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## Introduction<sup>1</sup>

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The United Nations Research Institute for Social Development (UNRISD), in co-operation with the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), carried out an action research programme on Technical Co-operation and Women's Lives from 1992 to 1998. This programme was meant to facilitate co-operation between gender researchers, economists and policy makers, and to encourage the involvement of national research teams and civil society organizations in national policy debates. For each country involved in the programme, national-level workshops were held to establish priorities for empirical investigation. In Bangladesh and Morocco, the research focused on the feminization of the labour force in the context of increasing export manufacturing and trade liberalization.

This is an important topic for many countries facing liberalized trade regimes as they are seeking to build their export manufacturing sector. It has been argued — most emphatically by neoclassical economists but also in a range of other development writing — that trade liberalization can facilitate labour-intensive, pro-poor growth capable of “including” hitherto “excluded” social groups. The tendency for many newly established export-oriented manufacturing activities to rely heavily on female labour has been cited in support of this contention. That this employment benefits women is a view that is widely shared across the political spectrum, including among many feminists. However, the subject remains controversial: within

the general discourse on global labour conditions, women workers in particular have been portrayed as a vulnerable segment of the workforce, recruited by international capital in ways that undermine existing labour standards. In addition, within the gender and development literature itself there has been a long-running debate about the implications of labour market inclusion for women. In the context of export-oriented industrial strategies, where women have been highly visible, interpretations of women's encounter with capital have varied widely. What has become clear is that investigation of this question must be both detailed and nuanced, taking into account individual women's direct experiences as well as the longer term societal changes associated with the terms under which they are incorporated into the manufacturing labour force.

The chapters in this volume shed light on various facets of women's experiences in export manufacturing in Morocco and Bangladesh, focusing primarily on garment manufacturing, which in both countries is the most highly female-dominated manufacturing sector. The countries within which the research was carried out, Morocco and Bangladesh, share some similarities, although their development trajectory has clearly been very different in recent years (Table 1). Their macroeconomic structures are similar, with Morocco being somewhat more industrialized. The adult female literacy rate is low in both countries, and is also substantially lower than that of men — a pattern that not only indicates constraints on women's opportunities, but that also suggests pervasive discrimination against females. The economies of the two countries are of similar size, although per capita income is much lower for Bangladesh. The most important difference for the discussion that follows is that Morocco established an industrial sector relatively early, and its growth has been slow, while the industrial and particularly the export sector of Bangladesh has seen exponential growth over the last 20 years. As will become clear below, as a result the process and terms under which female labour has been incorporated in the manufacturing sector has been very different in the two countries, with important implications for the social transformational potential of female wage employment.

Before turning to a discussion of the chapters included in this volume, we will first introduce some of the issues associated with female labour-intensive industrialization from both a micro and a macro perspective. These include: 1) female employment rates and conditions in export-oriented industry; 2) gender roles and gender subordination; and 3) the implications of liberalization and restructuring for female employment.

Table 1: Basic indicators, Morocco and Bangladesh

|  | Morocco | Bangladesh |
|--|---------|------------|
| <b>GDP, US\$ billion, 1998</b>                               | 35.5    | 42.7       |
| <b>GDP per capita, PPP*, US\$, 1998</b>                      | 3305    | 1361       |
| <b>% share of GDP</b>  |         |            |
| Agriculture  | 16.6    | 22.2       |
| Industry   | 32.0    | 27.9       |
| Services   | 51.4    | 49.9       |
| <b>GNP annual growth rate (%)</b>                            |         |            |
| 1975-90  | 4.2     | 4.7        |
| 1990-98  | 2.6     | 4.9        |
| <b>GNP per capita annual growth rate (%)</b>                 |         |            |
| 1975-90  | 1.9     | 2.2        |
| 1990-98  | 0.7     | 3.2        |
| <b>Exports of goods and services as % of GDP</b>             |         |            |
| 1990   | 19.4    | 6.3        |
| 1998   | 18.1    | 13.8       |
| <b>Net foreign direct investment flows</b><br>(US\$ million) |         |            |
| 1987-92 (annual avg.)  | 203     | 2          |
| 1998   | 258     | 317        |
| <b>Adult literacy (% age 15 and above, 1998)</b>             |         |            |
| female   | 34.0    | 28.6       |
| male   | 60.3    | 51.1       |

\* Purchasing Power Parity

Source: UNDP, 2000. Various annex tables.

## I. Female employment rates and conditions in labour-intensive industries

Labour-intensive industrialization in the context of increasingly open trade regimes has led to a significant transformation of the labour force in many countries, marked by a dramatic rise in women's share of manufacturing employment. This trend has been most evident in Southeast Asia, but has also occurred in Latin America, Africa and the rest of Asia. The shift towards female factory employment has occurred both in countries with a history of relatively high involvement of women in the labour force, and in countries with historically low female labour force participation.

To what can this trend be attributed? There is some empirical evidence suggesting that export promotion and trade liberalization policies, where successful, tend to lead to the feminization of the labour

force.<sup>2</sup> The relationship between export-oriented industrialization and feminization is particularly strong for economies specializing in commodities that require low-skill content and labour-intensive methods of production. However, the phenomenon of female-led and export-led growth has been both geographically patchy as well as highly volatile (Pearson, 1998). Even in Asia and Latin America — the epicentre of this genre of manufacturing — export-oriented and female-intensive firms have gained a foothold only in some countries, while complex political and economic factors have precluded their emergence in most parts of sub-Saharan Africa and the Middle East.

Moreover, the feminization of the workforce is not necessarily a sustainable or an irreversible process. In Hong Kong, for instance, the emergence of new low-cost competitors in the Asia-Pacific region and the erosion of Hong Kong's own cost advantage caused growth in manufacturing industries to slacken and eventually decline in the late 1980s, as investment moved to countries with lower wage costs (e.g. southern China). The implications for manufacturing employment, and especially for the women who have made up the majority of the rank-and-file workers have been serious and more complex than the "frictionless" picture painted by the government and by many economists (Chiu and Lee, 1997). Micro-level studies provide an account of the "fading of the Hong Kong dream" which has "pushed working class women down the class ladder and backward to domesticity as their gender destiny" (Chiu and Lee, 1997:759). Women's share of employment in the export processing zones of Mexico has also declined from its peak in the early 1980s — not, however, because of a loss of production facilities, but rather because of technological upgrading that has eliminated many of the low-skill jobs held primarily by women (Beneria, 1995; Pearson, 1991a). Bangladesh may face both of these problems in coming years, as the trade advantage it has enjoyed because of the Multi-Fibre Agreement is set to expire in 2005. Technological upgrading will almost certainly be necessary for the garment industry to remain competitive under more open trade regimes, and women's low literacy rates will preclude many from obtaining higher skilled jobs (Battacharya and Rahman, this volume).

The rise in women's share of manufacturing employment associated with export-oriented industrialization has been explained in a variety of ways. Joekes (1987, 1995) and Elson (1995) have argued that it is due to the tendency for many newly industrializing countries to specialize in labour-intensive manufacturing sectors in which

women have been traditionally employed, such as textiles, clothing and footwear. Thus the increased female labour force participation rate reflects an expansion of traditional women's activities, with women employed in largely female sectors and the gender division of labour remaining essentially intact. Standing (1989), on the other hand, suggests that women workers have been substituted for men workers by employers seeking more flexible, docile and cheap labour as global competition increases. The chapters in this volume suggest that the traditional gender division of labour and the perception of women's dexterity helped to determine the initial choice of female workers in the garment industries, while women's docility, their willingness to accept non-formal employment status, and consequently the flexibility they impart to the factory workforce have been important factors contributing to employers' continued preference for female workers (see esp. Bourqia and Khan).

The implications of women's increasing participation in export manufacturing is also the subject of some disagreement. Ironically, some of the most negative assessments of women's entry into export-oriented manufacturing were made in the context of the first-tier newly industrialized countries (NICs) such as Hong Kong and Taiwan. While there is no doubt that incomes and wages, including women's wages, rose spectacularly over a short period of time in these countries, both the gender gap in wages and the degree of occupational segregation has remained large by international standards, and has shown little sign of diminishing over time (Joekes, 1995).

A more positive assessment of the impact of export-oriented industrialization for women workers — frequently made by neoclassical advocates — compares this type of industrialization to import-substitution industrialization (ISI). It is argued that ISI tends to provide jobs for a male "labour aristocracy", which generally excludes women, whereas the types of industry that expand in response to foreign market opportunities in an open trading regime rely heavily on the use of a female workforce. It is further argued that, in the long run, trade will raise aggregate incomes and wages in developing countries and in the process reduce the gender gap in wages. The assumption behind this assertion seems to be that in a trade-expansive context the demand for female labour increases faster than that for male labour, so that female wages also rise faster than male wages, and eventually converge (Joekes, 1995).

The disagreements over how to assess female employment in export-oriented manufacturing are due largely to disagreements over what such employment should be compared to. Even though most

writers agree that discriminatory forces underpin women's emergence as the preferred labour force in a significant portion of the labour-intensive manufacturing sector, there is not a clear consensus as to whether the discriminatory forces which characterize women's employment here need to be assessed in relative (national) or absolute (universal) terms, and what weight should be given to the accounts and views of women workers themselves.

Both Lim (1990) and Joekes (1995), for example, take a relativist position and criticize some strands of the feminist literature for assessing the terms of women's employment in export-oriented manufacturing from an absolutist perspective. The evidence they and others cite with regard to women's earnings in factory jobs indicates that, compared to alternative low-skilled female occupations — such as farm labour, domestic work, small-scale local industry and service sector activities — these factory jobs often offer better working conditions and are certainly better paid. The picture that emerges from most of the studies in this volume certainly supports this position. Women employed in the manufacturing sector in Morocco and Bangladesh prefer this work to the other employment options available to them, and in many cases, especially in Bangladesh, choose to work in manufacturing even when they are not obliged to seek employment by economic necessity.

But a full assessment of the question of whether export-oriented manufacturing provides better opportunities for workers than does the traditional domestic manufacturing sector, Joekes (1995) adds, would also have to include some comparison of wage rates in export-oriented manufacturing with wages in the rest of the manufacturing sector — and the data necessary for such comparisons are seldom available. Taking the export processing zones (EPZs) and transnational corporations (TNCs) — for which there is more evidence — as a proxy for export-oriented manufacturing, Joekes is able to sketch a picture that is very mixed both across countries and over time: in many cases EPZs pay higher wages than in the surrounding national economy, but in others (e.g. India and Mauritius) the wages they pay are definitely lower (Joekes, 1995:27). Assessing the linkages between export-oriented manufacturing and gender discrimination in wages is even more problematic. The availability, reliability and interpretability of the data on pay relativity by gender pose major problems, especially if a comparison between export and non-export sectors is attempted. In some cases the gender gap in wages appears to be smaller in export-oriented industries, while in other cases the opposite seems to hold.

The chapters on Bangladesh in this volume suggest that wage levels in the garment industries are generally lower than those in the rest of the manufacturing sector. This is attributed in part to the absence of collective bargaining arrangements or social mechanisms for the enforcement of the national minimum wage, and in part to the lack of alternative employment opportunities for women and the consequent surplus of female labour. However, the gender gap in wages in the export-oriented manufacturing sectors (nearly 10 per cent) is only a fraction of the gender gap in wages for the manufacturing sector as a whole (49 per cent) (Battacharya and Rahman).

The chapters on Morocco paint a similar picture, with the chapter by Belghazi and Baden addressing the issue directly through the use of econometric analysis. Official data sources reveal a significant degree of “pure” gender wage discrimination operating in the Moroccan labour market as a whole. The main components of discrimination against women workers are the age at starting work (women who start working late receive lower wages), length of the working week (women are rewarded for working longer hours less favourably than men) and household headship (women heads of household are penalized in wage terms compared to women who are not household heads, while male household heads receive a premium in wages over other men). However, Belghazi and Baden also find that the level of wage discrimination is lower in the export-oriented textile and garment sectors than in the urban labour market as a whole.

While this observation may be taken to support the prediction from international trade theory that, over the long run, expansion in trade will raise aggregate income and wages in developing countries and reduce discriminatory forces, the micro-level mechanisms that might bring this about, and the gender dimensions of these mechanisms in particular, have not been identified or adequately explored in the literature. Moreover, the econometric results reported here will have to be tempered with two critical qualifications. First, in both countries the relatively low level of discrimination in export industries would look less benign if it signified that men who worked in feminized industries fared badly compared to other male workers, that is, that the feminized sectors of industry tend to have generally lower wages. The second qualification is that the very high share of women in these export-oriented industries renders direct comparisons of pay relativity (or wage discrimination) between export and non-export sectors problematic. If, with industrial diversification, women

become increasingly confined to a narrow range of occupations, a dual (male/female) wage structure may gradually emerge; it is thus imperative that the notion of discrimination be raised in a more dynamic sense.

The difficulties of making meaningful comparisons between export-oriented manufacturing and the rest of the manufacturing sector also become apparent when we turn to those conditions of work which impact on workers' health and well-being. Here there is some agreement across the political spectrum that physical working conditions — in terms of levels of heat, dust, noise and hygiene — are probably much better in the export-oriented factories than in the informal sector (Edgren, 1982; Joekes, 1995; Lim, 1990). However, the health hazards — both physical and mental — specific to some export-oriented industries should not be ignored. These can include the use of carcinogenic substances, long working hours, and also the nature of the work, which is repetitive, monotonous and fast, and can leave the young workers prematurely “burnt out” or “used up” in the labour process (Edgren, 1982; Heyzer and Kean, 1988; Lee, 1995).<sup>3</sup>

One of the contentious issues dividing feminists writing on export-oriented industries concerns the interpretation of women workers' own assessment of labour conditions. According to Gita Sen, the fact that young women sometimes voice a preference for this type of work rather than going back to the confines of rural households only emphasizes how harsh the conditions of rural poverty and rural patriarchal dominance are for these women, rather than being a positive indicator of the conditions of work in the factories (Sen, 1999). Providing a somewhat different reading of women's voices, Kabeer (1995) has argued that work in export industries in Dhaka has helped households meet basic survival needs, improved their security, and begun a process by which women are being transformed from representing economic burdens on their families into economic assets. Kibria's chapter in this volume tends to agree with Kabeer's interpretation of the situation in Dhaka. Although she documents the extremely long working hours of female garment workers — often from 8 a.m. until 10 p.m., six days a week — the workers themselves consider factory employment to be “cleaner” and less physically taxing than the limited alternative employment options open to them: brick breaking, agricultural labour and domestic work. In addition, as Afsar (this volume) points out, escalating dowry costs have added to the economic burden that girls are perceived to place on their families. Girls who obtain factory employment and thereby support themselves for a period of time are able to delay marriage — which



occurs, on average, at age 15 for girls in Bangladesh — and to have a better choice of marriage partners.

## **II. Employment, gender roles and gender subordination**

### **1. Women's employment and reproductive work**

Women in Morocco and Bangladesh typically voice a preference for formal employment in the industrial sector rather than the informal sector alternatives available to them. However, the predominance of young, unmarried and childless women in this sector suggests that manufacturing employment is not yet a viable option for most women in these countries. In Bangladesh, the average age of unskilled female garment workers is 16.6 years, and few female employees are older than 25 years. Over 90 per cent of female employees under age 20 are childless, and almost 60 per cent of women workers aged 20-24 have no children (by comparison, in Bangladesh as a whole, only 45 per cent of women aged 15-19 are childless, as are only 10 per cent of women aged 20-24) (Afsar, this volume). These figures suggest, on the one hand, that women employed in factories are delaying marriage and childbearing: more than 90 per cent of married female industrial employees report using contraceptives, compared with 60 per cent of married Bangladeshi women nationwide. On the other hand, these figures also imply that industrial employment is not compatible with childbearing: fear of pay cuts or termination of employment were cited as primary reasons for using contraceptives, and nearly three quarters of female factory workers who do have children depend on kinship networks for child care, while the remaining report managing childcare and employment themselves. Thus women tend to consider industrial employment as a temporary rather than a long-term activity. Because of the preference of employers for young women, and thus the perception that manufacturing employment will only be possible for a short period, marriage and motherhood are still regarded by women as the best strategy for long-term security; marriage and motherhood, in turn, generally imply the loss of formal sector employment (see also Kibria, and Battacharya and Rahman, this volume).

In many countries, gender roles mandating women's responsibility for household and childcare tasks mean that entering or maintaining formal sector employment is difficult for married women, and especially those with children. In Morocco, women with

household responsibilities often prefer to work in the semi-formal carpet sector. Although this employment is seen as less desirable than garment work by young women, women with children and other family responsibilities find that the flexibility of working hours in the carpet sector make it a more viable option for them, despite its lower pay rates and lower status (Bourqia, this volume).

In fact, more women than men take on casual, part-time, and homework, across a wide range of economies, because of the flexibility it offers them. And it is arguable that the vast majority of women who have domestic responsibilities have an immediate interest in a more flexible job structure that can offer them greater choice about hours and patterns of work and getting skills recognized and used (Elson, 1996). The key issue to recognize in this context, Elson argues, is not so much the disintegration of previous norms of “regular” employment, which were in any case always more applicable to men than to women. Rather, the critical question is about how workers can secure decent livelihoods to support themselves and their dependents. What forms of organizing and what visions of social policy are needed to make this happen?

At the analytical level, the reality of women’s extensive entry into the labour force, the erosion of the male breadwinner/female homemaker model and the questioning of women’s wages as “pin money” have been assimilated, although unevenly, into a wide range of institutionalist writings (e.g. Howes and Singh, 1995; Gore, 1994). However, some critics would argue, as both Fraser (1997) and Jackson (1998) have done, that the emphasis on formal labour markets central to both European social policy thinking and institutionalist approaches has a problematic gender sub-text. It assumes autonomy and “breadwinning” to be requirements of a universal “worker”, whereas “livelihoods for women need to be seen as including a legitimate reliance on men (and the state) for compensation for reproductive labour” (Jackson, 1998:26). This critique raises many discomfiting questions, not only for institutionalists, but also for many neoclassical economists who see labour market inclusion, along male norms, as an unproblematic and desirable livelihood strategy for women.

It is rarely recognized in the development literature that women workers may have different priorities from male workers: some form of childcare support, for example, may be much more important for them than having a minimum wage. In an insightful study of women’s employment and organizational strategies in an electronics factory in India, the authors show how the demands and priorities voiced by

women workers related to specific problems they had experienced as *women* (Chhachhi and Pittin, 1996). Women workers organized to demand transport and uniforms, which were granted by management. Transport was seen as essential to avoid sexual harassment, with the company bus also allaying the fears of parents, especially of unmarried women. And the demand for uniforms was linked to the problems arising from the fact that women in this factory came from different socioeconomic backgrounds and many could not afford the higher standards set by the better-off. Male workers, however, interpreted the success of the women organizers differently:

*Girls do not know how to raise demands. They fall into the trap laid by management. They ask for general facilities while the real issue is wages ... now the girls have a bus, uniforms so they are just happy with that. They don't ask for wages.* (cited in Chhachhi and Pittin, 1996:115)

The failure of trade unions to represent women's demands for the provision of child care facilities and other needs specific to women employees, and the lack of initiative on the part of governments and enterprises to assume their share of responsibility, mean that ultimately all the costs and anxiety involved in the balancing of the productive and reproductive sectors fall on the shoulders of women workers. As feminist economists have argued, by refusing to recognize the costs of reproduction inevitably borne by women workers and their families, both private entrepreneurs and the state may be undermining the continued viability of the paid economy, especially if daughters are withdrawn from school to replace their working mothers at home.

However, proposals for recognizing women's special needs, or for subsidizing or compensating women for reproductive labour, are always contentious, and are especially problematic in labour surplus countries. Neo-classical economists generally view labour standards as impediments to labour market clearing: "excessive labour standards" are said to increase labour costs, cause unemployment and allocative inefficiency, jeopardize growth and drive a wedge between protected and unprotected workers, benefiting protected workers at the expense of the unprotected. In addition, as Khan's chapter vividly illustrates for Bangladesh, in many countries there are considerable barriers to labour organization, which is often a prerequisite for improved labour standards or the enforcement of existing labour regulations.

Women workers, in particular, are often seen as the victims of regulation. Regulations that are paternalistic — such as those which

prevent women from working in “dangerous” occupations or at night — tend to reduce the demand for women workers (World Bank, 1995:44). Given this trade-off between labour standards and employment, workers are advised to forgo standards and act with maximum flexibility in order to maintain their jobs. However, these criticisms of labour standards do not always stand up to empirical scrutiny. While it is true that some forms of protective legislation can be inimical to women workers' interests, as the long-running feminist debate on the subject has recognized, labour standards are not inevitably a “cure worse than the disease”. Some of the earliest International Labour Organization (ILO) conventions did take the approach that is criticized by the World Bank report; however, pressure from feminist equal rights lobbyists has led to the revision of these conventions to ensure that protective legislation does not diminish women's employment opportunities. New, gradualist approaches to labour standards, which work to slowly extend basic benefits beyond the organized formal sector, are being proposed and show some promise, and the possibility of an incremental extension of security and protection to the huge workforce at drift in the rural and urban informal sector economy should not be discounted (Breman, 1996). This may be particularly important from the point of view of many women, given the greater flexibility and independence that homeworking types of arrangements may give them in carrying out their reproductive responsibilities, and maintaining their social networks.

Maternity benefits are among the most important means of making employment compatible with childbearing. However, it has been recognized for some time that legislation that grants generous maternity benefits to women can work against the interests of the very women it seeks to protect, especially when such benefits are financed mainly by the employer (Hensman, 1988; Bullock, 1994). Such benefits effectively increase the cost of hiring women workers, and thereby depress their wages or discourage their employment. The neo-classical response to this situation is to argue for abandoning maternity leaves and other benefits specific to women. The World Bank admits that one way of providing women workers with benefits that take into account their reproductive responsibilities without reducing their wages or diminishing their employment options is for such benefits to be financed through general taxation and not be wholly borne by individual employers. But the final verdict of its report is that, due to the practical impediments to such a scheme — cited as “administrative difficulties and the risk of abuse” — women

in low-income countries would be better off without such benefits (World Bank, 1995:74).

However, others believe that the state has a responsibility to ensure that women receive some basic minimum benefits: the relevant ILO convention sets out the principle that maternity pay or benefits must be provided through a social security scheme or government funds, so that employers are not individually liable for them. While it is true that, at the present time, social security schemes are underdeveloped or overstretched in many countries, the difficulties inherent in the immediate compliance with this convention do not imply that its goals should be abandoned altogether. In some contexts women's organizations and trade unions may be able to explore alternative policy options for maternity provision, such as new forms of shared cost or social insurance systems. In Burkino Faso, for example, the unions on the tripartite governing body of the social security department have secured an agreement that working mothers will be covered by social security during their three months' leave, to redress employers' reluctance to hire young women (Cissé, cited in Bullock, 1994). Provisions such as these are unlikely to be applied in a uniform manner, given the weak bargaining power of many women workers, the rigid opposition of employers to regulatory measures, and the social identity of decision makers and bureaucrats at all levels of the public administration down to the labour inspectors. But they provide at least a resource that some women's organizations may be able to use to facilitate women's labour market engagement on fairer terms.

## **2. Women's employment and gender subordination**

Perhaps no aspect of women's industrial employment in developing countries is more controversial than the implications and meanings of labour market inclusion for the women concerned. Does industrial employment provide an avenue for liberation from social and cultural constraints, or are women workers simply exchanging domination within the household for domination by capital? Many studies have documented that what lies behind the demand for female labour is largely its perceived docility and "cheapness" — notions that have been deconstructed by several writers to show that they are not simply a question of absolute wage relativity, but also include working conditions, employers' contribution to the social wage, the manual dexterity and patience of the workforce to perform highly repetitive and tedious tasks with little formal training, as well as non-

militancy and acquiescence given the lack of more attractive employment options (Pearson, 1998).

Elson and Pearson (1981), in their path-breaking work on women's incorporation into export-oriented manufacturing in world market factories, provided a nuanced and insightful analytical framework for distinguishing its impact on gender subordination. They distinguished "three tendencies" in the relation between factory work and the subordination of women which suggested that factory work could either *intensify* the existing forms of gender subordination, *decompose* them, or *recompose* new forms of gender subordination (1981:31). However, as Pearson (1998) herself has recently argued, this analysis left uncontested the idea that women workers' interactions with capital and patriarchy were somehow structurally determined rather than open to negotiation and reconstitution by women workers themselves. Such structuralist accounts, critics argued, rendered women workers "faceless and voiceless" (Wolf, 1992:9) and attributed much more personality and animation to capital than to the women it exploits (Ong, 1988:84). At a more general level, the oversight highlighted some of the difficulties of integrating an actor-orientation in structuralist analyses.

Some of the feminist research that was recording women's own understandings of their work, and their experiences of engagement with factory management, provided somewhat diverse answers to some of the key questions that Elson and Pearson (1981) had raised. In-depth anthropological studies carried out in the 1970s and 1980s suggested that in the East Asian societies with sizeable ethnic Chinese populations, such as Hong Kong, Taiwan and Singapore, family and kinship systems marked by strong gender and age hierarchies and emphasis on intergenerational obligations were producing a perverse "dutiful daughters" syndrome, whereby parents took their daughters out of school early and pushed them into the labour market, while they channeled their daughters' earnings into the education of their sons (Greenhalgh, 1985; Kung, 1983; Salaff, 1990). Despite their earnings, opting out of familial residential arrangements was constrained by the expectation that women remain at home until married, by the obligation to "repay" parents and also by public housing policies which were either given only to families according to need criterion (Hong Kong), or organized through tightly supervised dormitories (Taiwan) (Salaff, 1990). Indicative of the extent to which the East Asian family system had dampened the transformatory potential of factory work was the observation that one of the few ways in which these young women gain satisfaction is

by repaying their “debt” (of birth and upbringing) to their families (Lim, 1990).

Wolf’s (1992) account of industrialization in rural Java suggested that the young female factory employees there did not seem to submit their needs to the betterment of the family economy in the way that Taiwanese daughters did. Wolf in fact argued that factory work in Java was giving young women the tools with which to “hack and whittle away at parental and patriarchal controls over their lives, at least for a certain period, with longer-term implications such as deciding when and whom to marry” (1992:254). However, the increased field of maneuvering that factory work had offered the Javanese daughters at home was matched by different patriarchal controls in the factory setting that kept these factory women “relatively acquiescent, poorly paid and vastly unprotected in industrial jobs that are often dangerous” (Wolf, 1992:254). The increased voice and agency in the familial sphere did not seem to carry over into the factory: the managers and the work discipline seemed to be much less flexible and much more overwhelming than were parents in their rules and discipline.

A similar conclusion emerged from research on garment factory workers in Dhaka, Bangladesh (Kabeer, 1995). Prior to the growth of the garment industry, women’s entry into the public domain in search of employment had previously been associated with dire economic need. The availability of factory work, Kabeer argued, had not altered some of the striking features of gender subordination in this context, such as women’s dependence on male protection (even though it may have reduced their dependence on male *provision*). Nevertheless, women’s ability to earn a wage (whether their wages disappeared into a common pool, were retained under their own management or handed over to or appropriated by household heads or other senior members) had made a difference in how women were perceived and treated, as well as in their feelings of self-worth. The increased sense of power became even more visible in moments of crisis when the expanded possibilities offered by the strengthening of women’s “fall-back position” allowed them to walk out of, or not enter into, relationships which undermined their agency in unacceptable ways (Kabeer, 1995:35).

The chapters on Bangladesh in this volume indicate that women there are still largely constrained by societal norms and limitations to depend on marriage for long-term security. The implications of industrial employment for women within the household must be evaluated in this context. Afsar establishes that female factory workers

remain unmarried and childless longer than do girls in rural areas, most of whom are married by age 15. Such early marriage is the result of societal perceptions of young women as being economic burdens to their families, especially in view of the dowry inflation that has taken place in recent years. For these reasons, girls are often married off as soon as possible when suitable dowry agreements can be made. The factory women are generally not deferring marriage simply because they prefer employment; rather they are using employment as a way to reduce the burdens they place upon their families, which in turn buys them both some time before marriage and a better choice of marriage partners. It is interesting to note that, although Afsar reports that some young women remit a substantial proportion of their wages to their sending families, Kibria's interviews indicate that, because of the very low wages paid, many female factory employees rely on their families for the costs of establishing them in Dhaka and for periodically subsidizing their living expenses. The young women report being glad to reduce some of the burden of their upkeep for their families, as well as to be able to make some contribution to their dowries.

The chapters on Morocco, however, provide a less sanguine account of the impact of employment on household gender relations. Women workers who were interviewed neither acknowledged the emancipating possibilities of wage work for themselves, nor was their economic contribution acknowledged and valued by family members (Bourqia). Clearly, women's entry into labour market situations that are to some extent similar is nevertheless experienced very differently depending on the social and cultural configurations within which different groups of women find themselves. In Bangladesh, the very rapid growth of the textile industry has drawn into the workforce women who otherwise would not have entered wage employment, and women who have left their natal home to seek employment. Under these circumstances, Bangladeshi female factory workers have relatively little difficulty in establishing a significant degree of control over their earnings. In Morocco, on the other hand, the growth of the garment industry has been slow. Rather than drawing additional workers into the labour force, its labour needs have largely been met by women and girls who would have been expected to seek employment in any case because of the economic situation of their families. These workers generally remain in their natal home, and have little control over their earnings.

The assessment of working conditions for women in both countries studied is also rather bleak. The terms under which women



participate in labour markets carry and reproduce societal gender norms that are distinctly biased against women. The chapters on both Bangladesh and Morocco reveal authoritarian management practices prevailing in female-intensive enterprises. This is consistent with much of the literature examining such enterprises in other countries. Export-oriented production processes tend to reproduce gender hierarchies, providing employment that is in many ways exploitative under working conditions that are far from ideal — Lee's (1995) account of labour control in a Shenzhen plant, in particular, provides a vivid illustration of this point. But such “despotic” labour regimes are social constructions that are both contested and invested with different meanings and purposes by different parties. Lee shows how the women workers in a Hong Kong plant used family duties as a pretext for circumventing certain managerial demands, citing gender-based inconvenience and their mothering burdens at home to reject management demands for assignments which required cross-border commuting and overnight stays (Lee, 1995). Bourqia's discussion of absenteeism, tardiness, work slowdowns and “collective hysteria” in Moroccan factories provides examples of other types of tactics employed to resist demanding and restrictive management practices.

Such fine-grained accounts, which provide a contextual analysis of labour force formation taking into account workers' histories, familial and kinship relations and local networks, can also provide better insight into issues relating to collective action — suggesting why traditional trade union strategies have proven so problematic in some contexts. In South Africa, for example, where Taiwanese industrialists have invested in garment factories employing women, Hart (1995) argues that the fact that trade unions have experienced extreme difficulties in organizing clothing workers to press for higher wages and better working conditions reflects not only the adamant opposition of the foreign industrialists, but also broader processes of labour force formation and the desperate search by huge numbers of dispossessed people for a modicum of economic and social security.

This is also the picture that emerges from Khan's study of organized labour in Bangladesh (this volume), where there is a near absence of collective bargaining arrangements in the ready-made garment industries, and industrial conflicts are often resolved through autocratic and unilateral decisions of the owner-managers. In some instances, patrimonial relations have been re-created through the recruitment of workers from villages where the owner-managers are

among the landowning elite. While it true that most women workers resort to individual strategies for obtaining higher wages (Afsar), those workers who have sought to form unions to achieve their legally sanctioned rights (such as timely wages, proper remuneration for overtime, and maternity leave) have faced strong opposition from the management. The negative perceptions of the latter towards trade unionism — which seem to emanate at least in part from the history of unionism in the public sector — have in effect prevented the healthy growth of trade unions in the garment factories, with the outcome that a pervasive patron-clientelist nexus has developed between interested male outsiders and mostly female garment workers. The existing male-dominated garment federations have thus far been unable to represent the interests of women workers adequately.

An assessment of the impact of wage employment on gender subordination must include not only analyses of household and conjugal relations and conditions on the factory floor, but also an analysis of employment's impact on women in the public sphere. In contexts in which young women have traditionally been tightly controlled and closely guarded, the very fact of employment — which involves spending the majority of the day outside of parental or spousal control, and which often necessitates walking unescorted on public streets and using public transport — greatly enlarges the public space legitimately accessible to women. Kibria's interviews with Bangladeshi women, many of whom live independently as a direct result of their employment, convey a sense of the range of new experiences that have been opened for them. They clearly enjoy their newly-found independence and the choices now available to them. Even in Morocco, where female factory workers seldom leave their parents' households and are often escorted to their jobs, factory work affords occasional opportunities for independence. Bourqia reports that girls are delighted to take advantage of unannounced work holidays to spend an unfettered day “on the town”, unconstrained by family oversight.

