

Saha
new_ets_user1

**Bringing Economic, Social, and Secular Change: The Case of Bangladeshi
Garment Industry**

An Analysis of Research to Date

By

Neeete Saha

**A Thesis Submitted Under the Direction of Professor Ellen Marakowitz for the
Degree of Master of Arts
May 2008
Department of Anthropology
Columbia University**

Introduction

“The overwhelming majority of women in Bangladesh are not only poor but also caught between two vastly different worlds---the world determined by culture and tradition that confines their activities inside homesteads and the world shaped by increasing landlessness and poverty that draws them outside into wage employment for economic survival” (World Bank report cited in Siddiqi 2006). Although I agree with this statement, I believe the World Bank has left a crucial component out of this observation. The lives of Bangladeshi women are not only determined by tradition and poverty, their lives are determined by religion as well; in this case, Islam, the predominant religion of Bangladesh. “According to Islam, man is the earner and woman is the server of man: ‘Men are the managers of the affairs of women, for that God has preferred in bounty one of them over another, and for that they have expanded their property. Righteous women are therefore obedient, guarding the secret for God’s guarding” (Cain, Khanam, and Nahar, 407 & Chaudhury and Ahmed, 6).

It is obvious that Islam has separated the role between men and women. Men have been given the power to control women. As it shows, Bangladeshi women are not only controlled by Islamic doctrines but they are controlled by patriarchy as well. Bangladesh is a patriarchal society. As Walby states, “patriarchy is multidimensional. Private patriarchy means the exclusion of women from public life, confining them to households and domestic jobs, whereas public patriarchy encourages and requires women to participate in employment outside the home, especially in government-sponsored development activities” (Alam, 445). I define patriarchy as a form of oppression where men dominate women in the private sphere although anthropologists, Marxists, feminists

Saha
new_ets_user3

and other social scientists have provided different definitions for it (Cain, Khanam, and Nahar, 406 & Alam, 445). This is not to say that Bangladeshi women are not oppressed in the public sphere. In fact, it is a much debated topic that even though the garment industry loosened the private sphere of patriarchy by bringing women out of their households, it has created another form of patriarchy where women are subordinated by the male-dominated entrepreneurs and the state structure (Ahmed, 1 & Alam, 445).

I wish, however, to explore the social, economic and secular changes the garment industry has brought to the lives of Bangladeshi women within this scope of a public patriarchy. The following statement by Cain further explains the term patriarchy in the context of Bangladeshi society. As Cain observes, “In Bangladesh, patriarchy describes a distribution of power and resources within families such that men maintain power and control of resources, and women are powerless and dependent on men. The material base of patriarchy is men’s control of property, income, and women’s labor” (Cain, Khanam, and Nahar, 406). The control of men over women is critically monitored by purdah, which is an aspect of Islam. According to Cain, “purdah is a ‘system of secluding women and enforcing high standards of female modesty’” (Cain, Khanam, and Nahar, 408). This system enforces women to stay within their homesteads and wear appropriate clothing to cover their face and body. This system “...denies women access to many opportunities and aspects of everyday life...,” but address that the wellbeing of the women is the responsibility of the men (Cain, Khanam, and Nahar, 408). Therefore, on the one hand, purdah restrictions control women of their livelihood; on the other hand, it takes care of all the basic necessities of their lives.

Bangladeshi women maintain purdah by staying indoors, a female space, whereas, outdoors is considered to be a male space (408). They start their typical day with the following domestic responsibilities: making breakfast, serving the family and rearing the children, preparing for lunch and dinner, tidying up the house, washing and ironing clothes etc. These are the traditional duties for Bangladeshi women and these duties need to be maintained by the culturally sanctioned purdah restrictions. In other words, women are expected to stay within their household and assume their roles of “docile daughter,” “compliant wife,” and “dependent mother” (Ahmed and Chaudhury, 5). However, out of economic necessities, which date back to pre-independence Bangladesh, poor rural women have stepped out of their households and sought work as agricultural laborers, earth-cutters, brick-breakers, construction and road maintenance workers (Sobhan and Khundker, 62). Many rural women have also become self-employed with the help of loans from the Grameen Bank and NGO’s such as ASA and BRAC (24). For these jobs women have stayed mainly within their household and have been able to maintain the traditional role of Bangladeshi women (Adnan, 1); these jobs were also confined within the individual villages.

Conversely, there were other groups of women that took jobs in the garment industry, necessitating migration to big cities, like Dhaka and Chittagong. They left their domestic boundaries as well as their village. By working in the “garment industry,” which became nationally recognized for its economic success, as well as being a female dominated industry, these women broke away from the purdah norms and entered the public or the male space (Kabeer, 2000 and Cain et al, 408). Islamic leaders and Islamic

Saha
new_ets_user5

organizations saw this female encroachment into “male space” as a threat to the wider patriarchal order of Bangladesh. According to Naila Kabeer,

Religious meetings were frequently organized within the vicinity of the factories, often lasting for two or three days and nights, during which time various mullahs [religious leaders] used loudspeakers to denounce the behavior of the ‘bold’ garment women who moved around the streets of Dhaka unaccompanied by any male guardian. For those who may have missed the message, the speeches were recorded in cassette form for wider circulation (Kabeer, 83).

As the above descriptions shows, garment women were criticized by the religious leaders. By entering into the male space, these women clearly offended the religious, as well as the patriarchal, authorities in Bangladesh. As the *New Nation*, a Bangladeshi newspaper, has observed, the women’s presence in public space is provocative:

A group of girls ...with faces in cheap makeup, gaudy ribbons adorning their oily braids and draped in psychedelic colored saris with tiffin carriers in their hands are a common sight [these] days during the morning and evening hours. These are the garment workers, [a] new class of employees” (*New nation*, 22 December 1986, cited in Kabeer 82).

Bangladeshi garment workers are ill treated by society because they broke away from the purdah norms. It is worth mentioning that many families supported this choice to break away from the purdah norms as they willingly send their daughters to work in the factories. The above comments explicitly downplay the roles of these working women. It is obvious from these comments that these women’s entry into the public space threatened the core ideals of this patriarchal society. Not only were garment workers seen as morally loose because of their entry into public space, they were a constant target of bypassers’ disrespectful comments (Kabeer, 83). Kabeer’s explanation below further elucidates the reason behind this ill treatment:

For women in a culture which expressly forbade their public appearance, and especially for those for whom the daily foray into the public domain was still a new and uncomfortable experience, these encounters served as a constant face-to-

Saha
new_ets_user6

face reminder that they were transgressing 'male' space and had consequently laid themselves open to harassment by any passing male (Kabeer, 83).

These "garment workers, a new class of employees" are precisely the subject matter of this paper. And this "transgression of male space" is a radical change for Bangladeshi women. These women in their patriarchal society, under Islamic ideals, who are only to cook and take care of their families; who are told whom to marry; who are beaten by their husbands for not being good housewives; who are secluded from the outside world and criticized for going outside of their households; are now going beyond their domestic boundaries to find jobs. This is a challenge and a threat.

In this paper, I argue that working in the garment industry has not only improved women's economic status but has helped them achieve self and social status. Now many of these workers not only have investments for their future, but are also able to meet their natal families' financial needs. Status signifies, as Ahmed and Chaudhury note, is "...in the authority and power she holds within the family, and/or prestige she commands from the other members of the family and the community (qtd. in Ahmed and Chaudhury, 1)." By self status however, I am addressing their self-confidence to break away from their traditional role of mother, sister, and wife. In a society in which women are expected to get married in their teen years and leave their parental home to stay with their husbands, this new found confidence is now shifting the traditional male expectation of women not going out to work. Even if it is out of financial necessity, these women are not very much concerned with the restrictions of purdah (Kabeer, 88). Since purdah is strictly observed in the village settings, rooted in the religion and the culture, this flouting of raises question about the religious nature of these women. Significantly none of the scholars

Saha
new_ets_user7

have addressed the question of the women's religious interests. Are they religious or secular? What is their view on purdah restrictions?

This paper will be an analysis of the changes the garment industry brought to the lives of Bangladeshi poor/working class women. What I seek to analyze is to what extent working in this industry has helped or hindered their socio-economic, family, and their own status in their families? Their "own status" in this case signifies the empowerment of women. Have their new found identities as industry workers changed their role in the family? In what ways are these women challenging and changing the societal norms of this country? Finally, I want to explore if this social change can lead to secular change for Bangladesh. I will not only look at the secondary sources but will also critically review the selected testimonies of the garment workers. In addition, my own experiences of gender oppression as Bangladeshi will contribute to this essay.

This paper is divided into the following sections. The first section is an overview of Bangladesh in which I examine the history of Bangladesh in order to depict the causes of economic hardship for Bangladeshi citizens. This section will be of great help in understanding the financial hardship which began to develop in pre-independence Bangladesh and caused many rural women to heed wage employment. In the second section, I briefly examine the advent of the Bangladeshi garment industry. In the third section, I deeply examine the inferior position of women in Bangladeshi society by explaining the term purdah which is ingrained in their lives. The impact of the garment industry on the lifestyle of Bangladeshi women will be the fourth and possibly largest section of this thesis. Here, I focus on the lives of the garment workers, why they are working, where they live, how much money they make, their status, etc. My fifth and

sixth sections will be about the personal, economic, and social changes that garment industries brought to these married and single women. These sections will mostly be based on testimonies which will be analyzed to make an attempt to answer the initial questions of this proposal. In my last chapter, I examine if this is a shift toward secularism. I begin my paper with the following issue: the economic hardship.

Economic Hardship and Bangladesh

Introduction

Economic deprivation that took place before and after the liberation war of 1971, and a disastrous famine afterward became the sources of poverty and hunger, affecting rural families and changing the role of Bangladeshi rural women. As Feldman and McCarthy put it, “The unsettled period brought by war, famine, floods, and the increasing social deterioration stimulated by landlessness, poverty, rising prices, inflation, and unemployment has forced rural women out of traditional modes of action and thought” (Feldman and McCarthy, 949). Home to 144.3 million people (World Bank), Bangladesh is one of the most populated and poorest countries in the world. The socio-economic future of its women has been tied to a garment industry that is poised to change the ideological roots of Bangladesh.

Historical Background of Bangladesh

It was once known as East Bengal when it was under the umbrella of the Indian subcontinent. Then, in 1947, when India became independent from British colonial rule, Bangladesh became part of Pakistan and was identified as East Pakistan. The advent of the nation, Bangladesh, began in the late 40’s. However, it was on March 26th, 1971 that East Pakistan gained its independence from the dominance of West Pakistan and became

Saha
new_ets_user9

Bangladesh. It was a year of hardship and turmoil but the salient and unforgettable year for Bengalis of East Pakistan. Bengalis fought long and hard for nine months to free themselves from the “colonial exploitation” of West Pakistan (Oldenburg, 711). Colonial exploitation and Bangladesh go a long way back since it was colonized by the British. Subsequent to the liberation from British colonial rule, the prospect of Bangladesh as an independent country remained lost under the rule of Pakistan until 1971.

Economic Disparity

Economic hardships were among other reasons for the agitation for an independent Bangladesh. East Pakistani or East Bengalis were not only deprived linguistically and politically from West Pakistan, they were also deprived economically. This exploitation by West Pakistani was perceived by East Pakistani as “internal colonialism” which became another reason for them to seek independence (Islam, 64). According to Oldenburg, “This colonialism was manifest in the unequal exchange via foreign trade mechanisms, of primary products for manufactured goods (Oldenburg, 711).” Pakistan’s foreign exchange was dependent on jute which was only produced in East Pakistan; however, contrary to East Pakistan, West Pakistan had the highest per capita income. From 1969 to 1970, this rose to 61%, an amount that almost doubled in 10 years, from 1959 to 1960. Industrially, West Pakistan was more developed than East Pakistan. West Pakistan had 9 textile mills in 1947 and 150 in 1971. On the other hand, East Pakistan had 11 textile mills in 1947 and 26 in 1971. Moreover, there were more colleges in West Pakistan than East Pakistan. From 1947 to 1969, Pakistan built 271 colleges for West Pakistan but only 162 colleges for East Pakistan (Akmam, 546-547). West Pakistan had more “university scholars” than East Pakistan (Akmam, 546). The

Saha
new_ets_user10

above statistics show that West Pakistan was a developed and advanced province than East Pakistan. East Pakistanis were treated poorly in every aspect of their lives. They earned less but paid more than West Pakistani. In spite of many requests made by East Pakistani leaders, the economic improvement of East Pakistan was neglected (Choudhury, 245).

