo-liberal scholars have conceptualized globalization as “an inevitable leap into friction-free flows of commodities, capital, corporations, communication, and consumers all over the world... [that this would erode] fixed in-state places into fluid un-stated places now preoccupies the neoliberal managers of globalizing enterprises” ([Luke and Tuathail, 1998, p. 76](#)). These scholars have identified the ways in which an unfettered flow of capital and commodities across national borders has benefitted developing and developed countries ([Toffler and Toffler, 1995](#)).

Feminist scholars are critical of this neoliberal view of globalization. Feminist responses vary greatly because of the epistemological and methodological differences among various feminist approaches. Although

feminists disagree about many aspects of globalization, most argue that neo-liberal researchers focus only on the formal sector of the economy and the public sphere of economic and political processes. They argue that neo-liberals overemphasize the crucial role of multi-national corporations (MNCs), markets, and international trade agencies. This is essentially a masculinist view of corporate globalization (Folbre, 2001; Sparke, 2001), which has led to the oppression of women throughout the world (Enloe, 2007). Feminists underscore the informal spheres of economics that operate in households and communities in which women are the primary agents of social reproduction that contributes to the formal processes of globalization (Marchand and Runyan, 2000). They explain the role of household production, reproductive labor, culture, decision making power differentials between men and women within households, and women's access to resources within the family in a globalized world.

A great body of feminist literature addresses the negative impacts of the imposition of Structural Adjustment Programs (SAP) on women (Cagatay, Elson and Grown, 1995). Van Staveren, Elson, Grown, and Cagatay (2007) demonstrate how the global capitalist system and MNCs have increased gender inequality by establishing the exploitation of national governments, workers and civil society. The literature has focused on the intense pressure on women, households, and the community in social reproduction when neo-liberal states withdraw financing for programs that were once subsidized by the state through various social services, such as healthcare, insurance, and housing (Folbre, 2001). The lack of social services has intensified women's roles in production, reproduction and the management of the community (Beneria and Feldman, 1992; Marchand and Runyan, 2000).

Relatively less attention has been paid to the ways in which global factory work has had positive effects on the women workers of global factory of developing nations, such as Bangladesh. Although Bangladesh is currently the second largest RMG manufacturer after China (McKinsey, 2011), very little research has been done on the positive effects of factory work on women. Approximately 60% of RMGs imported by America and the European Union are made in Bangladesh (McKinsey, 2011).

Research that addresses the positive effects of trade liberalization and foreign investment, two popular measures of economic globalization

(Braunstein, 2008), on women in developing nations in general measures these effects in terms of the resulting increase in women's employment (Rahman, 2014; Dominguez-Villalobos and Brown-Grossman, 2010; Mukhopadhyay, 2015). However, this research indicates that increased women's employment aggravates the gender wage gap. Researchers also argue that an increase in women's employment does not indicate empowerment if employment fails to eradicate the exploitation of women workers (Morrisson and Jutting, 2005).

Some researchers have noted that women's employment in global factories gives them a political voice (Mittelman, 2000; Kabeer and Mahmud, 2004). Collectively addressing their daily struggles helps these women challenge the oppression of globalization (Lind, 2000). Researchers underscore the ways in which globalization has given women an opportunity to engage in community management (Marchand and Runyan, 2000). Mohanty (2003), Spivak (1998), and Das (2010) identified the complex nature of the role of agency and power in the lives of women in developing societies. According to post-colonial feminists, who emphasize decolonization theory and discourses (Mohanty, 2003) and representation and setting or locale (Rajan and Park, 2005), women's agency in post-colonial societies always is not reflected in their dramatic acts of resistance. Post-colonial feminists have highlighted the ordinary forms of daily tactics and strategies women employ to overcome the struggles (Das, 2010). They argue that in order to theorize how women global factory workers of post-colonial societies exercise power, we need to go beyond Eurocentric view that perceives these workers as Third-world, silent and passive victims of global capital. Instead, they argue, we need to see how they develop practices within them to exercise their agency as they deal with their struggles in specific cultural context (Marchand, 2009). In this paper, I will demonstrate that many women factory workers are not forced to work against their will. Even for these poorest of the poor women, factory-work is a choice, although it is a choice made within severe constraints. Interview data reflect aspirations of these workers for a stable life for themselves and a better future for their children, which challenge the dominant portrayal of these workers as victims.