The consequences of opening public space to women as a result of employment are likely to be compounded over the longer term. When young women are seen to have legitimate business in public, their demands for protection from harassment are also considered legitimate. Indeed, a number of private and public initiatives to protect women workers are being initiated in Bangladesh. Such initiatives will not only benefit current workers, but will also make public spaces more accessible to all women. In turn, the increased acceptability of women in public space is likely to increase their options and thus

their bargaining power within marriage. Already, although older people in Bangladesh still consider employment to decrease a woman's marriageability, among younger people it is considered an asset, indicating both a woman's willingness to undertake hard work and her ability to contribute to household expenses if this becomes necessary.

### **III. Liberalization, restructuring and female employment**

The current emphasis on trade liberalization and economic restructuring will affect many countries that have a large female labour force in labour-intensive industries. There will be even more emphasis on competitiveness; given the limits to productivity of low-skill labour-intensive strategies, increasing competitiveness must come in large part from technological upgrading and increasing labour productivity. Such a strategy is likely to result in a workforce both better trained and better compensated, although, at least in the short term, it may also result in overall job losses. In addition, there is some evidence to suggest that women will be the first to lose their jobs, and the last to receive the education and training necessary for them to compete in the new labour force.

Low-end, poorly paid jobs provide a pool of relatively accessible first-entry employment opportunities which help integrate young women migrants from rural areas in many countries. Women workers occupy the lower rungs in both garment and electronics manufacturing even though, in terms of education, they may not be disadvantaged compared to their male counterparts.<sup>4</sup> Women are very often recruited as unskilled workers (usually as apprentices to begin with), given very little training and face limited promotion prospects. As a result they often practice "job hopping" from one firm to another as a way of improving their grade and earnings (Edgren, 1982; Kibria, Bourqia, this volume).

The country studies in this volume reveal a certain amount of disingenuousness among employers, who complain about the instability of women workers and the high levels of labour turnover, but who subscribe to a system of management and production organization that finds a high level of instability functional and wish to retain only a small group of stable workers at the centre. While management in Morocco speak of the dire need for skilled and educated workers, they are reluctant to hire workers with degrees

(who may not be so malleable, and who demand higher wages). A similar reluctance is documented for Bangladesh, where entrepreneurs refuse to hire educated workers, preferring less-educated and unskilled employees. The econometric exercise on the determinants of wage discrimination in Morocco provides further evidence of the problematic relationship between education and employment. In the textile export sector a primary diploma has little effect on women's wages, while it has a strong positive impact on men's wages; thus at higher levels of education the gender discrimination in wages is accentuated (Belghazi and Baden). The reluctance to hire educated female workers is likely to act as a constraint on the capacity of garment factories to recruit the workforce necessary to upgrade their production processes, as they will need to do if they are to maintain their international market share in a changing trading environment.

The maturing of the industrial sector in developing countries is likely to involve higher technology and higher wages. How far will such a path of industrial accumulation be able to retain the mass of rural, predominantly female, migrants who have been absorbed into export-oriented manufacturing? Some observers fear that the "high-tech" road to industrialization — with high wages, skilled workforce, good working conditions — even if it could be constructed, would probably only include better-off men (Hart, 1995). The debate on the de-skilling or upgrading effects of modern technology continues, but one of the trends that seems to be supported by the available evidence is that of skill polarization, with some workers acquiring the training necessary to work with new technologies, and others relegated to residual low-skill employment (Standing, 1989).

There is some evidence to suggest that technological and skill upgrading of export production, especially multi-skilling of flexible labour engaged in high-performance production, can lead to a process of de-feminization of manufacturing labour, since women seem to be disadvantaged in the processes of production that are capital intensive and that rely on skilled labour.<sup>5</sup> The fall in the share of women in the manufacturing labour force of Mexico's export border zone (*maquiladora*) between 1982 and 1985, was attributed to product diversification, elimination of low-skill operator jobs held by women, the need for higher levels of training, as well as trends towards certification and experiments with new work schedules (Beneria, 1995; Pearson, 1991a). Evidence from countries such as Singapore also suggests that with product diversification the proportion of women employed falls markedly, and a cross-country study of export

processing zones hypothesizes that the fall in the share of women workers is a general phenomenon (Joekes, 1995). In other words, as the mix of products produced for export markets is diversified beyond the relatively labour-intensive and low-technology ones (such as garments and footwear) in the process of product upgrading and deepening of the employment structure through investments in technology and skills, the share of women workers tends to fall. In the case of Singapore, the swing back from female intensity in manufacturing has been attributed, as a proximate cause, to the fact that women workers with the requisite qualifications are not available for recruitment to technical and other skilled grades, because few women have had access to the necessary technical education and training (Joekes, 1995).

The educational qualifications of the female workforce in the export-oriented manufacturing sector vary widely from country to country, over time and across industries. Lim (1990: 107) reports seeing “similar tasks in multinational electronics factories being performed by primary school dropouts in Singapore, where labour is scarce, and by high school graduates and even part-time college students in the Philippines, where unemployment rates are high.” However, within the same country, the education level tends to be higher in the electronic industries compared to the clothing/garment industries. Elson (1996) makes a useful point in this connection. She argues that organizations of and for women workers should be concerned with “enhancing the skills and education of those workers, so that if workers lose their jobs, they have acquired something of permanence — more self-confidence, more organizational and advocacy skills, more knowledge of how their society works” (1996:50). The comments of one Malaysian woman worker (from an electronics factory) who was retrenched during the 1985 recession captures the problem succinctly:

*After eleven years of working, I realize that I have learnt nothing that is of any use to me. The government has told me to find another job, not to be choosy. How can I be choosy? I have nothing anyone wants. (cited in Lohead, 1988:288)*

The female intensive industries in both Bangladesh and Morocco will almost certainly face extensive restructuring over the next few years. Bangladesh is due to lose the advantage in garment production it has enjoyed under the Multi-Fibre Agreement, which imposed production quotas on neighbouring countries and thus drove production to Bangladesh, and which will be phased out by 2005. Labour in Bangladesh, while cheaper than in neighbouring countries,

is also less productive, and Battacharya and Rahman argue that, unless the industry can adopt more efficient, higher technology production methods, reduction in market share and subsequent job losses are likely to be substantial. As in other countries, there are some early signs that the rate at which women have been participating in garment manufacturing may not be sustainable as export manufacturing diversifies; currently in the fastest growing subsectors, such as knitwear and hosiery, women constitute no more than 4 per cent of the labour force. It will take, according to Battacharya and Rahman, deliberate policies designed to dismantle the gender segmentation of the labour market, as well as a conscious effort to train the female labour force, to retain a significant share of future manufacturing employment for women.

In Morocco, the textile/garment sector has been facing declining international competitiveness in recent years due to several factors, among them stagnation in productivity growth. The research team suggests that, if Morocco is to overcome the current stagnation in its international competitiveness, alternative industrial models must be explored — as some entrepreneurs in the garment industry have already begun to do. Such models would improve product quality by retaining the best women workers, reducing labour turnover, and providing more scope for worker responsibility and participation through trade unions and other organizational forms. In other words, as Belghazi and Baden argue, a low-wage export strategy based on the use of female labour, subject to discriminatory forces, is no longer viable. The common explanation that Moroccan wages are “too high” relative to those in competitor countries is thus rejected. Instead, it is argued that wages should be understood not as a component of production costs, but as a factor that influences production methods and factor use, and thus that the variable to be addressed in restructuring is not labour costs but labour productivity.

The challenge in Morocco, as in many other countries, would be to make the transition to higher wage, higher productivity employment without substituting male workers, and more socially privileged female workers, for the existing female workforce drawn from lower income households. The training of the existing workforce, and improvement in methods for the valorization of the skills and experience of current workers, seem to be important aspects of the production upgrading process. The role of public policy is critical too in providing accessible training programmes. Training and education issues thus deserve imaginative policy responses, notwithstanding the inertia of the education system and the general crisis of resources for social development.

## IV. The case studies

The chapters in this volume open with an investigation of wage discrimination in Morocco's urban labour force. **Belghazi with Baden** provide data on female labour force participation and wage rates in export manufacturing, and they discuss theoretical explanations for wage discrimination by gender. Based on macro-level data, they provide a preliminary analysis of the contribution of different factors in explaining wage differentials. Clearly, more empirical work is needed to fully quantify and understand wage differentials, but it is interesting to note that education is neither valued nor rewarded in the female manufacturing labour force (women's wages neither rise significantly with higher levels of education, nor suffer from lack of education). The chapter then turns to a discussion of the implications of gender discrimination in the manufacturing sector. It advances the hypothesis that, contrary to the general perception that low wages are the necessary result of low productivity, low wages (including gender discrimination in wages) should be seen as a primary cause of low productivity and declining competitiveness in Morocco's industrial sector. Low returns to employment result in low commitment to employment, which, combined with lack of returns to education, means that the female labour force is largely unskilled and unproductive. A great deal more empirical work in different contexts needs to be done to determine whether this hypothesis is sustainable in Morocco and in other contexts, but the question is essential to raise and to examine because of its crucial policy implications.

The chapter by **Bourqia** follows by examining on a more micro level the forces through which gender discrimination works in Moroccan industrial employment, as well as its implications. Women in Morocco have worked in manufacturing since colonial times, and most female industrial workers are unmarried and live with their parents near their place of employment. It is common for parents to seek employment for their daughters, and to exert control over all of their earnings. Young women are the preferred labourers in textile work because of their docility and flexibility. Education is not valued by factory heads, and while experience does lead to increased wages, factory heads make little effort to stem the very high labour turnover rates. In general, this chapter tends to support Belghazi and Baden's contention that low wages result in low productivity. The low wages paid in textile work contribute to a perception that such work is low status, which in turn leads to a low commitment to employment and



a lack of incentive to improve skills. The women workers interviewed by Bourqia justify their high rates of absenteeism and tardiness on the basis of their low wages. Indeed, based on the findings of this case study, one might go even further than did Belghazi and Baden in linking gender discrimination to low productivity: not only might wage discrimination depress productivity, but so might social discrimination. The lack of control that female factory workers had over the terms of their employment, as well as over their earnings, meant that employment held very few personal rewards for them and they had few incentives to improve their skills or work performance.

The chapter by Afsar sketches the conditions for women in the garment sector in Bangladesh. In contrast to Morocco, there was a sudden and rapid boom in garment manufacturing in the 1980s, when women were drawn into the wage labour force in large numbers, with the vast majority of them being drawn from rural areas. This sudden influx of women workers had a much greater social impact than did the slowly growing textile sector in Morocco. Young women often left their parents to join the workforce, and quickly gained a measure of independence and mobility not possible in their rural homes. Employment for some represented a means of escape from family conflicts or unsatisfactory marriages. The relatively high wages that were possible meant that employment did not necessarily represent a distress sale of labour, but that jobs were often sought as a means to obtain funds for education and for investment. With growing numbers of girls from “good families” seeking employment, wage labour was increasingly seen as a socially acceptable, and even desirable experience for young women. Within the workplace, women sought career advancement, and bargained for higher wages.

**Kibria** delves even more deeply into the subjective experience of female garment workers in Bangladesh, providing a closer look at the process through which women become garment workers and at their perception of employment. She finds that garment workers are socially and economically more diverse than rural female labourers. For most who had previously held employment in other sectors, garment work represents upward mobility. Many had personal motives for seeking employment, including a desire to gain experience and independence. Garment workers' earnings tend to be largely under their own control, with sending families not relying on remittances from them — on the contrary, sending families often cover workers' initial expenses for establishing themselves in the city.

Afsar's and Kibria's work suggests that Bangladeshi women's



experience in garment work is largely positive, relative to the alternatives available to them. **Khan**, looking at the conditions in Bangladeshi garment factories from a more global perspective, paints a somewhat different picture. He reports that working hours in the factory are extremely long, with overtime often required and few holidays. Management makes deliberate efforts to keep employment conditions as informal as possible. Factory owners seek young female workers from rural areas because they have low aspiration wages, they are docile, and they are easy to dismiss. Attempts to organize garment workers have met with little success: only between 3 and 5 per cent of factories have active unions. Labour organizers must confront not only hostile and often brutal management, but also inefficient or corrupt labour boards. Khan's assessment of this situation is largely consistent with Belghazi and Baden's analysis of the effects of wage discrimination in Morocco: Khan argues that opposition to labour organization and improved labour standards in the garment sector in Bangladesh will decrease the potential for productivity gains in the sector. Improved working conditions would be expected to reduce labour turnover and consequently increase the experience of the workforce, making the training schemes necessary for upgrading skills much less risky for employers. In addition, Khan provides evidence from other countries to suggest that unionization tends to reduce the gender gap in wages, which will also help to increase women's commitment to the workforce and the returns to training.

**Battacharya and Rahman** return to more macro-level data to assess the prospects for garment manufacturing in Bangladesh, and for female workers in this sector. This chapter provides a somewhat different interpretation of the low-wage, low-productivity dynamic than that offered by Belghazi and Baden. The authors argue that, in Bangladesh, existing low levels of productivity were offset by low wages, and it is this that allowed the large scale influx of women workers into the manufacturing sector, and indeed provided a comparative advantage to women workers. However, Battacharya and Rahman agree that low productivity will become a serious constraint on the garment industry in the coming years. It will be necessary for the sector to improve production technology, and for women to develop the skills necessary to employ such technology. However, women are not currently in a position to take advantage of the improved technology, as it is concentrated in the parts of the production process with little female employment. Thus there is a very real danger that women will be marginalized if Bangladesh

succeeds in restructuring its garment industry to become more competitive. The most important policy implication of this finding is that ways must be found to share the costs of technological training for women: because of the high labour turnover in the sector, employers will be reluctant to provide such training.

These chapters suggest a number of factors that have led to the differing experiences of female textile workers in Bangladesh and Morocco. In Bangladesh, rapid female-dominated, export-led industrialization has rent the social fabric in many areas, opening up possibilities for women unimaginable even 20 years ago. Due in part to the fact that women were recruited in large scale from rural areas, they were able to move into new social spheres and to exert considerable control over their income, in the process making many existing social institutions obsolete. This is not to say that conditions in the garment factories are good by global standards; in this case, women's long-term strategic gender interests may well be better met than are their short-term material interests. However, the progress women have made in the labour market in Bangladesh may easily be reversed if the garment sector does not find a way to become more competitive in the opening global markets.

In Morocco, on the other hand, the slower growth of the industry has meant that female textile workers were recruited largely from among the pre-existing female labour force. This labour force, which evolved out of a traditional carpet-weaving sector, remains largely under parental or spousal control, and provides few material or personal returns to the workers themselves. The ambivalence that Moroccan women expressed toward factory employment is due to this lack of returns, as well as to prevailing norms and attitudes that attach little value to women's paid employment.

These chapters further suggest that the emphasis on trade liberalization as a vehicle for increased women's labour force participation is somewhat misguided. It may be that what matters, for the women concerned, is less the terms of their country's incorporation into global markets, than the terms of women's incorporation into the labour market. Although export-oriented industrialization often improves labour market terms for women, this is not always the case. And indeed, in Bangladesh, the growth of female employment in the garment sector is largely the result of the sector's protection in global markets.

## V. Conclusion

Although gender issues are not extensively explored in the neo-classical discussion of trade liberalization and macro-policy prescriptions, the overall thrust of the argument seems to be that trade liberalization will deliver considerable benefits to women, both in terms of the sheer quantity of employment it can offer them and also in terms of employment conditions — i.e., in reducing gender wage discrimination. A contextualized analysis of labour force feminization, we have argued, provides a more qualified picture, mapping both the *uneven* “gendered landscape of the new international division of labour”<sup>6</sup> across time and place, as well as the *contradictory* implications of “inclusion” for those specific groups of women who have been incorporated into these new forms of work.

The empirical literature suggests that the ability to create successful export-oriented manufacturing has been geographically uneven; and it has not been sustainable in all contexts. The argument that export-oriented industries provide higher wages to women, and exhibit lower levels of wage discrimination raises further questions: do the lower levels of wage discrimination in the export-oriented industries signify that men’s wages are lower there? How significant are the wage discrimination data, when the export-oriented sectors are predominantly female? A meaningful assessment of what these jobs have meant for women would have to include not only wage data, but also some indication of the qualitative changes it has generated in their lives, in terms of life-long earning prospects, bodily well-being, changing social relationships (with parents, siblings, husbands, co-workers), and issues around dignity, autonomy and self-worth.

Institutionalist analyses have been useful for understanding how labour markets can become “bearers of gender”, i.e. how gender-based hierarchies are substantiated through labour market institutions. Institutionalist accounts, however, have not been sufficiently attentive to women workers’ understanding of their work, its implications for their personal lives, and “everyday” forms of resistance on the shop-floor. The more situated feminist accounts, which have complemented structural analyses of labour market institutions with the perceptions and accounts of women workers themselves, have shown how the response to the wage contract is contextually specific and gendered.

As Fraser (1997) puts it, the moral is that the wage contract requires looking beyond the boss/worker dyad. At the very least one must see the trade-off between subordination in paid employment

against the potential for relative freedom from subordination outside it.

The free mobility of capital, the downward spiral of labour conditions, and political decisions by states and employers to eschew responsibility for workers' well-being are clearly important concerns for large numbers of men and women. But political responses and the search for coalescing strategies will most probably be shaped at the juncture of three sets of issues: 1) despite being problematic, there is a need to maintain these jobs, and very few women would like to see their jobs disappear, 2) the high-wage/high-tech road may be an option available to only a few countries and may be open to a limited number of men (and even fewer women), 3) the agenda for social and gender-equitable development needs to be widened to include the conditions for social reproduction that can effectively subsidize the social wage — this is an area that needs to be explored creatively from a gender perspective. The political processes to drive this agenda include national and international acts of solidarity, but in either context the extent to which the interests of women workers can be genuinely represented will depend critically on their politicized presence in those movements.

Elson (1996) makes the important point that the observed processes associated with global feminization are not intrinsically interlinked: the flexibility of production made possible by technological changes does not have to be associated with the erosion of workers' rights made possible by the unfettered mobility of capital, or with political decisions by states and employers to eschew responsibility for workers' well-being. She also makes the critical observation, from a gender perspective, that male norms of full-time employment may not necessarily be the desirable norm to which all workers do and should aspire. Similarly, the message that may be drawn from women's experiences with trade unions at the national level is that the obvious workers' priorities may be, in fact, implicit male priorities.

Furthermore, as Battacharya and Rahman argue, even where access to wage employment is of immediate advantage to women, there is a need to look beyond such short-term advantages to longer-term strategic gender interests. These will include continued access to employment and enhanced gender equity in the labour market. Access to employment will entail first, that these manufacturing sectors remain competitive in world markets, and second, that women not be displaced by men in the restructuring process. Continued competitiveness will require increased productivity through

improved technology. The studies in this volume clearly suggest that gender discrimination is an impediment to increased productivity, because of employers' reluctance to provide training for women, or to improve working conditions in order to reduce labour turnover, which in turn is necessary for training and the adoption of new technologies.

Much of the problem here, of course, is that traditional gender roles and gender stereotypes, in the short term, tend to be reproduced rather than transformed by factory work. Employers often have the attitude that women are not committed to the labour force, and that they are not capable of benefiting from technological training. Thus, while macroeconomic and trade policy changes may have stimulated export-oriented industrialization and the emergence of new forms of employment for women, the significant interventions that will have to be made in order to enable women to secure labour market entitlements are not achievable through the manipulation of such macroeconomic tools. Exchange rate and interest rate changes may affect the performance of the industrial sector as a whole, but they are too blunt to influence women's access to employment or gender equity within the labour market. Instead, these social objectives will have to be addressed through a wide range of micro-policy instruments, which will necessarily vary under different conditions, and which may include such disparate measures as improved street lighting or transportation, affordable housing facilities, accessible training programmes, childcare facilities or health insurance schemes. The labour market interventions needed in the context of the restructuring of export-oriented industry are essentially aimed at making both public authorities and the private sector more accountable for the social costs of production — i.e. making them more “socially responsible” — thereby enabling women workers to enhance their capabilities (in terms of health, skills, decision-making power) and to obtain more sustainable labour market entitlements.

## Endnotes

1. Sections of this chapter draw on Razavi (1999).
2. See Cagatay and Ozler (1995), Joeke and Weston (1994), Joeke (1995), and Standing (1989).
3. While there is an extensive literature on the health hazards of new technology in developed countries — documenting muscular-skeletal disorders, eyesight injuries, stress and fatigue, skin complaints and reproductive hazards — very little research has been undertaken to monitor the health implications of working with new technology in developing countries (Pearson, 1991b).
4. Belghazi's analysis of Moroccan employment and wage data, for example, suggests that there is strong selectivity in participation by educational level. The female urban labour force in Morocco is on average better educated than the male, despite a significant gender gap in education even in urban areas (this volume).
5. See Elson (1996) for evidence of such reversals in some developed countries (e.g. electronics plants in the Republic of Ireland and Scotland, and textile manufacturing in the United Kingdom).
6. This phrase is borrowed from Pearson (1998).

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# **Wage discrimination by gender in Morocco's urban labour force: Evidence and implications for industrial and labour policy**

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## **I. Background**

### **1. The feminization of export production**

Over the years, the feminization of export production has been an issue of considerable debate in the gender and development field (Elson and Pearson, 1981; Lim, 1990; Baden and Joeques, 1993; Pearson, 1998). The secular rise in female labour force participation globally in recent decades (Joeques, 1987; United Nations, 1995), concentrated particularly in the export sector of newly industrializing economies, has also caught the attention of development economists interested in trade and labour issues. Reviewing global evidence on employment trends by gender, some studies have argued that there is a link between the feminization of the labour force and the increasing casualization and flexibilization of employment (Standing, 1989; 1996). Others have explored the correlation between rising female intensity of employment in export industries and trade performance, the extent to which trade performance is related to human capital endowments and the possible relationship between investment in female education and trade performance (Wood, 1991; Berge and Wood, 1994).

Feminist studies, on the other hand, have been particularly concerned with what, if any, benefits are conferred on women workers in this process of incorporation into the global labour market, and

whether this newly-incorporated labour force is subject to specific, gendered forms of discrimination and exploitation (Elson and Pearson, 1981). They have also been concerned with the impact of women's employment in export-oriented industry on gender relations; on whether such employment provides women with greater autonomy and choice, or merely reproduces a new variant of patriarchal gender relations (see, for example, Greenhalgh, 1985; Kabeer, 1995). Underpinning these debates is Sen's concept of "perceived contribution" as a factor in increasing women's bargaining power within the household (Sen, 1990). In this view, earned income through wage employment may contribute more to the women's status than less visible forms of economic activity.

## 2. Labour markets and gender discrimination

Since the mid-1980s, a considerable theoretical and empirical literature on labour markets and discrimination (by gender and other variables) has emerged based on studies of developing country labour markets. These come from a range of perspectives, including neoclassical (Appleton et al., 1990; Birdsall and Sabot, 1991; Psacharopolous and Tzannatos, 1992; Hotchkiss and Moore, 1996; Glick and Sahn, 1997) as well as institutional and feminist viewpoints (Humphrey, 1987; Sinclair and Redclift, 1991; Terrell, 1992).

These studies have provided a wealth of evidence on the extent of the male-female wage gap in different contexts, the degree to which this can be attributed to "discrimination", and on other mechanisms of discrimination in labour markets. The range of estimates of male-female wage differentials varies between countries, sectors and time periods, as well as between different groups of women. For example, studies cited in Ashenfelter and Oaxaca (1991:43-47) report earnings differentials from as low as 27 per cent (Brazil, formal sector) to as high as 85 per cent (Nicaragua, national). Hotchkiss and Moore (1996:671) find a gross earnings differential of around 20 per cent for Jamaica. Terrell (1992:393) reports female earnings as a percentage of male at between 47 per cent and 87 per cent, for a variety of Latin American countries. The proportion of these differentials that is thought attributable to discrimination (rather than differences in endowments) is also highly varied, ranging between 10 per cent and over 100 per cent, depending on country, sector and education level, *inter alia*, with many estimates at over 60 per cent of the wage gap (Ashenfelter and Oaxaca, 1991:47; Psacharopolous and Tzannatos, 1992; Terrell, 1992). Aggregate gender discrimination may disguise

differences in impact between groups of women. For example, there is evidence, particularly from Asia, that married women suffer from discrimination to a far greater extent than single women. Similarly the extent of discrimination may vary with the education level or age of workers (World Bank, 1995; Psacharopoulos and Tzannatos, 1992.)

These studies have also resulted in new insights regarding the limitations of conventional labour market models in explaining gender discrimination in the developing country context, as well as highlighting methodological difficulties. One particular problem in the neoclassical approach is the difficulty in distinguishing empirically the effects of discrimination from the “preferences” of employees. For this reason, the upper limit of discrimination is often identified as the residual, unexplained wage differences. The rigid separation of supply side and demand side factors also leads to a failure to recognize their interplay.

One overall conclusion is that there is no universal explanation linking gender discrimination to economic development (Ahsenfelter and Oaxaca, 1991:52). Regional differences in the extent to which “traditional roles” have influenced male-female job access and productivity have been highlighted (Schultz, 1991). Some studies suggest that wage discrimination *per se* is less important in developing countries than in developed industrialized economies, whereas access to jobs in particular sectors may be a more important factor (Appleton et al, 1990; Hotchkiss and Moore, 1996). Given entry barriers in formal labour markets, the relatively high proportion of the labour force, and particularly women — who are disproportionately represented — in informal sector or self-employment in developing economies is a major factor determining differential earnings. This suggests that existing studies of gender discrimination in wages may understate the problem since they mainly rely on data gathered in the formal sector.

The question of whether wage differentials are likely to increase or decrease with development has also been raised, although studies are inconclusive on this. Some (e.g. Tzannatos, 1995) suggest a closing of the formal sector wage gap in developing countries, although this view has been criticized for not taking into account changes in human capital differences (Joekes, 1995c).

The causes of wage discrimination are identified in some of these studies, which highlight monopsonistic and segmented labour markets and imperfect information as underlying factors. Discussion in the literature of the impacts of wage discrimination by gender

suggests that not only will it have negative consequences for individual women, but also that it will have long-term negative impacts on the economy as a whole:

*[D]iscrimination will tend to slow economic growth by reducing efficiency in the allocation of labour among firms and the economy by reducing job commitment and the effort of workers who perceive themselves to be victims of injustice; and by reducing the magnitude of investments in human capital, and the returns on those investments. (Birdsall and Sabot, 1991:7)*

### 3. Objectives and structure of the study

The current study builds on the existing literature, in attempting to link the issue of gender-based wage discrimination to trade performance and competitiveness. It argues that the low-wage export strategy based on female labour that has been pursued in Morocco needs to be rethought if Morocco is to maintain its market share in textile export in the global economy. This is a challenge to the common view that wages are too high in Morocco to compete with new entrants such as China, India and Viet Nam.

To develop this argument, the chapter uses data from urban labour force surveys to estimate the extent of gender-based wage discrimination. It also attempts to identify the main determinants of gender-based wage differentials. Drawing on this empirical analysis, it hypothesizes a link between the declining competitiveness of Moroccan industry, declining productivity and gender discrimination in wages. It concludes with policy proposals designed to redress gender-based wage discrimination, thereby, it is argued, improving productivity, and, by extension, the competitiveness of Moroccan industry.

Section II provides the overall macroeconomic context for the study, covering the period 1980-93 and focusing on the competitiveness of Moroccan industry. The third section gives an overview of employment trends in the same period while the fourth specifically examines the feminization of manufacturing employment. The fifth section provides some data on wage differences by gender in urban labour markets. Theoretical explanations for wage discrimination by gender are reviewed (section VI) and then the methodology and results of the analysis of wage discrimination undertaken in Morocco are presented (section VII). These results are analyzed in some detail in section VIII, which identifies the factors explaining differences in wage levels by gender, as well as wage

differentials, in urban Morocco. Section IX draws together policy conclusions and suggests fruitful areas for further research.

## **II. Economic performance and policy in Morocco, 1980-93**

The background to this study is a broad concern with the long-term competitiveness of Moroccan industry, as structural adjustment (introduced in 1986) and increasing deregulation are pushing the country towards greater integration in the global economy.

Following structural adjustment, Morocco's trade performance was initially strong and its share of world markets grew up to 1988. Since 1988, competitiveness has declined, as reflected in rising trade deficits, a falling share of world markets overall and a falling export-import ratio after 1988.

In 1981 (before adjustment), the trade deficit was equivalent to 19 per cent of GDP, falling to 5 per cent in 1988, and rising again to 10 per cent in 1994. While the devaluation of the dirham associated with the adoption of a structural adjustment programme in 1986 initially supported the positive trade performance, in the longer run, structural adjustment has not led to a sustained improvement in trade indicators.

Growth in exports has slowed and imports have risen rapidly. Between 1980 and 1988, the growth rate for exports was 4.71 per cent annually. Between 1988 and 1993, this fell to 2.07 per cent, while import growth rose from 1.72 per cent annually (1980-88) to 7.21 per cent (1988-93). Alongside the loss of international competitiveness, there has been a loss of competitiveness in the domestic market, with foreign producers being the main beneficiaries of increases in domestic demand (Belghazi, 1995a).

Improvements in the current account in the period 1982-93<sup>2</sup> were largely due to revenues accrued from tourism and remittances of migrant workers, sources that may be unreliable in the longer term. Pressure on the current account is compounded by the rising burden of debt repayment following rescheduling in 1993. Although the current account deficit was financed by a massive increase in foreign private investment, there are concerns that unless there is significant domestic investment alongside this, the economy will remain highly vulnerable.

Compared to other newly industrializing countries, Morocco's competitive advantage is concentrated in final consumer goods and

semi-manufactured goods, particularly in semi-conductors, electronics, textiles and clothing. Analysis of the trends in global market share for different products in the 1980s and early 1990s reveals a number of trends. From 1978 to 1985, there was a decrease in market share for industries based on natural resources (food, beverages, minerals and metals), offset by a rising market share of chemical products and textiles and clothing, although these represent a much smaller share of their respective world markets. Overall, the global market share in major exports fell in the early 1980s, then rose again in the second half of the 1980s (following structural adjustment), only to fall again subsequently. While the overall picture is one of loss of competitiveness, a microeconomic perspective gives greater cause for optimism, because of increased diversification of production. Furthermore, in some sectors, the market share has continued to rise, particularly in clothing and electronics, both sectors with a high representation of women in the labour force.

Because of their labour-intensive nature, the profitability of export industries is highly sensitive to wage costs (Baden and Joeke, 1993). Belghazi (1995a) finds a higher share of wages in value-added in enterprises that export a high proportion of their turnover, compared to those exporting a lower percentage. It is argued here that this is closely linked to the trend of female labour being drawn into export manufacturing, under conditions of increasing global competition.

### **III. Overall employment profile and trends<sup>3</sup>**

Over the past 10 years or so, there has been an increase in the overall labour supply in Morocco, due to a combination of factors, including changes in the family economy leading to increases in female labour force participation, population growth and the stagnation in labour opportunities for overseas migrants. Labour force growth has outstripped the supply of formal employment, leading to increased activity in the informal sector. While labour absorption in the household and informal economies has reduced pressure on the labour market, it may have negative implications for fiscal revenues, for industrial productivity and hence competitiveness.

Between 1985 and 1993, the economically active population in Morocco grew by 0.8 per cent annually in rural areas and 3.8 per cent in urban areas, faster than population growth in both cases (at 0.4 per cent and 3.4 per cent respectively). This was due to the age structure of the population as well as rural-urban migration.



Overall, the size of the urban male labour force has increased faster than that of the female labour force (by 5.14 per cent per annum 1986-1993, compared to 3.05 per cent for women). In 1993, 22.1 per cent of the urban female population over 15 was recorded as working compared to 73.1 per cent of the urban male population over 15.<sup>4</sup> Overall, the education level of the urban labour force is higher for women than men.