Birth of Bangladesh

Until March 26th 1971, West Pakistan dominated East Pakistan or East Bengal for twenty-three years. From 1947 to 1971, Bengalis were controlled linguistically, politically, and economically. Even though East Pakistan was part of Pakistan, the citizens had no basic rights; they were the prisoners of their own country. They were the bulk of Pakistan; yet, they were deprived of power. They had no choice but to abide by the rule of West Pakistan. East Pakistan had been patient with West Pakistan for 23 years. However, on March 26th 1971, it was the end of injustice, dominance and cruelty of West Pakistan. To bring Bangladesh into existence and to earn Bengalis freedom, millions sacrificed their lives and became martyrs. This was the time when thousands of women became victims of rape and brutality by West Pakistani men. According to Akmam, "...one to three million people had been killed and 200, 000 women were raped causing 25, 000 pregnancies (Akmam, 549)." This was the time when one million Bengalis had no choice but to leave East Pakistan and become refugees in India (Akmam, 549). 1971 was the year of the bloody civil war between West Pakistan and East Pakistan that destroyed the economic livelihood of many Bengalis.

Development of NGO's

During this period NGOs began to take the initiative in the development of the country which expanded even more during the years 1975 to 1990 when Bangladesh was under the martial rule of Ziaur Rahman and Hossain Mohammad Ershad. Overall, since the democratization period of 1990s until now, thousands of NGOs have developed in Bangladesh (Haque, 414). NGOs in Bangladesh overlap in their objectives even though they are categorically different, such as those focusing on welfare, development, service, the environment, advocacy, human rights, religious, and women (Haque, 415).

The Grameen Bank and the Bangladesh Rural Advancement Committee (BRAC) are the two largest NGOs in Bangladesh. F.H. Abed founded BRAC in 1972 and this organization serves the following purposes: 'education and training, leadership and entrepreneurship development, skills in irrigation and water management, income-generation activities such as poultry and livestock rearing, fisheries, forestry, and handicrafts, primary health care, family planning, informal primary education, teacher training and credit (Haque, 415)'. Grameen Bank, which can be translated as "rural bank," was founded by Mohamed Yunus, who was recently awarded the Nobel peace prize for his successful management of the bank. He started the Grameen Bank in 1976 with the idea of providing small loans to the poor, which ended up being the largest employment sector for rural women in Bangladesh (Haque, 416).

The Bangladeshi Garment Industry

Similar to NGO's, the garment industry has also provided jobs to many rural women; it is the other largest employment sector for Bangladeshi women. The garment industry began in 1977 (Siddiqi, 65). The industry has grown tremendously since

Saha
new_ets_user12

its inception. By 1981, there were 21 garment factories. However its fast growth can be seen from the following statistics; there were 2174 and 2200 garment factories in 1995 and in 1996 respectively (Siddiqi, 65 & Dannecker, 31). Due to the expansion and success of this industry Bangladesh became an exporter to 50 countries; it exports around 100 different garments. As Ahmed states, “In the short spaces of 15 years, Bangladesh emerged as the eighth largest garment exporter to the United States by 1991 (Ahmed, 1).” Not only did this industry economically uplift Bangladesh, it also provided jobs for millions of poor women. Dannecker observes that there are 0.8 to 1.2 million or 80% women garment workers in Bangladesh (Dannecker, 31). It should be noted here that according to Bangladeshi Garment Manufacturers and Exporters Association (BGMEA) 90% of the workers are female even though this percentage varies by researcher (Zohir and Paul-Majumder, 7).

It is correct that the garment industry has become the dominant work industry for many Bangladeshi women. But how did this all begin? To shed some light on this question, I will briefly summarize the advent of the Bangladeshi garment industry. It didn't begin with the interests from the international development agencies or the government bureaucracy of the country; it was rather the Bangladeshi people in the business sector who were motivated by the success of other garment industries in South Korea, Hong Kong and Singapore that launched this industry. Bangladeshi entrepreneurs had a tough time building up the industry since they were new to this area and had no experience in the garment business.

Though Reaz Garments and Jewel Garments were the first two to export, it was in 1978 that the industry became more involved as one of the entrepreneurs, Mr. Quader,

Saha
new_ets_user13

collaborated with Daewoo, a Korean garment industry. This alliance was in the interest of Daewoo's tactical strategy to avoid the quota imposition of the United States and set up industry in Bangladesh, which was a lucrative way to get around this regulation.

Quader's Dosh garment stayed with Daewoo for over a year but gained some skilled workers. Many of these trained workers by Daewoo decided to become entrepreneurs by starting their own garment business (Quddus and Rashid, 59-63).

By the early eighties, the industry began to flourish and by 2001 as many as 3900 garment industries are built in Bangladesh (Rahman, 56). Since Bangladeshi entrepreneurs were not "...trained or experienced in the technical, supervisory, or managerial aspects of garment manufacturing," they extended their hands to the overseas investors who wanted to do business in Bangladesh to circumvent the quota regulations on their countries (Quddus and Rashid, 64-65). It is not to say that all Bangladeshi garment industries are jointly partnered with South Korean, Hong Kong and Taiwanese proprietors; in fact, the majority of them are owned by Bangladeshi owners (Rahman, 55). Knitwear, woven products, and sweaters and jackets are manufactured by Bangladeshi Garment industry. From this industry Bangladesh earned 4 billion US dollars in 1998 (Rahman, 58) and as Quddus and Rashid state, "Bangladesh has become the largest supplier of T-shirts and woven shirts among all suppliers to the European Union countries and the sixth largest supplier of apparel to the United States (1994-1997). And in 1997-98, the garment sector represented 74% of the total foreign revenue earnings of Bangladesh" (Quddus and Rashid, 50&58).

What are the factors behind this success? Quddus and Rashid address the following factors behind this success: low wages, back-to-back letter of credit, bonded

Saha
new_ets_user14

warehouse facility, participation of female workers, underdeveloped economy, the catalysts, a flexible and supportive policy environment, quota negotiating teams, policy environment in Bangladesh, and dynamic entrepreneurship (Quddus and Rashid, 72-80). My interest here is on the participation of female workers in the garment industry of Bangladesh, although some of these other factors will be touched upon while discussing the role of these women.

Participation of female workers was considered part of the explanation of the industry's success due to their nimble fingers, docility, and cheap labor. The garment industry preferred women as Kabeer states, "The need to meet the deadlines imposed by their buyers, compulsory overtime, the locking of the factory gates to ensure that workers did not smuggle out duty-free fabrics intended for export production, all of these required a compliant labor force" (Kabeer, 72). Kabeer further indicates, "Such docility on the part of women workers is hardly surprising in a country where women are brought up from childhood to defer to male authority, to speak in a soft and pleasing voice and to remain within the shelter of the home" (72).

Women as the Docile Backdrop of Bangladesh

"Women in Bangladesh have lower status, as compared to men in every sphere of socio-economic and political life (Ahmed and Chaudhury, 5)." This is a potent observation by Ahmed and Chaudhury which echoes my own experiences of living in the country for sixteen years. Because of their lower status women are less powerful than their male counterparts. Their powerlessness is additionally hampered by the predominantly patriarchal and Islamic nature of the country. There are currently 88.3% Muslims, 10.5% Hindus, 0.3% Christians, 0.6% Buddhists, and 0.3% others residing in

Saha
new_ets_user15

Bangladesh (U.S. Department of State, 2007). “Even though Islam apparently has granted numerous privileges to women, the social structure defined by Islam is based on male dominance, control, and inequality between the sexes” (Sultan, 6).

Bangladeshi women are not only oppressed by Islamic dicta, they are similarly oppressed by the legislative dicta of the country. The judicial system in Bangladesh discriminates against women because religious laws are given more power than existing secular laws that provide equal rights for women (Sultan, 7). These laws by religion and society control women’s movement in every sphere of their life. These restrictions are carried on by the imposition of an institution called, *pardah*. As Paul observes, “The extent of female space in rural Bangladesh is closely linked to the *pardah*, which is deeply rooted in Islamic doctrines. The word literally means curtain or veil, and their seclusion in the home compound, which is surrounded and shielded by houses and foliage, and fencing (Paul, 2).”

A deeper look at the *pardah* system is outside the scope of my paper but I will provide a general overview of the topic to understand how the lives of garment workers are associated with this traditional system. When Bangladeshi women go outside of their household they cover their face with part of the *sari*, or wear a veil, or a *borkha* (a type of garment) to maintain the *pardah* restrictions. Another way they follow this restriction is by being secluded from the outside world, which means from the male sphere (Papanek, 296). Mernissi’s observation looks at the critical aspects of *pardah*:

It is central to the entrenchment patriarchal power, linking the territorial regulation of female sexuality and the institutionalization of male power in the societies where it is practiced: ‘institutionalized boundaries dividing parts of the society express the recognition of power in one part at the expense of the other. Any transgression of the boundaries is a danger to the social order because it is an attack on the unacknowledged allocation of power. The link between boundaries

Saha
new_ets_user16

and power is particularly salient in a society's sexual patterns' (Mernissi qtd. in Kabeer, 36).

Mernissi's observation brings out the other dimension of purdah that "...relates to the Islamic view of female sexuality as active and dangerous, threatening moral chaos and disorder (*fitna*) if not properly regulated" (Kabeer, 35). To maintain this moral order, women are to stay outside the view of the men. If women come into the public sphere of men, they are "...guilty of provoking men to thoughts of *zina* (illicit intercourse), endangering his peace of mind, social prestige and allegiance to the moral order" (Kabeer, 35).

Clearly, purdah restrictions are not only about staying within the periphery of the household; it has much more meaning attached to it. Precisely this Islamic aspect of purdah restrictions makes the lives of the garments workers even more remarkable and even more disturbing as they have come out of this constraint by walking and working side by side with men. It is remarkable because women are using their "intelligence" to seek out jobs and make a living for themselves. Their thinking process has developed since Begum's observation in the 80's. "The sad fact is that their intelligence has been blunted and their thinking capacity lulled by the pressure of tradition" (qtd. in Kabeer, 38). However it is this same tradition that is not being followed which compels women to leave their households and find jobs. As Cain observes,

Purdah is a complex institution that entails much more than restrictions on women's physical mobility and dress. It denies women access to many opportunities and aspects of everyday life and at the same time confers upon them social status as a protected group. Thus, in theory, purdah both controls women and provides them with shelter and security. While men have power and authority over women, they are also normatively obligated to provide them with food, clothing and shelter (qtd. in Kabeer, 41).

Saha
new_ets_user17

This normative obligation has shifted for many men as they have stopped supporting their wives or mothers or daughters. The following testimony was provided by Rahela who is divorced and a mother of two young children. She sought for divorce because she did not want to live with a co-wife as her husband had married for a second time. As she states,

I work in garments because ...what else can I do? I don't see any other options available. What I would have liked the best is to be a housewife. My husband would have worked and I would have stayed at home, looking after the family. Occasionally we would have gone out visiting [relatives]. But the way things work out, this was not possible. And things might not be better for my daughter. It is possible that she might have to work. I doubt her fate is likely to be any better than mine (qtd. in Kabeer, 103).

Rahela's statement clearly illustrates her bitter feelings toward her situation. While Bangladeshi women are told from their childhood that they will get married and live with their husband's family, joining the workforce certainly questions the perception of today's reality.