A body of research exists addressing the gender consequences of global factory work in Bangladesh. According to Kabeer (2000), there was a dramatic change in women's paid employment with the rise of RMG factories because women were perceived as docile, low-cost labor that would allow the industry to compete in the global market. Kabeer (2000) demonstrates that Bangladeshi women workers in the textile industry have challenged the norm of seclusion at home as they participate in a public life of work. She suggests that agency and oppression are conterminous and not mutually exclusive. Everyone exercises agency within individual and structural constraints. Sen (1990) indicates that perceptions of individuals' choices are socially shaped when considering what is possible for those individuals. More research is needed to explore how women's involvement in factory work has contributed to their agency within individual and structural constraints. It is impossible to deny the oppressive nature of globalization or the fact that poor women work in factories due to their need for economic survival. In this paper I reveal facts that are reliably counterintuitive to the assumption that we have taken for granted: women work in the factory only out of a need for economic survival. I argue that women work in factories for a variety of reasons. I argue that globalization does not always empower women across social and historical contexts. I also argue that globalization does not always hurt women across nations. The present research expands the previous literature that has focused on the autonomy of women workers resulting from global factory work. It demonstrates that work in the RMG industry in Bangladesh improves the level of autonomy of many women workers. Their attempts to address their daily struggles at work and home give them authority in their homes. This authority is mediated by their social context. This research examines specific themes that have emerged from interviews with women factory workers in Bangladesh at FB Fashion and thereby offers nuance regarding the broader question of the autonomy of women factory workers.

Women's autonomy is measured using indirect proxies and direct measures (Agarwala and Lynch, 2006). Researchers pointed out that women's autonomy is a multidimensional concept (Dyson and Moore, 1983). According to Agarwala and Lynch (2006) different demographic and socioeconomic factors shape different dimensions of women's autonomy. They pointed out that autonomy is context specific. For example, women's

employment may be correlated to their autonomy in one situation, such as food preparation, while it may be uncorrelated to a different situation, such as women's decision to have a desired family size. My measure of women's autonomy is drawn from Jejeebhoy and Sathar (2001, p. 688) and entails "the control women have over their lives – the extent to which they have an equal voice with their husbands in matters affecting themselves and their families, control over material and other resources, access to knowledge and information, the authority to make decisions, freedom from constraints on physical mobility, and the ability to forge equitable power relationships within families".

The export-oriented garment industry of Bangladesh is the country's most important industry in terms of employment. Approximately 60% of RMGs imported by America and the European Union are made in Bangladesh (McKinsey, 2011). Garments account for 80% of Bangladesh's manufacturing exports (World Bank, 2012). The industry accounts for 13% of the country's GDP, a dramatic increase from 3% in 1991. It has created more than 4 million jobs. The value of its exports was little over 4.0 billion USD in 1999. At that time, the industry was worth approximately 2.0 billion USD based on its economic activities (Bhattacharya and Rahman, 1999). In 2010, exports from the RMG industry were worth 48 billion USD (McKinsey, 2011).

### **Methods**

Interview data were collected in Bangladesh in the summer of 2014 and 2016 at FB Fashion, a factory located in Dhaka. Approximately 80% of all RMG industries are located in Dhaka (Hossain, Mathbor, and Semenza, 2013). FB Fashion is representative of the nation's privately owned, small, low-quality factories. Referring to the size of RMG factories in Bangladesh, Yunus and Yamagata (2012, p. 20) noted "...most of the firms in Bangladesh are of small scale..." Like the majority of RMG firms in Bangladesh that subcontract with other smaller firms (Kabeer and Mahmud, 2004), FB Fashion subcontracts garment production on a tight margin to other garment factories. It has no direct connection to foreign buyers. It has 600 workers, 82% of whom are women. Aside from quality-control staff and supervisors, workers have 0-5 years of schooling. Most of the quality control



staff has 12 years of schooling, and tailors have 0-5 years of schooling. All maintenance workers are men. Ninety percent of the operators are women. All helpers are women. All but four supervisors are men. All but one member of the quality-control staff are men. The factory has been operational since 2006 and requires workers to produce at least 200 finished pieces of garments per hour. Labor unions are legal, but organizers are not allowed to talk to the workers in the factory. Base pay is 55 USD per month for helpers and 65 USD for operators. However, this pay depends on whether the workers fulfill their quota of 200 pieces of garments per hour. Overtime pay is 30 US cents per hour. There is no medical insurance or paid sick leave for workers.