If the workforce over 15 is used as the reference population, data indicate that the urban economically active population either stagnated (for men) or fell (for women) in the period 1986-93 (see Table 1 below). Including the active population under 15 alters the picture such that the active population increased for men but not women (crude activity rate). There has been a sharp decline in the per centage of the working female population under 15 in urban areas (falling by nearly 9 per cent per year, 1986-93), possibly related to improved schooling opportunities, to informalization of employment among women (where official data do not capture this adequately) or to a "discouraged worker" effect among young women.

**Table 1: Urban economic activity and unemployment rates by gender, 1986 and 1993, and average growth rates 1986-93**

|                         | 1986 (%) |        | 1993 (%) |        | Average growth rate 1986-93 (%) |        |
|-------------------------|----------|--------|----------|--------|---------------------------------|--------|
|                         | Male     | Female | Male     | Female | Male                            | Female |
| Activity rate (over 15) | 73.1     | 23.7   | 73.1     | 22.1   | 0.00                            | -0.99  |
| Crude activity rate     | 40.3     | 12.7   | 42.9     | 11.9   | 0.90                            | -0.98  |
| Unemployment rate       | 13.9     | 20.4   | 14.2     | 21.7   | 0.31                            | 0.89   |

Source: Belghazi, 1995b:34.

### Trends in unemployment and underemployment<sup>5</sup>

Unemployment rates are higher overall (by 50 per cent — see Table 1) among women than men in Morocco. This is particularly pronounced in urban areas, where the female rate is almost twice the male rate. Unemployment has also risen faster for women than men (0.89 per annum compared to 0.31 per cent, 1986-93) (see Table 1). However, the reverse is true among the unemployed who have never had a job, i.e. the unemployment rate is rising faster for men than women among new entrants.

Additional data on unemployment by educational level show rising unemployment among qualified wage earners, including those with middle level education (up from 21.3 per cent in 1985 to 24.6 per cent in 1993) and especially those with higher education (up from 8.3 per cent to 18.7 per cent, 1985 to 1993). By contrast, unemployment has fallen among those with primary education or less.<sup>6</sup>

Economically active women are underemployed to a far greater extent than men. Underemployment, defined as those in the working population who are working under 32 hours per week, was 20 per cent for the population as a whole (1990-91), but 10 per cent for men and 41 per cent for women. The gender difference in underemployment is wider in absolute terms in rural areas (13 per cent for men compared to 44 per cent for women) than urban areas (9 per cent for men compared to 35 per cent for women) (Belghazi, 1995b:35).<sup>7</sup>

#### IV. Feminization of wage employment in Morocco

There has been a shift in the profiles of economic activity by gender in terms of occupational status. The proportion of working women who are wage earners increased more rapidly than that of men, at 5.2 per cent per year, compared to 4.2 per cent per year, in the

**Table 2: Economically active population by professional category and gender, 1986-93**

| Professional category            | Percentage of labour force (1993) |       | Annual average growth rate (1986-93) |       |
|----------------------------------|-----------------------------------|-------|--------------------------------------|-------|
|                                  | Men                               | Women | Men                                  | Women |
| Unemployed, never worked         | 6.6                               | 12.9  | 8.9                                  | 3.9   |
| Self-employed                    | 20.5                              | 4.6   | 8.0                                  | 6.6   |
| Employers                        | 4.9                               | 0.7   | 11.5                                 | 9.3   |
| Wage earners                     | 55.5                              | 59.6  | 4.2                                  | 5.2   |
| Partners or co-operative members | 4.1                               | 0.7   | 19.4                                 | 20.3  |
| Workers at home                  | 0.2                               | 18.0  | -2.5                                 | 0.9   |
| Home helpers                     | 4.6                               | 2.1   | 11.6                                 | 6.6   |
| Apprentices                      | 3.3                               | 1.2   | 8.8                                  | -6.6  |
| Not declared                     | 0.2                               | 0.1   | -3.4                                 | -11.8 |
| Total                            | 99.9                              | 100.0 | 6.3                                  | 4.1   |

Source: Statistical Directorate, cited in Belghazi, 1995a:28; 1995b:36.

period 1986-93 (see Table 2). In 1993, women formed 32 per cent of urban wage earners, compared to 30 per cent in 1986.

While the proportion of wage earners in the overall urban labour force decreased from 61.6 per cent (1986) to 56 per cent (1993) with the growth of the informal sector, of the total working female population, almost 60 per cent were wage earners in 1993 (up from 55.3 per cent) compared to 55 per cent of men (down from 61.6 per cent) (see Table 3).

**Table 3: Wage earners as a percentage of total working population by gender, 1986, 1993**

|       | 1986 | 1993 |
|-------|------|------|
| Men   | 61.6 | 55.5 |
| Women | 55.3 | 59.5 |
| Total | 61.6 | 56.0 |

*Source:* Belghazi, 1995a:27; 1995b:36.

Women's share of formal employment grew in manufacturing as well as in service employment (e.g. public administration, teaching, health, banking and insurance). The proportion of working women employed in manufacturing increased from 21 per cent to 37 per cent in the period 1980-93.

Women's employment has grown faster than overall employment in most manufacturing sectors except those, such as clothing, where women already formed a very high proportion of the labour force (76 per cent in 1980). Women's employment rate even grew in sectors where the overall labour force participation rate was in decline, such as beverages and tobacco and basic metals. A positive relationship was found between the rate of increase in real wages and those sectors with relatively high rates of female employment, which, it is argued, gives evidence of the ongoing demand for female labour.<sup>8</sup>

## **V. Wage differences by gender in the urban working population**

Although data directly comparing male and female wages were not available by manufacturing sector, comparison of crude data on average wages in enterprises with different levels of "female intensity"

indicates that the higher the representation of women in the enterprise labour force, the lower the average wage (see Table 4).

**Table 4: Average wage according to percentage of women employed in enterprise, 1993**

| Percentage women employed | Average wage (DH) (1993) |
|---------------------------|--------------------------|
| < 20 %                    | 25,600                   |
| 20-25 %                   | 25,139                   |
| 25-45 %                   | 26,662                   |
| 45-64 %                   | 21,716                   |
| > 64 %                    | 17,437                   |
| Total                     | 24,020                   |

Source: Adapted from Belghazi, 1995a:9; Belghazi 1995b:18.

Further statistical analysis reveals a positive correlation between the level of exports in an enterprise and the number of women employed; as well as a negative correlation between the number of women employed and average wages.<sup>9</sup>

Looking across different manufacturing sectors, a similar pattern can be observed, that the higher the share of women's employment in the sector, the lower the average wage tends to be (see Table 5 below).

**Table 5: Sectoral breakdown of average wage, female share of employment and percentage of output exported**

| Sector                               | Average wage (1000 Dh) | Female share of employment | Percentage of output exported |
|--------------------------------------|------------------------|----------------------------|-------------------------------|
| Food products                        | 36.79                  | 10.83                      | 0.64                          |
| Other food industries                | 22.86                  | 36.10                      | 49.43                         |
| Textile, knitted and crocheted goods | 23.88                  | 42.20                      | 50.66                         |
| Clothing (not shoes)                 | 19.23                  | 77.88                      | 90.14                         |
| Leather goods and shoes              | 23.75                  | 30.87                      | 53.06                         |
| Electrical and electronic equipment  | 51.00                  | 41.06                      | 38.43                         |
| Other manufacturing                  | 37.25                  | 33.63                      | 24.76                         |
| Total                                | 31.47                  | 35.54                      | 41.21                         |

Source: Adapted from Belghazi, 1995a:11; 1995b:19.

**Table 6: Male and female labour force by wage level**

| Wage level   | % male labour force | % female labour force | Total labour force |
|--------------|---------------------|-----------------------|--------------------|
| < 1000 Dh    | 21.15               | 33.00                 | 23.98              |
| 1,000-1,500  | 22.77               | 25.84                 | 23.50              |
| 1,500-2,000  | 18.95               | 12.15                 | 17.33              |
| 2,000-3,000  | 19.02               | 16.60                 | 18.45              |
| 3,000-4,000  | 6.72                | 5.03                  | 6.32               |
| 4,000-5,000  | 2.42                | 1.60                  | 2.22               |
| >5,000       | 3.64                | 1.75                  | 3.19               |
| Not declared | 5.34                | 4.03                  | 5.03               |
| Total        | 100.00              | 100.00                | 100.00             |

Source: Adapted from: Belghazi, 1995a:17; 1995b:25.

Table 6 illustrates the distribution of male and female labour forces by wage level. This shows that the female labour force is more concentrated among those earning Dh 1,500 or less than is the male labour force (56 per cent compared to 44 per cent).

Further data disaggregate the male and female labour wage earners by sector (administration, state enterprises, private, informal — defined as enterprises with 10 employees or less — and household) according to whether they earn more or less than the minimum wage (*Salaire Minimum Interprofessionnel Garanti*: SMIG). Overall, 54 per cent of female wage earners earn less than the minimum wage while 39 per cent of male wage earners do. Interestingly, however, a higher proportion of the female than the male labour force in the informal sector earns the SMIG or more, while in the private formal and public sectors the reverse is true.

While the above data give indications of the pattern of wage differentials between women and men in the urban labour force, it does not in itself demonstrate that these differentials are statistically significant, or that they are due to discrimination *per se*. To establish this a more rigorous econometric analysis is needed.

## VI. Theoretical explanations for wage discrimination by gender

Neoclassical economic theory of wage formation states that wages are determined by marginal productivity, where labour markets are perfectly competitive markets and there is homogeneity and perfect substitutability of the labour force. However, observation

reveals that, in actual labour markets, there are considerable and persistent wage differentials between social groups (men and women, but also e.g. ethnic, caste and race groups) which are not easily explained by orthodox theory (Birdsall and Sabot, 1991).

Attempts to explain labour market discrimination within the neoclassical framework have looked at both demand and supply side issues. Demand side explanations have focused on employer prejudice (e.g. Becker, 1957, cited in Birdsall and Sabot, 1991:2) and statistical discrimination due to imperfect information (Phelps, 1972 cited in Birdsall and Sabot, 1991.).

In the former explanation, employers have a preference for hiring people from their own, or particular social groups, and thus are prepared to pay a premium on wages to hire workers from the preferred group. In the latter, a "transactions costs" approach is used to explain why women are paid less than men and/or discriminated against in recruitment. In this case, gender is seen as a supplier of information, where the time and money involved in assessing the capacities of employees is limited. Employers use gender as a screening device, on the basis that (observing existing gender divisions and educational level) women are, on average, deemed likely to be less productive than men. While the impact of this is discriminatory, since all women are assumed to have the characteristics of the average, presumed inferior, woman, it is held to be not intentional discrimination. Employers lack information about the actual productivity of individual workers and this information is too costly to acquire on a case by case basis. So, employment decisions are made on the basis of information or assumptions about the average characteristics of a particular social group. Ultimately, however, it is unclear whether there is a real difference between these two explanations; assumptions about particular social groups may themselves be founded in prejudice.

Other approaches to explaining women's lower wages rest on supply side issues, i.e. their weaker attachment to the labour force, due to childbearing and rearing responsibilities. This also ties in with institutional approaches to labour market analysis where technology is seen as key to the development of primary and secondary labour forces, and labour force segmentation. Since women are more weakly attached to the labour force, they tend to be confined to lower wage jobs in the secondary labour force. It also links in with Becker's theory of household specialization and comparative advantage. Becker's approach (1981, cited in Schultz, 1991:16) suggests that women may choose to specialize in domestic work, rather than wage earning work,

because they are more efficient in this sector, as a result of pre-existing gender divisions of labour. Furthermore, because women are less efficient in commercial activities (since they have not specialized in these or made human capital investments), they command lower wages in the labour market. This differs from previous theories in that it does attempt to explain women's lower wages, not by intrinsic biological differences, but rather by a theory of gender division of labour according to comparative advantage. Nevertheless, it rests on the idea that women's productivity is lower and that the market itself is non-discriminatory.

Here, it is argued that a supply-based, behavioural model is not a wholly satisfactory explanation in the sense that women do not freely choose to underinvest in training. There is an interplay between supply and demand factors, whereby, for example, a woman with limited prospects (because of statistical discrimination) invests less in training and therefore loses comparative advantage.

Estimation of a production function for 1992-93 shows that the elasticity of value added with respect to the participation rate of female workers (permanent or temporary) is lower than that for male workers in both categories. This, it is hypothesized here, gives some evidence that, in line with neoclassical theory, the productivity of the female labour force is lower.

## **VII. Analysis of wage discrimination in Morocco**

### **1. Methodology**

Exploratory econometric analysis was undertaken to establish the relative contribution of supply and demand related factors to women's observed lower wages in Morocco, using 1993 data from the national urban employment survey (ENPAU), which covers urban wage earners in both formal and informal sectors.

Following Arrow (1973) and Becker (1975), separate wage functions are estimated for men and women (in logarithmic form), where wages are regressed on vectors of quantitative and qualitative explanatory variables in each case. A further regression used as the dependent variable the difference between women's actual wages and the wages they would receive (hypothetically) if their characteristics had been utilized to the full, in the absence of gender discrimination, i.e. as if they were men. This is calculated by substituting the coefficients on the quantitative and qualitative vectors of variables

from the male wage function, and the constant from the male wage function, into the equation estimating the female wage.<sup>10</sup> The coefficients in the final equation show the relative weight of each personal or work-related characteristic in determining the average wage differential.<sup>11</sup>

**Table 7: Average differential between men's and women's wages, using different estimation methods**

| Method   | Estimate  |
|--|-----------|
| Absolute differential                                  |           |
| Male wage in Dh  | 1896      |
| Female wage in Dh                                      | 1496      |
| Gross differential                                     | -21.12 %  |
| Estimated wages from log wage function                 |           |
| Male wage in Dh  | 1519      |
| Female wage in Dh                                      | 1163      |
| Gross differential                                     | - 23.42 % |
| Estimated differential with theoretical reference wage | - 41.20 % |

Source: Belghazi, 1995a:18; 1995b:26.

## 2. Results of analysis of wage functions and estimation of gender discrimination in wages

Table 7 gives the estimates of wage discrimination using three different methods. The first is simply a comparison of the absolute wage gap between men and women using ENPAU data. The second is the estimation based on log linear earnings functions; and the third is the estimate based on the difference between observed female wages and the theoretical male reference wage.

The main implication from this table is that the observed level of discrimination from direct comparisons of male and female wage estimates is lower than the level of discrimination comparing actual female wages with a reference theoretical male wage, controlling for the impact of personal and workforce characteristics by gender. This relates to the earlier observation that the urban female labour force is generally more educated than its male counterpart; so that observed wage differences understate the true extent of discrimination.

Sectoral analysis of wage discrimination (see Table 8) shows that it is highly variable, with the highest levels of discrimination occurring



in domestic service, banking and insurance and “other” manufacturing industries (not textiles and clothing), while the lowest levels are recorded for collective services (education and health) and trade as well as textile and garment manufacturing. Interestingly, the most female intensive sectors (textile and garment) appear to have relatively low levels of discrimination. However, this may be because wages are depressed in the sector overall and men in the sector are paid lower wages than they would be in other sectors. On the other hand, as seen above, there is a positive relationship between the rate of female employment in manufacturing sectors and the rate of increase in real wages, which may indicate that employers are recognizing the importance of retaining skilled female workers (Joeques, 1995a).

**Table 8: Wage discrimination by sector**

| Sector of activity                            | Percentage discrimination |
|---|---------------------------|
| Administration                                | - 29.18                   |
| Agric., forestry and fisheries                | -37.08                    |
| Textile, clothing, leather                    | -21.06                    |
| Other manuf. industries                       | -46.68                    |
| Trade   | -8.46                     |
| Hotels and catering                           | -38.69                    |
| Banking and insurance                         | -56.90                    |
| Domestic service                              | -63.61                    |
| Collective services<br>(education and health) | -3.35                     |
| Total   | -41.20                    |

Source: Adapted from Belghazi, 1995a:19; 1995b:27.

## VII. Contribution of different factors in explaining wage levels (male and female) and differentials<sup>12</sup>

Three different approaches were used in estimating the overall level and determinants of the gender gap or discrimination in wages. In the first linear multiple regression, a dummy variable for gender was used, which gave a value for the wage differential of Dh 273.52. In other words, men were found to have an advantage of 11.47 per cent over the average total wage, while women have a disadvantage of -3.42 per cent. This, it could be argued, shows the “pure” effect of gender separate from its interaction with various household and work related characteristics (see below).<sup>13</sup>

Linear earnings functions were also estimated for the male and female workforce, with a range of personal and workplace related characteristics.<sup>14</sup> Using this procedure, the average wage for men and women was calculated as 1,525 and 1,162 Dh respectively, a difference of approximately 23 per cent (see columns 3-4 in Table 9).

The results from these estimations show that, in order of importance, the factors determining wage levels for men and women are:

- the constant (possibly indicating a minimum necessary income or reservation wage — which is higher for men than women);
- location of enterprise (with a higher coefficient for men than women);
- type of establishment (a lower coefficient for men than women); and
- “household characteristics” (positive for men, negative for women).

While some variables contributed positively to both male and female wage levels, others had a negative impact. For the most part the direction of the effect was the same, except for household characteristics. Household headship and size of household had a negative impact on wages for women, but a positive impact for men, while the number of working members in the household had a positive impact for women but a negative one for men.

Other factors were age, length of the working week and location (effect stronger for women than men), and monthly wage contracts (ditto). The lack of a diploma depressed wages for both sexes, but more so for women than men. Type of establishment had a negligible effect on male wages, but a slight positive effect on female wages, particularly in government administration and the private formal sector, possibly indicating the effect of better regulation in these sectors. Branch of activity had a negligible or very small effect in most cases.

From the estimated earnings functions, the notion of the reference wage across the genders arises, which allows the identification of the wages that would be paid to a person of given characteristics according to the wages function of the other gender. In this case, an estimate was made of the wage a typical female worker would receive if her gender were to change to male (see column 5 in Table 9).

Analysis of factors underlying the wage gap defined as representing discrimination (i.e. the difference between the actual female wage and the theoretical male reference wage), finds that some

are positively associated with gender discrimination, while others are negatively associated with the wage gap.

**Table 9: Factors determining wage differentials between men and women**

| Population                  | Total     | Men       | Women    | Female to male |
|-----------------------------|-----------|-----------|----------|----------------|
| Labour force                | 1,893,252 | 1,451,340 | 4,41,912 | 459,799        |
| Explained variable          | wages     | wages     | wages    | wage gap*      |
| average in Ln               | 7.2663    | 7.33      | 7.058    | -0.53          |
| average in Dh or %          | 1,431     | 1,525     | 1,162    | -41.14 %       |
| Household characteristics   | 0.92      | 1.15      | -0.96    | 19.71          |
| Professional qualifications |           |           |          |                |
| Training                    | -1.95     | -1.31     | -1.34    | -26.27         |
| Job experience              | 19.72     | 14.11     | 18.85    | 175.07         |
| Job framework:              |           |           |          |                |
| Working hours/week          | 9.14      | 6.56      | 6.39     | 65.46          |
| Type of employment          | 1.55      | 0.92      | 1.85     | -493.08        |
| Contract                    | 4.32      | 0.00      | 3.99     | -20.38         |
| Location                    | 5.25      | 2.65      | 12.89    | -84.27         |
| Branch                      | -0.82     | -0.56     | -0.57    | -103.69        |
| Constant (%)                | 62.41     | 76.48     | 58.89    | 567.45         |
| Value of constant in Ln     | 4.54      | 8.37      | 4.153    | -3.11          |

\* gap between observed female wage and theoretical male reference wage

Source: Belghazi, 1995a:20; 1995b:28.

The causes of gender discrimination in wages are in large part unexplained, as demonstrated by the fact that the constant term is the largest component of the wage difference. This residual represents the “starting level” of discrimination, i.e. what a new entrant with no qualifications would earn, by gender, and thus may indicate the gender discrimination based on wider social processes, or, possibly, actual or perceived differences in productivity between male and female workers.

Discriminatory processes linked to particular labour market variables were identified which explained the remainder of the difference between male and female wages. These do not relate specifically to the different sectoral and occupational distribution of men and women in the labour force (although this also leads to

different earnings when averaged across the labour force), but to disparate rewards accruing to different personal (supply) and workforce (demand) characteristics.

The main explained factor contributing to lower wages for women is age at first job (here subsumed under job experience), i.e. the later a woman starts work, the more likely she is to earn less than a man starting work at the same age. This may act as a disincentive to women pursuing an education, especially since the positive impact of education on the earnings gap seems to be small (Joeques, 1996).

A further explanatory factor in the male-female wage gap relates to the length of the working week, i.e. the longer the working week, the higher the wage gap between men and women. The elasticity of male wages to hours in the working week is 50 per cent higher than that for women.

Finally, headship of household and size of household also appear to contribute to the gender gap in wages, the effect of the latter being stronger than the former. Careful demographic analysis from a gender perspective may be needed to understand this. Women who are heads of household earn less than others with the same characteristics; the reverse is true for men. In other words, women are paid less as heads of household, while men are paid a premium. An explanation offered here is that poverty of female headed households may act to lower their reservation wage, while it has the opposite effect on male wage demands. Similarly, large households may correlate with poverty, such that the push factor on women (as "additional workers") to enter the labour force is greater, while increase in the number of working members has the opposite effect.

Other factors which appear to mitigate the gender gap in earnings to varying degrees are monthly wage contracts (other types of wage contract also have a compensatory effect, though smaller), working in the textile or collective services industries (see also Table 9 above), employment in certain locations, age, and absence of qualifications (in other words, there is less discrimination where both men and women are uneducated workers).

## **IX. Implications for policy and scope for further research**

Following from the theoretical literature summarized in sections I and VI, the low level of female wages in export manufacturing in Morocco could be hypothesized to act as a disincentive to productivity

increases in two ways. First, employers, faced with the availability of relatively cheap, flexible female labour under highly competitive conditions, are disinclined to invest in capital to increase productivity. Secondly, the low wages paid to women may be a cause, rather than a consequence, of relatively lower productivity among women workers, who perceive that they are discriminated against and thus lower their effort (see Bourqia, this volume).

Because of its policy implications, it is important to investigate the relationship between wage discrimination and productivity in manufacturing in more depth. Although the traditional perception is that low productivity leads to low wages for women in the manufacturing sector in developing countries, it could also be hypothesized that gender discrimination in wages actually results in low productivity and declining competitiveness. If the data support this hypothesis, a strong policy implication is that long-term efficiency and competitiveness in export industries requires a change in strategy towards productivity-enhancing measures both in terms of technology and capital investment and in terms of workplace organization and labour practices. Increasing wages for women workers may stimulate increased productivity (from both workers and employers) and so be consistent, rather than in conflict, with competitiveness in the sector. Indications that real wages in the export clothing/textile sectors are indeed rising may be evidence that employers are beginning to take these steps already (Joeques, 1995a).

Based on the existing research and the specific findings relating to wage discrimination, a series of policy measures are proposed. First, given the observed discrimination against female heads of household working in industry, it is proposed that some form of unemployment insurance protection should be provided for this group to limit their exploitation. Awareness raising and advocacy work, e.g. with trade unions, is also proposed, to strengthen the legitimacy of higher wage claims for women heads of household (Joeques, 1996).

Policies are also proposed to reduce the penalties on women who are late starters in manufacturing employment, e.g. by providing training for older women. More generally, a culture of training and valorization of female skills is required (Joeques, 1996).

The long working hours (for little extra reward) of many women workers suggests a need for some form of control or protective legislation to ensure that this is not the product of coercion and/or that damaging health consequences do not result.

More broadly, proposals are made for reform of the current, dualistic labour market structure which would promote profit and

flexibility at the same time as employment stability and upward mobility for employees. The key areas for reform that are stressed are job flexibility and security; training and flexibility; worker participation; and improving productivity and participation of workers in the informal sector. It is argued that these measures would have spin-offs in terms of addressing gender inequality in labour markets.

The tentative nature of the findings from this research require further, more detailed study in order to fully evaluate appropriate policy options. Some additional work has been done under the UNRISD project which looks at discrimination within the textile export sub-sector (Belghazi, 1996a<sup>15</sup>; 1996b; Bourqia, this volume). This work underlines the gender-segmented nature of the urban labour market. Certain features of textile employment are identified which suggest it is less discriminatory than other sectors. For example, the starting wage does not differ by gender; discriminatory features are expressed mainly through different treatment in employment.<sup>16</sup>

This study also provides evidence on returns to experience and education at different levels of the female workforce. Returns to work experience are better in textile than in other sectors and the sector does not penalize low education levels, although rewards to middle levels of education are poor. This implies that women from poor families face considerable difficulties in trying to improve their position in the labour market. This may threaten the existing niche of relatively uneducated, low-income women in the manufacturing labour force, when textile export firms find it necessary to upgrade their production methods and organization in response to global competition.

Overall, this research raises a number of questions which could usefully be pursued. For example, do men in feminized industries fare badly compared to other sectors? Do similar features apply to other feminized industries (as well as textiles)? One hypothesis worth exploring is whether the competitive pressures of textile export production mean that, while in other sectors, gender prejudices allow men to capture an economic "rent", in the more competitive textile industry, the equivalence of male and female productivity is acknowledged (Joekes, 1996). Linked to the overall performance of the economy, it would also be worth exploring whether the high degree of segmentation in the urban labour market adds a further layer of static allocative inefficiency to that linked to wage discrimination *per se*.

## Endnotes

1. This chapter is based on a series of research papers prepared by Saâd Belghazi for the UNRISD programme on Technical Co-operation and Women's Lives (see references). Sally Baden has summarized, interpreted and contextualized Belghazi's empirical analysis and related hypotheses.
2. The deficit in the balance of payments current account fell from 12.9 per cent of GDP in 1982, to 2 per cent of GDP in 1993 (Belghazi, 1995:3).
3. Data used in this study originate for the national urban employment surveys (ENPAU), which cover both formal and informal sectors. The rural population is not covered.
4. This is based on official statistics which may have gender-biased definitions of what constitutes work and/or produce gender bias in the data collection procedures. It has been reported from elsewhere in the Arab states that women who are working may not define themselves as doing so (Anker and Dixon Mueller, 1988).
5. The measurement of unemployment and underemployment, by gender, is beset with difficulties. Women are often less likely to report as unemployed. Definitions of underemployment (here — working less than 32 hours per week) are somewhat arbitrary and tend, by definition, to be higher for women who devote less time to paid work because of domestic responsibilities.
6. These data are not disaggregated by gender. The data on unemployment and education levels show a decline in total unemployment rate from 19.9 per cent in 1985 to 15.9 per cent in 1993 (Belghazi, 1995b:35). This is inconsistent with reported data in Table 1 which suggest rising unemployment rates for both men and women over the 1986-93 period.
7. No trend data were available on underemployment by gender.
8. An alternative interpretation might be that, in sectors where the rate of female employment is already quite high, the increase in the average wage reflects a reverse shift in the male-female ratio in the sectoral labour force.
9. The correlation coefficient between number of women employed and average wage was -0.1090 compared to -0.0751 between level of exports and average wage.
10. The model used for the analysis of wage determination and discrimination is as follows:

$$\ln S_f = a_1 \ln v_f + a_2 \ln q_f + k_f + u$$

$$\ln S_m = b_1 \ln v_m + b_2 \ln q_m + k_m + u$$

$$\ln E_{Sfm} = \ln S_f - \ln S_m = (a_1 - b_1) \ln v_f + (a_2 - b_2) \ln q_f + (k_f - k_m)$$

$$\text{with } \ln S_{fm} = b_1 \ln v_f + b_2 \ln q_f + k_m + u$$

In final form:

$$\ln E_{Sfm} = C_1 \ln v_f + c_2 \ln q_f + k_e + u$$

Where:

$S_f$  = women's wages

$S_m$  = men's wages

$S_{fm}$  = theoretical wages for women if there was equal treatment of both sexes

$E_{Sfm}$  = ratio of men's and women's wages

$v$  = a vector of quantitative variables, together with the indicator  $f$  for the female population and  $m$  for the male population;

$q$  = a vector of qualitative variables, together with  $m$  (male population) and  $f$  (female population) indicators;

$a_1$  and  $a_2$  = vectors of coefficients of quantitative and qualitative variables respectively for the female population

b1 and b2 = vectors of coefficients of quantitative and qualitative variables respectively for the male population

c1 and c2 = estimated coefficients, corresponding to  $c1 = a1 + b1$ ;  $c2 = a2 + b2$ .

11. This "decomposition" methodology appears to follow that developed by Oaxaca (1973).

12. It should be noted that the analysis undertaken here is preliminary in nature and ideally would need further, more rigorous testing and development of the model. There is a lack of statistical data presented on which to judge the significance and validity of the regression results. The large number of variables used in the multiple regression suggests the likelihood of problems of multi-collinearity, for example.

13. For simplicity, the results for this regression are not presented in Table 10.

14. There is a strong assumption here that particular endowments have the same productivity value, irrespective of the gender of worker who possesses them (Joeke, 1995).

15. This study uses a different methodology to estimate wage discrimination, and arrives at a different estimate for the sector.

16. For further discussion of qualitative issues around employment in the textile and clothing sectors, see the chapter by Bourqia (this volume).



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# 3

## Gender and employment in Moroccan textile industries

*Rahma Bourqia*

### I. Introduction

Within the urban labour market, gender discrimination tends to take the form of occupational segregation, with women concentrated in poorly-paid, unskilled jobs, and of disparity in earnings, with women earning less than men (Anker, 1997; Birdsall and Sabot, 1991). Studies on female employment in Morocco have demonstrated the existence of wage discrimination against women (Joekes, 1985; Belghazi, 1995; Belghazi and Baden, this volume). Labour market discrimination against women is legitimized by stereotypes and social discourse surrounding female work. Employers reflect social attitudes about women's work, for example, when they argue that "women are only working to buy lipstick" (Joekes, 1985). In other words, a woman's work is not considered to be an important source of revenue for the family.

However, social discourse surrounding women's employment stands in stark contrast to labour market trends. The increase in the rate of female employment in Morocco, especially in the textile sector, suggests that women's work is becoming more and more a necessity for family livelihood strategies. The overall rate of women's employment in all sectors is now 35.5 per cent, but it has reached 42 per cent in the carpet sector, 71 per cent in knitwear and 79 per cent in garment manufacturing (Belghazi, 1995). On the basis of estimates

of the level and correlates of pay discrimination in urban enterprises, Belghazi found that, while the urban labour market has been able to attract female workers, there is a marked gender wage gap (41.2 per cent) overall. The lowest level of wage discrimination (3 per cent) was found in the public sector (administration and public services) whereas the highest level was found in the domestic service (64 per cent) (Belghazi, 1995:25).

Another interesting finding emerging from Belghazi's study concerns the export textile sector. Overall, wage discrimination in this sector (21 per cent) is lower than in many other sectors, with respect to the rewards for education and experience for male and female workers. Belghazi's research also finds that there is little gender discrimination in the starting wage for men and women in the textile export sector, which contrasts strongly with the situation in other sectors. In the textile export sector, however, discriminatory features are expressed through gender differentiated treatment in the workplace (Joeques, 1995).

This finding is an important one and helps to justify the focus of this chapter. In principle, the lack of gender discrimination in the starting wage implies that the discriminatory features of employment in the textile sector can be identified by examining the employment practices of the textile factories. This chapter therefore seeks to explore how the process of discrimination actually works. What social factors and organizational patterns within the factory support discrimination?

In the neoclassical economic model, wage differentials are explained by women's lower educational qualifications. As women usually have less training than men, they are at a disadvantage in employment and they therefore accept low salaries. This view underpins an industrial model of competitiveness, based on low-wage female labour. But this explanation is mainly descriptive and does little to reveal the socio-cultural factors that affect the division of labour between men and women, both inside and outside the factory, and that directly or indirectly determine wage discrimination and other forms of gender differentiated treatment in the labour market (Humphrey, 1985).

A quite different approach holds that the basis of wage discrimination against women is to be found not in the factory, but in the division of labour within the family. The vulnerability of women is due to their lack of training and to the difficult situation of their family and hence their need to earn an income. This has contradictory effects: it is favourable to them as regards employment, as the rate of feminization in the textile sector is high, but it is unfavourable as far

as the level of wages is concerned. This approach also has its limits, as wage discrimination is explained only by the situation of women in their households, ignoring how gender differences are experienced in the factory and the impact this has on discrimination against women.