Papanek's observation further enhances the understanding of *purdah*. According to Papanek, "The crucial characteristic of the *purdah* system is its limitation on interaction between women and males outside certain well-defined categories, which differ among Muslims and Hindus (Papanek, 289)." Here, I briefly mention this distinction between Hindu and Muslim *purdah* since a detailed discussion of this topic is far beyond the scope of this paper. Muslims follow the *purdah* restrictions outside of their family connections, whereas for Hindus it is among relatives that *purdah* restrictions need to be followed.

Papanek also say that "Muslim seclusion begins at puberty, Hindu seclusion strictly speaking begins with marriage" (Papanek, 289). Unlike Muslim women, who have to observe *purdah* in their household, Hindu women may freely mix with their

Saha

new_ets_user18

relatives and do not observe purdah in front of them. After their marriage, they are entitled to observe purdah among her husband's relatives and this observance is varied among castes and villages. However, Hindu women are expected to stay within their household which is similar to Muslim purdah, even though, they do not have to cover themselves like Muslim women unless they are married. It is worth mentioning that Muslim women who marry their cousins do not observe purdah since they have known each other from their childhood. This however does not apply to Hindu women because Hinduism generally does not accept marriage between cousins, with some exceptions in South India (Papanek, 1973).

This discrepancy could be why Hindu women in my village faced no societal problem for working in the garment industry, which is opposite for many young Muslim women. My statement is based on the conversation with friends who have been working in the garment industry to support their parents. Does this suggest that Hindu garment workers have some advantages over their Muslim colleagues? There is no explicit research done on Hindu garment workers so it is difficult to understand if they have faced any societal problems. Papanek also notes that urban lower-middle-class families face more purdah restrictions than urban upper class because of their "increasing contacts with modern education and western life styles (Papanek, 292)." Rural women on the other hand face more of these restrictions in comparison to their urban counterparts (Ahmed and Chaudhury, 7). So it can be seen that as Papanek states "purdah system is related to status, the division of labor, interpersonal dependency, social distance, and the maintenance of moral standards as specified by the society (Papanek, 292)."

Saha
new_ets_user19

As it shows, Bangladeshi women are limited in their livelihood through cultural, social and religious norms. These limitations start as early as they are born to a family; the birth of a boy is celebrated with a prayer but the birth of a girl is rarely celebrated. “The idea that women are inferior to men is stressed from the very moment a child is born and supported by behavior patterns prescribed for girls and women (Ahmed and Chaudhury, 12). The preference for a son has to do with his high economic value in comparison to the low economic value of women. Men will bring income home and girls will become a member of another family and that is why daughters are seen as a burden to their parents rather than as blessing from God (Ahmed and Chaudhury 10-12).

When people hear the phrase, “It is a girl,” they instantly think about a dowry instead of being happy for the birth of a child. Dowry, though prohibited by the law, is a large sum of money given to the groom’s family, in exchange of their daughter’s happiness. However, some recent research shows that many unmarried garment workers are working to save money for their potential dowries (Zohir and Paul-Majumder, 1996 & Sultan, 1997). Dowry cases in Bangladesh show those women, whose families are unable to pay dowry for them, are in some cases tortured, beaten, and even killed by their husbands. The husband’s families are also involved in this cruelty: some women are set on fire, strangled to death, or become the victims of acid attacks (ALRC statement). For instance, the daily newspapers of *Bogra*, Bangladesh reported that, two nineteen-year-old housewives were killed by their husbands and their families because they were unable to pay dowries (Khan, The Daily Star). Though unfortunate, this happened to many married women, who pay the final price of dowry. But what is their situation before their marriage? What role do they play in their own wedding? To clarify the position of

Saha
new_ets_user20

women in dowry-related marriages, I will narrate two cases from my own experiences in Bangladesh.

Case 1: I was about 13 years old when my youngest aunt got married. The event was so exciting for me that I was involved in every detail of the marriage. Being the oldest grandchild, I had the privilege of attending all the gatherings because my grandfather always kept me by his side. I didn't understand anything then but now it makes me angry to realize that even in my own family dowry exists. The ceremony took place in a village because most of the groom's relatives lived there, though the groom and his family lived in the city. He was fairly educated and belonged to a wealthy family but that did not stop him or his relatives from asking for a dowry. It is, however, difficult to pinpoint if grooms are solely interested in the demand for dowry or whether is the family that decides this matter. Certainly, asking for money in my aunt's case was not phrased as "dowry" because the groom's family did not want to look bad among their neighbors. People might gossip about them being greedy and no one wanted to face the accusation, even though covertly everyone is aware of the giving and taking of dowry. It has found through research that darker, shorter and poor girls have a tough time getting married because they would require more money and it is difficult for their parents to arrange money for them (Cain, Khanam, and Nahar, 408). Even though my aunt was educated, fair and tall, my grandparents had to pay for the household furniture, the marriage ceremony, gold, and cash of some 20 to 40,000 taka. Her wealth, her social status, her education, her fair skin didn't save her from the tradition of dowry and this is a similar situation for many Bangladeshi girls.

Saha
new_ets_user21

Case 2: This case is of my best friend's sisters' potential marriage. Both cases are 11 years apart but things have barely changed for the overwhelming majority of women in Bangladesh. As the father had recently passed away, this family was going through more problems than ever. People say that he could not tolerate the idea of arranging money for his three unmarried daughters and died in shock because of it. They are all close in age and "culturally" it is expected for the families to marry off their daughters as early as possible. A couple of weeks ago someone asked for the oldest daughter's hand, and to meet their dowry demand they are selling their land. Since we have a good relationship with them they asked my father to buy the land. Out of concern for humanity, my father agreed to help financially but refused to buy the land because they have no other asset. Who would help her two youngest sisters?

There are a few reasons behind the narration of the above stories. I wanted to show that majority Bangladeshi women still face a lot of discrimination from society. My stories are over 11 years apart but the conditions of women are unchanged. It is not to say that there is no progress but to note that the progress is too little when compared to the wider societal problems women face in Bangladesh. At the time it didn't occur to me that my grandparents didn't even ask a single question of my aunt nor did I understand the significance of it. Was she not the one to get married? Now that I understand, it is appalling how she was married off without her consent. My second case also shows parents' helplessness when it comes to marrying off their daughters. They feel pressured by the societal norms to marry off their daughters and not to hesitate to ask others for monetary help. Even though this bride is modern and educated, she still has to accept the

Saha
new_ets_user22

traditional norm of the society and say nothing against her parents' will. Her decision has little or no values for her families because they have to meet the societal expectation.

Like dowry there are other social constraints that remain visible among Bangladeshi women. The space differentiation between men and women is one of the major social constraints and this traditional space between male and female has yet to be diminished. As Mernissi states, "The presence of women in male space is generally considered to be both provocative and offensive (Mernissi, qtd. in Paul, 2)." From the time women are born, they are confined in their homes and households (Paul, 2). Women are told what to do and what not to do because any wrong-doing on their part can cause their family *sharam* (shame). Shame is very crucial in this culture since it is very much connected to the family's *izzat* (honor). Honor, which is deeply ingrained in the purdah system, is maintained by the "virtue and modesty of the women (Kabeer, 34)." It is customary for daughters to be married. Unmarried daughters and their parents are subjects of much scrutiny in their neighborhood. Even after marriage, women are controlled by their husbands and their families (Paul, 5). In many cases, women suffer an unhappy married life but cannot do anything to change that. There is a saying for rural Bangladeshi women, "*buk pathe kinto muk pate na* (literally, the chest explodes but the mouth does not explode)". In other words, no matter how much pain or suffering women go through, they would never speak of their situation. In villages, parents do not educate their daughters because they will get married and leave the family. Therefore, educating women is seen as neither lucrative nor appropriate by many families (Schuler and Hashemi, 65). And for many rural villagers it is not financially possible for them to send their daughters to school. Some parents think a few years of schooling is enough and

Saha
new_ets_user23

don't consider sending their daughters to receive a college degree. To find employment in Bangladesh people often have to count on a higher education and poorer families do not have money to pay for high school let alone reflect on higher education for them.

However, economic deficiency has changed many things for these women. The scarcity of food and hope for a better life has pushed many women to take off their purdah and find jobs outside of their homes (Feldman, 2001). Many women work as domestic servants for wealthier families; as agricultural workers, receive small business loans from NGOs; and many go to the cities to work in garment factories. These job opportunities provide women financial independence and most importantly it gives them a sense of self-confidence (Wahra and Rahman, 56).

Now women have some choices over their family matters because they are providing for their families and in many cases they are the primary household earner (Ahmed and Bould, 2004). This replaces the traditional household norms in which the male is the primary earner and supports the family. I am trying to look at whether this shift in women's independence from nothing to something suggests that Bangladeshi women are changing the traditional norm of the society. I believe that independent women, being the other half of Bangladesh, are having an impact on cultural, social, and religious norms. It is the garment industry that I argue began to distort the line between female and male space differentiation.

The Impact of the Garment Industry on the lifestyle of Bangladeshi Women

The above section was an attempt to portray the lives of Bangladeshi women before entering the factory. Now I will talk about the lives of these women after entering

Saha
new_ets_user24

the factory. I divide this section into three broad subsections: who are these women, why do they migrate and life in the garment industry. These subsections are further divided into small sections. Kabeer's and Zohir and Paul-Majumder's work are most visible in this section due to their extensive research although other scholars are cited. Zohir and Paul- Majumder's research included 32 privately-owned factories in their research; 30 of these factories are located in the capital city (Dhaka) of Bangladesh and the rest are close by Dhaka. They haphazardly interviewed 245 male workers and 428 female workers. The number of female workers are higher than male workers due "...to the sex ratio of the garment workers" (Zohir and Paul-Majumder, 4, 7).

Who are these Women?

A Female Dominated Garment Industry in a Male Dominated Country: Over one million women are employed in this industry (Quddus and Rashid, 45); women of all ages whether from urban or rural background dominate the floors of this industry. Zohir and Paul-Majumder observe more female child workers ranging from 10 to 14 years of old than male child workers. Overall, 80% of this workforce is women (Dannecker, 31). Bangladeshi garment workers depending on their job categories earn from 300 taka to 2500 taka excluding overtime. In total, they earn up to \$4.36 to \$36.39. The bulk of these Bangladeshi garment workers are earning \$7.27 a month and barely making ends meet. Most live in a slum with 4 to 5 roommates and walk 2 to 3 kilometers a day to get to their workplace. The majority work 10 to 14 hours a day in a congested environment with approximately a 90-minute break including one long lunch break and two 15-minute short breaks. The majority of these workers work seven days a week and don't receive any personal days even when they are sick. Sometimes they don't want to take any sick

Saha
new_ets_user25

days because it will be taken out of that 300 Taka. People disrespect and harass them on the street because they are women garment workers (Paul-Majumder and Zohir, 1996). Then why do women work in this industry? And to what extent has this industry brought changes to the lives of these women?

One broad answer for the first question, which will be discussed below in more detail, is that they have no alternative options but to settle for that meager amount even though they may not want to work there. As Absar bluntly puts it, “Women work because of economic hardship and 91 percent receive minimum wages” (Absar, 3012). Many Bangladeshi have only positive thoughts when it comes to the garment industry of Bangladesh. I too have positive thoughts like many people in Bangladesh; I believe that despite the low wages and exploitative working conditions by improving their social, economic, and personal lives, the garment industry has brought changes for these women. People without skills or education and in definite need of jobs perhaps feel indebted to the garment industry for providing them with jobs. Liberals who “...are opposed to religious orthodoxy while committed to modernization, development, and the progress of women” look at this enterprise as a way that the country is moving toward modernity (Rashiduzzaman, 976).

The garment industry not only provided jobs to millions of people but boosted the national income (Zohir and Paul-Majumder, 2). The success of the industry told the world that Bangladesh is not only known for poverty and flood but has tactfully mastered the garment business and created jobs for entrepreneurs and provided jobs to the most underrepresented groups of people in Bangladesh. Now 1.5 million Bangladeshi poor with little or no education who would perhaps have worked as a maid, laborer, prostitute,

Saha
new_ets_user26

or in the informal sectors with less money and no respect, now work for the garment industry with slightly more money and a great deal of respect (Rahman, 56).