I received a letter from the management of FB Fashion explaining that they are aware of the goals of this research and do not have any objections to their workers participating in it.

### **Sample**

I used a qualitative research design to address the research questions of this study. I posted recruitment flyers inside and outside the factory. I interviewed 100 women workers who were recruited by using snowballing method. Initially, I contacted ten workers. I used to work with these ten women in a different factory in the past. I maintain close contact with them. I explained to them the goal of this research and asked about their willingness to recruit workers who would be willing to participate in it. They were screened face-to-face to determine their eligibility. Respondents were required to be 18 years old or older, worked in a garment factory for at least one year, and were able to read and sign the informed consent. I obtained information about the respondents' address and cell phone number. I interviewed respondents in tea stalls and workers' clubs. All respondents provided written informed consent and a photocopy of their employee identification-cards.

The respondents ranged in age from 18 to 40 years. They had worked in various garment factories for an average of 6 years. Seventy-five respondents were helpers. The mean age of the helpers was 20.32 years. Twenty-five respondents were sewing machine operators (Operators). The mean age of the operators was 26 years. Thirty helpers were not married.

Four helpers were divorced. All but one operator was married. All married operators and helpers had at least one child. The name of the factory used in this paper is a pseudonym. Respondents were compensated with 20.00 US dollars for their time and for travel-related costs.

When interviewing the respondents, I followed principles of feminist methodology that emphasize the closeness of the researcher to the research subjects (Fonow and Cook, 1992). As a former garment factory worker and a former coworker of a few respondents, I was able to achieve closeness with the respondents. The answers to the research questions are long and descriptive. These responses are then analyzed in the language of the respondent and by using analytical codes.

The respondents were asked the following questions: Why did they decide to work in the factory? What are the major life events that have occurred before and after working at the factory? How has their work affected their family life and vice versa? I purposefully asked open-ended questions to elicit explanations of why the workers decided to work in the factory. These questions were followed by a request to talk about their life stories more generally, their challenges and the sense of fulfillment they experienced in the past and present. Their responses included various stories and examples.

## **Data Analysis**

All interviews were conducted in Bengali, translated and transcribed by me. First, I read all of the transcribed data without coding to achieve an in-depth knowledge of the data. Then, using NVivo Version 10 software, I analyzed the transcribed data using thematic analysis techniques (Vaismoradi, Turenen, and Bondas, 2013). I searched for leads, insights, and themes in the data and attempted to bring some order to the data themselves. More precisely, I focused my attention on key phrases and thick descriptions of the phenomenon of interest in analyzing the interview transcripts. Each key phrase and thick description was then labeled using codes. I used these codes to identify the significant broader patterns of meanings that respondents attached to their responses. I used these codes into themes, categories and subcategories. Each respondent, irrespective of their different life experiences, told a consistent story about how their factory work has

changed their lives. Four major themes emerged upon analysis of the data: (1) resistance to domestic violence (2) resistance to sexual exploitation of women and girls, (3) autonomy in family decisions, (4) autonomy to be members of labor union and political empowerment.

## **Results**

### **Resistance to Domestic Violence**

Bangladesh ranks fourth among the world's countries in marital violence and sixty-five percent Bangladeshi men think that physical violence against a wife is justifiable ([United Nations Population Fund, 2011](#)). In 2015, 80 percent married women were victims of intimate partner violence, and 50 percent of married women were victims of physical violence by their husbands ([The Daily Janakantha, 2016](#)).

All married respondents reported that they experienced physical violence by their husbands. While the majority of the respondents decided to stay in an abusive family, others decided to leave the abusive relationship. Two major themes emerged upon analysis of the data on domestic violence as it pertained to factory work: (1) self-assertion while staying in an abusive home and (2) self-assertion by leaving an abusive home.