The present study looks at gender relations both in the household and in the factory and the way in which these determine gender discrimination in the labour market (Humphrey, 1987). In other words, it explores how gender relationships are experienced and perceived both in the family and at work. It hopes to demonstrate how gender hierarchies, which have been firmly established by society, are extended and maintained in the factory. Moreover, since factories themselves are not monolithic in terms of employment practices and production methods, the chapter also attempts to compare women's experiences in different sectors of the textile export industries.

The woman worker is caught up in power relationships which determine her position in the hierarchy of the factory and the negotiation of her wages. One could deduce from this a relationship of total exploitation and obedience, with the woman worker in a situation of total dependence, at the service of the factory and with no bargaining power. But this would be to simplify the complexity of the strategies used both by the factory and by the women workers to maximize their benefits and preserve their interests. In other words, it would underplay the role of human agency.

The scope of negotiation available to actors in organizational contexts has been explored by Crozier and Friedberg (1977). While acknowledging that power relationships operating within organizations favour some to the detriment of others and that the powerful obtain greater advantages for themselves, they argue that power can be exerted by the less powerful individuals through actions that are unpredictable (breaking established norms and rules) or by refusing to concede to demands. This model needs to be refined to grasp the reality of women workers in Moroccan factories, which are organized so as to restrict workers' scope for bargaining. It is the organization that makes the rules, establishes the division of work and fixes the wages. The use of individual strategies depends on the position of the actor in the system, her resources and constraints. The rationality and behaviour of women workers is shaped and, indeed, limited, by their position in society and in the factory.

This chapter argues that unequal gender relations within the family and the society are carried into the factory and reproduced there. Gender subordination functions throughout the employment

process, influencing the choice of sector, access to employment, recruitment, type of job, experience, and wage levels. Certain values and norms that underpin gender inequality, like the submission of women to authority, their lack of ambition, their humility and their willingness to accept manual tasks which require dexterity are, from the viewpoint of the factory, positive attributes for the productivity process. Indeed, as this chapter hopes to demonstrate, patriarchal forms of control are used by factory owners and managers to consolidate their power over women workers and to maximize production in their factories. These observations raise questions about the extent to which paid employment contributes to women's "emancipation". Is it not yet another terrain where the consequences of gender subordination are evident?

## 1. Methodology

This study is based on a series of interviews with workers and management in 16 Moroccan export-oriented enterprises, all located in the industrial zone Salé outside Rabat, which formed a representative sample of the three sectors of the textile industry: carpets, knitwear and garment-making. A questionnaire concerning socioeconomic conditions, training, access to employment and recruitment, division of tasks and factory hierarchy, attitudes towards innovation, penalties and rewards, and the interaction between work and family life, was addressed to 225 employees — 197 female workers and 28 male workers. Eight women workers were given in-depth interviews in order to obtain qualitative information about their lives, their recruitment into the factory and how they experienced both their employment and family life, in particular their perceptions of the discrimination to which they are subjected.

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**Table 1: Survey sample by sector**

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| Sector                  | Carpets | Knitwear | Garments | Total |
|-------------------------|---------|----------|----------|-------|
| Number of factories     | 5       | 5        | 6        | 16    |
| Number of women workers | 73      | 37       | 87       | 197   |
| Number of male workers  | 5       | 15       | 8        | 28    |

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In addition to the main questionnaire, a form addressed to the 16 heads of companies provided information about how their factories were organized, the style of management and the employees, with particular emphasis on gender differences in systems of rewards and



punishments; output and quality; and perceptions of gender differences in the production process.

In terms of production methods, it is worth noting that the garment and knitwear factories are based mainly on a Taylorian system, whereas the carpets factories are semi-artisanal (Belghazi and Bourqia, 1997). Especially in the latter case, there is a tendency to rely on a small corps of regular, semi-skilled or skilled workers, with the majority of workers being unskilled, casual labourers, who work either in the factory or in their own homes (Belghazi and Bourqia, 1997).

While a number of the factories are direct exporters, there are several, especially in the garment sector, that receive sub-contracts from foreign firms. Where factories are engaged in sub-contracting arrangements, they are likely to prefer a flexible labour force able to respond to orders as they are received, which may explain the use of casual labour observed in this survey.

**Table 2: Distribution of the sample according to the position of the employees**

|                  | Male | Female |
|------------------|------|--------|
| Workers          | 24   | 176    |
| Head of team     | 1    | 4      |
| Supervisor*      | 0    | 14     |
| Head of workshop | 2    | 0      |
| Total            | 27   | 194    |

\*The supervisor (*contrôleur*) is the person who supervises and controls the quality of the items by a team.

This distribution shows that the major difference between men and women in terms of position they hold in the hierarchy of the factory is the position of head of workshop (*chef d'atelier*) which in most cases observed were men. Because this position implies the implementation of rules of discipline and the use of authority, the heads of factories believe it must be handled by men.

Because of the sensitivity of the issue of casual labourers for the heads of the factories (who were informed by the research team about the content the questionnaire), this question was not asked directly. However, we have taken registration in social security as an indicator of being casual or regular, because when an employee becomes regular he or she is registered by the head of the factory in social security. This fact thus provides information on the percentage of regular and casual employees.

**Table 3: Regular and casual employees**

|                               | Female | Male | % of male employees | % of female employees |
|-------------------------------|--------|------|---------------------|-----------------------|
| Registered in social security | 70     | 11   | 39.3                | 35.5                  |
| Non-registered                | 96     | 14   | 50.0                | 48.7                  |
| No response*                  | 31     | 3    | 10.7                | 15.7                  |

\* The category "no response" includes all the people who did not answer the question, presumably because they did not understand what social security means.

Social security status indicates that the majority of employees are casual. It is safe to assume that all heads of the teams, supervisors (*contrôleurs*), or heads of workshop are regular employees.

## II. Social and family situation of women workers

Because women workers tend to belong to a disadvantaged social class, most of those who seek factory work live in precarious conditions, and their employment plays a very important role in their families' survival strategy. This precariousness forces all the adult members of a family and sometimes even the children to seek employment. It has resulted in the feminization of the labour force in various sectors of the economy, in general, and of the textile industry in particular.

### 1. An historical perspective on women's industrial employment

The feminization of the labour force in the textile industry is a historical fact, both internationally and nationally. While Moroccan industry has not undergone the same evolution of industry as in the West — from industrialization to Taylorism to automatization — it too required women workers right from its emergence during the protectorate period (1912-56) (Kergoat, 1982). In fact, women's employment started with colonization, when industrial plants were set up in Casablanca and needed women workers to supplement the male labour force. The entry of women into the urban labour market was a consequence of colonial industry as well as the women's need to find ways of contributing to their family income. Adam's study on Casablanca during the protectorate period indicates that the

disintegration of the traditional family and the frequency of repudiations forced women to look for work in the factories (Adam, 1972). These women had little education or training and were often illiterate. The lack of skills was characteristic of the first women to enter wage employment in significant numbers (a trend that has continued to the present day, as we see below). Although women were obliged to work for economic reasons, their aspirations appeared to lie elsewhere: the ideal was a position of economic and social security provided by a breadwinning husband. Even though they worked, these women would have gladly given up employment if their ideal could be met (Adam, 1972).

While there have been changes in the size and composition of the female workforce, its status and its aspirations since Moroccan independence, economic necessity still drives women into the job market, and their lack of skills still determines their tasks in the industrial textile sector. The feminization of the industry, for garments (79 per cent), knitwear (71 per cent) and carpets (42 per cent) (Belghazi, 1996), has determined the choice of our sample, which is composed of 87.6 per cent women. Because of the overwhelming presence of women in this industry, a straight comparison between men and women in the production process is difficult, as men and women do not always occupy the same jobs. Nonetheless, it is worth exploring gender differences apparent in management practices and authority structures as well as in attitudes about women and work.

## 2. Family livelihood strategies

The industrial zone of Rabat-Salé, where most of this survey was carried out, is near the poorer districts that receive constant inflows of rural migrants. Even though most of the men and women workers were born in Salé, more than a quarter of them originate from the rural areas. This zone began its urban expansion in the 1980s when it increasingly attracted the region's rural population, who came

**Table 4: Place of birth by gender**

|            | Women  |     | Men    |     | Total  |     |
|------------|--------|-----|--------|-----|--------|-----|
|            | Number | %   | Number | %   | Number | %   |
| Town       | 143    | 73  | 19     | 68  | 162    | 72  |
| Rural area | 54     | 27  | 9      | 32  | 63     | 28  |
| Total      | 197    | 100 | 28     | 100 | 225    | 100 |

to look for work. It can be argued that the rural ethos of this labour force has an impact on their adaptation to an urban way of life and the development of an industrial consciousness.

As has already been indicated, the social stratum from which the women workers emerge suffers from precariousness of income. The head of the family is usually unable to take care of the needs of his household. While still very young, children start looking for work. Because of socialization, girls and young women invariably have affective ties to their families and are ready to make economic contributions to them. When a young woman works she tends to contribute much more than a young man to the family's expenses, sometimes becoming the chief income earner. Women's employment, however, does not necessarily free them from the social and cultural constraints of their status as women who belong to a poor social stratum. In other words, the experience of class and gender subordination intersect.

The survey showed that a third of the women workers do not reside with their parents. There is clearly some geographical mobility among the women workers, especially single women who leave their parents to look for a job in a different town. Some of them come from nearby towns like Kénitra, Tiflet and Maaziz, or from the rural areas, attracted to towns like Rabat-Salé, which offer greater opportunities of employment and better wages than they can find in their own towns.

However, most of the women workers in the textile factories are unmarried and live with their parents. They are thus subject to the control of their parents, even while they are giving material support to the family. For many of them, the importance of their incomes to the family's coping strategies is evident from the way that their own parents push them into seeking employment. According to the interviewees, the mother or father sometimes accompanies the daughter to the factory gates to ask for a job. This is confirmed by factory heads and it suggests that parents do not object to the employment of their daughters. On the contrary, they drive them into seeking employment in order to earn an income. At the same time, young women are rarely free from parental or marital tutelage. The majority of the women reported that they had to ask for the authorization of their father or husband in order to work.

As we see below, the way the girls are socialized limits their sense of responsibility and commitment to work. The paradox is that the families of the women workers, spurred by economic necessity, push them into the employment market, but with an education that

has instilled into them the notion that it is the man who should work and meet the needs of the family. Even the Moroccan Code of Personal Status, which governs the status of women and family relations, stipulates this. The Code is based on traditional Islamic law and on the Malékite rite. It places women under male tutelage throughout their lives — celibacy, marriage, divorce, widowhood — and institutionalizes a strict division of gender roles: the man is the head of the family and is responsible for maintaining his wife and children; the woman has duties only towards her spouse or, rather, her master (Naciri, 1998:16).

**Table 5: Number of people in the family who are entirely dependent on the respondents, according to gender**

|        | None     | One to three | Four to eight |
|--------|----------|--------------|---------------|
| Female | 67 (34%) | 83 (42%)     | 46 (24%)      |
| Male   | 17 (61%) | 8 (29%)      | 3 (11%)       |
| Total  | 84 (38%) | 91 (41%)     | 49 (22%)      |

The wages of young women workers are important in supplementing the household budget. Families follow various survival strategies to meet their material needs. In the same family, the father might be an occasional labourer, the mother a domestic servant, the sons, street vendors and the daughters, factory workers. The above table shows that most of the women workers have at least one person for whom they are economically responsible. According to the female interviewees, in most cases, their wages constitute the largest and most stable source of income for the family. Yet the socio-cultural constraints on a woman's status still make themselves felt. Even if a young woman is a source of revenue for her family she remains under the authority of her parents, who dictate her behaviour and control how her wages are spent. Nevertheless, the economic needs of families and the changes that the society is undergoing are putting a strain on this parental control. The young women who emigrate to the big towns to find work, and perhaps live on their own, are inevitably part of this change.

### 3. Women workers and domestic responsibilities

Domestic responsibilities are seen by society as inherently belonging to women, whatever paid employment they may have.

Obviously these responsibilities constitute a handicap for married women who work in a factory: in fact, marriage and all that it involves in terms of family obligations and responsibilities is seen both by the factory heads and the women workers themselves as being a hindrance to their work. To the question: "Do you know one or more women who have divorced because of their work?", the majority of workers (both male and female) replied in the affirmative. Evidently, the fact that she is contributing an income to the household does not spare a woman from the tensions caused by her dual obligations to her job and to her family. In many cases this leads to divorce. The case of Mbarka is a good example.

*Two or three years after having moved to Hay Rahma, I got married to a young man. He had been following me in the street, then he came and asked my family for my hand in marriage. He came from Shoul originally. He followed me when I went to work. He was as badly off as I was: he worked in a sand quarry. He hadn't enough money to rent a house for me and he asked my family to live with us. So we set up house with my parents. Once we were married he would not let me go to work any more. He was jealous..."* (Mbarka, carpet worker)

Although the household economy requires the woman to go out to work, a husband wanting to exercise his authority over his wife will sometimes not let her go to work, or demand that she leave her job. Even when he allows her to work, the woman is always in a vulnerable position because her husband can change his mind at any time. In the marital relationship, the wife's job becomes the subject of bargaining, and is used by the husband to demonstrate his authority.

Having children is another handicap for women workers. The majority of respondents (both men and women) replied in the affirmative to the question, "Is having children a hindrance for working women?". There was thus a general consensus that having children and domestic responsibilities were irreconcilable with having a job. This consensus is internalized by the women workers themselves who, in the interviews, often mentioned the tug between domestic obligations and factory work. Household duties, the husband's authority and demands he places on his wife are all limitations to the demands of the factory, such as diligence, regularity and the observance of fixed working hours. This suggests that, in addition to the "rural ethos" of the women workers, patriarchal structures impose constraints that make it difficult for women to conform to the factory culture.

Although single girls and young women do not have as many family obligations as married women, they still have considerable

domestic responsibilities. It is they who do the domestic chores such as cleaning, cooking and looking after small brothers and sisters. Young women see factory employment as “emancipatory”, enabling them to earn wages and freeing them from their family duties, as well as allowing them to escape the direct authority and control of their parents, at least during factory hours. Some small factories, when they have no orders, give one or two days’ leave to the women workers while waiting for new orders. When this happens, some young women leave home for the factory, pretending to their parents that they are going to do a day’s work there. But, instead, they spend the day walking about the streets in town. Clearly, the young single women see the work world as a way of escaping the household duties that the gender division of labour imposes upon them.

**Table 6: Opinions of workers (men and women) on employment as source of power in the family**

|                                | Women | Men  |
|--------------------------------|-------|------|
| Employment gives some power    | 69 %  | 79 % |
| Employment does not give power | 31 %  | 21%  |
| Total                          | 100%  | 100% |

Both men and women workers interviewed felt that employment gives them some power within the family. Although more men than women held this view, this can perhaps be explained by the fact that men’s self-esteem is linked more than women’s to employment (and a situation of unemployment lowers this self-esteem). Nevertheless, it is significant that most women feel that their job gives them a little power inside the family. Employment can raise the status of a woman and lessen the authority of her parents when she is single. However, the attitude to women’s work is still ambiguous in a society that is undergoing tremendous change. Wage work is more accepted and valued for young single women than for married women. A father appears to accept being supplanted as the income earner by his daughter more than the husband accepts being supplanted by his wife. The employment of single girls and young women is accepted, as it is seen as a temporary situation until they marry or until the family’s fortunes improve.

Thus, within the context of existing gender relations within the household, paid employment may constitute a means of emancipation for women by raising their status within the family and giving them

partial autonomy from parental/marital control. By becoming integrated into the world of work, however, women do not necessarily escape from relations of gender subordination, since the social relations and mechanisms that produce and maintain gender disadvantage follow them into the factory.

### **III. Recruitment and employment practices in textile factories**

Available data, as well as field observation, show that discrimination against women within the workplace is not straightforward. Women, for example, are more likely than men to obtain employment in the textile sector. Nevertheless, as we explore below, women's experience of wage employment reflects their experience of disadvantage in the household and in society. The repercussions of gender disadvantage are evident at all levels in the organization of work and production. Here we shall examine the role that women workers play in the production process and the relations and mechanisms that replicate their position of disadvantage.

#### **1. Recruitment/selection**

Recruitment is a decisive moment when the strategies of the employers and their choice of criteria for recruitment become evident. Several factory heads state that they do not have clear criteria and that they do not make women workers take a test before they employ them. It is true that most firms do not make women workers pass tests that are based on physical attributes or on certain precise and predetermined criteria that are applied at recruitment time. However, a set of implicit criteria, used to select the women workers, surfaced during the interviews with employers.

Some factory heads consider it important to recruit women workers who live in the same district as the factory, as this limits problems created by being far away from the workplace, such as unpunctuality and absenteeism. Of the women workers in our sample, the majority go to work on foot. This proximity facilitates access to their work and at the same time protects employers from claims for transport expenses.

Age and marital status are the other two main factors that determine recruitment: there is a preference for women who are young and single. This fact was mentioned by many factory heads and



corroborated by our random sample, which showed that most of the women workers were under the age of 25 and unmarried.

Especially in the garment and knitwear sectors, married women are seen as having family responsibilities that limit their availability and usefulness to the factory. According to the picture that emerged from the interviews with factory heads, young, single girls and women offer several advantages:

- they have fewer family responsibilities and obligations, therefore more time to devote to the factory as they are not worried about children or their duty to their husbands;
- their youth makes them malleable and more disposed to accept authority structures. According to social norms, one can scold a young girl and thus control her, but not a mature woman;
- their lack of experience and qualifications put them in the apprenticeship category, justifying the low wages offered when recruited.

**Table 7: Age of employees**

|        | Less than<br>20 years | 21-25       | 26-30       | 31-35      | 36 and over | Total       |
|--------|-----------------------|-------------|-------------|------------|-------------|-------------|
| Female | 44<br>22.3%           | 73<br>37.1% | 58<br>29.4% | 14<br>7.1% | 8<br>4.1%   | 197         |
| Male   | 4<br>4.3%             | 8<br>8.6%   | 10<br>35.7% | 3<br>10.7% | 3<br>10.7%  | 28          |
| Total  | 48<br>21.3%           | 81<br>36%   | 68<br>30.2% | 17<br>7.6% | 11<br>4.9%  | 225<br>100% |

**Table 8: Marital status**

|        | Single       | Married     | Widowed   | Divorced   | Separated | Total       |
|--------|--------------|-------------|-----------|------------|-----------|-------------|
| Female | 142<br>72.1% | 40<br>20.3% | 1<br>0.5% | 12<br>6.1% | 2<br>1%   | 197         |
| Male   | 19<br>67.9%  | 9<br>32.1%  | 0         | 0          | 0         | 28          |
| Total  | 161<br>71.6% | 49<br>21.8% | 1<br>0.4% | 12<br>5.3% | 2<br>0.9% | 225<br>100% |

As for recruitment procedures, it would seem that the intermediaries who are important in other industrial contexts (see Kibria, 1998; Afsar, 1998) do not play a great role in Morocco. The

majority of women workers are recruited directly: they present themselves at the gates of the factory looking for a job. Only a small number of workers reported having been recruited through a family member, although a significantly larger number reported having relatives working in the same factory. This was confirmed by one of the managers:

*Our firm has a policy of not taking on girls from the same family. We avoid recruiting a girl if her sister works in the company as it creates problems. If one of them is unhappy she influences the other, or if the supervisor has problems with one, it has repercussions on the other. So, instead of having one problem, we could have two, and this upsets the work. (Head of factory)*

It is important to note that it is only in the knitwear and garment sectors that the factory heads avoid recruiting workers from the same family: the work is individualized and family solidarity is seen by some of them as impeding production. But in the carpet sector, where recruitment is carried out in two stages, family solidarity is an asset. The factory head or foreman first recruits the *maalma* and then, in turn, she recruits the weavers from among her family. A more detailed discussion of this sector appears below.

## 2. Training, apprenticeship and probation

The female labour force in the sample factories had a low level of educational attainment: more than a third of the women workers had no schooling at all. Another third had only attended primary school and about one third had completed the first cycle of secondary schooling. Vocational training was rare.

The majority of girls and women who have no schooling are found in the carpet sector, where 75 per cent of those interviewed were illiterate. Producing carpets requires an artisanal training which does not need a specific education level. Indeed, this lack of education was never raised as a problem in the interviews with the heads of the carpet factories. Production is based on the artisanal know-how of the experienced women. Apprenticeship is carried out informally, with the *maalma* taking responsibility for teaching the craft to the girls that she takes on. This gives her freedom in controlling the apprentices that factory heads would not have.

The women workers with the highest levels of education are found in the garment-making sector: only 12.9 per cent of them are illiterate. Here the ability at least to read is an asset for the worker. All the factory heads emphasized the importance of the worker

knowing how to read figures and letters. The level of education of the workers determines the quality of their work. An illiterate worker gets the sizes muddled up and makes mistakes in putting numbered pieces of material together, which has a negative effect on production quality. It is interesting to note that while many factory heads expressed the wish to recruit employees with a rather higher level of education or with some vocational training (Table 9 indicates the virtual absence of higher qualifications amongst the sample group), they nevertheless hesitate to put such policies into practice. There are several reasons that may explain this pattern.

**Table 9: Level of instruction for women workers by sector (percentage)**

| Level of instruction             | Carpets | Knitwear | Garments | Total |
|----------------------------------|---------|----------|----------|-------|
| None                             | 75.0    | 33.3     | 12.9     | 38.1  |
| Primary school                   | 22.1    | 30.6     | 32.3     | 28.4  |
| Secondary I cycle                | 1.5     | 27.8     | 43.0     | 25.9  |
| Secondary II cycle               | 1.5     | 8.3      | 11.8     | 7.6   |
| Professional or higher education | 0       | 0        | 0        | 0     |
| Total                            | 100     | 100      | 100      | 100   |

Even if a girl has had some education, its value for the employer is questionable. In fact, even when she has finished the five grades of primary school, her education is insufficient: what she has learnt is not enough for the job market, not to mention the fact that when she leaves school her knowledge is soon forgotten and she becomes almost illiterate. Several factory heads confirmed that most of the women workers, even those with several years of primary education, cannot read French or make out figures properly.

In addition, firms want a labour force whose apprenticeship and qualifications they control. Comments made by one head of a garment factory about the more educated job-seekers are illustrative of the attitudes that prevail.

*University graduates are no good. Unfortunately, when they are recruited they want to have a telephone, an office and a secretary, whereas they have to be working in production. They are spoiled, they don't want to work between 12 and 2. But in this job one has to sweat. University trains people for working in an office, which hinders them from getting jobs. (Head of a garment factory)*

For most of the factory heads, training on the job is fundamental and should be done inside the factory. The apprenticeship period is thus also a period of "discipline". The young woman learns to follow the rules and regulations of the factory and, having learnt the craft, she becomes indebted to the firm. Apprenticeship and on-the-job training are also ways of delaying the moment when the employees have to be given the statutory minimum wage. This is seen by factory heads as being a probationary period which gives the firm an opportunity to select their employees at the same time as having them work for low wages. Even if a girl has a dress-making diploma, she is paid Dh 600 a month for a period that lasts from six months to two years.

According to some factory heads, in any one group of women workers recruited, half of them are dismissed after six months of training because they have not given satisfaction and have not adapted to the working conditions. By using probation as part of this selection procedure, the firms save money on wages. At the same time, this system means that the qualifications and diplomas obtained in the schools and training centres are devalued. The main reason given by factory heads is that the knowledge that comes with a diploma does not correspond to the needs of the firm. Experience is valued more highly than qualifications and is used as the basis of promotion.

This emphasis on experience rather than qualifications puts the factory head at an advantage in selecting workers and fixing their wages. Factory heads thereby gain the flexibility they need to organize the development of the women workers and to decide the level of skill (experience) they have acquired, as well as their wage level. It should be noted as well that the qualification given by a diploma can lead to collective bargaining to link qualifications to salary levels, whereas the criterion of experience and the capacity or incapacity of the worker to learn quickly results, at best, in individual bargaining where the factory head and his supervisors have the power to evaluate the experience of the women workers.

The low education levels and poor on-the-job training methods mean that the training period for women workers in the garment and knitwear sectors goes on for some time. During this period, their work is not officially recognized as it is not remunerated at the minimum wage level. Some factory heads take advantage of the low wages during the training period and try to prolong it for as long as possible.

Although the factory heads complain about the lack of education, in practice they seem to choose employees who have education but

no diplomas. Those with diplomas are seen as being pretentious, not prepared to carry out any job and rejecting authority. A contradictory position has thereby arisen wherein the factory heads decry the lack of skilled labour needed for industrial production while they profit from this unskilled labour force.

### 3. High labour turnover and instability of employment

Precariousness and instability in the employment of female workers can be explained both by their need to balance the demands of paid work with their domestic responsibilities, and by the factory production system based on a low-wage, occasional labour force. This is particularly true of the carpet sector where the informal nature of the production process and the organization of work means that the labour force is always unstable, as the factory work is not carried out on a contractual basis. A limited number of *maalmas* are recruited by the *cabran* according to the number and size of the orders and they in turn recruit the number of weavers required for the job. These weavers form the majority of the labour force which is constantly being renewed by the *maalmas*. The instability of the labour force is thus inherent in the way that the work is organized. When the orders fall off, some workers stay at home without earning, as they are paid for piece work.

In the garment and knitwear sector, employment instability is due to several factors:

- Surplus labour is readily available at the gates of the factories. These job seekers are always looking for work in the textile factories and they form a “reserve army of labour”, which within a broader context of weak labour contracts, accounts for the precarious employment of those inside.
- Women have a disadvantaged position in Morocco and are ambiguous about paid employment. The female worker, as a woman, internalizes the idea that her employment is dictated by temporary necessity and that the ideal situation is to have the economic protection a father or a husband. In this context, when a woman encounters difficulties at the factory, including low wages, she is more likely to leave her job.
- The length of the training period and the low wages discourage the workers from seeking stable employment.

Among the women workers, over a quarter have less than two years of seniority and more than half have been in their present employment less than three years. But whatever the seniority, stable

employment is never guaranteed. Almost half of the women workers of our survey had already worked in another factory and some of them are in their fourth or fifth factory. The reasons for “job hopping” are made apparent in the interview excerpt below:

*The first time I got work it was with X firm which the vocational training centre had mentioned to me. But the working conditions were difficult and the wages low, so I left it pretty quickly. I was without work for several months and then I got a job with another firm at Kénitra. I stayed there three years. But I left it because the exploitation was too great and the wages too little. Low wages are typical in Kénitra. As my father died, I had to find a way of increasing my income. So I thought of going to Salé (30 kms from Kénitra) and to look for work there so I could help my family. I was sure that the working conditions in Rabat or Salé would be better than those at Kénitra. My family wasn't against the idea. I left for Salé and there I presented myself at a company which I had heard was the best in that industrial district. The owners were foreigners: they were known for their sympathy towards the workers and the wages were the best. They paid the statutory minimum wage (SMIG). I was accepted when they saw I had a dressmaking diploma and that I had worked with other firms. I liked the work in this factory but the problem was my supervisor: she was a very authoritarian woman who used to insult us, especially me. She was always against me. I left the firm because of this cheffa, even though I was better paid than where I am now. I got 7.30 dirham an hour, but I left. I went to this factory when I saw the girls lining up outside to ask for work. I was soon taken on, especially after I had done a practical test on the sewing machine. (Touria, worker in a garment factory)*

For the employees who had already worked in another firm, the duration of the previous job varied from a few months to more than four years. More than half the women workers interviewed had stayed at their previous place of employment less than two years. Among the reasons given for leaving the previous job were: the low wages, the working conditions, authoritarian work practices and personal factors.

Instability of employment is not always a disadvantage to women workers. They can use the existing system to accumulate know-how, and when their jobs are in danger they too threaten to leave and go and sell their experience elsewhere. The women workers thus play on competition between the factories hoping to better their position. The factory heads also attempt to use this accumulation of skills to their own advantage:

*The factory heads look for trained girls who have already worked in another factory and they are offered a wage that is a little higher than ours. The girl is ready to leave for a few more dirhams. Last year they pinched six trained and qualified workers from me. They were offered a little more and they left.* (Head of a garment factory)

These findings suggest that the instability of employment in the textile industry is largely a structural characteristic of the way that the factories are organized. The employer favours a production system based on high turnover: a method of employment that keeps and stabilizes only a small part of the labour force. This limits the accumulation of skills and know-how for the firm and keeps the female labour force constantly rotating between the different factories. As we see below, this constant turn-over of labour acts as a constraint on the development of a process of collective bargaining for higher wages and better working conditions.

#### 4. Women workers, production and performance

Women are generally seen as being more suitable than men for work in the textile industry. This perception is based on the gender division of labour: spinning, weaving and dress-making have traditionally been considered to be female activities and such attitudes have been largely responsible for the fact that these activities have emerged in the modern textile industry as “women’s work”. The justification given is that women have more of a bent for such activities and possess the necessary physical attributes. According to this reasoning, in carpet production, the dexterity of girls’ fingers enables them to handle the threads, while in garment-making and knitwear, their precision and nimbleness suit the needs of these crafts. Such attitudes were confirmed in interviews with factory heads, one of whom made the following observation:

*Textile production is women’s work. If a foreign client sees a man on a machine he is shocked because even in France it is a woman’s job. Women have slimmer and more agile fingers. Historically women have always done this work. But for certain machines, strong muscles are required and we use men.* (Head of a garment factory)

While the majority of women workers interviewed thought that women performed better than men in textile factories, the male workers were almost evenly divided between those who thought women performed better and those who thought men performed better. Nevertheless, how performance is measured depends on each firm’s criteria. Maximum performance is achieved differently in the

carpet sector than in the garment and knitwear sectors.

In the carpet sector, wages depend on performance (measured in terms of quantity). The *maalma* is paid by the square metre so her wages are linked to her capacity to produce and make others produce the quantity that the firm requires, using her apprentice weavers. Production is carried out in an artisanal manner. The *maalma* has every interest to achieve maximum production, giving as much as she can of herself and of "her girls" to produce as much as possible and thus to earn more wages.

In the garment and knitwear sectors, even though wages are linked to performance, most of the women workers are paid by the hour and efficiency is measured according to the rhythm of the orders received and it is thus not fixed very precisely. It depends on the work season and the orders, as well as on the deadlines, which are stipulated by the clients before production is started. Even though most women workers say that the standards are precise, in practice these are just the instructions that the women workers receive every day from the head of their workshop.

During the interviews, the workers mentioned variations in the efficiency criteria. And as these are not fixed this enables the factory head to pressure workers to produce more whenever the extra production is needed.

*When the bosses want us to produce 30 items an hour, they ask us to produce 40, and when they see that, after making a big effort, the workers nevertheless produce 40, they ask for 50. If we produce 50, they ask for 60. Sometimes they ask us to produce 80 or 90 articles an hour and force us do it, although it is impossible. For example, when we are making jackets it is difficult to do more than 30 or 35, but they insist on us producing 50 without arguing. (Touria, worker in a garment factory)*

While most of the women workers say that it is generally not difficult to keep up with the pace of the assembly line, at times maximum productivity is demanded from them when the orders become urgent and the deadline approaches. Under these circumstances, the factory heads push women to their limits in order to maintain the rhythm of production. The women workers realize this. So they slow down production in order to keep within the scope of their actual capacity.

As for the carpet sector, maximum productivity is achieved by mobilizing young girls and girl children under the control and supervision of the *maalma*, who is responsible for the quality of the production. The work of the girl children in the making of carpets is



often justified by saying that this work inside the factory prevents delinquency.

*The foreign clients request the producers to sign a contract stating that the work has not been done by children. We sign, but sometimes we have social problems. According to our tradition a boy is put in charge of a maalem (master artisan) and a girl with a maalma. Nowadays, of course, there is school but there are all those who have left school and have nowhere to go. What to do? Sometimes the mothers come and beg us to let their children work. We let them do so, as we are sorry for them.* (Head of a carpet factory)

The heads of the carpet factories take a relative position on child labour and allow the socioeconomic context to determine their policies. While this does not conform to Western policy on child labour, it is accepted in Moroccan society where the rate of girls not enrolled in school is high and where poverty on the streets is prevalent. In the absence of obligatory schooling up to the age of 16 and of vocational training centres for youth, the factory heads claim to support the employment of children as a way of protecting them against the social evils of the street, such as cigarettes, drugs and vice.