Although there are some conservatives, mostly religious leaders and groups who have no positive things to say about this topic, tend to criticize this line of work (Kabeer, 2000 and Shehabuddin, 1030). Therefore, “garment industry” in Bangladesh has many connotations to it, particularly when this industry is one of the largest employment sectors for millions of Bangladeshi women, the other one being the NGO sector. Since a majority of garment workers are from lower and working class family and mostly of rural origin, it has a lot to do with this association. To greater part of Bangladeshi, mostly the middle class and religious conservatives, look down on working in garment factories and are hardly seen as “good,” unlike working in the government job sectors. Not only is the job is scrutinized, the workers are scrutinized as well; generally, they are given less respect, they are thought as sex workers, they are blamed for mixing with men and having lesser values etc (Kabeer 83).

The following excerpt by Islamic economists clearly depicts the disapproval of these women working in the factories, “Men and women sit in the same working place face to face. Whatever liberal arguments are put forward in favor of this arrangements, in reality the close proximity of opposite sexes arouses lust and love for each other which on many occasions lead to immoral and scandalous affairs between them” (cited in Kabeer, 82). Although what others think of the garment workers will be discussed further in the paper.

Age Rank: There were more female migrants than male migrants; female migrants were much younger in age (ranging from 15 to 24) than their male counterparts

Saha
new_ets_user27

(ranging from 20 to 29). As indicated by Zohir and Paul-Majumder, “70% of the female garment workers are from rural areas” (Zohir and Paul-Majumder, 17). They also find that the younger generation took over the Bangladeshi factory floors given that “73 per cent of all workers are 24 years or younger” and 45 % of these fall below 20 years (Zohir and Paul-Majumder, 14). 13.2 % of the interviewees belonged to the age group of 10 to 14 and these child laborers come to the city due to their economic need. This phenomenon of young girls coming to city to work entails that “there has been a social change in attitude towards marriage” (Zohir and Paul-Majumder, 26). Given that conventional Bangladeshi women get married as early as 14 years of age are now going off to the cities to earn income instead of going off to their husband’s families demonstrate a change in the society. Zohir and Paul-Majumder state, “This has a great significance in a society like Bangladesh where females aged above 12 years are often expected to observe purdah. It shows that there has definitely been a cultural change with the advent of garment industry” (Zohir and Paul-Majumder, 24). Additionally, some urban parents prefer their young daughters to work with them in the industry since they do not feel safe leaving them alone at home. These girls are mostly the child laborers. Nonetheless, many parents do not want their daughters to work in the industry because to them “working in the garment factory is bad, it spoils girls, and night work spoils girls” (Zohir and Paul-Majumder, 28). However, parents with minimal income who cannot pay for their child’s education or dowry have to disregard these comments and send them to work.

Marital Status: Zohir and Paul-Majumder observe that this younger generation of women is single; 58% of their interviewees were never married compared to 42% of

being “ever married” (Zohir and Paul-Majumder, 14). This “ever married” group of women represents widowed, divorced and separated women. What the scholars found is worth mentioning here and state that majority of their sampled married women, 84% to be precise, recently married women. It is interesting because working women are said to “have negative impact on their reproductive behavior” (Zohir and Paul-Majumder, 16). Perhaps this is why 38.8 % reported to have no children and “...41.7% of women were yet to have children”. Although what Zohir and Paul-Majumder meant by “yet to have children” is unclear as they provided no further explanation. Does this mean that these women are pregnant?

Education: There were 78% literate and 22% illiterate workers among the interviewees. 30% of these illiterate workers are female as compare to 10% male and this findings resonates with parents’ interest in educating boys instead of girls which was mentioned at the beginning of this paper. Furthermore, 75% of this literate group of people are male and went to school more than 5 years, whereas, 36% of these people are female but have 5 or more years of schooling (Zohir and Paul-Majumder, 17). On the contrary, 45% of the child laborers (10 to 14 years old) in this research were illiterate. It is worth mentioning that to combat economic struggle, 27% of these workers abandoned school and 33% of them are female child laborers (Zohir and Paul Majumder, 22 & 27). This low percentage raises the question of why female have the lowest years of schooling even though the Bangladeshi government made education free up to eighth grade. This however strengthens the notion of purdha restrictions as many parents still hesitate to send their daughters to school.

Why Do They Migrate?

Migration: The majority of these garment workers migrate to the city to become financially stable and improve their livelihood. These people have little or no income to support them or are supported by their parents since income from the agricultural sector was mostly phased out due to landlessness. Research shows that many of these workers come from families who have less than one acre of land (Sultan, 1997). On the other hand, Bangladesh, being one of the economically deprived countries, makes the situation even worse for these people. It is not to say that only rural poor are working at these factories, though they are the majority, there are many urban poor as well working at these factories. Women are seeking out work to meet the economic demand of their families or themselves. Some are getting jobs through the NGOs within their villages and others become garment workers. Women who are abandoned by their husbands or families; are widowed; belong to poor families; need or want to financially contribute to their household; and women who want to work because others are working, women who want to work because it make them feel self-sufficient are the employees of these two major hubs.

Here I summarize the many testimonies that illustrate the experiences of many of these garment workers. These testimonies will be further discussed in the subsequent paragraphs of the paper. Working women interviewed provided the following opinions of the garment industry.

- Working in the garment industry has no future, it is a dead end job
- There are no other options, having a job is better than not having a job at all

- Factory jobs are difficult to sustain since one has to work long hours which causes their health to deteriorate
- Management treat them badly
- Their every hours are monitored even the amount of time they take in the bathroom
- Fear being raped in and outside the factory
- Resent the bad names associated with factory jobs
- They could buy new clothes and new shoes
- They are financially secure
- They have better lives
- They live in brick buildings instead of tin sheds and they have access to electricity
- They can contribute money to their families
- Working in the garment factories is better than sitting at home and doing household chores
- Working to earn middle class status
- Working for their children so they could go to better school
- After working in the industry, they became clever and independent
- Factory job is better than being maid or day laborer; it has more status and prestige
- Now they have to work both at home and outside, many struggle with this reality of double burden
- It is a low-paying job

- Factory jobs are a god-send
- The only way to feed themselves and survive in this world

As we can see there are positive and negative implications associated with factory jobs.

Prior Migration: How have these workers escaped from the traditional purdah norms? As Kabeer finds, many of these workers had to negotiate their way out of their village. Leaving the village to work in the industry was not an easy task for many of these women; families and sometimes the community needed to be convinced of their decision to work. Many women however did not face any objection from the families since no one wanted to take care of them and many who faced objections disregarded them. The statement below is by a girl who talks about her mother being reluctant to let her work as a maid but allowed her to work in the factory. Her mother, who is a maid, prefers factory work over domestic work.

She told me that if I worked in other people's houses, I would have to wash their dirty clothes and that the bad food they would give me to eat would make me ill. She could not bear that I should have to do that. She said she would rather keep me next to her and let me die than have me work in other people's homes (Kabeer, 104).

Zohir and Paul- Majumder find that housemaids are decreasing because of their increased interests toward the garment industry (Zohir and Paul- Majumder, 1996). This increased interest is due to the shame associated with household servants in Bangladesh (Ahmed and Bould, 2004). Additionally, many leave their jobs as domestic servants due to ill treatment from the family. As one girl narrates:

When I was young a relative...brought me to Dhaka and put me in a job, as a live-in domestic in a person's house. At that time my mother and father were not living in Dhaka. So from a very young age I have been working in people's homes. I could not stand it anymore. It's a lot of work, all day and all night, and then there are a lot of hassles with people. You are constantly getting scolded, getting hit. So I left [about a year ago] and came to my mother who was living in

Saha
new_ets_user32

the *bastee* [squatter settlement] with my younger brothers and sisters. She [mother] was angry at first but then the people living around us said: “why don’t you send your daughter to garments?” A woman, who is well respected in our neighborhood, said to my mother: “your daughter has been working as servant for a long time. Give her some relief, let us take her to garments.” (Sobhan and Khundker, 70).

I cite this to show that many girls are compelled by their parents to find jobs.

Kibria also observes that some families pressure their daughters to work in the garment industry (Sobhan and Khundker, 72). Due to her family’s economic scarcity, this girl was not even welcomed by her mother even though she had worked for a long time. In this case, there was no need for a negotiation since getting a job was necessary for her survival. Conversely, Aleya asks the religious leader “Can you feed us?” when she comes across “...*maulvis* object to garment work because they say we come into contact with strange men” (Kabeer, 89). This is indeed a powerful stance for Aleya and her question shows her being practical and active rather than being passive, which is expected of Bangladeshi women. Furthermore, “...in challenging the rights of this wider community to regulate their behavior, women workers were also questioning the continued relevance of social norms which they believed belonged to a different time or a different place when the notion of community itself had a very different meaning” (Kabeer, 137).

Then again some of these women with conservative values had to convince themselves to take up work at the industry. The following account is a good example of a conservative woman who uses her rational thinking to come up with a decision.

Islam forbids women to work but Allah won’t do anything for me if I just sit at home. I have to try and help myself, only then Allah will help me...If I have to support my family...is it a *faraz* to work or to sit at home (Kabeer, 89)?

The Koran says it is one’s duty to preserve oneself. So even if we are breaking the Koran by coming outside to work, we are not breaking it fully...It is said in the

Saha
new_ets_user33

Koran that when one's survival is at stake, one can eat anything, even that food which is forbidden by the Koran (Kabeer, 89).

This woman could be religious or secular. She obviously respected the religious authority of the Koran but her perspective on the Koran is rather interesting to explore. This actually is very similar to Taslima Nasrin's proposal to update the Shariah, Islamic law. Although this respondent doesn't directly question the Koran, the questions she raises explain that she wants to work toward changing her socio-economic status.

On the other hand, there are some families even those in dire economic need, who disapprove of their daughter's decision to work in the factory. As explained before due to purdah restrictions, Bangladeshi women are expected to stay within their households and men are the sole breadwinners of the family.

Young single women often have to negotiate their way out of their parent's home; they are not only disapproved of their families but their relatives as well. Parents are concerned that if they work in the industry, their reputations will become tainted and for that, they will face difficulty getting married. As Kabeer states, "Women are clearly aware of the negative views of this wider community. By taking up outside employment, they were effectively accepting the cultural costs such employment entailed" (Kabeer, 88). Below I provide the case of Delowara, which clearly illustrates the negotiation process with her parents as well as her awareness of the "cultural costs for working in the industry" (88). She wanted to work because she did not want to be the burden on her family. She had to stop going to school because her family could not afford to send her to there anymore. She had to request her cousin, her brother and the cousin's wife to mediate with her parents as they have refused to accept her decision to work in the industry.

My father said no, so did my mother. I said, 'if my cousins can do these jobs, why can't I? But my parents were against it because of what people might say, they were afraid I might go off and fall in love with someone, or do something like that. I said, it is better than me just sitting around here. I might be able to earn something. My father talked about loss of honor and chastity so I said to him 'Abba, if I am going to throw away my chastity, I can do that sitting right here. And if I am not going to do it, I can take care of myself even if I do go out to work.'

I told my brother, you explain things to our father and I will explain it to our mother...I then explained to my mother...'If (my cousins) can do these jobs, why can't I?' My brother said to my father, 'You can see that Halima and the others have gone there to work, so what is wrong with Apa going their as well?

I pointed out to her [cousin's wife], 'if I decide to do something so terrible that my parents lose face in our society, if I decide to have a love affair with someone, I can do that even while I am living at home...can't I? I don't need to go there in order to do so. But I am not so silly that I would do something like that to them'. So I explained things to her and she spoke to them and ...finally they agreed. They were mostly worried about my getting involved with some man. There are other things as well. For example, I had never been to Dhaka, so they worried about that as well. They said, 'These are not good times, you don't know what might happen. It might not be safe. Something bad might happen to you' (Kabeer, 110 -111).