### **Self-assertion while Staying in an Abusive Home**

The majority of abused married respondents decided not to leave their abusive family. The strong stigma attached to divorce, the belief that their husband gaining custody of their children, and the belief that husband may hurt them and their children as a punishment for divorce were all reported as primary reasons for staying in an abusive family.

Many respondents mentioned that after they started to work at garment factories, activists of women's groups frequently visited them in clubs. Activists informed them that domestic violence is a crime. The work of these groups raised awareness of domestic violence as a crime and increased workers' decision-making capabilities. Respondents reported similar variations on the story below:

My husband used to hit me regularly. Two years ago, I started to work at FB Fashion. My husband controls my income. He does not hit me now although he always says that he will hit me. I tell him that if I am badly injured, I will have to miss work. He knows that frequent absences at work will mean a lay-off, which means starvation. It is not that I never thought about getting a divorce. He will kill the children if I leave him. So, divorce is not an option.

Gender studies research reveals that masculinity is frequently achieved, not by overwhelming force, but by evoking a fear being dominated and controlled (Kimmel, 2006). The above case suggests that the respondent's husband's threat of hitting her is a way to establish his control on the respondent. However, it also suggests that the victim's decision to stay in an abusive home is motivated by her deep fear for the well-being of her and her children. As Abrams (1997) has found in her research, the above case demonstrates the respondent's resistant self-assertion by ensuring the protection of her children even in a dangerous situation.

Respondents shared their understanding of various types of strategies they used to stop their battery while staying in an abusive relationship. The following narrative represents the experiences of many respondents:

My husband used to hit me for giving birth to daughters. He brought a co-wife. Then, I started to work in a garment factory. I live in a separate house with my daughters. For the first time in my life, I challenged my husband by renting a house. I do not want a divorce. He is my husband. A husband has authority over his wife and his children. I give him some money because he is my husband.

Jejeebhoi and Sathar (2001) suggest that women's autonomy in India and Pakistan is reflected in their ability to forge equitable power relationships with their husband within the family. However, the women factory workers in this study demonstrate how economic freedom has provided them the autonomy to make decisions about matters affecting these women and their children although these women failed to forge equitable power relationships with their husband. The above cases suggest that the

poor women develop a strategy to stop physical abuse that is less challenging, less politically charged, less dramatic, and less collective, but still effective. All married respondents mentioned that they regularly used these types of subtle and subversive forms of resistance, a strategy that is not often recognized by scholars. Although individual subversive acts may not be the same as collective forms of resistance, this is a common type of resistance by structurally powerless people. As Nikoi (1998) found in her research in Ghana, the current research suggests that women's employment in paid labor force improves their confidence in their abilities and feeling of self-worth.

### **Self-assertion by Leaving an Abusive Home**

A few respondents decided to leave violent families. Their primary reasons for leaving were severe physical abuse by their husband; the help of women's organizations who provided them with shelter; and most importantly, their entry into the paid labor force, which improved their economic and psychological well-being and increased their autonomy. The following narratives represent the stories of many respondents who decided to leave an abusive family:

Two years ago, I had a miscarriage. My husband started to hit me after the miscarriage. After my husband strangled me in front of my neighbors, the neighbors contacted the police, who sent me to a women's shelter. I realized that my husband wanted to kill me. The staff of the shelter helped me to get a factory job and file for divorce.

One more respondent stated:

When I was seven months pregnant, I was hospitalized because I had a miscarriage due to my husband's violent abuse. From the hospital, I fled to the home of my friend who was working in a factory. She contacted a women's organization, which helped me to file for divorce. My friend helped me to get a helper position at FB factory.

According to Kabeer (2001), empowerment of poor women is related to their ability to make meaningful choices. She suggests that the precondition of poor women's ability to make strategic choices is their access to resources. The present research suggests that the economic independence of many women factory workers affected their empowerment. Their empowerment is mediated by the social context in which they live and work. A patriarchal society that restricts women's rights does not simply lead women to give up their hopes. Instead, they have been able to take action against injustice.

### **Resistance to Sexual Exploitation**

Many respondents mentioned the ways in which their factory work helped them to challenge the existing sexual exploitation of themselves and their daughters by their family and relatives. The two major themes that emerged upon analysis of the data on resistance to the sexual exploitation of women and girls as it related to factory work are (1) resistance to trafficking in women and (2) resistance to child marriages.