## 5. Division of tasks and hierarchy

The division of tasks within a textile factory is determined by the different jobs to be done throughout the production process, which goes from spinning to packaging in the carpet and knitwear sectors, and from cutting to packaging in the garment-making sector. The organization of work varies. In the carpet sector, the firm's organization chart specifies the tasks of the employees. Some more modern carpet factories include, at the executive level, not only a manager but also a financial director and an artistic director. The foremen, whose number depends on the orders and the requirements of production, are responsible for the installation of the weaving looms, the supervision of the activities of the *maalmas* as well as of the general functioning of the work, and the distribution to the *maalmas* of the thread needed for the weaving.

The weavers form most of the female labour force of the carpet factories, their number varying constantly, according to labour needs. For example, in a carpet factory that employs between 800 and 1,100 workers, only 145 would be permanent. The female weaving labour on which the production depends is being renewed all the time by the *maalma*, who is responsible for the work of one weaving loom or more, under the authority of the foreman. The *maalma's* function is to

weave and to monitor the quality of the work of the other weavers.

The division of tasks, in addition to being hierarchical, also follows a pattern of occupational segregation observed in many other workplaces around the world (see Anker, 1997). Some jobs are considered suitable for women and others for men. For example, in a carpet factory visited during our survey, out of the 800 employees, 20 were men and their job was to repair the weaving looms and to do the cutting, brushing and finishing off of the carpets, as well as the packaging and transport. The tasks that need physical effort, such as transport and the use of heavy instruments (such as the shears), are entrusted to men, while the spinning, washing of the wool and weaving are women's jobs. Similarly, technical know-how tends to remain the purview of men, raising questions about prospects for women's employment and promotion as new technologies are adopted in textile factories.

In the garment sector, the division of tasks is based on the same principle, with the heavy jobs given to men and the light ones to women. There is another principle which distinguishes between the know-how of the men and that of the women. The stitchers are always women: it is rare to come across a male stitcher. Men workers sometimes have responsibilities at the executive level with regard to cutting, mechanics, packaging, transport and factory security. Secretarial work is usually done by women. Responsibilities for dealing with customers in export/import of textile products (transit) are given to both women and men.

In garment-making, production is carried out on an assembly line. After cutting, workers are responsible for placing the articles on the assembly line, monitoring, finishing off, ironing, inspecting, putting into plastic, packaging and transport. Knitwear undergoes the same process with an extra stage to produce the knitted material for the making of articles. It is the workshop head who is in charge of organizing the work in garment and knitwear and he is the immediate supervisor of the heads of the assembly line and the women workers. The team responsible for cutting is supervised by the head cutter, while each assembly line has a chief, a controller at the middle and end of the assembly line, and stitchers who carry out the bulk of the production. Once the articles come off the assembly line they go for finishing off, a last check, wrapping up in plastic and packaging. Only the packaging is sometimes done by men, the other tasks being carried out by women.

The general attitude of both men and women employees is in

favour of mixing the sexes on the assembly line in the garment and knitwear sectors. The factory heads do not take this view. This is because they perceive women as being docile and willing to accept the orders of the bosses more easily than men, who tend to contest commands. By mixing men with women the risk is that the men will influence the women.

*Our firm has a policy not to mix men and women on the same assembly line, as this creates problems. Some factories that have done that have had difficulties. Men are more demanding and they often have bad manners. If a man has an affair with a girl on the same assembly line, he can influence her if there are problems with the supervisor and this makes good work difficult. This is why it is our firm's policy only to employ girls. They are nicer and they immediately understand what is required of them. (Head of a garment factory)*

According to most of the factory heads, when men are mixed with women in the same assembly line, there is an interaction and dynamic in the relationship between them that results in the men wanting to demonstrate their superiority by contesting the authority of the supervisor. This wish to show off to the young women disturbs the production process. The interaction between men and women on the same assembly line does not create a positive rivalry that promotes production: it reproduces social gender relationships in which men exalt their authority as a symbol of their masculinity.

Overall, in dividing tasks between men and women, firms follow a logic of profitability which is grafted on to society's preconceived attitudes about the gender division of roles and abilities.

*Women work hard, but when there are responsibilities men can cope better. I have put women in charge of assembly lines because they know how to talk to other women, they can communicate better. But when there is a technical problem, for example with measurements, the men will look for the cause of the problem, like the cutting of the garment and solve it, while the woman with the same responsibility will not do so. She asks for help from her boss, the technical director. Men behave in a different way when faced with problems and they show much more sense of responsibility. (Head of a garment factory)*

The attitude of the factory head towards the capacities of women conforms with the education and socialization of young girls within society, as a result of which they are less prepared and equipped to shoulder responsibilities. Their education does not encourage them to have any confidence in themselves, or a sense of responsibility when

faced with some difficulty. Women learn to fear authority, which is often constructed as male authority — that of the father, husband or older brother. This situation is reproduced within the factory and is maintained and manipulated by the bosses in the production process.

The characteristic feature of the management style in all three types of factories is authoritarian. Indeed, human resources “management” emphasizes its controlling rather than its training role in the textile industry. In the garment and knitwear sectors, the hierarchy is organized so that women work directly under supervisors, who exercise their authority in a different way to the factory heads. The supervisors consist of the head of the workshop, who is usually a man, and the heads of the assembly lines, who can be men or women. The supervisors have the most direct authority over the women workers: through them the factory heads issue their orders to the labour force. It is the same situation in the carpet sector, except that it is the *maalma* who has the authority over the weavers. But she in turn, together with the weavers, has to submit to the authority of the workshop head.

The relationship between workers and their immediate supervisors tends to be a primarily coercive one, which is seen as the only way of ensuring maximum production. The interviews with factory heads suggest that management models where worker responsibility is enhanced (e.g. “responsibilization”) were deemed inappropriate for Morocco textile factories.

*There must be authority, but it should not be abused as people are sensitive. You have to handle them properly. As we say, give them a slap with a velvet glove. Too much authority doesn't work, no authority and trying to make them responsible doesn't work either.*

(Head of a garment factory)

While the supervisors exercise direct authority, it is the head of the firm who plays the role of arbiter when tensions explode between the women workers and the heads of the workshops or of the assembly lines. This sometimes improves the image of the factory owner among the women workers and diminishes that of the workshop heads. Generally, the authority of the factory head seems to be legitimate in the eyes of the women workers, whatever the sector. This legitimacy stems from the fact that he is the owner of the factory (*moul sharika* or *moul al maamal*) and is usually relatively well educated. The spatial distance from the workers also lends to the legitimacy of the factory head: his distance inspires fear and respect.

In all sectors the authority of the workshop head, as opposed to that of the factory head, is not readily accepted by the women workers

and weavers. Similarly, women workers distinguish between the authority of the assembly line heads and that of the workshop head. The former are closer to the women workers and they themselves work on the sewing machines, their authority being limited to checking the production process on the assembly line, whereas the workshop head, who is usually a man, is responsible for the production and behaviour of the workers. He is the confidential agent of the factory head whose power is relayed through him and he sometimes abuses it.

*I don't like the head of the workshop, I can't describe him. The trouble is he is incompetent. He doesn't know the work, he doesn't know how to cut. He knows nothing. He only knows how to insult people for the slightest reason and sometimes for no reason at all. (Woman worker in a garment factory)*

*The foreman does what he wants. He treats certain women well and others badly. There are girls whom he considers serious and their work good and he treats them with respect. He goes after other ones and if they do not play the game he loses his temper with them (shad maaha dad). He looks after the one who is his girlfriend and gives her good work to do. (Woman worker in a carpet factory)*

In the carpet sector, the *maalma* has more authority over the weavers than the heads of the assembly line have over the stitchers. She has the power of recruiting and is thus always able to keep the weavers indebted to her. Nevertheless she does not escape the authority of the workshop head, as he can, if the quality of production does not conform to fixed standards, destroy her whole day's production and make her start again.

Does the behaviour of the women workers justify such patterns of authority and control? On what is this system of management based? Authority is used to ensure discipline and the functioning of the production process. For example, it is sometimes used to control the chatting of the young women workers making garments, as this upsets production. This is an example of the tension between cultural norms and the exigencies of the factory. The workers want to gossip while they work. This is part of Moroccan culture, as attested by the popular saying "spinning talk and task" (*hdith wa moughzel*): one can both chat and spin wool. To counteract this behaviour, some workshop heads control chatting by transmitting music and putting up the volume when necessary.

The workplace authority systems were perceived by the workers as excessive. Women workers recount the insults that they have received from workshop heads because of some mistake they have

made. This coercion is justified, in the eyes of most of the factory heads, by the irresponsible behaviour of the women workers. Interestingly, such rationalizations sit in stark contrast to attitudes voiced by the same factory heads about the docility and compliance of women workers. According to factory heads, authority is exercised in order to ensure that the jobs are done and that the workers are diligent, that they respect the hours of work and do not cheat. Once again we see a social presupposition that attributes irresponsible behaviour to those in subordinate positions, in order to justify the domination and authority of the bosses.

The authority of the workshop heads is always present and direct and it puts the women workers in a permanent state of fear of authority. As soon as the immediate authority is removed it unleashes behaviour that is not always responsible. As we see below, authoritarian practices may trigger off defence mechanisms which take the form of cheating, sabotage or stealing, which may be interpreted as signs of agency and protest.

## 6. Penalties and rewards: Blocked professional mobility

In spite of the authoritarian factory regimes, a surprisingly small number of women workers reported having received sanctions or penalties. How can this information be interpreted? One explanation is that the workshop heads exercise direct control; therefore, women workers are prevented from committing errors and thus incurring penalties. At the same time, fear of punishment and deductions from the pay packet likely deter errors on the part of the women workers. In the carpet sector, work that is badly done is destroyed, which can cause the weaver to lose one or two days' work. In the garment and knitwear sectors, a mistake means a reduction in wages.

The most serious penalty is dismissal, which is used as an example to others to avoid mistakes and penalties in the future. All factory heads try, through their workshop heads, to establish a strict discipline that leaves little room for error.

*It was difficult to establish a regular discipline at the beginning. But we took steps from the start to instill it. For the Eid celebration they were given two days' paid leave, but 25 women workers took an extra day and they were sacked. Since then no one has been absent as they know if they prolong their leave they will be dismissed. They are not allowed to be late either. If a worker is a few minutes late in the morning, she upsets the assembly line. If she is late once she is told off verbally, but if it happens again she is sacked. (Head of garment factory)*

Given the plentiful supply of labour available outside the gates, there is little concern about sacking those who do not submit to the factory discipline.

As for the rewards and incentives, the majority of women workers say that they have not received any rewards. This contrasts with the male workers, more than half of whom said they had received rewards for their work. Clearly, there are few positive incentive structures to encourage the productivity of women workers. Only a small minority claimed to have received verbal encouragement. Although relatively costless — compliments tend to make people feel appreciated and raise their self-esteem — in an authoritarian management system, any verbal encouragement is considered a weakness that reduces the authority of the employer. The positive payoffs were, however, recognized by one factory head:

*Sometimes the women workers receive words of encouragement to show them that they are appreciated. In other cases, when we see that a girl is productive and serious, we give her a bonus. Obviously that encourages her and it also encourages the others to behave like her. In yet other cases girls are promoted to be the assistant to the chief of an assembly line or to be the chief and will earn 300 dirham more. Those who are promoted like this must pass through all the stages of production on the assembly line... This creates a competitive spirit among the girls and encourages them to give a better performance. (Head of a garment factory)*

Still, the survey indicated that rewards and promotions were the exception rather than the rule. A factory with 200 workers could have four assembly lines for which it would only need four heads. There are virtually no opportunities to promote weavers or stitchers upon whose work the production depends. Similarly, factories offer very few opportunities for professional mobility. The women workers who get stuck in their jobs and for whom employment offers few chances of promotion exhaust their potential and their output too. Motivation is limited, in spite of the fact that the future of the sector must to some extent depend on a labour force which has opportunities for upward mobility.

## 7. Wages and perceptions of work

The average present salary for women workers in the sample is Dh 1,037, whereas for men it was Dh 1,642. A comparison between the highest and lowest wages earned by men and women shows that men start with a slightly higher wage at the lower end and this

advantage grows as the wages increase. The average starting salary for women workers is Dh 703, whereas for men it is Dh 1,025. One explanation for these differentials can be found in the fact that women workers accept lower salaries, while men usually ask for a higher salary than women. The jobs reserved for women also put them at a disadvantage in terms of wages. Women for the most part work at the stitcher level, while men are employed at the technical and managerial levels. This occupational segregation operates as a form of discrimination against women.

Methods of wage payment in the textile factories differ from one sector to another, and from one firm to another. Wages in the carpet sector are paid by the piece. The *maalma* is paid Dh 50 to 60 for a square metre and she undertakes to pay the weavers whom she hires and supervises. Wages given to the weavers depend on their age and the agreement that she makes with them: they are usually paid around Dh 10 a day. Sometimes parents entrust their little girls to the *maalma* so they learn the craft, in which case they are not paid at all. In other cases the *maalma* gets her sisters or relatives to weave. This augments her production and therefore her income and thus increases the family revenue.

In the carpet sector, the weavers taken on by the *maalmas* constitute the overwhelming majority of the labour force. The conditions of employment suggest that weavers straddle formal and informal sectors. Since women workers come to the factories to work, they are not out-workers or home-workers in the standard sense. However, their status of occasional workers and their dependence on the goodwill and authority of the *maalma* mean that the wages are uncertain and not subject to any regulations, characteristics associated with the informal sector. The absence of any regulation of the wages for children leaves them particularly open to abuse and exploitation. Nevertheless, this informal structure, which is based on piece work, has a flexibility which, while enabling the firm to make a profit on wages, is also suited to the social background and needs of the weavers. The main observations from the research on this point are noted below:

- The *maalma* weavers prefer to do piece work because they can earn an income with the support of their daughters or sisters, thus enabling them to carry out their domestic responsibilities and sustain family networks. The women working on carpets are allowed to make their daughters or sisters work and even to bring their babies to the workplace. The piece work system also enables the little girls to become integrated into a work system



rather than being left to their own devices on the streets.

- Through the employment of members of the family, income is earned within a context of solidarity and mutual aid.

- Piece work involves a continual turnover in the carpet sector. The *maalmas* are constantly renewed and, in their turn, they renew the weavers they take on. The weavers generally work on an irregular basis, i.e. when they are called upon and when they go to seek “a task” at the factory. The piece work system and the flexibility of hours enable the women to manage their time: they can stop their work if they need to look after their home or their children.

Men workers also do piece work as cutters and finishers. They pointed to some of the same advantages as the women workers, one of the most important being the mutual aid of the family.

*The cutters prefer piece work because they can bring in members of their family to help them. Some of them can produce up to 4,000 square metres a week, earning Dh 3.5 a square metre. There are several of them at work. One employee takes the order for piece work and recruits others to help him. Usually they are members of his family.* (Head of a carpet factory)

Piece work enables the factory heads to economize on an organization of production based on the training of weavers. It integrates the traditional method of weaving into the factory. The weaver thus has her weaving work to do in the factory rather than at home. She does not own what she produces, as in the traditional system, but receives a wage based on production.

In spite of its perceived advantages, the flexibility of employment in the carpet sector has a number of negative implications. Employment is unstable and uncertain, depending on the orders and the goodwill of the employer. There is little continuity for the young girls and they do not accumulate experience. Moreover, the wages are lowest and the wage increases are smallest in the carpet sector. According to the findings of the survey, the average wage in the carpet sector is Dh 623, compared to Dh 784 and Dh 815 in the knitwear and garment sectors respectively. Wage increases reported by workers in the carpet sector were derisory, varying between 50 centimes and Dh 10 for a square metre of carpet production.

*The best work is not what I am doing at the moment, but rather dress-making in a garment factory. If only I knew how to sew! Wages are better there than in carpet-making... If I had a good offer of marriage I would leave the carpet sector. I would leave this work if I could find a better one. For me, a good salary is 1,000 dirham a*

*month. If I could make that I would not ask for a rise. (Weaver in a carpet factory)*

The fact that the carpet factory wages are low detracts from the reputation of the craft and creates a lack of confidence among the weavers about their know-how. The maintenance of a traditional structure means that the weavers do not consider it to be a field in which they would like to develop their skills. Sometimes they aspire to work in the garment sector, which is seen as offering better wages.

In the garment and knitwear sectors the method of payment of the workers varies. Their work is usually calculated by the hour and the wages paid each week, fortnight or month. The wages of women workers who are paid monthly vary between Dh 300 and 4,000, but most of them range between Dh 300 and 1,400. Those who are paid weekly or fortnightly often receive their pay irregularly, especially in the factories which have financial difficulties. In the knitwear sector, certain small firms farm out the work to be done at home and it is paid by the piece. The statutory minimum wage is only given to the woman worker after a period of at least one year. The mandatory increase is 5 per cent every two years and 10 per cent every five years but it is applied very rarely because of the constant turnover in the labour force.

The overall impact of low wages on women's labour turnover and commitment to their work is negative. The single woman worker enters the job market seeing her work as temporary, while she waits to get married. The low wages and lack of professional mobility reinforce this attitude and do little to foster a more positive attitude among women to factory work. Many women state that if their wages reached Dh 2,000 they would not leave their work.

*I'd like to leave this work which I don't enjoy any more. From what I hear the statutory minimum wage is 7.50 dirham an hour but we are not paid at that rate. If we were, we would work harder. The ideal salary for me would be 2,000 dirham. If I could earn that I would never think of leaving work, even if I got married. (Woman worker in a garment factory)*

The implication here is that the wage level is an important factor determining the stability of the women workers. Their income aspirations, especially in the garment and knitwear factories, are fixed around the minimum wage, or a little higher.

For the women workers, wages are the most important criterion for a good job and a great majority of those in our survey felt that the wages determine the status of a worker. They claim to be prepared to accept rigorous discipline in the factory when their work is well paid.

The women workers see their work from the viewpoint of society's attitude to employment, which usually corresponds to the level of remuneration. Thus work in a factory is seen as being better than that of a domestic servant.

Work in the garment factories was generally perceived to be of a greater value than that of the carpet factories, and not just for the higher salaries earned in the former. The young women workers distinguish between the work inside a carpet firm (*maamal*) and that of a garment or knitwear factory (*sharika*). Work in the garment and knitwear sectors is based on modern know-how in dress-making and knitting, whereas work in a carpet factory is based on traditional knowledge, on weaving, which is looked down on in society.

Low wages are not the only disincentive for women's work. In many cases, the wages of women workers are central for family survival strategies and this means that the women workers have very little control of how their earnings are spent. This may lead to even greater ambivalence about employment as their income fails to increase the independence of women workers in ways that have been documented in other regions (see Kibria, 1998).

*At Salé, three quarters of the women workers live with their parents and are under their control. Their social conditions are very bad. Whatever the factory conditions are, their work environment is wonderful compared with the poverty of their home life. In spite of this, the labour force is not motivated because most of them do not receive their money. Many of their parents come to demand the wages of their daughters and ask how much they earn. The girls are under their authority and they are obliged to give the parents their pay. As a result the girls are not motivated to work. (Head of a garment factory)*

*I share my wages with the family. I don't earn much so I can't buy things like jewelry or plan to buy a house or a plot of land. Those things are far away. My situation and my wages don't allow me to aspire to them. I would like to dress well and take care of my appearance, but God is All-Powerful (Allah Ghaleb). (Woman worker in a garment factory)*

Earning a wage certainly raises the status of a woman worker within the family, insofar as she becomes the provider of income and covers certain family expenses. But she is frustrated because her wages are low and she is not able to meet her own needs, especially for clothes. This is especially a problem for the young girls who are going through the phase of trying to emulate their peers through their dress. Interestingly, certain factory heads are aware of this problem and have

made the wearing of aprons obligatory during work.

Overall, the findings on wages and attitudes to work indicate that the “status” or “authority” that earning an income could potentially confer on a woman is diminished by the way gender relations are played out in the family and in society. The fact that her wages are low neither enables her to meet her family’s needs nor what she needs for her own well-being. Thus the emancipatory process of the woman worker remains blocked.

## 8. Unpunctuality and absenteeism

As observed in the sections above, the entry of women into industrial wage employment initiates a complex process whereby social norms, values and practices intersect with the demands of the factory. This can also be seen in patterns of unpunctuality and absenteeism, where the different production systems and management practices of the carpets and the knitwear/garment sectors create different sets of conditions for women workers.

While some carpet factories have fixed opening and closing hours, in others there are no fixed hours. The latter operate on a piece work basis and the *maalma* organizes the timetable to achieve her production. This organization of hours of work is in line with the perception that weavers have of work hours and it enables them to deal with their family obligations. If a mother has a sick child she knows that she can stop her work to look after the child, and make up for it later. Similarly, the breaks in the work are not fixed by the carpet factory. The weavers rest when they feel the need. For the weaver, working according to her capacities and needs, while having some flexibility in managing her time, is similar to the way she organizes her time and work in the home. In other words, at this level the organization of the factory coincides with the social norms and responsibilities of the workers. The weaver thus has continuity between her domestic space and her workplace so that she feels at ease, although she pays for this by her low wages.

In the garment and knitwear sectors, the hours are from 8 in the morning until 6 in the evening, with one hour, between 1 and 2 p.m., for the women workers to have their lunch. Some factories give the women workers 15-minute breaks for rest in the middle of the morning and in the middle of the afternoon, while others do not. According to the women workers, the breaks are not the same for all jobs. The stitchers who work on the assembly line work regularly for hours on end so they need more frequent pauses because of the intensity of

their work, whereas cutting and packaging do not require such concentration. The breaks can also vary according to sex because of the division of work between women and men. But the breaks, where they exist, are limited in time and never last more than one hour for the mid-day meal and from 10 to 15 minutes in the morning and afternoon.

These breaks enable the women workers not only to rest but also to socialize and communicate among themselves. The factories that do not allow the short breaks in the morning and afternoon deprive workers of a moment of much-needed socializing. A feeling of camaraderie is created among the young girls by the work they do together, their common age, the same problems and living conditions. So the break not only lightens the work burden but promotes interaction among the women workers.

Most of the women workers say that their working hours are convenient, as they are single and do not have the responsibilities of mothers or married women, for whom it is always a problem to respect working hours. However, while a majority of the women workers declare that the working hours are convenient, this is not always evident in daily practice in terms of punctuality and diligence. Absenteeism among the women workers is a problem that the factory heads attempt to tackle during the pre-recruitment period by the dismissal of some workers to give a lesson to the others.

Various reasons can be given for absenteeism. First, there is an absence of a culture of punctuality. The lack of respect for fixed hours is characteristic of the overall society (which, incidentally, has a strong impact on public administration). The only way to get people to submit to fixed hours is by training and by motivating them financially. Low wages justify absenteeism in the eyes of the women workers.

Second, socialization within the family does not reinforce the organizational norms and practices of the industrial workplace. For example, the parents of the women workers tend to be first generation rural migrants who have a different relationship with time than do people in an urban industrial culture. Thus the parents of the young women workers do not encourage their daughters to conform to the work patterns of the factory. Absenteeism is always rife when there are religious holidays and family occasions. Sometimes parents come to the factory to ask if their daughter can take leave because the family must all go to the village or visit a relation. (Although such requests are usually granted, if they are repeated they may result in dismissal.)

Third, their low wages put women workers in a precarious position. Although the work is important for them, it does not completely solve their material needs. The uncertainties of their employment reduces their motivation and this affects their diligence and punctuality.

## 9. Forms of solidarity and strategies of resistance

The factory is a system that brings together management (the head of the firm and his supervisory staff) and the women workers. They all have different interests, sometimes divergent ones, and they all use strategies to defend their interests. In industry, workers usually engage in collective action through trade unions to put forward their claims. However, there was little evidence of trade union activity in the factories studied. Only one (male) worker in the sample claimed union affiliation. While some workers (95) in the sample claimed that their non-membership was a personal choice, there was a significant number who responded that they had never been approached by a union (45) or that they had no knowledge about unions (45). Only a handful of respondents (five) said that they did not join a union for fear of sanctions. Nonetheless, workers' membership in and attitudes towards unions are clearly shaped by those of management, for which trade unions are an anathema.

*Unions are an obstacle to our work. We prefer to have direct negotiations with the workers. I have some workers whom I recruited for lack of anyone better when we started up. I cannot dismiss them now even if they have learnt nothing and are not productive. I have inherited a labour force that is not qualified but I keep them on all the same. (Head of a carpet factory)*

As a consequence, it may be that even if workers are members of a union they will not declare it. However, there was some evidence to suggest that women workers are distrustful of unions and their representatives. Various reasons were given by the women workers for their non-membership in unions. One common view is that unions are a prerogative of men. This view was echoed by the heads of the factories. Men are seen to have greater ambitions and more likely to resort to joint action to press their claims than women, who do not express their grievances formally and are more likely to attempt to use personal relations to settle their problems. In addition, the high turnover rate suggests that women workers will simply move to another factory or quit their jobs, rather than to try to overcome poor working conditions. The impact of traditional forms of solidarity

(within the family) was referred to by one garment factory head:

*The girls are not responsible. A girl depends on her family. She is not supposed to work for her living but she does it through necessity. The family spirit is something of a hindrance as, at the last resort, it is the family who resolves her problems.* (Head of a garment factory)

Still, there is some evidence that women workers do attempt to foster forms of solidarity within the workplace. When one of them enters the factory she often looks for someone to act as an intermediary to replace her sister or parent. However, mutual support in carrying out tasks or resolving problems goes against the rationality of the factory, which requires each worker to occupy his/her post or job and not to ask for help except from the immediate supervisor. Where there are work problems to be resolved, they appear to be dealt with on an individual basis with the head of the assembly line or the *maalma* in the carpet sector. According to the factory heads, the proper functioning of the factory is not reconcilable with the social solidarity that links the women workers together and strengthens their relationships with each other. As we see below, this solidarity and complicity among them are a force that can potentially be mobilized against the factory to disrupt the organization of work.

There is also a marginal form of solidarity between workers on a material level. Sometimes a group will organize contributions of money to create a fund on which they can draw in turn in order to meet an urgent family need. If someone has to buy a piece of furniture or repair their house, they can use the whole sum that has accumulated and the following month it will be someone else's turn to use it. However, this form of solidarity is not very widespread among the women workers.

The development of collective forms of solidarity among the workers suffers from two main constraints. First, the activism of trade unions is considered a political activity and is strongly discouraged within the factories. And second, as employment is precarious (with job-seekers lining up at the factory gates), it is important for women to keep their jobs, submitting to the regulations and the control of management, rather than participating in organized forms of solidarity. At the same time the absence of trade unionism signals a more general problem concerning the failure of women workers to assimilate a collective identity and "consciousness" as industrial workers.

Without any formal structures within which to put forward their claims, women workers fall back on culturally specific forms of

resistance. One example is the frequent crises of hysteria experienced by women workers. These were mentioned during the interviews by both women workers and factory heads. In the middle of her task, a woman will have an attack of hysterics, crying out and gesticulating. Sometimes she has to be taken to hospital and looked after until she is calm again. The hysteria is collective at times, with one woman's crisis setting off the others.

*Some women often have fits of hysteria. The girl will fall down and cry out and everyone will gather around her. Once I had eight women all having a crisis at the same time: it was a collective hysteria. The women workers interpreted this as being caused by the jnoun of the factory. They suggested bringing a sheep and killing it in the courtyard. We did that. They also brought a taleb who read from the Koran. And since then there have been no more crises. (Head of a knitwear factory)*

In this way, beliefs of the popular culture are brought inside the factory. For example, the notion that there are *djinns* who live in the workplace is strong, especially when the factory is badly ventilated or badly lit, or is located in a basement.

*It often happens in the factory. When a girl has a crisis, we tell her to stay at home and get better. I decided this in 1986-87. We have an industrial doctor who comes each week and checks the workers. If the problem is not medical I send them away. Once the girls spread the voice that there were jnoun in the factory and there was a collective hysteria. Everyone was sent away, waiting for the jnoun to disappear. They found themselves without work and they came back. Before that hysterical fits were frequent in our factory but now they happen only rarely. (Head of a garment factory)*

The intensity and long working day (nine hours), trigger off hysteria in some women workers, as a psychological defence mechanism to draw attention to themselves and to give them a respite from their work. Nonetheless, when they realize that they have to pay for these crises by stopping work and foregoing their pay or by being dismissed, they conform to factory regulations and repress their crises.

This phenomenon, considered "theatrics" by the factory heads, can however be interpreted as a form of protest of the women workers in response to the stress of their work. For these young single workers, who have a low opinion of themselves because of their disadvantaged social background and their position of gender subordination, with their work being depreciated by society, the hysterical crisis is a compensatory mechanism whereby they get attention, even if only momentary.



## IV. Conclusion

According to theory, the more a firm develops its technological and organizational level and the more it rationalizes its management and its work standards, adopting regulations concerning jobs and demanding a skilled labour force, the more it will tend to inculcate a committed and disciplined workforce. This survey suggests that Moroccan textile enterprises appear to be moving only slowly in this direction. Instead, what we find is a sector that remains largely committed to an export strategy based on a low-wage, unskilled female labour force, working within factories that operate with authoritarian and, indeed, patriarchal, management practices.

The paper has shown that women workers within the textile factories are faced with two contradictory pressures. One is economic, dictated by the livelihood needs of the family which force a young woman into paid employment. The other is dictated by her education and socialization, reinforced by the law, which stipulates that a woman is under the responsibility and protection of her father or her husband. These contradictory pressures are experienced, perceived and acted on in contradictory ways. Indeed, women workers tend to oscillate between these two realities. The family provides moral support and an escape route in times of difficulty at work. In other words, the family is a safety valve for the woman worker in an industrial environment, the norms of which she has not completely internalized and which do not guarantee her material security and stable employment. Although her work is a necessity for her, when the factory does not meet her aspirations she abandons her job to take refuge in her family.

At the same time, the management culture and practices of the textile factories, which play upon gender hierarchies to control the workers, militates against the development of a committed workforce with a collective identity as workers. Significantly, the forms of resistance adopted by women workers are traditional ones, demonstrated by the example of collective hysteria. Women bring with them into the factory culturally constructed and assigned patterns of behaviour that impact on and are perpetuated by their experience in the industrial workplace. Indeed, their experience within the workplace does little to overcome women's ambivalence about work. This ambivalence is further reinforced by the relationships of authority and control within the factory as well as by the low wages. While the wages in the knitwear and garment sectors are higher than the carpet sector, the women workers appear to find the management

practices particularly abusive and arbitrary, making it very difficult to establish the “rules of the game”. Interestingly, those firms which are closest to the artisanal tradition, like the carpet factories, are more likely to give low wages but this is compensated by the flexibility of the working hours and an environment that is reminiscent of the family environment and which is acceptable to them.

Finally, the findings of this study suggest that employment in itself helps to “emancipate” women, according to their own perception of emancipation: going out of the house, earning a salary and acquiring a certain importance that raises their status within the family. Nevertheless, the social relations and mechanisms which reproduce gender and class disadvantage within the factory are such that a genuine emancipation of the women workers does not take place: indeed, it is circumvented.

## Endnotes

1. In the 1980s, Joeques (1985) found that women stitchers in the textile sector earned less than their male counterparts. Belghazi's findings are discussed throughout this chapter.
2. In other words, if one were to take the "average" male worker, and to change only one of his labour attributes, namely, his gender, this would lead to a 41.2 per cent reduction of his wage. Conversely, a typical woman worker would experience a wage increase of at least 41.2 per cent should her gender change to male.
3. One interpretation is that men who work in feminized industries receive lower pay compared to male workers in other industries, implying that in this highly feminized sector, the whole wage structure is dragged down (Joeques, 1996). Another interesting finding to emerge from Belghazi's study concerns rewards to education. Although overall returns to education are less for women than men in the urban industrial sector as a whole, with women with middle and higher level qualifications being most discriminated against, the situation is different in the textile sector. Since women without any education suffer less wage discrimination in the urban labour market, the degree of discrimination in the clothing sector is relatively low and corresponds to the low level of education among women workers in this sector (Belghazi, 1995 and 1996).
4. See Humphrey, 1987.
5. The formation of an "industrial consciousness" is, of course, an issue that has received wide treatment, especially in terms of the formation of an industrial "working class consciousness and identity".
6. The Malékite rite is a school of Muslim law. Malékism, founded in 795, is based on particular interpretation of the Koran and the tradition of the Prophet (*Sunna*). Applied throughout the Maghreb region, it is considered one of the most conservative interpretations because of certain dispositions related to the status of women and the family.
7. This concept of the "factory culture" helps us to understand the factory as a "social entity" with rules, norms, customs, patterns of behaviour and preferences, representations and beliefs that are "owned", insofar as they are "shared" by those who share the same workplace.
8. The first cycle of secondary school consists of the 7th, 8th and 9th years, while the second cycle comprises the 10th, 11th and 12th years of secondary education.
9. This is borne out in the chapter by Belghazi and Baden, which finds that women workers receive low returns to education, as well as low penalties for lack of education — women workers' experience is valued more than educational qualifications.
10. These expressed preferences of employers seem to be borne out in practice if one considers the findings of Belghazi and Baden suggesting that there is a marked discrimination against women with higher educational qualifications in the urban labour market. The low educational levels of women workers in the textile sectors may therefore reflect the preference of employers.
11. *Cabran* is a distorted version of the French word *caporal* and it means foreman. The term is used in the carpet sector, the other two sectors using the title of workshop head.