Even though Delowara's statement does not represent the negotiation process for every woman in Bangladesh, it gives an overall idea of the process that a woman might go through to persuade their parents. Women depending on their socio economic background as well as marital status experience different kinds of objections. However, the concern of Delowara's parents about her "loss of honor" and her parents "losing their face" over her being involved with a man represent the general concern of every parent in Bangladesh. As mentioned earlier, honor is significant to a women's life because it is deeply rooted in purdah and loosing honor can harm the family's reputation in society. Another aspect of Delowara's remarks that is particularly significant is the notion of going to an unknown place for the first time. Since a majority of garment workers are

Saha
new_ets_user35

from rural areas, they are first-time visitors to the city where finding affordable safe housing has been an unpleasant trauma for many of them.

Kibria on the other hand finds that community support is crucial to many of her respondents. The community in this group helped by providing them with "...information about the [job] availability, salaries and conditions of garments jobs, assistance in finding a job, coming to Dhaka, and locating a place to stay [in Dhaka]" (Sobhan and Khundker, 81). This help is necessary for many of these women to secure a position in the industry. Many of these rural women found their jobs through the factory owners who are from the same village, and in fact, many owners intentionally hired these women. Relatives and other people from the villages also helped many of these women to get their jobs. It is not to say that none of these women faced any objections from the community but rather it was the gradual acceptance of the community as many women from the same village took up work at the factory (Sobhan and Khundker, 81). This finding shows the gradual process of social change that the Bangladesh garment industry is bringing to this society.

Why Work in this Industry?: People migrate to cities to work because they are poor and they need money to survive (Sobhan and Khundker, 62). What's more is that they will make more money in the cities than in the villages. They also have some education which they could use to their advantage in the industry rather than in the village (Zohir and Paul-Majumder, 1996). Kibria finds that women with sewing skills saw working in the industry as a way to move up the socio-economic ladder (Sobhan and Khundker, 70). However, more recent study done by Kabeer (2000) finds other reasons for migrating to cities. She states that the bulk of her women interviewees moved to cities because they didn't have any men in their lives to support them although there were some

Saha
new_ets_user36

women who migrated to cities to maximize their family income, and others due to poverty. The following remarks accentuate Kabeer's findings:

Before my husband's death, I never had to worry about work, we had servants, I knew I was cherished. I never moved alone. I used to wonder how garment workers worked all day and then came home and did the housework while people like us stayed at home all day and yet needed servants to do the housework...Now suddenly I have to worry about how to survive (Kabeer, 102).

The above statement does not only explain why this woman has to take on the factory job but touched on the "double burden" issue of working at home and outside. It is important to mention that husbands are helping out with household work. There are men who work in the house for 2 to 4 hours as their wives are working overtime in the industry. Traditionally domestic work is for females, and male participation in this female sphere recognizes that these men understand the value of their wives' income which is a big social change in the perspective of Bangladesh. Although some families are helping these women by taking on domestic chores, others receive no help and struggle to balance both their jobs (Zohir and Paul- Majumder, 120 & Kabeer, 122-124). Zohir and Paul-Majumder also find that long-term female factory workers were in risk of getting divorced from their husbands. "...About 33 percent of the married female workers said that their relationship with their husbands has improved, while 6 percent said that it has deteriorated after joining the garment industry. For the rest, the relationship has not changed" (Zohir and Paul-Majumder, 121). This shows that although a small percentage of men are not accepting their wives' role as factory workers, a majority of them are not opposed to their wives working in the industry. They have accepted their working wives and had no objection to their decision to break out of purdah norms. As one woman stated:

One person income is not enough for the whole family. We could not buy clothes. My job has helped to improve the living standards of the family. We would have found it difficult to educate the girls...My husband had no objections. My father was upset, but he said, I got you married, I no longer responsible for you, it is up to your husband (Kabeer, 109).

This person on the other hand opts for factory work to improve her family's financial position. Like this woman, many others are also working in the industry to improve their socio-economic status (Sobhan and Khundker, 73). This woman, like others in the remainder of the paper, is interested in educating her daughters. She is also one of those women who received no objection from her family, in this case from her husband. Her father's objection was not valued because she is married, and after marriage women become the responsibility of their husbands, not their parents.

On the other hand, some women work to secure their future, particularly when they are childless. Men in these households traditionally get married for a second time and first wives are usually deserted by their husbands. Many women in this situation decide to take a job in the industry (Sobhan and Khundker, 74).

As it shows that need of financial support was greater for some than others and those with urgent economic need had to digress from the societal disapproval and take up work in the factory (Kabeer, 86 & 332). This lack of support mostly from their husbands elicits the risk of patriarchal authority on the male body of Bangladesh. Kabeer further contends,

For women who had grown up expecting to live a sheltered life, looking after their husbands and children, and in turn being cared for, and protected by them, but, instead, found themselves on their own, abandoned, widowed, divorced, deceived, 'patriarchal risk' had materialized as harsh reality. They took up factory work as a response to a perceived contraction in their choices, not an expansion. What defined their 'distress' was consequently not poverty per se, but economic need mediated by gender disadvantage" (Kabeer 2000, 332

Kabeer's last sentence above is of particular importance for my thesis as I ask the following question; in what ways are they challenging and changing the societal norms of this country? As mentioned earlier in this paper, "gender disadvantage" for women is not a new phenomenon; Bangladeshi/Bengali women have been discriminated for centuries now. However, what is interesting is that with the advent of the garment industry women are challenging this "gender disadvantage" by breaking out of their traditional purdah norms and migrating to cities to work in the garment industry. Clearly, the garment industry has played an enormous role in this shift as it has opened doors by bringing income to millions of Bangladeshi women. Kabeer also finds that women moved to cities because of the availability of jobs and "...partly to escape the restrictive confines of village *shamaj* or community" (Kabeer, 68). Kabeer's latter finding is interesting and explains the initiation of women's willpower to change their socio-economic status even if it is by disregarding the traditional rules and regulations of society.

Life in the Garment Industry

Becoming a Garment Worker: The search for jobs begin after women migrated to the cities. All the workers interviewed by Zohir and Paul-Majumder reported that they applied for a position in the industry and subsequent to the application procedure they were interviewed and obtained their positions. It is important to recall that many of these workers are illiterate and barely know how to sign their names. So, then how do they become a worker? Researchers have observed that a majority of the workers had families working in the industry who helped them to get a job. There were others who were helped by their neighbors, friends and relatives; although 30 % of females and 37% of males reported that they were not helped by anyone. Factories post their job openings on

Saha
new_ets_user39

the newspapers as well as their factory gates and many get their jobs through these mediums. To land a position at the factory, workers wait from 5 days to over a month and because of this short period of time migrant workers rarely go through the problem of being unemployed (Zohir and Paul-Majumder, 68).

Skills: Zohir and Paul-Majumder found that 29% of the workers worked before as small businessman and laborers, hence, they had work experience compared to only 7% of women (of which 39% were tailors and 32% were housemaids). According to the researchers, garment industry prefers unskilled workers because of their cheap labor; since they lack experience they are in a no position to bargain for higher pays. As they state, “for 90 per cent of these workers (operators and sewing helpers), a job at the garment industry was their first job outside home” (Zohir and Paul-Majumder, 22).

Job Description: Workers below 21 years of age hold low position jobs as sewing and finishing helpers compared to older workers who hold high positions, such as quality controller, cutting master/cutter, and supervisors. Child workers mostly work as sewing and finishing helpers. They find that people who studied up to sixth grade work as quality controller, cutting master/cutter, and supervisors and that these jobs are dominated by the male workers. On the other hand, women, since they have less education than men, dominate the jobs of sewing and finishing helpers. Although factory owners would like to hire women for the quality controller, cutting master/cutter and supervisors positions, their lack of education leave the owners no choice but to hire male workers. Zohir and Paul-Majumder point out that “females with higher education are not taking up jobs at the garment industry as such jobs are not considered prestigious by the

Saha
new_ets_user40

society” (Zohir and Paul-Majumder, 21). The above statement depicts how societal norms enforce the limitations on Bangladeshi women.

Hours and Remuneration: Garment workers in Bangladesh work more than 9 hours a day even though labor laws allow them to work only 9 hours a day. Zohir and Paul-Majumder find that “On an average, a worker had to work 11-12 hours a day. Of the total 671 workers, 10 percent worked the normal 8 hours a day, 20 percent worked 2 hours of overtime, 35 percent worked 4 hours of overtime, and 30 percent worked for 6 hours of overtime” (Zohir and Paul-Majumder, 29). The work hours varied for different job categories as well as for male and female. High position workers such as supervisor and cutting masters worked an hour more than operators and sewing helpers, the low position workers; men worked more hours compared to women. To meet the delivery deadlines some workers have to work the whole night; this is mostly the workers at the finishing section. Even though the Factory Act of 1965 states that employees should receive a weekly holiday, there are workers who do not receive such provision even in a month. One out of 32 factories, according to Zohir and Paul-Majumder receives a tea break and the rest of the factories do not provide any other breaks before lunch. The usual lunch break for 62% was half an hour and for 36% it was one hour. The Factory Act of 1965 states that workers should be provided with one hour or two half- hour breaks every six hours of their work. However, it is rarely the case for the Bangladeshi garment workers; they work for long hours with unpaid short breaks (Zohir and Paul-Majumder, 30-33).

To regulate work hours, management used time cards for the workers. Workers on the other hand do not regularly get their time cards; thus, only 45% of the workers knew

Saha
new_ets_user41

their exact work hours. Some of these workers did not see this as a problem and stated that they believed the management. Zohir and Paul-Majumder find that garment workers did not receive their overtime payment regularly even though the labor laws stipulate that it should be paid weekly. The factory management uses this regulation to control the turn-over rate for the workers and to pay their overtime money four weeks to four months from the actual due date.

According to Zohir and Paul-Majumder, these overtime hours are not required by the management even though "...it is often alleged that the workers in the garment industry are compelled to work overtime against their will" (Zohir and Paul-Majumder, 37). They observe that 63% of the interviewees were not compelled to change their decision to not to work but 37% unwillingly worked for one time only. It is worth mentioning that workers are not only working for long hours, they are also being cheated of their money. Factory workers according to the Factory Act 1965 are to be paid double the basic salary for their overtime hours which does not happen for these workers. "The basic salary...is expected to be 45-47 percent of the total salary," and the workers lack of knowledge in this wage distribution keep them from receiving their own income (Zohir and Paul-Majumder, 38).

Women workers are more discriminated along this line as they are paid less than their male counterparts, "...the female worker earns only 66 percent of the male worker's pay, and take home income...on an average, the monthly pay of a worker was tk. 1053, while overtime was tk. 363 and other benefits tk. 34 per month" (Zohir and Paul-Majumder, 44-45). It is not to say that everyone earns the same amount; sewing helpers, finishing helpers, cutting helpers, iron men, folding workers, respectively earned the

Saha
new_ets_user42

following amount: 464, 624, 887, 911 and 923 taka. It should be emphasized that since July 1994, the minimum wage was fixed to 930 taka per month although it is not clear if it is being followed through on by the factory managements (Zohir and Paul-Majumder, 45 & 155).

Working Condition: The working conditions in most of the industry are appalling and unsafe. There were factories with inadequate fire protection and many fire incidents took place in many factories. Many workers couldn't escape from the factory due to the locked gate and died on the spot. Zohir and Paul-Majumder find no training personnel who knew how to use the 'fire extinguishers and buckets with sand' in case of fire even though all the sampled factories had this equipment. There are laws about fire safety and work safety but none are fully enforced in Bangladesh. Factory Act 1965 asserts that "...the first aid boxes are to be kept on the premises, one box for every 150 workers and where more than 500 workers are employed, there needs to be an ambulance and a room provided with a qualified medical practitioner in charge, assisted by at least one qualified nurse" (Zohir and Paul-Majumder, 107). These however were not seen in the sampled factories except for the first aid boxes which also did not meet the full criteria. Additionally, none of the firms had enough bathrooms for the workers.