### **Resistance to Trafficking in Women**

Trafficking in women is a major crime in Bangladesh. According to Bangladesh Country Report (2010), 10,000 to 20,000 girls are trafficked out of Bangladesh through India every year.

According to Kabeer (2010), women's control over their income is one of the major indicators of their empowerment. According to the women, their employment opportunity empowered them and lowered the vulnerability of women to trafficking at the community level. Many respondents mentioned that young girls in dire poverty constituted a group at high risk of being victims of sexual exploitation traffickers. Respondents mentioned that they themselves or their daughters could have been sold to traffickers by their parents when they had no right to speak up in opposition. The economic freedom that resulted from factory work empowered them and helped them assert their authority to make decisions to defend themselves. One respondent stated:

I overheard my husband asking a woman, known in the village as a trafficker, for 10,000 taka [120 USD] for selling my ten-year-old daughter. I told my husband to marry my daughter off instead of selling her to a trafficker. An argument ensued. He slit my wrist with a kitchen knife. The next night, I ran away from home with my daughter and came to Dhaka to stay with my sister. With my sister's help, I started to work at FB Fashion. I do not want a divorce. Divorced women are looked down. I am considering other options I may have. My husband complained that I tarnished family honor by leaving his home.

Gender research reveals that uneven gender revolution (England, 2010) in America led to sweeping changes in the gender system, such as entry of women in paid employment. But it failed to cause simultaneous cultural and institutional changes, such as intimate heterosexual marital relationships in the home. The above narrative corroborates England's (2010) assertion. It suggests that although women of Bangladesh have gained autonomy as a result of their entry in paid work, their decision to exercise that autonomy is shaped by the hegemonic norms of Bangladesh. Although women's access to paid work has destabilized gender relationships in paid work, traditional gender ideologies remained remarkably resilient. Although women's paid work provided them the opportunity to actively challenge the cultural expectations of maintaining family honor and conventional gender norms, it also has caused conflicts between, in Hamilton and Armstrong's (2009) words, a commitment to self-development and intimate relationship.

### **Resistance to Child Marriage**

Interview data indicate that employment opportunities have led to a decline in the number of child marriages. According to a survey, twenty nine percent of girls in Bangladesh are married before the age of sixteen and sixty-five percent are married before the age of eighteen (UNICEF, 2014). The legal age of marriage for women is eighteen, but this law is not enforced.

The majority of unmarried respondents mentioned that their factory work prevented their parents from forcing them to marry at an early age

because they were the only earning member providing support for their families. Their income has helped their families to send their siblings to schools and buy food. Economic incentives provided by the factory work to combat poverty can explain the reason behind parental decisions against child marriage. Many respondents mentioned that they would prefer that their daughters complete school before they are married off. As Kabeer (2010) has found, critical material resources enhanced respondents of this study's ability to exercise their choices and enhanced their socio-economic status at the household level. The women mentioned that they are sending their daughters to schools instead of seeking husbands for their underage daughters. The following narrative represents the experiences of a number of respondents:

I had six daughters when my husband died ten years ago. All my children were young. I could not feed them. My four daughters were married off so they could eat in their husband's home. Four years ago, I started to work at FB Fashion. All my children go to school now. I have saved money to pay their school fee. I want my children to finish their school before they are married. Their education will help them to have a better life than mine.

A number of respondents said that they would like to choose their own mate, someone who would not be abusive. Expanding women's employment opportunities and their financial resources have significant impacts on women who actively negotiate the existing norms related to marriage in their favor.

In summary, in a society where arranged marriage is the norm and in which a daughter is perceived to be of little value to her family, many woman workers strive to achieve something that is more meaningful to them by supporting the end of trafficking in women, by stopping child marriage, and by negotiating the existing norms related to marriage in their favor. It demonstrates their ability to subvert stereotypical social norms by using ordinary and extra-ordinary forms of resistance.