12. We noted, during our interviews with the women workers, that they know the names of all the factories in the area, as well as the names of their owners. They all evaluate the factories in terms of wages and human relations.

13. In many cases a woman worker will leave one factory to go and be recruited by another which does not necessarily offer her better wages.

14. In this connection Joeques (1995:12) observed that Moroccan clothing producers believe that the quality of women's work is superior to men's, while men's work rate is higher.

15. Here it is possible to see how competition between the sexes in the production process is hindered by gender relationships. This is particularly the case for factories in which the girls are unskilled, with low levels of education.

16. The same discourse occurs among certain women vis-a-vis their domestic servants: that they cheat, steal and are irresponsible.

17. The trade union movement in Morocco was traditionally linked to the independence movement. Once independence was achieved, there was a fragmentation of the movement due to social and political forces. The trade union movement in Morocco remains subject to discriminatory pressures, collective bargaining mechanisms are dysfunctional and the legal infrastructure protecting workers' organizations is weak. Nonetheless, there is some evidence of activity around the factories. One woman garment factory worker explained that because there are no trade union delegates within the factory, they sometimes take their troubles to trade union members outside the factory. How far trade unions are able to respond to the needs of women workers is unclear, though studies on women and trade unions in other countries raise questions on this account (see Mitter, 1994; Khan, this volume).

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# 4

## Gender dimensions of labour migration in Dhaka city's formal manufacturing sector

*Rita Afsar*

### I. Introduction

Recent years have witnessed an increasing awareness of women's productive roles, mobility and contributions to development. Nevertheless, the processes of women's migration and entry into the labour market, and their coping strategies within the urban labour market and society, have received little attention in policy discourse. Such neglect is regrettable, not only because female migration is occurring on a scale comparable to that of men in most regions of Asia, but also because there are interrelations between female migration, the functioning of the urban labour market and society, and women's roles and status.

The existing literature suggests that migrant women differ markedly from migrant men in a number of ways: in both their underemployment and unemployment; in their prospects for occupational mobility; in the incomes they earn; in the occupations they perform; in their participation in the informal sector; and in their tendency to send remittances home (Anker and Hein, 1986; Chant, 1992; Findley and Williams, 1991; Lopez, Izazola and Gomez de Leon, 1993). Some of these studies (Findley and Williams, 1991; Lopez, Izazola and Gomez de Leon, 1993) also note differences in the characteristics between migrant and non-migrant women workers in the labour market. For example, they observed higher levels of

education and labour force participation by migrant than non-migrant women workers at areas of destination. However, it is argued that these differences need to be documented systematically and analysed in terms of the processes leading to them (Hugo, 1993:65). Moreover, none of these studies attempt to combine the interactions between women's economic roles and their social situation in urban society.

Historical evidence suggests that the expansion of the manufacturing sector is one of the key elements in the urbanization and migration processes of developed and developing countries. In Bangladesh, the sudden and rapid boom of the ready-made garment industry (RMG) in the 1980s generated considerable female employment in the formal export-based manufacturing sector. Bangladesh is a classical case of female-led industrialization. Here the degree of female intensity in manufacturing industries is very high, far above the norm for other developing countries. The share of women in the total labour force in manufacturing industries was 64 per cent in 1994, compared to 35 per cent in some other developing countries (e.g. Morocco and Jamaica), which experienced a steady rise in manufacturing output. In Bangladesh export-oriented manufacturing contributes two thirds of the country's total foreign exchange. Export earnings from garments rose from US\$ 976.98 million in 1991 to US\$ 2,488.50 in 1995 (BGMEA, 1996). The country's dependence on clothing is evident from the fact that in 1992, it alone accounted for 72 per cent of the total merchandise exports compared to 37 per cent in 1988 and 0.4 per cent in 1980-1981 (Rahman, 1992).

The garment industry alone absorbed nearly a fifth of the women employed in the manufacturing sector and two thirds of those employed in medium and large-scale enterprises (Zohir and Majumdar, 1996). According to the Bangladesh Garment Manufacturers and Employers' Association's (BGMEA) statistics, garment factories alone absorb 1.2 million workers of which 1.08 million or 90 percent are women (BGMEA, 1996). Figures differ in some other surveys (Zohir and Majumdar, 1996; Afsar, 1998b) which found that these factories are composed of nearly two thirds women and one third men workers.

Given the composition of the labour force, it is important to understand the mode of entry of female migrant workers in the formal manufacturing sector of Bangladesh, and their position in the labour market and urban society, compared to men and non-migrant co-workers. This study explores the ways in which migrant women enter and cope with the demands of the urban labour market and society,



compared to male migrants and non-migrant workers of either sex. More specifically, it addresses the following questions:

- Is there any difference in the socioeconomic characteristics of migrant men and women who enter into the urban labour market and do these characteristics differ remarkably from those of non-migrant workers;
- Is there any difference in motivations for and processes through which migrant men and women enter the labour market;
- Do men and women migrants receive differential treatment in the labour market and in the urban community (e.g. living conditions); and
- Do men and women migrants adopt different strategies to deal with and improve their living and working conditions.

The study is primarily based on a small-scale sample survey of the migrant labourers in five garment factories in Dhaka. Comparison was also made with a small sample of male and female workers of other manufacturing factories, namely electronics, pharmaceuticals and food processing. Although not as female-dominated as the RMG sector, these factories also absorb a large number of women workers.

Using a quota sampling technique, 213 workers were drawn from a list of 530 workers from five garment and three other manufacturing industries (pharmaceuticals, electronics and food processing) in Dhaka city. Table 1 presents the sample workers selected for the study by gender, category of work and factory type. The numbers of male and female workers were 107 and 106, respectively, selected to facilitate comparison and to identify appropriate policy measures. Because the RMG industry has generated considerable female employment since the 1980s, a larger sample of 153 was drawn from garment factories, compared to 60 workers from other manufacturing factories. The workers were interviewed in both their workplace and home. The sample garment factories were established between 1984 and 1994 and excepting the pharmaceutical industry (CIBA Geigy Ltd.) which was founded in 1984, the remaining two (food processing and electronics) were established in the 1960s. The size of the sample factories varied between 250 and 2,500 employees. The other sample manufacturing units have nearly 100 employees. However, the food processing industry employs 530 workers. The share of women workers is almost double that of men in the sample garment factories, while in the other manufacturing industries, excepting pharmaceuticals (in which men are over-represented), there is almost equal representation of male and female workers.

The broader sample of workers drawn through quota sampling revealed that more than 90 per cent of workers in garment factories are migrants. By contrast, migrants constitute nearly half of the total respondents in other manufacturing industries. Almost no divergence is found along gender lines in this regard. It should be noted that migration is defined using both geographic and temporal criteria. A person who was not born in Dhaka and migrated there between 1980 and 1996 is defined as a migrant. Further, those who migrated between 1991 and 1996 are defined as "recent migrants", whereas those who migrated between 1980 and 1990 are "long-term migrants". It is assumed that 15 years is sufficient to adjust to the urban environment. Hence, those who came before 1980 were treated as non-migrants. Consequently, around 37 per cent were classified as recent migrants and 46 per cent as long-term migrants, yielding a total sample of 83 per cent migrants and 17 per cent non-migrants, among the sample respondents finally studied (Table 2).

As indicated above, the spread of RMG in the mid-1980s and early 1990s generated greater employment opportunities for women than men. During the sampling stage, it was observed that women workers predominated in unskilled and skilled categories in both RMG and other manufacturing industries, while men predominated at the managerial level. According to the employers, women are preferred over men as both unskilled and skilled operators mainly because:

- female labour is cheaper than male labour;
- women workers are more docile, loyal and law-abiding in nature than men;
- women workers are also more hard-working and sincere than their male counterparts; and
- women workers have less contacts, exposure and bargaining power than male workers.

The perception of the employers reveals that women workers are preferred not exclusively as a cost-cutting measure. Their performance, sincerity and law-abiding nature are also valued by employers. However, this suggests that women workers are likely to be in a disadvantageous position compared to their male counterparts. Male migration is an established phenomenon in South Asia, in general, and Bangladesh, in particular, and mechanisms have evolved to facilitate their migration over the years. Independent female migration is a relatively recent phenomenon. It is important, therefore, to explore the mechanisms which facilitate female migration and settlement in urban areas.

**Table 1: Total number of male and female workers of the sample factories and the sample drawn for the present study**

| Name of the industry               | Total no.of workers* |        |       | Samples listed using quota sampling method |        |       | Final samples derived |        |       |
|------------------------------------|----------------------|--------|-------|--|--------|-------|-----------------------|--------|-------|
|                                    | Male                 | Female | Total | Male                                       | Female | Total | Male                  | Female | Total |
| <b>Garment</b>                     |                      |        |       |  |        |       |                       |        |       |
| Applique Fashion Wear Ltd.         | 115                  | 164    | 279   | 27   | 25     | 52    | 15                    | 15     | 30    |
| Bari Apparels Ltd.                 | 235                  | 340    | 575   | 33   | 50     | 83    | 16                    | 17     | 33    |
| Florata (Pvt.) Ltd.                | 80                   | 170    | 250   | 30   | 43     | 73    | 15                    | 15     | 30    |
| Jeacon Garment Ltd.                | 300                  | 1200   | 1500  | 33   | 45     | 78    | 15                    | 15     | 30    |
| Sparrow Apparels Ltd.              | 1100                 | 1400   | 2500  | 35   | 53     | 88    | 15                    | 15     | 30    |
| All Garment                        | 1830                 | 3274   | 5104  | 158  | 216    | 374   | 76                    | 77     | 153   |
| <b>Other manufacturing</b>         |                      |        |       |  |        |       |                       |        |       |
| CIBA Geigy Ltd.                    | 43                   | 28     | 73    | 18   | 20     | 38    | 10                    | 10     | 20    |
| Haque Brothers Ltd.                | 250                  | 300    | 550   | 28   | 44     | 72    | 10                    | 10     | 20    |
| Mehar Industries Ltd.              | 67                   | 55     | 122   | 25   | 21     | 46    | 10                    | 10     | 20    |
| All other manufacturing industries | 360                  | 383    | 743   | 71   | 85     | 156   | 30                    | 30     | 60    |

\* Statistics provided by the employers of the sample factories

Source: Sample survey of migrant workers of Dhaka's formal manufacturing sector, 1996.

**Table 2: Types of samples selected for the present study by skill categories and migration status**

| Types of workers                         | Garment |        |         |        | Other manufacturing |        |         |        |
|--|---------|--------|---------|--------|---------------------|--------|---------|--------|
|  | %       |        | Numbers |        | %                   |        | Numbers |        |
|  | Male    | Female | Male    | Female | Male                | Female | Male    | Female |
| Helper/unskilled production worker       | 35.5    | 36.4   | 27      | 28     | 33.3                | 36.7   | 10      | 11     |
| Operator/skilled production worker       | 32.9    | 36.4   | 25      | 28     | 10.0                | 10.0   | 3       | 3      |
| Supervisor/technical/managerial category | 31.6    | 27.3   | 24      | 21     | 56.7                | 53.4   | 17      | 16     |
| All                                      | 100.0   | 100.0  | 76      | 77     | 100.0               | 100.0  | 30      | 30     |
| Non-migrants                             | 3.9     | 6.4    | 3       | 5      | 43.3                | 53.3   | 13      | 16     |
| Long-term migrant                        | 46.0    | 48.0   | 38      | 37     | 40.0                | 46.7   | 12      | 14     |
| Recent migrant                           | 50.0    | 45.5   | 35      | 35     | 16.7                | -      | 5       | -      |

*Source:* Sample survey of migrant workers of Dhaka's formal manufacturing sector, 1996.

## II. The growth of the RMG sector and women's independent migration

As noted above, the growth of export-oriented manufacturing has led to the expansion of employment opportunities for unskilled women in metropolitan cities of Southeast Asia, and Bangladesh is no exception. The expansion of employment opportunities for unskilled women in the 1990s can be substantiated by micro-level case studies. In 1991-92, using a randomly selected survey of slums in four wards of Dhaka city, the proportion of women involved in RMG industries was found to be well below 10 per cent (Afsar, 1995). However, a more recent slum census in 1996, indicates that about one fifth of women of active age are involved in garment factories (Afsar, 1997). Moreover, in some *thanas* such as Mirpur and Mohammadpur (where there is a concentration of RMG factories), the proportions of women garment workers increases to a quarter (in Mirpur) and one third (in Mohammadpur). These findings point to the expansion of female employment in RMG industries, particularly among poorer women.

Another significant finding of such micro-level studies concerns the increasing proportion of migrant workers. In their study on garment factory workers in 1990, Zohir and Majumdar (1996) found that migrants constituted three quarters of the total workers, with a greater proportion of male migrant workers (83 per cent) than female (69 per cent). In the present study, the proportion of migrant workers in garment factories represents 90 per cent of the sample, although no gender-based differential is found. Similarly, the results of the author's recent survey of 14 garment factories in Dhaka (Afsar, 1998b) show that migrants constituted 90 per cent of the total workers. It also reveals that the proportion of migrant workers who came in recent years (between 1991 and 1996), has more than doubled the figures for 1981-90 (from 31 per cent to 60 per cent for males and from 28 per cent to 64 per cent for females). This indicates greater labour migration in recent years, particularly of young women workers.

The sex ratio of Dhaka city dwellers over the years is becoming more balanced from 150 (males to 100 females) in 1961 to 105 in 1993-94. This trend can be linked to the increase in women's independent migration for employment in export-oriented labour intensive manufacturing, particularly in the RMG sector (Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics, 1996:44; Thwin et al., 1996). The slum census mentioned above revealed an even more balanced sex ratio (96) in 1996 (Afsar, 1997). However, existing evidence suggests that the overall sex ratio of the slum and squatter settlements is generally balanced (e.g. Majumdar et al., 1995; Thwin, 1996). What is significant, however, is that the sex ratio is becoming more feminine for the 15 to 34 year age group. In 1991, the sex ratio obtained for that group was 103 (males to 100 females), which dropped to 79 in 1993 and to 65 in 1996 (Afsar, 1995, 1997; Thwin et al., 1996).

## 1. Reasons for female migration

In order to examine factors which facilitate or constrain female labour migration, the present study used "reason for migration" as only one indicator.<sup>1</sup> The findings were supplemented by relevant characteristics of migrants and conditions of their households at the time of migration, which often mediate the process of migration decision-making significantly. Factors include age, level of education, occupation, and size of cultivable land at the time of migration.

Like their male counterparts in garment and other manufacturing units, female workers in garment factories came predominantly in search of employment. Nearly three quarters of

women and men came for work-related reasons (Table 3). Although 43 per cent of women migrants from other manufacturing industries came for economic reasons, 29 per cent were associational migrants (marriage/family migration) who accompanied their husbands to Dhaka. It is instructive to compare these findings to the global review on reasons for women's migration by the United Nations Secretariat (1993), which indicates that:

- a significant proportion of women migrate for economic reasons (including migration for education, which leads to seeking better employment opportunities later);
- worldwide, more women migrate for family than economic reasons, including to accompany other family members or spouse and to get married.

While the present study departs significantly from the above pattern, it is consistent with the findings from Bangkok metropolis (Phongpaichit, 1993). In Bangkok, female migration occurred as a direct response to the demand for cheap labour for the export-oriented manufacturing industries. This can be substantiated in the present study by the finding that nearly two out of every five garment factory workers, irrespective of gender, came directly for the present job. Those who migrated directly for the present job constituted 35 per cent of the male workers and 14 per cent of the female workers from other manufacturing units. Although employment-related reasons always dominate in the case of male migration, this increased significantly in the 1990s (90 per cent) compared to the 1980s (68 per cent) (Afsar, 1998b). Afsar (1998b) also indicates that 76 per cent of recent female migrants, as opposed to 36 per cent of the long-term female migrants, came for employment-related reasons. These findings confirm the importance of greater employment opportunities in Dhaka city as a "pull" factor to explain recent migration patterns, particularly for women.

Cross-classifications by marital status and age at migration provide a useful tool to confirm results of subjective data on "reasons for migration". Nearly 75 per cent of women respondents from the garment factories migrated for work-related reasons, whether married or unmarried. Divorced and widowed workers came exclusively for this purpose. Excepting married women, none of the sample workers from the garment factories were associational migrants. Further, among female garment factory workers, those who migrated for education-related reasons were substantially higher (2.5 times) for unmarried than other marital categories. Although nearly 43 per cent of the women respondents from the other manufacturing industries

migrated for work-related reasons, the number increases substantially (two thirds) for unmarried workers. Those who migrated in search of a job falls to two fifths in the case of married migrants from other manufacturing units. A third of married women migrated for associational reasons and a quarter for higher studies.

The response pattern on the reasons for migration by female workers from other manufacturing units appears to be logical. An unmarried woman worker from those units is younger (27 years old) and better educated (4.7 years schooling), than a married woman worker who is 33 years old and had 3.6 years of schooling on average. In the case of female garment factory workers, while the unmarried women are younger than married female colleagues by eight years, the latter had slightly more education (3.0 years of schooling) as opposed to 2.3 years of the former (Table 4). If education is taken as a rough indicator of the level of aspiration, no marked divergence is found in the response patterns of workers of garment factories on reasons for migration by marital status than the simple frequency distribution on the reason for migration.

A large percentage of the migrants found in RMG factories come from central and southeastern districts of Dhaka, Mymensingh, Faridpur, Barisal and Comilla. Over the years, it has been observed that migrants in Dhaka slum and squatter settlements are also from those districts (Afsar, 1997, 2000; Majumdar et al., 1989; CUS, 1990).<sup>2</sup> The districts from which these workers migrate in greatest numbers are characterized by highly disproportionate land-population ratios. Four out of every five female workers from the garment factories and two out of every three female workers from the other manufacturing industries were functionally landless. Nearly half of male workers, irrespective of type of industry, were functionally landless. Although women workers in general are landless, female garment factory workers are more disadvantaged in this regard. On average they had 1.3 acres of land as opposed to 2.0 acres for their male counterparts in the same factory and 2.3 acres for female counterparts from other manufacturing units.<sup>3</sup>

It is important to note that the level of education of female garment factory workers is higher than either their age cohort in rural areas or their counterparts in slum and squatter settlements. In Bangladesh, education is positively correlated with household income. Seven out of 10 female workers from landless households either had no education or incomplete primary education. By contrast, nearly three out of every five female workers from other industries had secondary education or above. They belonged to small and large

landholding families.

Studies conducted in poorer urban agglomerations found that women have less than one year of schooling (Afsar, 1991; 1995). By contrast, female workers in the garment industry had 2.5 years of schooling prior to migration while the figure was 3.3 for female workers from other manufacturing factories. The corresponding figures for their male counterparts were 3.0 and 3.9 years respectively. Similarly, the median years of schooling of a female garment factory worker is four, compared to zero years in the case of their age cohort in rural areas (Afsar, 1998b). These findings suggest that work opportunities in garment factories provide incentives for female education as women with primary education had greater access than their illiterate counterparts.

## **2. Importance of information and the role of social networks in the process of labour migration**

The role of information and social networks as important determinants of migration and settlement is amply demonstrated in a number of studies in Bangladesh (Afsar, 2000b; Majumdar et al., 1995) and elsewhere (Lansing and Mueller, 1967; Caldwell, 1969; Gore, 1971; Hugo, 1978, 1981; Ritchey, 1976; Skeldon, 1990). A large majority of respondents in the present study had acquaintances in Dhaka prior to migration, who helped them in the process of migration and settlement. The study suggested that 90 per cent of female garment factory workers, compared to 80 per cent of their male colleagues in the same industry or female counterparts of other manufacturing industries, had family members and relatives in Dhaka city prior to migration. Friends and neighbours, as well as employers and their agents, are the other acquaintances the migrant labourers had prior to migration. They assisted in providing shelter and job-related information.

Similarly, a large majority of respondents (59 per cent of men and 73 per cent of women) received shelter from their relatives and acquaintances after migration. Responses recorded on this account do not vary much either by duration of migration or by types of factories. The other major types of support they received at the urban end relate to procurement of employment and job-related information. Variations in this connection are observed along gender lines, duration of migration and types of factories. In the case of garment factories, the level of support to both male and female respondents increased substantially over the years (Table 5). More respondents (both male



and female) from the other manufacturing industries received such help, suggesting that social networks might be advantageous in securing better employment opportunities. Job-related assistance, described above, facilitates more independent migration by women. More generally, patterns of such support reflect the expansion of job opportunities for garment factory workers over the last five years.

Independent migration in Bangladesh is not a phenomenon occurring independent of family livelihood strategies. Instead, it should be seen as a family-based strategy for income maximization and poverty alleviation (Afsar, 1995). This point is supported by the findings of Kibria in this volume. Hence, in the Bangladeshi context, whether migration can be characterized as “independent” or “associational” is determined mainly by the motive for migration. If the purpose of migration is availing employment opportunities in the city (including transfer or change of job) maximizing income gains to reduce family poverty, and improving levels of education, it can be considered as independent migration. Alternatively, if a person migrates to stay with other family members and/or as a part of the migration of the entire family — in other words, where the individual members do not necessarily have any specific motivations for migration — then it can be classified as “associational” migration. In both cases, social networks play an important role in labour migration process.

Table 6 (from Afsar, 1998a) shows that less than 10 per cent of the migrants interviewed (28 per cent male and 3 per cent female) came alone to Dhaka city. All the remaining respondents, irrespective of gender, came to Dhaka city accompanied by immediate family members, by other relatives and, in a few cases, by spouses. The propensity to come to Dhaka with parents has declined substantially over the years and this is true for both male and female migrants. Whereas nearly half of the long-term migrant respondents were accompanied by their parents to Dhaka city, less than a quarter of recent migrants were. Female recent migrants demonstrated greater propensity to migrate with kin members and friends/neighbours, than long-term female migrants, who were more likely to come with their parents. Whether accompanied by parents, siblings, relatives or friends, female workers generally migrate with someone they know well and seldom do they migrate alone. The propensity to migrate alone has increased more among the recent male than long-term male labourers. Nonetheless, the overwhelming majority of migrants come to Dhaka with someone else, thus confirming the role played by social networks in urban migration.

Female migrants from the sample garment factories reported that they relied (in descending order) on friends and neighbours, employer's agent, own initiative and family members/relatives to help them secure a job (Table 7).<sup>4</sup> Male migrants depended on the same sources, but a relatively higher proportion of them showed a greater tendency to rely on the employer and his agents. This was also true for the male workers of the other manufacturing industries. The greater mobility and work experience (average of two years) of men, compared to women (average of one year), observed at the country-wide level, might provide men with greater accessibility to employers or their agents, than their women counterparts. Conversely, women of other manufacturing industries depended more on family members and relatives, friends and neighbours, compared to their male colleagues. However, in those industries, 25 per cent of men and women relied on newspaper advertisements for securing their jobs. Those who depended on formal sources such as newspapers were much fewer (7 per cent) in garment factories. Table 7 suggests that women's entry into formal manufacturing industries, particularly garment factories, still remains largely dependent on informal sources of information and social networks.

A study of small garment workshops in low-rent district of Bangkok showed that virtually all workers were women under 20, mostly recruited among friends and relatives of the owner or from the owner's village. Such an informal system of recruitment ensures loyalty and docility in addition to cheap labour. This is also true for Bangladesh. The ex-president of the BGMEA stated that employers prefer rural migrants over local female labourers of Dhaka because the latter have greater aspirations, mobility and bargaining power, than the former. Such attitudes seem to be borne out by the tendency for direct recruitment from rural areas. Findings of the study reveal that nearly half of the migrant workers from garment, and two thirds from other, manufacturing units had contact with employers' agents prior to migration. It shows also that garment factory workers have blood connections with employers' agents; this tendency is greater for female workers and recent migrants (male and female). Similarly, the extent of recent migrant female workers from garment factories who knew the employers' agent prior to migration is much greater than long-term migrant females (63 per cent compared to 41 per cent). Thus more than half the garment factory workers are recruited from amongst the friends and relatives of the employers' agent; such types of recruitment appear to be increasing for female garment factory workers. Securing employment through known sources might be

considered safer for daughters by parents than unknown sources.

In many cases, respondents who migrated for the present job also had information about the nature of the work and wage. In this regard, non-migrants (those who were born in Dhaka or who migrated prior to 1980), had greater access to such information than migrants. Being in Dhaka for a long time, they could easily acquire such information through informal networks and more formal sources. The majority of women workers (53 per cent) from other manufacturing units belong to this category, thus suggesting that they have a better information base than other categories of workers (both male and female) in the sample. At the same time, there is a greater propensity of female recent migrants from the garment factories to have prior information about the nature of their present job than their long-term migrant colleagues (49 per cent compared to 35 per cent). This is consistent with Peterson et al.'s (1988) proposition that recent migrants have better information regarding job than long-term migrants. However, the percentage of male workers who had such information did not change by duration of period since migration. Increased access to information by female workers suggests wider and greater networking among recent migrant female workers from garment factories. More specifically, the role of social networks in supplying job-related information to migrant workers of the garment factory can be considered an important determinant of labour migration.

Of those workers from garment factories who reported migrating for employment, 38 per cent of the female workers and 34 per cent of the male workers came directly for the present job. Only 14 per cent of female workers from other manufacturing units came for the present job (Table 3). Thus the gap between migrating for an existing job and migrating for a prospective job is the most narrow in the case of female garment factory workers and largest for female workers of other manufacturing units.<sup>5</sup> Other studies (Zohir and Majumader, 1996) suggest that the waiting period for getting a job in a garment factory is less than a week for the majority of workers (for 60 per cent of female and 50 per cent of male job seekers). And, with the exception of about 10 per cent, all the remaining job seekers, irrespective of sex, obtain employment within a month (Zohir and Majumdar, 1996). The conclusion that can be reached, therefore, is that the risk of migration in search of a job is minimized through effective information exchange, strong and reliable social networks available to migrant labourers, and greater job opportunities for migrants in Dhaka city.

**Table 3: Distribution of sample migrant workers by reason for migration and some of the pre-migration characteristics**

|                             | Garment industries |       |        |       | Other manufacturing industries |       |        |       |
|-----------------------------|--------------------|-------|--------|-------|--------------------------------|-------|--------|-------|
|                             | Male               |       | Female |       | Male                           |       | Female |       |
|                             | No.                | (%)   | No.    | (%)   | No.                            | (%)   | No.    | (%)   |
| <b>Reason for migration</b> |                    |       |        |       |                                |       |        |       |
| To avail the present job    | 25                 | 34.2  | 27     | 37.5  | 6                              | 35.3  | 2      | 14.3  |
| Job search                  | 31                 | 42.5  | 27     | 37.5  | 8                              | 47.1  | 4      | 28.6  |
| Marriage/family migration   | -                  | -     | 5      | 6.9   | -                              | -     | 4      | 28.6  |
| Education                   | 9                  | 12.3  | 7      | 9.7   | 3                              | 17.6  | 3      | 21.4  |
| Others                      | 8                  | 11.0  | 6      | 8.3   | -                              | -     | 1      | 7.1   |
| All                         | 73                 | 100.0 | 72     | 100.0 | 17                             | 100.0 | 14     | 100.0 |
| <b>Age-group</b>            |                    |       |        |       |                                |       |        |       |
| <10                         | 10                 | 13.7  | 8      | 11.1  | -                              | -     | 1      | 7.1   |
| 10-19                       | 51                 | 69.9  | 56     | 77.8  | 9                              | 52.9  | 8      | 57.1  |
| 20-29                       | 12                 | 16.4  | 8      | 11.1  | 8                              | 47.1  | 3      | 21.4  |
| 30-39                       | -                  | -     | -      | -     | -                              | -     | 2      | 14.3  |
| Average age (years)         | -                  | 15.1  | -      | 13.2  | -                              | 20.4  | -      | 18.3  |
| <b>Level of education</b>   |                    |       |        |       |                                |       |        |       |
| No education                | 12                 | 16.4  | 21     | 29.2  | 1                              | 5.9   | 3      | 21.4  |
| Primary                     | 24                 | 32.9  | 23     | 31.9  | 1                              | 5.9   | 4      | 28.6  |
| Secondary                   | 13                 | 17.8  | 10     | 13.9  | 1                              | 5.9   | -      | -     |
| High school +               | 24                 | 32.9  | 18     | 25.0  | 14                             | 82.3  | 7      | 50.0  |
| Average education           | -                  | 3.0   | -      | 2.5   | -                              | 3.9   | -      | 3.3   |
| <b>Land holding</b>         |                    |       |        |       |                                |       |        |       |
| No land                     | 19                 | 26.0  | 33     | 45.8  | 5                              | 29.4  | 6      | 42.9  |
| < 1 acre                    | 20                 | 27.4  | 24     | 33.3  | 4                              | 23.5  | 3      | 21.4  |
| 1-2.5                       | 20                 | 27.4  | 13     | 18.1  | 3                              | 17.6  | 2      | 14.3  |
| 2.51-5.00                   | 10                 | 13.7  | 1      | 1.4   | 3                              | 17.6  | 1      | 7.1   |
| >5.01                       | 4                  | 5.5   | 1      | 1.4   | 2                              | 11.8  | 2      | 14.3  |

Source: Sample survey of migrant workers of Dhaka's formal manufacturing sector, 1996.

**Table 4: Distribution of respondents by marital status, average age and education**

| Respondents         | Male |      |         |               | Female |       |         |               |
|---------------------|------|------|---------|---------------|--------|-------|---------|---------------|
|                     | No.  | (%)  | Av. age | Av. education | No.    | (%)   | Av. age | Av. education |
| <b>Garment</b>      |      |      |         |               |        |       |         |               |
| Currently married   | 20   | 26.3 | 27.9    | 3.2           | 29     | 37.7  | 24.9    | 3.2           |
| Currently unmarried | 56   | 73.7 | 18.7    | 2.9           | 40     | 51.9  | 17.3    | 2.3           |
| Divorced/separated  | -    | -    | -       | -             | 7      | 9.1   | 22.0    | 2.4           |
| Widow               | -    | -    | -       | -             | 1      | 1.3   | 30.0    | 3.0           |
| All                 | 76   | 100. | 21.9    | 2.9           | 77     | 100.0 | 20.7    | 2.6           |
| <b>Others</b>       |      |      |         |               |        |       |         |               |
| Currently married   | 17   | 56.7 | 35.2    | 3.5           | 20     | 66.7  | 32.6    | 3.7           |
| Currently unmarried | 13   | 43.3 | 27.0    | 4.3           | 6      | 20.0  | 27.0    | 4.8           |
| Divorced/separated  | -    | -    | -       | -             | 3      | 10.0  | 30.7    | 1.3           |
| Widow               | -    | -    | -       | -             | 1      | 3.3   | 45.0    | 3.0           |
| All                 | 30   | 100. | 31.8    | 3.8           | 30     | 100.0 | 31.7    | 3.6           |

*Source:* Sample survey of migrant workers of Dhaka's formal manufacturing sector, 1996.