The majority of workers (73% of the females and 56% of the males) interviewed by the scholars knew nothing about the labor laws and according to Zohir and Paul-Majumder this is mostly why workers were not being protected by these laws. Management did not find implementing the laws to be necessary since no worker showed interest in the matter. However, a very small percentage of workers who knew about the labor laws participated in the trade unions. Many did not take part in the trade unions

Saha
new_ets_user43

because they are not aware of them. Others chose not to participate for fear of losing their jobs because many factories do not allow the formation of any trade unions (Zohir and Paul-Majumder, 126-129).

When it came to workplace harassment, a large number of Zohir and Paul-Majumder's respondents reported being nicely treated by their co-workers and their management (81). Kibria in contrast find that 1/4 of the women were harassed by their co-workers and supervisors but did not mention anything about the management. As she states, "Typically the harassment took the form of persistent demands from the man that the woman agree to marry him, coupled with threats and retaliation in the form of unsavory rumors and gossip about the sexual reputation of the woman" (Sobhan and Khundker, 79). Additionally, Zohir and Paul-majumder find a small percentage of workers were beaten in the work place and 2 percent mentioned to a rape that had taken place in the industry (95).

Living Condition: As indicated by Zohir and Paul-Majumder, "...73% of the workers lived with their family, while 17 percent lived in the mess, 8 percent in the relative's house, one percent in factory accommodation, and only two workers (of 671) lived in the government quarter" (Zohir and Paul-Majumder, 91). Women living in the mess (a brick building with a tin shed) with 5 to 6 other independent women constitute the social change that women are able to experience by taking jobs in the industry (Zohir and Paul-Majumder, 91). Messes however are owned by "*mastans* or local touts" and women who are living there are consistently vigilant about their safety. There are about 16 percent of women who live in the slums which are not only unsafe but also unhealthy. They are always on the run since these slums are illegal; therefore, they are often evicted

Saha
new_ets_user44

by the government: 19% of these workers were harassed and 5% were attacked by *mastans*; some reported being harassed by police officers. Four percent of the respondents reported that some of their colleagues were raped on the street. Workers who walked to work, sometimes more than one kilometer often had to face these kinds of violence (Zohir and Paul-Majumder, 89 & 96). Kibria states that some of these women she interviewed reported of being harassed in their neighborhoods (Sobhan and Khundker, 79).

Even though the standard of living for many of these women is dreadful, there are many who are living an improved life due to their garment jobs. As Zohir and Paul-Majumder find, by working in the factories women were able to build better homes for themselves. People who lived in a tin shed now moved to brick buildings; 87% of them have electricity, 66% have gas and 68% are enjoying potable tap water. “Before coming to work in the garment industry, most workers (51 percent) used to live in houses with a tin roof, 27% lived in *katcha* or [mud] houses, and 22% in *pucca* or [brick] houses. After coming to work, 43% lived in *pucca*, 46% in tin-roof and 12% in *katcha* houses” (Zohir and Paul-Majumder, 121). The difference in the percentages show, that by gaining income from the industry, many have improved their living standards.

Health Condition: Female workers suffered from more health-related problems than male workers; all these workers reported that their health had deteriorated after entering the industry. Eye troubles, headache, urine infections, cough, fever, fatigue are the common type of illnesses. As maintained by Zohir and Paul-Majumder, these illnesses are associated with the working conditions of the firms. Most of these firms are small and congested; workers have restricted access to the toilet, which perhaps explains

Saha

new_ets_user45

their urinary tract infection. They also suggest that long hours of work and insufficient food intake explain their weakness and fainting at work, particularly during the summer season. Female workers spend 12% more of their income on their healthcare compared to their male workers. Some workers come to work even when they are sick; they rarely take leave unless they are severely ill. Workers with less income often have to take leave due to their illness and as observed by Zohir and Paul-Majumder, they are “relatively more malnourished” (Zohir and Paul-Majumder, 104). This also could be explained in the account that some of these female workers do not spend money on food and starve themselves.

In the above sections, I utilized Zohir, Paul-Majumder and Kabeer’s extensive research to provide some background information on garment workers which I believe is necessary to understand their lives. It is true that some of the workers went through, and perhaps are presently going through, a great deal of trouble for working in the industry. It is also debatable that women have stepped into another form of patriarchal oppression by the entrepreneurs and the state. Ahmed’s observation strongly supports that by working in the factory, garment workers lost their ‘collective voices’ even though it has gained them ‘individual voices.’ As Ahmed states,

In a collective sense things have become worse for women’s rights. Can a sweatshop ever be a vision of a way out for women? Becoming a garment worker and keeping your job is synonymous with losing collective voice and staying mute. The women of the garment factory are vulnerable for economic and social reasons. They are more insecure than their rural sisters because of their need to maintain class boundaries and the higher cost of living (Ahmed, 5).

By “mute,” Ahmed meant the lack of interests in unionizing since women are fearful of losing their jobs by fighting for their rights. Zaman’s findings also echoes Ahmed’s observations as she indicates, “...the export-led garment industries have adverse impacts

Saha
new_ets_user46

on women, resulting in the erosion of women's rights ...consequently, women's employment, rather than freeing them from oppressive forces, intensifies and reinforces women's secondary position and marginalize in the society" (Zaman, 1).

Ahmed and Zaman's finding are critical and these points deserve full attention in order to enhance the lives of these women. It should be noted that many NGO's such as the National Labor Committee and the Clean Clothes Campaign are working in favor of these workers and Bangladeshi Garment Manufacturers and Exporters Association has looked into some of these problems. With some outside help, the workers themselves have initiated trade unions to change their working conditions. Since the 1990's positive changes started to take place, such as the enforcement of a minimum wage of 930 taka a month. Many NGO's have been providing housing, and training centers, schools for child workers, and health care centers have been established for the wellbeing of the workers.

Now I will discuss the positive changes of becoming a garment worker in more detail, which, I believe, to a greater extent outweighs the negative changes garment workers experienced in the course of their working life. What I mean by positive change is the sense of control these women have over their income, over their lives, over their families, over their future, and most of all, their presence in the public place which is not only threatening the patriarchal power but challenging the social norms of the country. This is not so say that workers in general should experience any troubles (i.e. harassment) in their work place but rather that these working conditions are in the process of gradual improving. Here I speak of the female garment workers and the positive changes that they have acquired after becoming a garment worker.

Personal, Social, and Economic Change for Working Mothers

Zohir and Paul-Majumder, find that "...90% percent of the female workers were unemployed prior to joining the industry. Thus their earnings from the garment industry are likely to have raised their economic status" (Zohir and Paul-Majumder, 123). They also find that 60 % of the female garment workers considered working in the factory to be good/very good. It is their ability to live a better life, do more shopping, have a part-time maid, make decisions, and above all, their self-confidence that allow them to judge factory work. All of these roles provided by the garment industry are new to many of these women. Now, they hire, instead of work as maids; this is a sign of middle class status (Zohir and Paul-Majumder, 125). Additionally, according to Sultan, "...the factory work has provided numerous destitute, poor, rural-migrant women with a means of self-support" (Sultan 1997). As one woman expressed it:

Factory work enable me to stand on my own feet, when my family could not feed me, and my husband could not keep me either. This work has saved me and many other women who had no other way to survive (Sultan, 1).

Indeed factory work enhanced and empowered many of these women's lives.

Ahmed and Bould's work on working mothers, in which they interviewed 120 mothers, find that these married mothers are "challenging a patriarchal system and express control over their lives and their finances" but observe that "this challenge is not based on a newly found autonomy in factory work; instead, the challenge is because of a patriarchal family system that no longer guarantees them male support" (Ahmed and Bould, 2). Ahmed and Bould also find that in a patriarchal system, where a man is supposed be the sole supporter of the household, needs make it impossible to maintain that patriarchal role, hence, the patriarchal system is at risk. Their findings strongly echo

Saha
new_ets_user48

Kabeer's argument that abandoned, separated, divorced, and widowed women are working in the factory due to their lack of male support (Kabeer, 332 & Ahmed and Bould, 2-3). What is interesting here is that these women with no male support disregarded societal scrutiny and migrated to cities to find jobs.

Garment jobs not only gave these women a voice over their husband's family but also allowed them to financially help their parental families as well as plan for their daughters' future. Eight of these mothers studied up to 10th grade and the rest of them studied up to 5th grade or less; they were all between the ages of 18 to 35. The majority of them had one or two child and earned up to \$37.50; 95% of the interviewees came from impoverished rural families. When asked for the preference of sons since "under the patriarchal, patrilineal, and patrilocal family system, women and men must have sons because sons are the key to security in old age," these mothers showed little interest in this idea of patriarchal authority (Ahmed and Bould, 3). As one mother told her husband in response to his need for a son,

I told him that there is no difference between sons and daughters these days. I want my daughters to be educated and have a better life than I did. One able daughter is better than 10 literate sons. Even though he occasionally brings up the issue, he cannot do much about it. I am bringing in a substantial amount of money to the family income and he knows he depends on that too (cited in Ahmed and Bould, 3).

This is a powerful viewpoint that requires further analysis. It shows that income-earning mothers have a say in her choices to have male children or not, which not only goes against the idea of patriarchy but also poses a threat to the overall institution.

These women understand the significance of education and realize that education will bring financial stability to their daughters' lives. Their income provides them with self-confidence and power as it show from this phrase "he cannot do much about it." This

Saha
new_ets_user49

is perhaps not the case for women without income, but for others it directly challenges the patriarchal authority in Bangladesh. Forty percent of married mothers, as Ahmed and Bould find, financially help their parents, although the majority of their income goes to their husband's families, a requirement of a traditional patrilineal system. This financial help is a sign of change in their economic status which results in economic power. As Blumberg theorizes, "when a married woman in a patrilineal system is able to make investments in her natal kin, this represents an important component of her economic power. It also represents an investment in her future" (qtd. in Ahmed and Bould, 3).

By providing money to their natal families, these women are not only gaining economic power, they are also changing the social norms by taking on the traditional role of a son which is to help parents in their old age. As mentioned earlier, parents prefer sons because of their economic value; sons have more economic value than daughters. Traditionally, sons are also held responsible to take care of their parents when parents are no longer able to help themselves. Now however, the weakening of the patriarchal system generates a question; based on the phenomenon of women taking care of their parents: will parents prefer daughters over sons?

This income improved women's decision-making status in their families; married couples are making decisions together, which is not the case in a traditional household, where the male head of the household makes decisions. Zohir and Paul-Majumder's findings largely echo Ahmed and Bould's findings that "...Women aged 25-29 years were the most liberated as 56 per cent of them spent their income on their own decision" (Zohir and Paul-Majumder, 115). Moreover, married women had more control over their income compared to unmarried women since their parents mostly made the decision for

Saha
new_ets_user50

them (115). Ahmed and Bould affirm that finding as they observe, “78% of the 64 married women reported that control over their lives increased a lot with their employment. Over 70% of these mothers had their own savings or had made investments. Their typical investment was in gold or in buying back the land that their parents had lost” (Ahmed and Bould, 4). As one respondent states,

I retain a part of my salary every month and hand over the rest to my husband. I do this willingly because he is good at managing family expenses. We make all the expenditure decisions together. He puts lots of value in what I have to say, because our family depends on my income. I send the money I retain to my brother and his family in the village, and my husband is okay with that (qtd. in Ahmed and Bould, 4).

Being able to buy gold and land reinforces the economic power they gained after working in the factory. This economic security makes them self-sufficient and explains their reasons for agreeing with the following statement “One able daughter is better than 10 literate sons,” as many women did not prefer a male child over a female child (Ahmed and Bould, 3).

Unlike married mothers, separated and deserted mothers have no male support in their lives. Why are these women separated and deserted? One obvious answer to this question is that they are the followers of Islam. In Islam a man can have multiple wives, which causes many problems for women who do not prefer to be the second wife and separate from the husband. On the other hand, some men divorce their first wife to take their second wife and in most of these cases they do not provide for child support, compelling these women to find work. Many women who stay as their second wives do not receive any financial support from their husbands because these are landless families and are too poor to maintain both of their livelihoods. In this scenario, the first wife becomes deserted and often goes back to her natal family. Unfortunately, due to poor

Saha
new_ets_user51

income and landlessness they too are forced to find separate living for them as “A deserted adult daughter and her children living in her father’s or her brother’s household would be a financial burden and cause of shame” (Ahmed and Bould, 4).