### **Autonomy in Family Decisions**

According to Kabeer (2010), the inability of a woman to meet her basic needs often subverts her ability to exercise critical life choices and disempowers her. The present research demonstrates that women's factory work transformed them from traditional housewives into economic actors who are visible in public spaces once dominated by men. Control on their critical material resources enhanced their empowerment within the family. It enables them to exercise critical life choices. Two major themes emerged upon the analysis of data regarding the ways in which factory work caused a sense of autonomy among respondents: (1) children's educational attainment, and (2) Enhanced socio-economic status within the family.

### **Children's Educational Attainment**

All respondents with young children mentioned that they hoped that their children's lives would be better than their own lives. To fulfill that hope, they believed that their children had to continue to go to school, which was only possible if they continued to work and could pay for education. They mentioned that they used to struggle just to stay alive. With the newfound empowerment that came with their work, they are reclaiming their lives. The following narrative reflects variations of similar stories I heard a dozen times from respondents:

I used to live in a village. I had six daughters. Four of them died when they were very young. My husband was the sole provider of the family and I could not tell him to get medicine for my daughters when they were ill. After I started to work in FB Fashion three years ago, I became the primary provider of the family. My husband does not have a regular income. My husband controls my income. He supports my decision to send our daughters to school. I am happy that I am the primary provider of my family and my husband agrees to send my daughters to school.

As in the above case, others also mentioned that factory work helped them to invest in their daughters' education. They hoped that their

daughters' education would lead to higher income than their own. They reported that their relatives thought that no man would want to marry girls after puberty. The majority of respondents mentioned that although they were worried about all the problems associated with sending their daughters to school, they also believed that education provided economic solvency. With the independent decision-making ability brought about by expanding employment opportunities, these respondents are able to influence their relative's decisions about the schooling of their daughters.

Women's participation in decision making concerning their sexual relation is one of the major indicators of interpersonal and relational empowerment (Malhotra et al., 2002). A few respondents stated that they experienced hostility from the men of the community who opposed women's work. These men perceived women factory workers to be sexually available to men outside marriage. Many respondents challenged men who saw them as sexually available. According to a respondent:

My husband lost his job as a farm laborer. My children were in constant hunger. So, we started to work at FB Fashion. My neighbor was very critical of my job. One evening when he visited us, I confronted him with a kitchen knife. I was covered with a veil and asked him if I looked like I was sexually available to him. I asked him to leave us alone or I was going to kill him. My husband hit me for saying that. It hurt my feelings. But I told him that no one fed our children when he lost his job.

### **Enhanced Socio-economic Status within the Family**

According to Malhotra et al (2002), an access to credit, savings, control over their income and contribution to family support are critical resources for economic empowerment of women. The present research suggests that factory work of women, their income, and savings are critical resources for the empowerment of poor women of Bangladesh. As Kabeer (2010) found in her research, respondents of this research pointed out that their financial support to their extended family enhanced their socio-economic status within the family. Respondents also pointed out that they developed friendship networks at work, which helped them to become members of cooperatives.

Cooperatives help them to save money and pool their resources. Membership fees of cooperative are twenty-five US cents a month. They save money in their account whenever they want. Six months after they begin their membership in the cooperative, they are eligible to obtain a loan with minimum interest rate, as opposed to external micro-credit loans provided by various organizations that have much higher interest rates.

Many respondents said that they use this loan to help their extended families in villages who invest it as a start-up fund for productive investment. Their ability to help their family has improved their social standing within the family that once perceived them as a burden. For example, one respondent mentioned that her sister bought a sewing machine with the money the respondent had sent to her. Her sister now earns her college tuition with the money she makes by sewing clothes for her neighbors. Her family is grateful to her for helping her sister. This finding confirms Kabeer's (2010) assumption that women's incomes enhance their socio-economic status at the household level.

To summarize, with their newfound autonomy through their work and mediated by social context, these workers are reclaiming their lives. The factory work of women increased the overall purchasing power of their households, improved their children's educational attainment, increased their autonomy in family decisions at home, enhanced their socio-economic status within the family and critically undermined hegemonic gender relations in Bangladesh.

### **Autonomy to be Members of Labor Unions and Political Empowerment**

According to Malhotra et al. (2002), women's ability to participate in collective action and knowledge of political and legal system are the major indicators of women's political empowerment. Many respondents in this research mentioned the ways in which factory work helped them to form social connections and empowered them. One major theme emerged upon analysis of the data addressing how social connection increased their autonomy to be members of workers' unions.