**Table 5: Distribution of respondents and types of help received after migration from kin and acquaintances who lived in Dhaka**

| Respondents' category    | Shelter | Help to get job | Job-related information | Monetary help | Job and shelter | Those who received help from acquaintances |      |
|--------------------------|---------|-----------------|-------------------------|---------------|-----------------|--|------|
|                          |         |                 |                         |               |                 | (No.)                                      | (%)  |
| <b>Garment</b>           |         |                 |                         |               |                 |  |      |
| Male                     | 58.9    | 33.9            | 12.5                    | 12.5          | 33.9            | 57   | 95.0 |
| Female                   | 72.7    | 20.0            | 16.4                    | 7.3           | 21.8            | 55   | 91.7 |
| <b>Long-term migrant</b> |         |                 |                         |               |                 |  |      |
| Male                     | 72.0    | 20.0            | 8.0                     | 4.0           | 20.0            | 25   | 96.1 |
| Female                   | 70.8    | 12.5            | 12.5                    | 8.3           | 20.8            | 24   | 88.9 |
| <b>Recent migrant</b>    |         |                 |                         |               |                 |  |      |
| Male                     | 56.0    | 45.2            | 16.1                    | 19.3          | 45.2            | 31   | 93.9 |
| Female                   | 74.2    | 25.8            | 19.3                    | 6.4           | 22.6            | 31   | 93.9 |
| <b>Non-garment*</b>      |         |                 |                         |               |                 |  |      |
| Migrant male             | 71.4    | 14.3            | 9.5                     | 23.8          | 28.6            | 21   | 70.0 |
| Migrant female           | 60.0    | 20.0            | 20.0                    | 26.7          | 33.3            | 15   | 50.0 |

\* As only five male respondents were classified as recent migrants, it was decided to present data from other manufacturing units as one category. Data presented here denote multiple responses.

Source: Sample survey of migrant workers of Dhaka's formal manufacturing sector, 1996.

**Table 6: Distribution of respondents by gender, migration status and people who accompanied them to Dhaka**

| Marital status prior to migration to Dhaka | Long-term migrant (%) |        | Recent migrant (%) |        | Total (No.) |        |
|--|-----------------------|--------|--------------------|--------|-------------|--------|
|  | Male                  | Female | Male               | Female | Male        | Female |
| Self (%)                                   | 12.0                  | 1.7    | 36.1               | 4.0    | 20          | 13     |
| Spouse (%)                                 | 8.0                   | 12.7   | -                  | 18.4   | 2           | 65     |
| Son (%)                                    | 52.0                  | -      | -                  | 0.7    | -           | 2      |
| Parents (%)                                | 20.0                  | 47.4   | 21.3               | 23.2   | 23          | 119    |
| Siblings (%)                               | 4.0                   | 20.3   | 21.3               | 20.6   | 15          | 80     |
| Kin (%)                                    | -                     | 15.3   | 10.7               | 28.0   | 6           | 94     |
| Inlaw (%)                                  | -                     | 2.6    | 2.1                | 4.0    | 2           | 14     |
| Servant (%)                                | -                     | -      | 2.1                | -      | 1           | -      |
| Friend (%)                                 | 4.0                   | -      | 6.4                | -      | 3           | -      |
| Neighbour (%)                              | -                     | -      | -                  | 1.1    | -           | 3      |
| All (No.)                                  | 25                    | 118    | 47                 | 272    | 72          | 390    |

Source: Afsar, 1998b.

**Table 7: Distribution of sample respondents by sources of help to secure/seek the present job**

| Sources                       | Garment industries |       |        |      | Other manufacturing industries |      |        |      |
|-------------------------------|--------------------|-------|--------|------|--------------------------------|------|--------|------|
|                               | Male               |       | Female |      | Male                           |      | Female |      |
|                               | No.                | (%)   | No.    | (%)  | No.                            | (%)  | No.    | (%)  |
| Family members/<br>relatives  | 14                 | 19.2  | 13     | 18.1 | 2                              | 11.8 | 4      | 28.6 |
| Neighbours/<br>friends        | 14                 | 19.2  | 16     | 22.2 | 1                              | 5.90 | 3      | 21.4 |
| Employers/<br>employers agent | 23                 | 31.5  | 14     | 19.4 | 5                              | 29.4 | 3      | 21.4 |
| Newspaper/<br>Other           |                    |       |        |      |                                |      |        |      |
| Advertisement                 | 4                  | 5.5   | 6      | 8.3  | 5                              | 29.4 | 3      | 21.4 |
| Self                          | 18                 | 24.7  | 23     | 31.9 | 4                              | 23.5 | 1      | 7.1  |
| All                           | 73                 | 100.0 | 72     | 100  | 17                             | 100. | 14     | 100  |

*Source:* Sample survey of migrant workers of Dhaka's formal manufacturing sector, 1996.

### III. Profiles of the sample workers and some important consequences of factory work

#### 1. Demographic and social characteristics

One major change in rural-urban migration over the past decade has been the increasing proportion of young women with low levels of educational attainment originating from rural areas. The increasing importance of RMG industries in absorbing young and literate or semi-literate women can be observed from the present study. Almost all the women (96 per cent) in the sample from the garment factories migrated between 1980 and 1996 (with the proportion evenly divided between the migration periods 1980-90 and 1991-96). In contrast, none of the women in the sample from other manufacturing units migrated between 1990 and 1996 (Table 2). The proportion of those who migrated between 1980 and 1990 was 47 per cent for females and 40 per cent for males. The sample confirms the observed tendency for RMG industries to attract women with little education: a migrant female worker in the garment factories is least educated compared to her male or female counterparts from the same or other manufacturing industries (Table 3), although, as noted above, she is likely to have more education than women who remain in rural areas. Regarding age at migration, a woman worker was on average at least two years

younger than her male counterparts. The average age of a female worker in garments was 13 years, while for other manufacturing industries the average was 18 years, compared to averages of 15 and 20 years, respectively, for their male counterparts (Table 3). A wider gap did not appear in present age between male and female workers in the sample since they were drawn by matching age. Nevertheless, cross-classification of age by year of migration shows that a female recent migrant from a garment factory is, on average, 17 years old, as opposed to 19 years for her male colleagues (Table 8). Although the average present age of a migrant woman in other manufacturing industries is 29 years, she is two years younger than a male migrant in those industries.

## 2. Delayed marriage and fertility reduction

The above discussion confirms that garment factories are generating employment for younger women. It is also interesting to examine whether entry into formal manufacturing leads to delayed marriage. Delayed marriage itself is considered to be an important step in controlling population growth. The majority of women workers (52 per cent) from the sample garment factories are currently unmarried, compared to nearly 74 per cent of male workers from the same and 20 per cent of female workers from other manufacturing industries (Table 4). Nearly a tenth of the women workers from the garment factories and the other manufacturing industries were reported to be divorced/separated or widowed. None of the male workers were either divorced/separated or widowed, irrespective of the type of industry. Apart from the figures of the divorced/widowed category, the marital status of both the female and male workers was almost the reverse of the urban pattern (see Table 9).<sup>6</sup> During field work, it was observed that women workers often tried to hide the incidence of divorce/desertion, due to cultural inhibition. Male workers too are not immune from such inhibition, and no man admitted to being either divorced or widowed. It is also interesting to note that, unlike those of their counterparts from garment factories, the marital status of the respondents of other manufacturing industries shows a striking similarity with the urban patterns (Table 9). However, the predominance of non-migrant and long-term migrant women among respondents from other manufacturing units might explain the congruence with figures for urban women.

According to the survey, 38 per cent of currently unmarried garment factory workers wanted to defer their marriage until they



save enough money. However one can observe a marked gender gap in this regard. The majority of men (53 per cent) compared to 12 per cent of women workers from garment factories wanted to defer their marriage for that reason. The bulk of the female garment factory workers (77 per cent), on the contrary, were waiting for their parents to find a suitable groom for them. The corresponding figures for their male counterparts were 38 per cent from garment and 15 per cent from the other manufacturing industries. The response pattern of female workers from other manufacturing industries is quite similar to that of their counterparts in garment industries.

The relevant issue at this stage of the first generational migration is not whether women defer marriage to generate savings or whether they surrender to their parents' choice of suitable marriage partner. Rather, the income-earning capacity of young women, with low levels of education from largely landless families, becomes a bargaining tool in arranging marriages. In rural areas, a girl from a poorer household is often considered to be a burden and is married off as soon as possible. The employment opportunities afforded by urban manufacturing industries change this picture. The average age of female garment factory worker is 17 years. Bangladesh Demographic and Health Survey data (1994) reveal that about 60 per cent of Bangladeshi women were married by the time they were age 15. It also shows that urban women marry later than their rural counterparts (15.4 versus 14.3 respectively), with an overall difference of more than one year in the median age at marriage among women between 20 and 49 (Mitra et al., 1994:74-75). Had they not been employed, they might have been married off earlier, and without much consideration for the suitable groom (Afsar, 2000a). Hence, the employment opportunities generated by the RMG sector for the young migrant rural women appear not only to improve their chances of making a suitable marriage, but may also have a potential impact on fertility reduction since marriage is delayed.

In order to examine whether work opportunities in garment factories leads to fertility reduction of the young women workers, comparisons were made with Bangladesh Demographic and Health Survey (BDHS) data (Mitra et al., 1994) and other studies on female garment factory workers (Zohir and Majumdar, 1996). Table 10a shows that whereas "ever married" women of reproductive age have on average 2.4 children (BDHS data), based on sample surveys of garment factory workers, the average number of children is significantly lower for garment factory workers, varying between 1.2 and 0.8 (Zohir and Majumdar, 1996 and Afsar, 1998b). Similarly, the proportion of ever-

married women of childbearing age who do not have children is 23 per cent (BHDS data), while for garment factory workers the figure is between 39 per cent and 52 per cent. At the peak of childbearing age (20-29), when the great majority of ever-married women in Bangladesh have on average two living children, more than half of female garment factory workers do not have any children. Currently married women of reproductive age in garment factories have a lower number of children (1.7) and incidence of child bearing (40 per cent) than Bangladeshi women in general (2.8 children and 90 per cent, respectively) (Table 10b).

The data presented in Tables 10a and 10b suggest, therefore, that married garment factory workers are controlling their fertility more effectively than Bangladeshi women in general. In her recent study (Afsar 1998), the author found that the use of contraception is widespread among the married garment factory workers and even unmarried workers of those factories (90 and 60 per cent of the male and female respondents) are familiar with condom. The former category claim to use contraceptives out of fear of pay cuts or termination of employment if they become pregnant. By and large, garment factory workers neither enjoy paid maternity leave, nor do they have necessary institutional infrastructure to look after their children. Nearly three quarters of married garment factory workers depend on kinship networks for childcare activities, while the remaining one-quarter manage themselves. Given the fact that they face intense difficulties in meeting their own basic needs as well as those of the family, and the pressure of the workload in a competitive market, it is natural that they try to defer pregnancy until they achieve a more comfortable position in the family. Based on existing data, it is projected that delayed marriage and effective control of fertility by the garment factory workers would help in reaching the goal of replacement level fertility by the year 2005 set by the government (GB, 1994:6).<sup>7</sup>

### **3. Gender differentials in income and income-earning opportunities**

The sample female workers of garment factories earn 77 per cent of the income of their male counterparts, while the figure is 90 per cent for other manufacturing industries (Table 8). The gender differentials in average wage of the female garment factory workers is comparable with the income ratio in urban areas (Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics, 1996). In the present study, the highest gender

disparity in income is found at supervisory/technical/managerial level, which is consistent with Rahman's (1993:103) findings on wages in export processing zones.<sup>8</sup> At the managerial level, often the total number of workers is included in the sample owing to the availability of only a small number of women in this category. Hence it was not always possible to draw gender-disaggregated samples by matching age. As a result, the gender gap is higher in this group as demonstrated by lower male-female earning ratios for both garment (0.73) and non-garment (0.83) than either skilled (0.87 and 1.02 respectively) or unskilled (0.82 and 1.02 respectively) workers levels (Table 8).

The above discussion suggests the importance of age in determining income. However, it also reveals that a sample female worker earns on average 10 to 25 per cent less than her male counterpart even after controlling for age. Hence, there are other socioeconomic factors that can help explain this gap. Both number of years of schooling and experience from other factories are important variables influencing income. On average, a male garment factory worker had 3 years of schooling and about 1.5 years of experience as opposed 2.6 and 1.2 years respectively for his female counterparts. While the average education of male and female workers in the other manufacturing industries is almost equal (3.8 and 3.6 years respectively), men have on average 1.6 more years of experience than female workers. It should be noted that given the extremely limited opportunities for on-the-job training, workers often learn skills from their fellow workers informally in the garment industry. Once they learn machine operation they apply directly for positions as operators or skilled production workers in another factory.<sup>9</sup> Consequently, the turnover rate is very high, as revealed through interviews with the employers of the garment factories and confirmed in other studies (Chaudhury and Majumdar, 1993). Even at the managerial level, where men and women have almost equal levels of education, experience matters a lot, especially in other manufacturing industries where the gender gap with regard to experience is widest (14.4 years for men and 0.6 years for women). The opportunities for informal training in management are not so readily available as is the case with skilled operators.

Results of a multivariate regression analysis run by Zohir and Majumdar (1996:51-52) on determinants of income of garment factory workers show that education beyond primary level, skills and experience are the most important factors affecting gender difference in earnings. They also found that even after controlling for all relevant variables, the income difference between male and female workers

remains at a quarter. Significant positive impact of the length of stay in Dhaka city on income was also revealed through their regression analysis.

Given the size and purposive nature of the data drawn for the present study, it is difficult to isolate the importance of migration in influencing income from other socioeconomic variables. Table 8 shows that the gender-based wage differential is the highest in the case of recent migrants and lowest for non-migrants. This suggests a positive impact on income of longer duration of residency in Dhaka, which may be related to the corresponding opportunities for informal training (Table 8).<sup>10</sup> The data suggest that men have greater opportunities to bargain and acquire more skills with longer stay in Dhaka city, as opposed to their female colleagues. In the absence of similar or more rewarding job opportunities in the city and limited scope to upgrade their skills and educational level, migrant women need more time than their male colleagues to supersede their non-migrant counterparts. Women tend to face greater burdens of poor and inadequate living and environmental conditions, compared to male garment factory workers.

Migration has provided an opportunity for young women from rural backgrounds to secure employment and to earn a wage for the first time. Although nearly 40 per cent of the total male and female garment factory workers earn less than the prescribed minimum wage, which was set at Tk 900 per month in 1993, it must be pointed out that from almost no cash income, 60 per cent of female garment factory workers were earning more than poverty level income if fixed at one dollar a day as poverty line (1985 purchasing power parity terms).

A comparison with the employment situation in rural areas is instructive. In rural areas, 83 per cent of employed women aged 15 plus years, compared to 15 per cent of men, are engaged as unpaid family helpers. With the exception of the 4 per cent who work as employees, the remaining 13 per cent are either self-employed (7 per cent) or day labourers (5.6 per cent) (Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics, 1996:48). Not only do rural women have highly limited options for paid employment, the wage/salary they receive is far below the urban average. The latest labour force survey data reveal that 62 per cent of rural women as opposed to 44 per cent of urban women in salaried service get less than Tk 250 per week which can be considered below poverty level income (see above). Those who make more than Tk 500 per week constitute 26 per cent of urban women and 15 per cent of rural women. Similarly, the average wage rate for a female day

labourer in urban areas is Tk 36 per day, which is higher by Tk 11 than a rural woman's daily wage (Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics, 1995). Existing micro studies indicate that female workers in the rural and informal sectors earn between a third and half of male wages. The situation in the urban formal sector appears to be much better, with the ratio of female to male wages ranging between 72 per cent and 97 per cent, depending on skills level (World Bank, 1996).

Conversely, had these women migrated and been engaged as domestic servants, they would have earned only Tk 690 (ADB, 1996) per month, which is half of their present average wage (Tk 1,389). Clearly, migration and the absorption in garment factories opened up better earning avenues for younger women from landless households with low level of education, compared to rural wage labourers or those migrants who worked as housemaids.

#### 4. Savings and remittances

Both the proportion of workers who save and the proportion of income saved is greater for female than for male workers. Whereas women workers in the garment industry save on average 8 per cent of their income, the figure for male workers is 6 per cent (Table 12). The respective figures for other manufacturing industries are 14 per cent for women and 10 per cent for men. Male and female migrant workers in the garment factories save on average six to eight times more of their income than non-migrants. Similarly, in other manufacturing industries, a migrant worker saves a proportionately greater amount than a non-migrant worker.

Propensity to save appears to increase with age. Thus workers belonging to the 30-39 year age group save nearly 20 per cent of their urban income, as opposed to nearly 3 per cent of their youngest counterparts (10-19 years) in garment factories. This holds equally for both male and female workers (Table 13). It should be noted that the monetary wage of garment factory workers also appears to increase with age, though this is not the case in the other manufacturing industries.

Nearly two fifths of migrant workers are able to send remittances to their families of origin. An analysis of remittances shows that the average size of the remittances as a proportion of monthly income is higher for garment factory workers than for workers in other manufacturing industries. On average, migrant male and female garment factory workers send 39 per cent and 30 per cent, respectively, of their income per month (Table 13). The corresponding figures for

their counterparts in other manufacturing industries were 35 per cent and 11 per cent, respectively. The proportion of remitters out of the total workers from garment factories (38 per cent) is higher than those of other manufacturing industries (32 per cent). In both cases, men remitters outnumber their women counterparts. While 26 per cent of women migrants from the garment factories sent remittances regularly to their families, the figure is 44 per cent for male workers. Nearly a quarter of female respondents from the RMG factories reported to have either single parents or siblings whom they need to support.

These findings do not follow patterns found elsewhere. A study of female labour migration in Bangkok metropolis in 1988 found that more women (56 per cent) than men (38 per cent) were sending remittances back to their village (Phongpaichit, 1993:189). In Thailand, like some other Southeast Asian countries, often eldest daughters bear the responsibility of bringing up the other siblings, which provides a further push factor for migration in response to demand for workers in export-oriented industries. By contrast, in Bangladesh, men are often considered the principal breadwinners and they have retained their supremacy in the overall rural-urban migration flows. Men continue to migrate and send remittances for survival and betterment of their families. Three quarters of men as opposed to half of women from garment factories are still single. This may help to explain why male workers are more likely to send remittances to their families of origin. The survey indicated that the figures for those who remitted among currently unmarried workers in garment factories are nearly 60 per cent for men and 40 per cent for women. Further, younger migrants from garment factories (10-19 years) are found to remit much higher proportions (45 per cent) of their urban income than their older counterparts (25 per cent). Thus, unlike savings, which appear to be influenced by level of income, the size of remittance appears to relate also to the intensity of social ties and responsibilities respondents bear vis-à-vis their sending families. This finding confirms patterns found elsewhere. Based on a review of five empirical studies, Rempel and Lobdell (1978:333) concluded that the size of remittances varied directly with the strength of social and economic ties to rural areas and inversely with how well migrants are established in urban areas.<sup>11</sup>

Women's ability to send remittances is also influenced by gender differences in urban expenditure patterns. Women garment factory workers spent 52 per cent of their income on housing, compared to their male colleagues, who spent about a 34 per cent of their monthly income for such purposes. In addition, they spent about 13 per cent

of their income for their own treatment in cases of illness as well as that of other family members. Moreover, spending on clothing, sandals, cosmetics, transport and tiffin amounts to about 10 per cent of their total expenditures. Hence, women often find they have to borrow from their co-workers, relatives and friends in order to meet their overall expenditures. The irregularity and, in some cases, non-payment of wages exacerbates the problems of indebtedness. Women workers of garment factories are in a more disadvantaged position in this regard than are male workers, who have greater opportunities to augment their income through acquiring higher skills or part-time jobs because of their greater scope for mobility and lesser burden of household chores.

The study also provided some insight into how remittances form part of the family livelihood strategy. The majority of remitters (more than 90 per cent) sent money for both family maintenance and education of siblings (Table 14). This finding is consistent with studies from other countries which demonstrate that consumption expenditure alone constitutes between 80 and 90 percent of poorer migrants' remittances (Afsar, 1995:260; Connell et al., 1976:98; Prakash, 1978:110; Hugo, 1978:273). In a country like Bangladesh, where half of rural households fall below the poverty line, the priority placed on consumption expenditure can be viewed as consonant with the "basic needs" approach to development without which the families of migrants would have been worse off (1995: 260). Remittances sent by sample respondents for both family maintenance and education can be seen as making a positive contribution to achieving sustainable development through investment in human resources. It suggests that labour migration is not only adopted as a strategy for individual income maximization, but also to strengthen the human resource base of the sending families.

**Table 8: Distribution of respondents by monthly wages, skills category, migration status and some more socio-demographic characteristics**

| Categories of workers                  | Number |     | Average wage/month (in Tk) |                   | Average work hours/day |      | Average experience (yrs.) |      | Average age (yrs) |      | Average education (yrs.) |     |
|--|--------|-----|----------------------------|-------------------|------------------------|------|---------------------------|------|-------------------|------|--------------------------|-----|
|  | G*     | O** | G*                         | O**               | G*                     | O**  | G*                        | O**  | G*                | O**  | G*                       | O** |
| <b>Unskilled production</b>            |        |     |                            |                   |                        |      |                           |      |                   |      |                          |     |
| Male                                   | 28     | 11  | 709.0                      | 1,524.0           | 10.9                   | 6.9  | 0.8                       | 1.7  | 16.6              | 28.9 | 2.4                      | 3.1 |
| Female                                 | 28     | 12  | 580.4<br>(0.82)            | 1,547.4<br>(1.02) | 10.3                   | 4.8  | 0.6                       | 3.6  | 16.6              | 32.4 | 1.8                      | 2.7 |
| <b>Skilled production</b>              |        |     |                            |                   |                        |      |                           |      |                   |      |                          |     |
| Male                                   | 25     | 10  | 1,570.0                    | 3,539.3           | 11.1                   | 4.4  | 2.6                       | 8.9  | 21.1              | 33.3 | 2.6                      | 4.2 |
| Female                                 | 28     | 9   | 1,370.2<br>(0.87)          | 3,612.2<br>(1.02) | 10.8                   | 4.1  | 2.1                       | 8.7  | 21.3              | 34.7 | 2.4                      | 4.2 |
| <b>Supervisor/ technical/ managers</b> |        |     |                            |                   |                        |      |                           |      |                   |      |                          |     |
| Male                                   | 23     | 9   | 3,421.7                    | 5,369.0           | 6.2                    | 8.2  | 2.9                       | 14.4 | 26.6              | 33.1 | 4.0                      | 4.3 |
| Female                                 | 21     | 9   | 2,493.2<br>(0.73)          | 4,468.2<br>(0.83) | 8.6                    | 5.5  | 2.0                       | 0.6  | 25.5              | 27.7 | 3.9                      | 4.3 |
| <b>All</b>                             |        |     |                            |                   |                        |      |                           |      |                   |      |                          |     |
| Male                                   | 76     | 30  | 1,813.2                    | 3,349.2           | 9.6                    | 6.5  | 1.5                       | 2.8  | 21.1              | 31.6 | 3.0                      | 3.8 |
| Female                                 | 77     | 30  | 1,389.3<br>(0.77)          | 3,043.1<br>(0.91) | 10.0                   | 4.8  | 1.2                       | 1.4  | 20.7              | 31.6 | 2.6                      | 3.6 |
| <b>Non-migrant</b>                     |        |     |                            |                   |                        |      |                           |      |                   |      |                          |     |
| Male                                   | 3      | 13  | 1,700.0                    | 3,474.6           | 7.8                    | 4.8  | 3.0                       | 6.3  | 19.3              | 35.3 | 3.0                      | 3.7 |
| Female                                 | 5      | 16  | 2,380.0<br>(1.4)           | 3,428.1<br>(0.99) | 8.4                    | 3.8  | 2.9                       | 3.5  | 23.6              | 33.9 | 3.4                      | 4.0 |
| <b>Long-term</b>                       |        |     |                            |                   |                        |      |                           |      |                   |      |                          |     |
| Male migrant                           | 35     | 12  | 2,522.9                    | 4,030.4           | 8.1                    | 6.0  | 2.7                       | 5.3  | 23.8              | 30.6 | 3.1                      | 4.2 |
| Female migrant                         | 37     | 14  | 1,838.6<br>(0.73)          | 2,603.1<br>(0.65) | 9.5                    | 5.9  | 1.9                       | 7.1  | 23.4              | 29.1 | 2.8                      | 3.3 |
| <b>Recent</b>                          |        |     |                            |                   |                        |      |                           |      |                   |      |                          |     |
| Male migrant                           | 38     | 5   | 1,168.4                    | 1,388.2           | 11.0                   | 11.8 | 1.6                       | 1.1  | 18.8              | 24.6 | 2.8                      | 3.4 |
| Female migrant                         | 35     | -   | 772.8                      | -<br>(0.66)       | 10.8                   | -    | 0.9                       | -    | 17.4              | -    | 2.3                      | -   |

\*Sample garment industries \*\* Other manufacturing industries.

Note: Figures in parentheses are the ratio of female earnings to male earnings: (Female earnings/Male earnings).

Source: Sample survey of migrant workers of Dhaka's formal manufacturing sector, 1996.



**Table 9: Distribution of the sample respondents by age and marital status and a comparison with urban Bangladesh**

| Age group    | Sample respondents |      |                     |       |                      |      | All (No.) |     | Urban Bangladesh*** |               |                      |
|--------------|--------------------|------|---------------------|-------|----------------------|------|-----------|-----|---------------------|---------------|----------------------|
|              | Currently married  |      | Currently unmarried |       | Divorced/<br>widowed |      | G*        | O** | Currently married   | Never married | Divorced/<br>widowed |
|              | G*                 | O**  | G*                  | O**   | G*                   | O**  | G*        | O** |                     |               |                      |
| <b>10-14</b> |                    |      |                     |       |                      |      |           |     |                     |               |                      |
| Male         | -                  | -    | 100.0               | -     | -                    | -    | 6         | -   | 0.5                 | 99.5          | 0.0                  |
| Female       | -                  | -    | 100.0               | -     | -                    | -    | 10        | -   | 2.1                 | 97.8          | 0.1                  |
| <b>15-19</b> |                    |      |                     |       |                      |      |           |     |                     |               |                      |
| Male         | -                  | -    | 100.0               | -     | -                    | -    | 27        | -   | 3.6                 | 96.4          | 0.0                  |
| Female       | 17.4               | 50.0 | 78.3                | -     | 4.3                  | 50.0 | 23.0      | 2   | 37.9                | 60.9          | 1.2                  |
| <b>20-24</b> |                    |      |                     |       |                      |      |           |     |                     |               |                      |
| Male         | 17.4               | -    | 82.6                | 100.0 | -                    | -    | 23.0      | 2   | 37.9                | 60.9          | 1.2                  |
| Female       | 34.8               | -    | 43.5                | -     | 21.7                 | -    | 23        | -   | 79.4                | 18.0          | 2.6                  |
| <b>25-49</b> |                    |      |                     |       |                      |      |           |     |                     |               |                      |
| Male         | 80.0               | 60.0 | 20.0                | 39.3  | -                    | -    | 20        | 28  | 85.0                | 14.7          | 0.3                  |
| Female       | 81.0               | 67.9 | 9.5                 | 21.4  | 9.5                  | 10.7 | 21        | 28  | 90.6                | 2.1           | 7.3                  |
| <b>50+</b>   |                    |      |                     |       |                      |      |           |     |                     |               |                      |
| Male         | -                  | -    | -                   | -     | -                    | -    | -         | -   | 96.5                | 0.9           | 2.6                  |
| Female       | -                  | -    | -                   | -     | -                    | -    | -         | -   | 55.8                | 0.9           | 43.3                 |
| <b>All</b>   |                    |      |                     |       |                      |      |           |     |                     |               |                      |
| Male         | 34.2               | 56.7 | 65.8                | 43.3  | -                    | -    | 76        | 30  | 54.0                | 45.5          | 0.5                  |
| Female       | 37.7               | 66.7 | 51.9                | 20.0  | 10.4                 | 13.3 | 77        | 30  | 61.0                | 30.6          | 8.4                  |

\* Sample garment industries

\*\* Other manufacturing industries.

\*\*\* Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics, 1996:9 (data do not provide absolute population size)

Source: Sample survey of migrant workers of Dhaka's formal manufacturing sector, 1996.

**Table 10a: Child bearing by ever-married women workers and Bangladeshi women in general**

| Age group | Average number of children/<br>worker/women |                                |                 | % of women/workers<br>with no children |                                |                 |
|-----------|---|--------------------------------|-----------------|--|--------------------------------|-----------------|
|           | BDHS data<br>Mitra et al.,<br>1994          | Zohir and<br>Majumdar,<br>1996 | Afsar,<br>1998b | Mitra et al.,<br>1994                  | Zohir and<br>Majumdar,<br>1996 | Afsar,<br>1988b |
| < 15      | -   | 0.0                            | 0.0             | 0                                      | 100.0                          | 100.0           |
| 15-19     | 0.3   | 0.2                            | 0.1             | 72.6                                   | 77.4                           | 90.0            |
| 20-24     | 1.4   | 0.9                            | 0.6             | 22.3                                   | 41.7                           | 57.0            |
| 25-29     | 2.5   | 1.7                            | 1.2             | 6.0                                    | 11.4                           | 32.0            |
| 30-34     | 3.3   | 1.3                            | 1.3             | 3.8                                    | 27.3                           | 19.2            |
| >35       | 4.7   | 2.7                            | 2.2             | 1.9                                    | 14.3                           | 12.5            |
| All Ages  | 2.4   | 1.2                            | 0.8             | 23.4                                   | 38.8                           | 51.9            |

Source: Mitra et al., 1994; Chaudhury and Majumdar, 1993, 1996; and Afsar, 1998b.

**Table 10b: Number of living children of currently married women workers and Bangladeshi women in general**

| Age group | Mean number of children of<br>currently married women/worker |   | % of women with no children             |   |
|-----------|--|---|---|---|
|           | Bangladesh data<br>(Mitra et al., 1994)                      | Garment factory<br>worker<br>(Afsar, 1998b) | Bangladesh data<br>(Mitra et al., 1994) | Garment factory<br>worker<br>(Afsar, 1998b) |
| 15-19     | 0.6  | 1.0   | 44.5                                    | 90.2  |
| 20-24     | 1.6  | 1.3   | 10.5                                    | 60.0  |
| 25-29     | 2.6  | 1.7   | 3.5                                     | 35.9  |
| 30-34     | 3.5  | 1.8   | 2.7                                     | 25.0  |
| 35-39     | 4.3  | 2.7   | 1.7                                     | 25.0  |
| 40-44     | 5.2  | 2.5   | 0.7                                     | 0.0   |
| All Ages  | 2.8  | 1.7   | 9.9                                     | 57.8  |

Source: Mitra et al.; 1994, and Afsar, 1998b.

**Table 11: Percentage distribution of respondents by wage group in 1996 and 1993**

| Respon-<br>dent*  | Up to Tk 500 |      | 501-900 |      | 901-1,300 |      | 1,301-1,500 |      | >1,501 |      | All (No.) |     |
|-------------------|--------------|------|---------|------|-----------|------|-------------|------|--------|------|-----------|-----|
|                   | M            | F    | M       | F    | M         | F    | M           | F    | M      | F    | M         | F   |
| Garment           | 6.6          | 26.0 | 28.9    | 11.7 | 18.4      | 23.4 | 3.9         | 13.0 | 42.1   | 26.0 | 76        | 77  |
| Other industries  | -            | -    | -       | 6.7  | 16.7      | 13.4 | -           | 10.0 | 83.3   | 70.0 | 30        | 30  |
| Respon-<br>dent** | 3.6          | 15.7 | 8.6     | 27.1 | 24.3      | 28.5 | 10.7        | 4.8  | 52.9   | 23.9 | 140       | 376 |

M=male; F=female

\* Respondents refer to the sample workers of the present study

\*\* Chaudhury and Majumdar, 1993

Source: Sample survey of migrant workers of Dhaka's formal manufacturing sector, 1996; and Chaudhury and Majumdar, 1993.