To help themselves financially, these women moved to the city and worked in the industry; however, many of them worked as maids and construction workers before the advent of the industry. Women prefer to work in the industry since other sector of work such as maid and construction work have no prestige compared to some prestige garner at the industry. One separated mother states,

When my husband remarried and stopped supporting me, I knew that I had to look for a way to support myself and my little girl. My brothers wanted to help but they are poor. So I decided to come to Dhaka to seek work and ended up in this factory. I am not earning a lot, nor am I extremely comfortable, but I retained my dignity and am able to feed my child (Ahmed and Bould, 4).

This power to leave their husband is a remarkable change in this patriarchal society in which the husband conventionally decides to end the marriage. “Over half (30 of 56) of these unmarried women chose to leave their husbands ...and over three fifths (63.3%) of these separated women indicated that they will not marry again” (Ahmed and Bould, 5). In a society where women traditionally, have no say in their marriages, but are now making the decision whether to get married or not is similarly extraordinary and a powerful change in the societal norms. It should be noted however that some of these women’s families disapproved of their decision to divorce their husbands but their desire to provide a better life for their daughters help them overcome this separation from their natal families.

Shift from Dependence to Primary Breadwinner: Implications for Self-confidence of Women: So what is the role they play in the family as they are not bound

Saha
new_ets_user52

by the patriarchal system? They are not divorced, separated and deserted women anymore. Now they are the primary breadwinners and the head of their households. Thirty percent of female respondents of Zohir and Paul-Majumder were too primary breadwinners and 37% of them were head of their households. It is worth noting that female-headed households are on the rise and there are approximately 25% female-headed households among the landless (Kabeer, 62). As Zohir and Paul-Majumder express, "This ...reflects that women were migrating out of rural areas on their own, leaving their husbands or parents behind" (Zohir and Paul-Majumder, 115). The account of one separated respondent illustrates,

I have no desire to go through that again. Marriages do not work these days. I am happy the way I am. I am not accountable to anybody, nor dependent on anybody. I wish both my daughters could get an education and have a better job in the future. Unfortunately, I am not able to do that yet, and my daughter helps me by bringing in her own income. But we are on our own and that is what I think is important (Ahmed and Bould, 5).

This woman left her husband due to a failed marriage and migrated to the city in search of an income and independent life. "We are on our own" is precisely the type of independent thinking that is generating so much attention in the patriarchal society of Bangladesh. The rise of female headed households portrays the shift that is taking place in this culture; women are not only making financial contributions to their families but became the "men" in the family. For these women who are replacing the men of the households, the garment industry was a god-send for these separated women. They are able to feed themselves, they are independent; they are not a burden on anyone as one mother articulates, "My family does not have anything to do with me, they were extremely disappointed and angry when I decided to leave my husband after he remarried. I barely make it with the salary I receive, having to take care of two children.

Saha
new_ets_user53

But I am on my own, and happy that I am not begging or dependent on anybody. I shall continue working as long as possible” (Ahmed and Bould, 5). It is worth noting that women living with their natal families are at advantage as far as child care is concerned over women living without their natal families.

Deserted mothers on the other hand, have more advantages over separated mothers. Even though these women were not divorced, they are free from their husband’s control and can remarry, 61% of the deserted women “...expressed control over their future marriage decisions.” This finding turned around the traditional arranged marriage pattern for women (Ahmed and Bould, 5). Although parents mediate many of these remarriages, making their voices heard is a significant change in traditional Bangladeshi society. These women have taken on the expected role of son, which is to provide for their parents financially; many of these women are taking care of their siblings along with parents. Even with their low income, they send remittances to their natal families; Ahmed and Bould find that 43.3% and 53.8% separated and deserted mothers respectively help their families. Some of these parents have no other income and depend on their daughter’s income. This is a shift in the traditional patriarchal household in which the fathers are solely responsible for their family’s wellbeing. The following comments explain this role reversal between male and female, in this case father and daughter.

My family depends a lot on my monthly remittance because we are a large family and very poor. Even though my parents reluctantly approved of my work, there was no other option. Now, they not only approve of it, but depend considerably on my income. They hope that things will not continue to be like this; they hope that I will be married again and be taken care of. I do not have any such illusions. I know I will have to take care of myself and family (Ahmed and Bould, 5).

Changing Household Patterns: This statement explains that these women benefit from the economic status they have received from the garment industry. This

industry provided them with “cash” that was not available to them prior to entering the industry. If they did have access to income through other informal jobs, it was of insignificant amount. It also sheds light on the disapproval that many women received from their families despite their poor economic status. Most importantly, it reveals the self-sufficiency these women acquired through this industry by earning capital to support themselves and their families. These women not only disregard their parent’s wishes for a remarriage but see it as an “illusion.” They utterly disregarded the support of a male figure in their lives which threatens the core ideal of the patriarchal order in which women are taken care of by men. The findings of Ahmed and Bould were striking and I strongly agree with their conclusion as they articulate, “The most radical challenge to the patriarchal, patrilineal, and patrilocal family system is found in a new form of household, a household in which the parent is living with the adult daughter and not the adult son and daughter-in-law” (Ahmed and Bould, 6). One of the interviewees brought her mother to the city because her brother did not treat her nicely and this shows many opportunities this industry has brought to these women. Prior to the industry, these women perhaps retained no choice to take care of their parents but now many are living the reality of a primary householder.

Now I go back to my initial question which is: how has working in this industry helped or hindered their socio-economic status, family status, and their own status in their families? This research confirms that by working in the garment industry these working mothers improved their socioeconomic status, family status and their own status. Most of the women in this study had an ‘uncomfortable childhood,’ their parents were either agricultural workers or had small businesses. Now they have their own savings and

Saha
new_ets_user55

investment. Even though they earned low wages, they were independent and comfortable with their lives. They were not only taking care of themselves but their families as well and that has improved their status within their families. They value their dignity of not begging others for food and earning their own income. This explains how their own status has increased due to this job. Their experiences of being illiterates and not being able to study allowed them to understand that their children, particularly their daughters should be educated for a better future. Everyone in the study had high aspirations toward their children's education; some kept tutors for their children. These women's motivation to hire tutors for their children which is an "urban middle class" trend demonstrates that they are striving for the status of an urban middle class family. 90 % of these interviewees kept tutors for their children since they could not help them in person. Their enthusiasm to provide a good education for their children by keeping a tutor stresses their improved socio-economic status (Ahmed and Bould, 7). According to Ahmed and Bould, a greater part of these working mothers believe that the role of a daughter has changed and will continue to change in the future. Moreover, the importance of a son over a daughter seemed less significant to these mothers; they preferred both boys and girls as long as they were "socially and economically capable children" (Ahmed and Bould 7).

What I found interesting in this research and the testimonies of working mothers is the lack of emphasis on their daughter's marriage. While the working mothers mention the importance of their children being "socially and economically capable," their statements do not give us any prospects on their daughter's marriage life. However this silence brings about the changes these women are bringing to their daughters lives.

Saha
new_ets_user56

Instead of thinking about their daughters getting married someday as many Bangladeshi parents dream of this day, these women are thinking about making them educated and “socially and economically capable” (Ahmed and Bould, 7). They want a better future for their daughters.

This in fact explains that these women are independent; they can think for themselves; they can take care of themselves; they can take care of their families; and they are ambitious. This assertiveness to work and express their thoughts is a change from traditional Bangladeshi women described by Begum,

(Village) women feel no urge to view themselves with detachment in relation to their culture; they do not seem to display any conscious inclination towards analysis or objectivity in regard to their pursuits. They do not explain the reasons for doing what they do, for behaving as they behave. They simply perform their ‘duty’ and behave according to custom (S. Begum qtd. in Kabeer, 37).

Research by Ahmed and Bould and the testimonies of the working mothers shows otherwise about their “inclination in regard to their pursuits.” These mothers broke away from their expected traditional role of a compliant wife and moved to the city to become independent. They decided not to take part in their husband’s wishes to be the second wife and sought for divorce from their husbands. They made a rational choice to detach from their parents to keep their dignity by not being a burden on their natal families.

In a situation of poverty and scarcity women suffer most in the traditional society of Bangladesh. The sanctification of motherhood, self-sacrifice, and obedience to the husband as head of the family leads to women putting their own interest last – always...Less educated in general than men their greater ignorance keeps them fearful of the outside world. They lack time and freedom from family duties to seek any remunerative employment outside the household (Gerald qtd. in Kabeer, 38).

These women stepped outside their houses and migrated miles away from their homes to seek “remunerative employment”. These women acted on their pursuit of happiness and

Saha
new_ets_user57

did not sacrifice their desire to be the first wife. By leaving their husbands, they deliberately disobeyed the expectations of a woman. It is true that many are making very little money but their acknowledgments of that income toward their life say otherwise. They didn't sit around the house because it was expected of a wife, a mother or a daughter as it was decades ago. They acted on their basic intuition of survival by seeking work. As Islam observes,

Brought up from childhood to believe that she exists only as daughter, wife and mother to some men, her whole existence is oriented to serve and please men. She is ignorant of the world outside the home and develops no outlook on life. She has no ambition in life and no desire or urge to improve her lot (Islam qtd. in Kabeer, 38).

Some of these working women admitted the expectation of serving as a wife and in return taking care of by their husbands but their circumstances changed their view point. They did not want to please their husbands by being the co-wife. They did not care about what other would say if they left their husbands. They did what they thought would be best for themselves. They are not ignorant of the outside world anymore. They are ambitious to lead a good life for themselves and for their children.

Personal, Social, and Economic Change for Single Daughters

According to a study done by Kibria, all 33 unmarried daughters work in the industry for a secure future. By providing for themselves, "...they are reducing the burden and responsibility of the family for one's upkeep and well-being" (Sobhan and Khundker, 76). This is perhaps due to their families' poor economic status as 25 of them belonged to landless families. It is interesting to note that a larger part of these women are the oldest daughters of the family and culturally the oldest of all siblings are expected to do more for the families than their youngest ones. They are obliged to become the role

Saha
new_ets_user58

model for their younger siblings and help their families with household chores. This is perhaps why this group of women felt the need to seek a job, so they could help their family financially. The same can be said for the married daughters as well since many of them were also the oldest daughters who took on the role of oldest sons. Nonetheless, the jobs in the garment industry were more appealing, had more status and were seemed more modern to unmarried daughters than working as agricultural workers or as a domestic servant. Furthermore, jobs in the industry are 'less physically taxing' and pay a lot more money than jobs in the informal sectors (Sobhan and Khundker, 77). The following explanation summarizes many of their reasons to choose garment works over other jobs.

What I heard about garments work was that it was easy for girls without much education to find a job. I heard about the pay; the pay is higher than what you make in the village. There are no jobs (*chakri*) in the village; you can make some money raising chickens or working for other people. Garment work is difficult, but it is easier on the body than cultivating crops, and you get paid every month. Garment work is also good because you go to the office every day, and you learn some new work (Sobhan and Khundker, 77).

Unmarried women in this sense opt for factory work. However, economic scarcity and lack of jobs were not the only reasons for these women to migrate to the cities. As the following testimony exemplifies, women work to earn money for their dowries since marriages are costly in Bangladesh.

There was nothing for me to do in the village. My father talked of giving me in marriage, but it is difficult these days for those who are poor; everyone wants money, a cow, a bed, a watch. How can my father afford these things? In my village there are many girls who work in garments. I thought, if I go and work with them then at least I will be feeding myself. I will not be a burden. And if I can learn the work well, then may be in sometime I can pay for the education of my younger brothers and sisters (Sobhan and Khundker, 78).

Saha
new_ets_user59

Families who cannot provide for their daughters marriage do not object to their daughters working in the factory. It was the case for the girl who provided the above statement.