Factory work is not just a technique of survival. Greater employment opportunities and the physical proximity of workers helped the respondents form friendship networks. Many respondents mentioned that

they gather in workers' clubs and tea stalls for leisure activities whenever they have the opportunity. The clubs bring workers of various factories together and provide them the opportunity to articulate their concerns about work and family life. Interaction with workers from other factories who share their everyday struggles has been the key to forming friendship networks. This interaction has helped the workers identify the common challenges they faced while working in factories and structured the common opportunities available in different factories in Dhaka. Activists from labor organizations, such as the Bangladesh Garment and Industrial Workers Federation and Garment Workers Solidarity Federation, often visit the workers in these clubs and inform them of their right to unionize, to not be intimidated by the owners of the factories, and to speak up about possible abuse by the management. Workers play trivia that measures their knowledge of their rights. Although many respondents mentioned that they are not a member of any labor union, they are aware of their right to be a member and that the management of FB Fashion has legalized labor unions. Many respondents who are union members mentioned that they try to attend meetings organized by labor unions when women speakers visit. According to the respondents, most of the factory-level union leaders are men and never worked in the factory. By contrast, women speakers are former garment workers. The respondents feel comfortable talking to women speakers. They mentioned that they never heard about labor unions before they worked in these factories.

To summarize, factory work is not just a technique of survival. Greater employment opportunities and physical proximity to other workers helped respondents to form friendship networks. Social connections increased their awareness of workers' rights and enhanced political empowerment. It helped them to be members of labor unions that protect their rights.

### **Discussion and Conclusion**

A vast feminist literature on gender and globalization has examined the forces that motivate women to stay in factory jobs despite the dangers and the horrendous pay and conditions. How does factory work affect women's autonomy and empower them? This question has been addressed by Beneria

and Feldman (1992), Marchand and Runyan (2000), Kabeer (2000), and Braunstein (2008). How does RMG factory work empower women of Bangladesh, a country that is currently the second largest export oriented garment manufacturer after China? This question is one that is often absent from the discussion on women factory workers of Bangladesh. Thus, it is important to discuss what we have learned thus far from research on gender and globalization. This paper is an attempt to provide an additional insight on how global factory work affects Bangladeshi women's autonomy and empowers them.

In this study, I explained how RMG industries have contributed to a dramatic increase in the gross domestic product of Bangladesh. Only the availability of plentiful and affordable women labor made this increase possible. These women were traditionally excluded from paid work outside the home. I highlighted how the exploitation of low-wage women's labor nonetheless constituted a relative autonomy given the highly constricted options available to these women. This autonomy is mediated by the social context in which they live and work. Expanding women's opportunities to work and their income has helped women to enforce their marriage and divorce rights, their rights to education, and their rights to participate in social, political and economic activities. The factory work of women increased their decision-making abilities in the home. It critically challenged the hegemonic gender relations in Bangladesh.

I explained how women who are left out of the hegemonic power of a patriarchal society resist their oppressor in less dramatic and less collective ways. To understand the ways in which these women effectively challenge the oppression of a patriarchal society and family, researchers need to recognize these individual, subtle and subversive forms of resistance. In his research on peasant revolts across nations and historical time periods, Scott (1985) has examined the ways in which peasants resisted the oppression of their employers in less dramatic yet effective ways. He suggested that researchers need to focus not only on obvious forms of outward revolt but also less dramatic but common forms of resistance by the weak. We need to tie this to research on women global assembly line producers. Post-colonial feminists have highlighted the complex nature of the role of agency and power in the lives of women in post-colonial societies. They invite us to carefully recognize the daily struggle of these women in the cultural context

of these societies and focus on the strategies they employ to overcome the struggles. The relative autonomy women factory workers achieve may seem trivial to many Western feminists who are sympathetic to women's causes. Trivialization of autonomy makes women in developing societies, who are marginalized by the hegemonic global power, further invisible. Feminists need to go beyond simplistic idealized version of autonomy of women.

This research is based on globalization and the autonomy of women in Bangladesh. Future research could focus on whether women's factory work can affect the capacity of communities and states to extend the social supports that these women need for furthering their autonomy.

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