These girls help their families by not being a burden on them as Kibria finds that not all of these girls regularly send money to their families. They do however occasionally send money along with other gift items. Kibria's finding is worth emphasizing here that dowry in these daughter's lives is not only the material goods, but their income also becomes part of the dowry. Therefore, these girls are also helping their parents by paying for their own marriages which is traditionally paid for by the parents (Sobhan and Khundker, 81).

Shift to Choice in Marriage Partners: Zohir and Paul-Majumder's finding on the other hand is relatively different than Kibria's. As they report, unmarried factory daughters are now deciding whom to marry. This is a rather unusual phenomenon for unmarried girls because marriages are traditionally arranged by their parents. Nevertheless their new found identity as factory worker allowed them to bring a change to this tradition. Now they decide that they will not marry anyone from the villages and many are saving up for their dowry. Although some reported that by working in the industry, their prospective marriage proposal decreased, for others it was seen as a good thing. Working in the factory in fact increased their chances of getting married. It should be noted that because of the bad name associated with the female garment workers many of their male co-workers prefer to marry girls from their villages instead of marrying their female co-workers. On the other hand, women are more interested in marrying their colleagues than marrying someone from outside (Zohir and Paul-Majumder, 118). These women too are challenging the patriarchal society. Even though, compared to the married daughters, these unmarried daughters are helping their parents less. They have broken out

Saha
new_ets_user60

of their purdah norms by working with the male workers. They are not only earning income but helping their parents indirectly by being one less mouth to feed for their parents.

Is This a Shift toward Secularism?

In this section I examine if the changes in the women's lives brought upon by the garment industry can be described as a shift toward secularism in Bangladesh. This is a speculative section since there is no research on this question. When we hear the Taslima Nasrin case and the issuing of fatwa to NGO's, a secular change in this context seems far from expected in this country. Taslima Nasrin, an advocate of women's rights, a secular activist, was issued a *fatwa*, an Islamic ruling, in this case a death threat, by Muslims fundamentalists of Bangladesh for her scrutiny of Islam (a debatable topic). To escape the *fatwa*, she has been in exile for many years. There are millions of Bangladeshi women who are becoming victims of ruthless physical and social abuses, which suggest that Bangladesh stands far from being a secular country. Religious leaders issuing *fatwas* to the NGO's because they believe that NGO's are turning the women to Christianity threatens the lives of many Bangladeshi women. Not only do they think that voting for women is 'un-Islamic,' they convince women not to get their child vaccinated because "...vaccines come from "Christian lands" and contain extracts from pigs and dogs, two animals considered unclean in Islam and prohibited for consumption" (Shehabuddin, 1021). In most cases these children die.

Most importantly, when the constitution of the country is based on Islam as "...the country disregarded the principle of secularism in favor of Islam," we can begin to doubt the immediate chances for secularism (Huque and Akhter, 200). Therefore,

Saha
new_ets_user61

women's entry into the labor force is perhaps not going to bring back the secular principles that Bangladesh was founded on. However, I argue that the overwhelming majority of Bangladeshi women's entry into the labor force, in this case the garment industry, to a greater extent, is challenging the social norms of Bangladesh. This phenomenon of women's entry into the public sphere is implicitly challenging the patriarchy which is reinforced by religion, two intertwined factors greatly affecting secularization. As Ahmed and Bould find, patriarchy in Bangladesh is at risk because of men's inability to provide for their family (Ahmed and Bould, 2004). Therefore, I believe that religious beliefs will decrease when the socio-economic strength of patriarchy begins to crumble as women's strength increases on many, but not all, levels.

According to Inglehart and Baker, "Modernization theorists from Karl Marx to Daniel Bell have argued that economic development brings pervasive cultural changes" (Inglehart and Baker, 19). The current situation of Bangladesh in fact is a foolproof example of this argument. Economic scarcity and the loss of patriarchal support pushed these women to leave their private space and enter into the public space. This entry along with their economic status gave these women new identities. They are garment workers; they are primary earners and they are the head of the households. Particularly the latter two roles challenge the patriarchal system of Bangladesh that men are the sole provider of the family. Now it is not the sons that take care of their old parents, it is the daughters who take on the roles of the expected sons. Not only are these women providing for their families, they are also deciding on whom to marry. They are taking part in making household decisions and these findings illustrate the changes that have taken place after the advent of the garment industry.

It is also worth emphasizing that entry into the garment industry did not only bring changes to the lives of the women and but the society as well. The Bangladeshi garment industry generated tolerance and understanding among the rural people, the most strictly purdah-observing citizens of the country. I say this because the majority of the garment workers are of rural origins and Bangladesh is 80% rural. This is truly an extraordinary change in the context of Bangladesh where women have been culturally, socially, and religiously oppressed for centuries. This does not however suggest that women are released from their traditional duties of being good mothers, good daughters, and good wives.

This also does not suggest that by working in the factory women are no longer oppressed by the society and in fact their work conditions clearly illustrate that they are being oppressed by the industry as well. However, here I argued that by working in the garment industry Bangladeshi women have become more independent and empowered and this empowerment is to some extent liberated them. These women are neither religious nor secular. According to Shehabuddin, "...poor rural women's actions are motivated by different and often contradictory concerns at different times, and it is nearly impossible to classify any one person as either pro-secularist or pro-Islamist, as either a victim or a resister" (Shehabuddin, 1032). This brings us back to my earlier question: what is the religious nature of these garment workers? Even though I agree with Shehabuddin, some of the testimonies convince me that Bangladeshi women are undergoing a secular change. The following testimony demonstrates the unwillingness of a woman to vote for a religious party because of their extremely conservative behavior toward Bangladeshi women: "If the Jama'at comes to power, they'll say that I can't leave

Saha
new_ets_user63

the house anymore to earn a living. Who's is going to feed me and my children then”

(Shehabuddin, 1039)? This type of practical thinking highlights the escape from religious and cultural dominance and supports the inclination toward socio-economic change.

Bibliography

Adnan, Shapan

1990 'Birds in a Cage'" Institutional Factors and Changes in Women's Position in Bangladesh. Dhaka: Research & Advisory Services.

Ahmed, Fauzia Erfan

2004 The Rise of the Bangladesh Garment Industry: Globalization, Women Workers, and Voice. NWSA Journal 16(2):12 pgs

Ahmed, Sania Sultan, and Bould, Sally

2004 'One Able Daughter Is Worth 10 Illiterate Sons': Reframing the Patriarchal Family. Journal of Marriage and Family 66(5): 10 pgs.

Akmam, Wardatul

2002 Atrocities against humanity during the liberation war in Bangladesh: a case of genocide. Journal of Genocide Research 4(4): 543-559.

Alam, Shamsul S. M.

1998 Women in the Era of Modernity and Islamic Fundamentalism: The case of Taslima Nasrin of Bangladesh. Signs 23(2): 429-461.

ALRC statement on 'dowry-related violence against women in Bangladesh'

2005 Received by commission on Human Rights

<http://www.alrc.net/pr/mainfile.php/2005pr/92?print=yes>, accessed January 6, 2008.

Asadulla Khan

2004 Dowry: The Crime Continues. The Daily Star January 10, 2004 <http://www.thedailystar.net/2004/01/10/d40110150183.htm>, accessed January 6, 2008.

Background Note: Bangladesh. U. S. Department of State.

<http://www.state.gov/r/pa/ei/bgn/3452.htm>, accessed January 6, 2008.

Siddiqi, Dina M.

1998 Taslima Nasreen and Others: The Contest over Gender in Bangladesh. *In Women in Muslim Societies: Diversity Within Unity*. Bodman, Herbert L, and Tohidi Nayereh, eds. Pp 205-229. Colorado: Lynne Rienner Publishers, Inc.

Cain, Khanam, and Nahar

1979 Class, Patriarchy, and Women's Work in Bangladesh. Population and Development Review 5(3): 405-438.

Chaudhury, Rafiqul Huda, and Ahmed, Nilufer Raihan

1987 Female Status in Bangladesh. Dacca: The Bangladesh Institute of Development Studies.

Saha
new_ets_user65

Choudhury, G. W
1972 Bangladesh: Why it Happened? *International Affairs* (Royal Institute of International Affairs) 48(2):242-249.

Dannecker, Petra
2000 Collective Action, Organization Building, and Leadership: Women Workers in the Garment Sector of Bangladesh. *Gender and Development* 8(3):31-39.

Feldman, Shelly
2001 Exploring Theories of Patriarchy: A Perspective from Contemporary Bangladesh. *Signs* 26(4):1097-1127.

Feldman, Shelley and McCarthy, Florence, E.
1983 "Purdah and Changing Patterns of Social Control among Rural Women in Bangladesh. *Journal of Marriage and the Family* 45(4): 949-959.

Haque, Shamsul M.
2002 The Changing Balance of Power between the Government and NGO's in Bangladesh. *International Political Science Review* 23(4): 411- 435.

Huque, Ahmed Shafiqul, and Akhter, Muhammad Yeahia
1987 The Ubiquity of Islam: Religion and Society in Bangladesh. *Pacific Affairs* 60(2): 200-225.

Inglehart, Ronald and Baker, Wayne E.
2000 Modernization, Cultural Change, and the Persistence of Traditional Values. *American Sociological Review* 65(1):19-51.

Islam, Nasir
1981 Islam and National Identity: The Case of Pakistan and Bangladesh. *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 13(1):55-72.

Kabeer, Naila
2000 The Power to Choose: Bangladeshi Women and Labor Market Decisions in London and Dhaka. London: Verso.

Oldenburg, Philip
1985 A Place Insufficiently Imagined: Language, Belief, and the Pakistan Crisis of 1971. *The Journal of Asian Studies* 44(4):711-733.

Papanek, Hanna
1973 Purdah: Separate Worlds and Symbolic Shelter. *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 15(3):289-325.

Saha
new_ets_user66

Paul, Bimal K.

1992 Female Activity Space in Rural Bangladesh. *Geographical Review* 82(1):1-12.

Quddus, Munir, and Rashid, Salim

2000 *Entrepreneurs and Economic Development: The Remarkable Story of Garment Exports from Bangladesh*. Dhaka: The University Press Limited.

Tait, Robert W.

2003 Trade Liberalization and Economic Change in Bangladesh. *In Globalization, Environmental Crisis and Social Change in Bangladesh*. Rahman, Matiur, eds. Pp. 49-81. Dhaka: The University Press Limited.

Rashiduzzaman, M.

1994 "The Liberals and the Religious Right in Bangladesh." *Asian Survey* 34(11): 974-990.

Schuler, Sidney R. and Hashemi, Syed M.

1994 Credit Programs, Women's Empowerment, and Contraceptive Use in Rural Bangladesh. *Studies in Family Planning* 25(2): 65-76.

Shehabuddin, Elora.

1999 Contesting the Illicit: Gender and the Politics of Fatwas in Bangladesh. *Signs* 24(4): 1011-1044.

Siddiqi, Dina Mahanaz

1996 *Women in Question: Gender and Labor in Bangladeshi Factories*. PhD dissertation, Anthropology Department, The University of Michigan.

Sobhan, Rehman, and Khundker, Nasreen

2001 *Globalization and Gender: Changing Patterns of Women's Employment in Bangladesh*. Dhaka: The University Press Limited

Sultan, Sania

1997 *Factory Workers: new roles for Bangladeshi women*. PhD dissertation, Department of Sociology, University of Delaware.

The World Bank

Bangladesh. Electronic Document, www.worldbank.org, accessed January 6, 2008.

Wahra, Gawher Nayeem, and Rahman, Ferdausur

1995 A Right to Live: Girl Workers in the Bangladeshi Garment Industry. *Gender and Development* 3(2): 54-59.

Saha
new_ets_user67

Zaman, Habiba

2001 Paid work and socio-political consciousness of garment workers in Bangladesh.
Journal of Contemporary Asia 31(2): 16 pgs.

Zohir, Salma Chaudhuri, and Paul-Majumder, Pratima

1996 Garment Workers in Bangladesh: Economic, Social and Health Condition.
Dhaka: The Bangladesh Institute of Development Studies.