**Table 12: Average savings of respondents by migration status and age**

| Respondents*      | Average savings out of total income (Tk) |        | Savings as a proportion of income (%) |        | All respondents (No.) |        |
|-------------------|--|--------|---------------------------------------|--------|-----------------------|--------|
|                   | Male                                     | Female | Male                                  | Female | Male                  | Female |
| <b>Garment</b>    |  |        |                                       |        |                       |        |
| Non-migrant       | 66.7                                     | 20.0   | 1.4                                   | 0.4    | 3                     | 5      |
| Long-term migrant | 261.4                                    | 144.1  | 8.6                                   | 6.2    | 35                    | 37     |
| Recent migrant    | 43.4                                     | 46.9   | 2.7                                   | 4.1    | 38                    | 35     |
| All               | 144.7                                    | 145.1  | 6.4                                   | 8.0    | 76                    | 77     |
| 10-19             | 27.3                                     | 32.6   | 2.2                                   | 2.9    | 33                    | 33     |
| 20-29             | 145.7                                    | 136.7  | 5.2                                   | 6.7    | 35                    | 38     |
| 30-39             | 625.0                                    | 816.7  | 14.6                                  | 20.7   | 8                     | 6      |
| <b>Others</b>     |  |        |                                       |        |                       |        |
| Non-migrant       | 584.6                                    | 493.8  | 6.0                                   | 5.6    | 13                    | 16     |
| Long-term migrant | 383.3                                    | 550.0  | 7.9                                   | 15.8   | 12                    | 14     |
| Recent migrant    | -  | -      | -                                     | -      | 5                     | -      |
| All               | 406.7                                    | 520.0  | 9.9                                   | 14.2   | 30                    | 30     |
| 10-19             | -  | -      | -                                     | -      | -                     | 2      |
| 20-29             | 321.4                                    | 800.0  | 7.1                                   | 16.6   | 14                    | 12     |
| 30-39             | 616.7                                    | 280.0  | 14.9                                  | 8.8    | 12                    | 10     |
| 40+               | 75.0                                     | 533.3  | 3.2                                   | 17.8   | 4                     | 6      |

\* Income here refers to average monthly wage and overtime. As recent male and female migrant respondents belonging to 10-19 age group in other industries reported no savings, respective rows are blank.

Source: Sample survey of migrant workers of Dhaka's formal manufacturing sector, 1996.

**Table 13: Average remittances of respondents by migration status and age**

|                   | Average remittances (TK) |        | Remitters (%) |        | Remittances as (%) of income* |        | All respondents (No.) |        |
|-------------------|--------------------------|--------|---------------|--------|-------------------------------|--------|-----------------------|--------|
|                   | Male                     | Female | Male          | Female | Male                          | Female | Male                  | Female |
| <b>Garment</b>    |                          |        |               |        |                               |        |                       |        |
| Long-term migrant | 1,033.3                  | 600.0  | 51.4          | 33.4   | 34.1                          | 25.8   | 35                    | 37     |
| Recent migrant    | 625.0                    | 457.1  | 36.8          | 20.0   | 39.3                          | 39.6   | 38                    | 35     |
| All               | 874.2                    | 535.0  | 43.8          | 26.4   | 38.5                          | 29.6   | 73                    | 72     |
| 10-19             | 462.5                    | 525.0  | 12.9          | 12.5   | 38.6                          | 45.4   | 31                    | 32     |
| 20-29             | 880.0                    | 507.1  | 73.5          | 40.0   | 31.4                          | 24.7   | 34                    | 35     |
| 30-39             | 1,250.0                  | 750.0  | 50.0          | 40.0   | 29.3                          | 21.1   | 8                     | 5      |
| <b>Others</b>     |                          |        |               |        |                               |        |                       |        |
| Long-term migrant | 1,450.0                  | 300.0  | 83.3          | 35.7   | 29.9                          | 8.6    | 12                    | 14     |
| Recent migrant    | 1,200.0                  | -      | 40.0          | -      | -                             | -      | 5                     | -      |
| All               | 1,411.1                  | 466.7  | 70.6          | 35.7   | 34.6                          | 12.7   | 17                    | 14     |
| 20-29             | 1,450.0                  | 250.0  | 54.5          | 28.6   | 32.1                          | 5.4    | 11                    | 7      |
| 30-39             | 1,466.7                  | 600.0  | 150.0         | 83.3   | 46.5                          | 23.8   | 6                     | 6      |
| 40+               | 1,166.7                  | 350.0  | -             | -      | -                             | -      | -                     | -      |

\* Income here refers to average monthly wage and overtime

Source: Sample survey of migrant workers of Dhaka's formal manufacturing sector, 1996.

**Table 14: Percentage distribution of the sample workers by purpose of sending remittances to families of origin**

| Respondent's category    | Family maintenance only | Education of siblings only | Treatment medication only | Religious ceremonies | Family maintenance education | Others | All remitters (No) |
|--------------------------|-------------------------|----------------------------|---------------------------|----------------------|------------------------------|--------|--------------------|
| <b>Garment factory</b>   |                         |                            |                           |                      |                              |        |                    |
| All migrant              |                         |                            |                           |                      |                              |        |                    |
| Male                     | 37.5                    | 10.0                       | -                         | 10.0                 | 35.0                         | 2.5    | 40                 |
| Female                   | 40.0                    | 40.0                       | 5.0                       | 5.0                  | 25.0                         | -      | 20                 |
| Long-term migrant        |                         |                            |                           |                      |                              |        |                    |
| Male                     | 36.4                    | 9.1                        | -                         | 4.5                  | 40.9                         | -      | 22                 |
| Female                   | 30.8                    | 23.1                       | 7.7                       | 7.7                  | 30.8                         | -      | 13                 |
| Recent migrant           |                         |                            |                           |                      |                              |        |                    |
| Male                     | 38.9                    | 11.1                       | -                         | 16.7                 | 27.8                         | 5.6    | 18                 |
| Female                   | 57.1                    | 14.3                       | -                         | -                    | 14.3                         | 14.3   | 7                  |
| <b>Other industries*</b> |                         |                            |                           |                      |                              |        |                    |
| Migrant male             | 16.7                    | 8.3                        | -                         | -                    | 75.0                         | -      | 12                 |
| Migrant female           | 42.9                    | 14.3                       | -                         | 28.6                 | 14.3                         | -      | 7                  |

\* As only five male respondents were classified as recent migrants, it was decided to present data from other manufacturing units as one category. Data presented here denote multiple responses.

Source: Sample survey of migrant workers of Dhaka's formal manufacturing sector, 1996.

#### **IV. Coping mechanisms of migrant workers in the urban labour market and society**

Women factory workers are perceived by the employers surveyed as docile, hard working and ready to work long hours, in addition to having less exposure to and contacts within the urban labour market and less bargaining power than their male colleagues. The findings of the present study also point to women's lower wages and mobility, compared to male workers, particularly in the RMG industries. It is therefore useful to examine whether there is any evidence suggesting that women workers try to improve their working conditions.

##### **1. Demand for paid leave, higher wages and change in night duty**

Of the sample women workers of garment factories, 51 per cent demanded paid leave and 56 per cent bargained for higher wages (Table 15). The proportion of men who made similar demands, is slightly higher than women (63 per cent and 62 per cent respectively). Women, by comparison, outnumber their male counterparts only marginally (30 per cent versus 28 per cent) in their demand to change night duty, an area that received considerably less attention from workers of both sexes. On average women work as long as their male counterparts (11 hours per day including overtime) and also work at night without any transportation facilities, a problem discussed in more detail below.

Women workers from other manufacturing units mainly asked for paid leave, and here they outnumbered their male counterparts. It should be noted that, unlike garment factories, which remain open even on weekly and public holidays for longer hours, other manufacturing industries do not differ as much from normal working hours. Workers in these manufacturing industries are less likely to bargain for higher wages because they are generally recruited on a regular basis and have contracts with the terms of employment clearly specified. Consequently, very few (3 per cent male and 7 per cent female) workers of other manufacturing industries demanded higher wages and only just over 10 per cent of the sample workers, irrespective of gender, bargained to change their night duty. Conversely, a large number of workers in garment factories are hired on a casual basis, mostly without contracts, which forces them to bargain for higher wages and better conditions. Although very few

of the sample workers bargained for overtime, here too the share of women workers from garment factories is much higher (13 per cent) than their male colleagues (8 per cent) or women in other manufacturing units (3 per cent). The low wages of female garment workers and greater assignment of night duty might have prompted such demands.

Although gaps between male and female garment factory workers who bargained for higher wages, paid leave and change in night shift are narrow, they nonetheless demand some explanation. Education is often considered a means to raise the level of workers' consciousness. Although the average male worker has a higher level of education than a woman, the latter has a longer length of service in the same factory than the former (Table 15). Hence longer length of service of female workers might have encouraged them to demand better terms and conditions almost at par with their male colleagues. More than 90 per cent of the sample workers, irrespective of gender and type of factory, applied for better terms and conditions with the help of supervisors. They did not involve unions or other influential sources such as employers' agents in making their demands. As garment factories operate by the private entrepreneurs purely with a profit motive, lack of discipline on the part of workers is not tolerated. Given the heavy competition for wage employment, the workers generally abide by existing rules and regulations of the factory (see Kahn, this volume).

## **2. Results of bargaining**

As regards outcome, excepting their lower wages, women are in a slightly better position in comparison to their male counterparts. For example, paid leave was granted to 80 per cent of female and 73 per cent of male workers in the garment factories (Table 15). The corresponding figures for other manufacturing units are 96 and 87 per cent respectively. Similarly, one fifth of the women workers who demanded overtime were granted it, whereas none of their male counterparts received a positive outcome in this regard. Conversely, more women were denied higher wages (70 per cent) than their male colleagues (64 per cent). However, on the whole, the difference between men and women workers with regard to outcome is marginal. It would be difficult to explain the employer's justification for conceding or rejecting demands without a case by case examination, although clearly questions of profit margin and the dictates of buyer's schedule come into play. However, even once a demand is acceded

to, enforcement remains a problem.

This is especially pertinent in the area of paid leave. For example, nearly one third of respondents experienced a salary cut for taking a leave of absence, mainly due to sickness. The burden in this regard falls more heavily on women (34 per cent) compared to their male counterparts (20 per cent). Women workers are more susceptible to sickness and fatigue arising from their double burden of domestic responsibilities and paid employment. There is also some evidence to suggest higher incidence of morbidity as a function of the systematic deprivation in food entitlements in childhood. In another survey (Afsar, 1998b) the author found that women take significantly greater amounts of time for sick leave, partly for their own illness but also to care for sick family members. Women were more likely to take sick leave for the care of other family members than men. This points to the importance of entitlements to paid sick leave for workers and, because of their double burden, particularly for women workers.

The discussion above raises questions of unionization and worker-management relations which are examined in the chapter by Khan (this volume). Here it is sufficient to note that the merits of each demand are examined informally and unilaterally by employers; hence the interests of the workers may not necessarily be protected. The present study revealed some encouraging trends, nonetheless. A large number of women bargained for better work conditions at par with their male counterparts and the outcome did not differ much along gender lines. However, women still suffer a higher incidence of salary cuts due to a greater propensity to take sick leave. Research on the types of diseases suffered by women and their children should also be undertaken in order to develop appropriate policy measures.

### 3. Living arrangements of migrant women in urban society<sup>12</sup>

Apart from a few exceptions, female garment factory workers do not get lodging from their factory. Living with family members and relatives is still most common among migrant female workers in garment factories (Table 16). Three quarters of them live either in their own nuclear units or as a member of the extended family nexus. The remaining one quarter of those workers either live in sub-let arrangements (16 per cent) or in mess (9 per cent). Those who live in sub-let arrangements either live with siblings and cousins (42 per cent) or co-workers (42 per cent). A few also live with single parents. In

total, only seven female garment workers from the sample live in mess or boarding house with co-workers. They are mainly divorced or separated, though a few are currently unmarried, and almost all migrated between 1991 and 1996. None of the female workers from other manufacturing units live in mess or boarding house and only three out of a total of 30 respondents live in sub-let arrangement. While nearly a quarter of garment factory workers live with co-workers, be it relatives or friends, this type of living arrangement is almost non-existent among female workers of other manufacturing units.

The type of living arrangement utilized usually relates to other socio-demographic characteristics of workers. As opposed to a large number of female workers from garment factories who are young and currently unmarried, their counterparts from other manufacturing industries are predominantly married (two thirds) and live in family units, either nuclear (60 per cent) or joint extended (40 per cent). It should be recalled that garment factory workers often are the first generation settlers in Dhaka city, whereas women workers from other manufacturing industries are either non-migrant or long-term migrants. Hence, they (the latter) are already entrenched in the existing family unit and do not need to create new ways to sustain themselves in urban society.

Unlike the family-based living arrangements of female garment factory workers, living in mess or boarding house is much more common among male workers in garment factories. One in three of these male workers lives in mess or boarding house mostly with co-workers; the majority, nearly three quarters, are also the recent migrants. Living in mess units or boarding houses is an age-old practice, which was in vogue in this sub-continent with the introduction of English education and subsequent city-based employment generated for men.

The pattern of living arrangements described above suggests that female workers, in particular, depend largely on family members to cope with the urban environment. To overcome the existing negative attitudes about independent female labourers, and lack of low-cost housing or hostel facilities in Dhaka city, women workers live with members of the immediate or extended family. Family-based living arrangements give them protection from theft and other untoward incidences. In addition, the family can provide necessary services, such as childcare. In the absence of any institutional support, the role of family members in providing childcare facilitates female employment outside the home. Of those female workers from garment factories who had children under 5, almost 90 per cent get familial



support, as opposed to approximately 60 per cent of their counterparts in other manufacturing units. A large number of the latter group (nearly two fifths) depend on domestic maids to look after their children. Male workers, on the contrary, depend overwhelmingly on family members for childcare. The lack of childcare facilities in many of the emerging mega cities poses a big problem for women's employment outside the home and for their occupational mobility. It cannot be assumed that families will continue to provide such services. Regarding the problem of theft, which is a major concern in urban Bangladesh, nearly 10 per cent of female garment factory workers, as opposed to 20 per cent of their male counterparts experienced theft in their place of residence while out for work. Incidence of theft is even higher in the case of male workers of other manufacturing units than their female counterparts. In the absence of responsible family members and relatives, who can look after the house during working hours, male workers who live in mess are more susceptible to theft than female workers.

In meeting their day to day needs and those of their families, female garment factory workers face intense competition. A large number of helpers (unskilled workers) and operators (skilled workers) live in low rental accommodations, where they have to share latrines and bathrooms with 16 to 22 boarders on average and cooking gas burners or heaters with 10 to 15 families. In the city proper (Karailer Math in Mahakhali and Kalapani area in Mirpur) they live in high room crowding with an area of nearly 3 square metres for each person in a semi-durable type of structure at the cost of Tk 600 per month, which constitutes nearly a half and the total salary of the operators and helpers respectively (Afsar, 1998a). Here they share two or three latrines and five or six gas burners or heaters with 10-15 families. These arrangements make them vulnerable to pay cuts as they are often 10-15 minutes late in arriving for work. They generally lack cemented bathrooms or a covered space and running water facilities for bathing.<sup>13</sup> Not only do workers have to pay for collecting water from the few tubewells that are found in the area, but time travelling to these wells further increases women's existing workloads.

As the first generation of workers in a metropolis that is poorly planned and equipped with cost-effective amenities to meet the needs of the poor, female garment factory workers would appear to pay a higher price to surmount the odds in the settlement process than do their male counterparts. Nonetheless, they seem to be surviving relatively well in the highly competitive formal sector and have achieved the status of independent earners. This was unthinkable for

most illiterate or semi-literate and unskilled rural women from landless households prior to the 1980s.<sup>14</sup>

#### 4. Safety and odd working hours<sup>15</sup>

In the absence of cheap and safe public or factory operated transportation systems, young migrant women are generally protected against violence, physical or sexual assault on their way to and from the factory by their co-workers and family members. Nine out of 10 female garment factory workers live in the same ward as the factory, or nearby, and therefore walk to their workplace. The remaining 10 per cent of the female workers travel either by tempo<sup>16</sup> or rickshaw. However, whether they walk or ride on a rickshaw, they are always accompanied by co-workers and or family members (Table 17). Seldom do they go to the factory alone, particularly at night. Their strong group identity on the road works as a protective shield in the otherwise unprotected lonely dark roads and lanes. Only a fraction of female garment workers (3 per cent) reported being teased while returning from the office at night. However, the survey technique is not often useful to capture sensitive areas like sexual abuse/harassment, since women often are inhibited about sharing their personal experience. Both men and women unanimously considered *mastaans* (muscle men), whether from their own communities or neighbouring ones, as the main threat, indicating that the problem requires serious attention by the authorities.

Community-based focus group discussions (Afsar, 1998b) revealed many instances of threat of *mastaans* and other forms of sexual abuse/harassment faced by female garment factory workers. "Eve teasing" on the road and kidnapping of the female garment factory workers are not rare.<sup>17</sup> Within the factory, there is evidence of sexual harassment. Some women complained that their male co-workers treat them as "garments" to be used for some time and then thrown away. Taking advantage of women's weaker economic position and bargaining power, male co-workers, technical, and even managerial staff make false promises of promotion or marriage. Once sexual relations are established, the women workers are often abandoned by their male colleagues. There are also cases reported where women do use relations with technical or even managerial staff to improve their position and end up leaving their own husbands. It is also worth noting that in the less-protected living and working environments found in urban settings, both male and female workers are susceptible to sexually transmitted diseases (STDs) (Afsar, 1998b)<sup>18</sup>, particularly

**Table 15: Proportions and profiles of workers who demanded better working conditions**

| Percentage and profile             | Paid leave |        | Higher wages |        | Change in night duty |        | More overtime |        |
|------------------------------------|------------|--------|--------------|--------|----------------------|--------|---------------|--------|
|                                    | Male       | Female | Male         | Female | Male                 | Female | Male          | Female |
| <b>Garment</b>                     |            |        |              |        |                      |        |               |        |
| Percentage                         | 63.2       | 50.6   | 61.8         | 55.8   | 27.6                 | 29.9   | 7.9           | 13.0   |
| Average education (years)          | 2          | 2.9    | 2.9          | 2.5    | 2.8                  | 2.6    | 2.0           | 2.0    |
| Length of service (years)          | 2.9        | 4.4    | 2.7          | 3.4    | 1.9                  | 3.7    | 5.0           | 3.5    |
| Percentage whose demand sanctioned | 72.9       | 79.5   | 36.2         | 30.2   | 42.9                 | 43.5   | 0.0           | 2.6    |
| <b>Other industries</b>            |            |        |              |        |                      |        |               |        |
| Percentage                         | 76.7       | 90.0   | 3.3          | 6.7    | 13.3                 | 10.0   | 3.3           | 3.0    |
| Average education (years)          | 3.7        | 3.7    | 2.0          | 4.0    | 2.7                  | 3.0    | 4.0           | 4.0    |
| Length of service (years)          | 6.9        | 8.5    | 12.0         | 12.0   | 3.0                  | 11.3   | 6.0           | 9.0    |
| Percentage whose demand sanctioned | 86.9       | 96.3   | 100.0        | 50.0   | 50.0                 | 100.0  | 0.0           | 0.0    |

Source: Sample survey of migrant workers of Dhaka's formal manufacturing sector, 1996.

**Table 16: Percentage distribution of respondents by types of living arrangement in the place of destination and migration status**

| Respondents                       | Family unit |            | Mess/boarding house |          | Sublet    |           | Others*  |           | All       |           |
|-----------------------------------|-------------|------------|---------------------|----------|-----------|-----------|----------|-----------|-----------|-----------|
|                                   | Male        | Female     | Male                | Female   | Male      | Female    | Male     | Female    | Male      | Female    |
| <b>Garment</b>                    |             |            |                     |          |           |           |          |           |           |           |
| Non-migrant                       | 66.7        | 80.0       | 33.3                | -        | -         | -         | -        | 20.0      | 3         | 5         |
| Long-term migrant                 | 65.7        | 75.7       | 17.1                | 2.7      | 8.6       | 16.2      | 8.6      | 5.4       | 35        | 37        |
| Recent migrant                    | 36.8        | 65.7       | 44.7                | 17.1     | 7.7       | 17.1      | -        | -         | 38        | 35        |
| All                               | 52.6        | 70.0       | 31.6                | 9.1      | 7.9       | 15.6      | 9.2      | -         | 76        | 77        |
| <b>Others</b>                     |             |            |                     |          |           |           |          |           |           |           |
| Non-migrant                       | 61.5        | 75.0       | 7.7                 | -        | 15.4      | -         | 15.4     | 25.0      | 13        | 16        |
| Long-term migrant                 | 16.7        | 78.6       | 25.0                | -        | 8.3       | 21.4      | 50.0     | -         | 12        | 14        |
| Recent migrant                    | 40.0        | -          | 60.0                | -        | -         | -         | -        | -         | 5         | -         |
| All                               | -           | -          | -                   | -        | -         | -         | -        | -         | -         | -         |
| <b>All (garment &amp; others)</b> | <b>87</b>   | <b>123</b> | <b>5</b>            | <b>4</b> | <b>14</b> | <b>12</b> | <b>7</b> | <b>10</b> | <b>34</b> | <b>15</b> |

\* Others include employer's land and squatting government/public land.

Source: Sample survey of migrant workers of Dhaka's formal manufacturing sector, 1996.

**Table 17: Source of transport, and accompaniment, when travelling to work at night, by migration status**

| Respondents                           | With male/<br>female worker (%) |        | Male neighbours<br>(%) |        | Rickshaw<br>(%) |        | Office transport<br>(%) |        | Others* |        | All<br>(No.) |        |
|---------------------------------------|---------------------------------|--------|------------------------|--------|-----------------|--------|-------------------------|--------|---------|--------|--------------|--------|
|                                       | Male                            | Female | Male                   | Female | Male            | Female | Male                    | Female | Male    | Female | Male         | Female |
| <b>Garment</b>                        |                                 |        |                        |        |                 |        |                         |        |         |        |              |        |
| Non-migrant                           | 33.3                            | 40.0   | -                      | -      | 33.3            | 20.0   | -                       | -      | 33.3    | 40.0   | 3            | 5      |
| Long-term migrant                     | 42.9                            | 70.3   | -                      | -      | 11.4            | 16.2   | -                       | -      | 45.7    | 13.5   | 35           | 37     |
| Recent migrant                        | 65.8                            | 82.9   | 5.3                    | -      | 2.6             | 5.7    | -                       | -      | 26.3    | 11.4   | 38           | 35     |
| All                                   | 53.9                            | 74.0   | 2.6                    | -      | 7.9             | 11.7   | -                       | -      | 35.5    | 14.3   | 76           | 77     |
| <b>Other industries</b>               |                                 |        |                        |        |                 |        |                         |        |         |        |              |        |
| Non-migrant                           | 23.1                            | 25.0   | 7.7                    | 18.8   | 30.8            | -      | 15.4                    | 37.5   | 23.1    | 18.8   | 13           | 16     |
| Long-term migrant                     | 16.7                            | 35.7   | 16.7                   | 7.1    | 16.7            | 21.4   | 41.7                    | 28.6   | 8.3     | 7.1    | 12           | 14     |
| Recent migrant                        | -                               | -      | -                      | -      | 40.0            | -      | -                       | -      | 60.0    | -      | 5            | -      |
| All                                   | 16.7                            | 30.0   | 10.0                   | 13.3   | 26.7            | 10.0   | 23.3                    | 33.3   | 23.3    | 13.3   | 30           | 30     |
| <b>All (garment &amp;<br/>others)</b> | 87                              | 123    | 5                      | 4      | 14              | 12     | 7                       | 10     | 34      | 15     | 106          | 107    |

\* Others include family members for female workers at large and no companion for male workers.

Source: Sample survey of migrant workers of Dhaka's formal manufacturing sector, 1996.

in the absence of public education campaigns on the spread and prevention of STDs and HIV/AIDS.

## V. Policy implications

The above discussion on migrant women workers' coping mechanisms in the urban labour market and society suggests some important areas for policy interventions. One area is housing and shelter, including the efficient delivery of basic amenities. Public sector housing so far has provided only 1 per cent of the urban housing needs. Hence, the informal private sector provides the bulk of housing needs, while the formal private sector is confined to upper-middle and high-income housing. There is only one hostel for working women run by the Department of Women's Affairs for the middle-class working women of Dhaka city. At a very limited scale, Nari Uddyog Kendra (NUK) started hostel schemes for low-income female garment factory workers. It has two rented structures accommodating a total of 200 women with facilities of food, education, skills development and recreation. However, as it charges Tk 700 (Tk 300 for food and Tk 400 for room rent), it is not often affordable by helpers or unskilled production workers in garment factories who earn Tk 500 per month, on average. During field work it was observed that helpers are the most transient category, and are often denied accommodation by their relatives, on account of inadequate monetary contribution. Hence, they have to move from one relative to the other in search of a house or look for a steady co-worker or single working cousin to live in sub-let arrangements. Thus, while there is a general need for low-income housing in urban areas, low-cost hostel facilities for working women, particularly unskilled garment factory workers, demand urgent policy intervention.

Often planners and policy makers are hesitant to develop low-cost housing, fearing that this might "pull" more migrants from rural to urban areas. Hence, many governments in developing countries (e.g. Bangladesh) try to discourage migration by adopting resettlement policy in urban areas and diverting investment for rural development. Such policies do not necessarily prevent rural-urban migration. For example, in India out-migration is higher from those districts that have better agricultural performance. Similarly in Ecuador, efforts to improve living conditions through integrated rural development have been successful, but fail to reduce rural-urban migration significantly. Values generated by modernization and increased aspirations cannot

be counterbalanced by the socioeconomic changes brought by rural development (Billsborrow, 1993). In countries such as Bangladesh and Thailand, where rapid growth takes place in the capital city, migration occurs to avail economic opportunities generated by those cities. In particular, women's independent migration occurs as a direct response to the demand generated by the export-oriented manufacturing industries in those metropolises. Hence, along with policies directed to slowing migration, the government must undertake migration-responsive policies. Migration-responsive policies in this case cover a broad range and include access to housing, basic amenities, health care and consciousness-raising on diseases such as STD and AIDS/HIV, education and training, transport and childcare services. Any policy that facilitates the provision of adequate housing and other services to female migrants will accelerate economic growth by facilitating female mobility in response to economic incentives. Some of the recommendations made by proceedings of the United Nations expert meeting on the "Feminization of Internal Migration" (1993) can also be emphasized for the present study.

- Governments, the private sector and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) should provide adequate support services to first time migrants in urban areas, including job placement services and accommodation for migrant women.

- There should be more low-cost but technologically appropriate public housing projects and housing credit schemes for women. Government should also ensure that existing legislation and administrative practices shall grant equal ownership and tenancy rights to women as to men.

The findings of the present study also draw attention to the need for cheap and safe public transportation. It showed a heavy concentration of women in those wards where garment factories are located. Elsewhere, the author (Afsar, 1997) argued that due to lack of horizontal mobility, women often compete for same type of job and as a result of a "crowding effect", wages paid to women are generally lower than men. Private sector actors, preferably NGOs, can start city shuttle services for female workers of garment and other manufacturing industries in the peak hours in the morning, evening and night to enable women perform their normal and overtime work. Employers can also use their vans to pick up and drop off women workers during odd hours of morning and/or evening and can charge for the petrol cost.

Elsewhere the author has also argued that the government should invest more to improve roads and transportation facilities

between rural and urban areas, which will encourage more temporary rather than permanent migration. This proposition was derived from one pertinent finding which shows that temporary migrants came from those villages which are better connected with Dhaka city than those of permanent migrants (Afsar, 1995).

The present study confirms that women are underrepresented in technically skilled jobs and in senior grades in industry, a universally common pattern. It also shows that the wage gap between men and women workers at this level is the highest compared to the skilled and unskilled production workers' level.<sup>19</sup> These findings call for a gender-equitable spread of students at secondary and tertiary levels of education and a revision of curriculum and teaching practices to achieve more scientific orientation and technological relevance. Demand-based vocational training, particularly for migrant women, should be organized by both government and non-government organizations. Women workers should also have opportunities for on-the-job training.

As the RMG industries are run largely by private entrepreneurs, it would be difficult to impose on-the-job training requirements through government directives. Employers may agree on paper but not in principle, or may implement training half-heartedly. Moreover, too many impositions may lead to closure of some of the factories and hence many women will be deprived of job opportunities. Therefore, some incentive and disincentive schemes along with education of employers and advocacy programs can be more effective. Incentives can take the forms of tax rebates or discounts and sales promotion. Donors can come forward with the funds for training for women workers. Those factories that organize such training on a regular basis can be made eligible such funds after thorough scrutiny and assessment by independent research bodies.

The study also reveals that women are not lagging behind men in making demands for better working conditions such as paid leave, higher wages and change in night duty. However, they are often more penalized through salary cuts for taking more sick leave than men. A women worker takes more sick leave because she is more vulnerable to sickness than her male colleagues, and because she must care for family members during their illnesses. Women workers bear the double burden of domestic chores in a situation where basic amenities are shared with 15-30 families. In addition, the lack of child care facilities or services for the urban working women, create constant conflict and tension. Hence, there is a need for better and more efficient delivery of water and sanitation facilities and protection of tenants'

rights. Dhaka Water and Sewerage Authority (WASA) can distribute those facilities adopting progressive ratings based on use rather than land ownership and fixed rate criteria. City Corporation, along with NGOs and both landowners and tenants should look after maintenance and care of water and sewer lines. Moreover, there should be some measures to protect the rights of the tenants so that the landlord cannot increase the house rent frequently at his own will.

Any policy that improves health and lowers fertility is likely to foster women's spatial mobility, economic opportunities and productivity. A health insurance scheme initiated by the NGO Nari Uddyog Kendra was adopted by employers of some garment factories. It ensures regular health check-ups for workers by medical practitioners. Similarly, immunization, reproductive and general health schemes provided in 93 garment factories in Dhaka by another NGO, Unity Through Population Services (UTPS), should be supported by the employers and the government. While these initiatives should be replicated on a larger scale both in the factories and communities, there should also be a set of basic safety standards to be followed by those factories. Here too the similar types of incentives outlined for on-the-job training can be adopted as cost-effective policy measures. Considering the threat of the spread of sexually transmitted diseases and HIV/AIDS among the garment factory workers, there should be education and preventive health programmes.

Finally, recognizing that the formulation of policy requires an adequate data base, data gathered by both garment and other manufacturing factories should include gender-disaggregated data by age, education, length of service and migration status.



## Endnotes

1. Often reason for migration is taken as a preliminary indicator of migration decision making. Although useful, it can be subjective and suffer from ex-post rationalization over time and hence has low response validity.
2. Elsewhere the author observed that nearly half of female and a third of male migrant labourers originated from Dhaka division and excepting Barisal, both female and male out-migration from coastal and hilly regions to Dhaka city is highly insignificant (Afsar, 1998b:10).
3. Greater incidence of landlessness among the garment factory workers was observed by the author in her recent study (Afsar, 2000a). A female garment factory worker had 0.51 acres whereas a male worker had 0.78 acres of cultivable land in the place of origin.
4. Elsewhere the author has also argued that location of a friend or relative at the place of destination is one of the pre-conditions for migration (Afsar, 1995), which equally holds in the case of labour migration, particularly women's independent migration to the RMG sector.
5. However, even those who came in search of job did not necessarily swell the ranks of the unemployed since, according to existing literature, unemployment is lower among migrants than non-migrants (Afsar, 1995).
6. It should be mentioned that, while Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics data show the figures for the "never married" men and women, "unmarried" in the present study refers to currently unmarried workers. A currently unmarried person may not necessarily belong to never married category.
7. Following one projection, it is hoped that if the trend of fertility reduction among garment factory workers and other women of reproductive age continues at the same or at a steeper rate, the population of Bangladesh is likely to stabilize at 211 million by 2056.
8. Chaudhury and Majumdar (1993) found a much wider gap (0.66) between male and female earnings. They also found gender-based disparity across job categories. The smaller gap in the income ratio found in the present study compared to Chaudhury and Majumdar's (1993) study and the highest gender differentials at the supervisory level can be explained as follows: while they derived data from a random sample, the sample drawn for the present study was drawn from a quota of different categories of workers by matching age of the male and female workers. Hence, the gender differential caused by demographic characteristics and subsequent socioeconomic entitlements is minimized in the present study.
9. Elsewhere the author found that nearly seven out of every 10 respondents acquired informal training in this way and the bulk of them (85 and 75 percent respectively of female and male respondents) are currently working as operators (Afsar, 1998).
10. This finding is supported by author's recent survey data (Afsar, 1998).
11. Elsewhere the author found statistically significant correlation between the size of remittances, age and marital status of temporary migrants, which supports the above proposition (Afsar, 2000b:175).
12. This discussion is largely based on Afsar, 2000a.
13. In focus group discussions with respondents, relatives, family members and neighbours at their community of residence, it was reported that there is acute crisis of running water supplied by the Dhaka Water and Sewerage Authority

(WASA) in those areas in the city proper.

14. The issues dealt with in this section as well as the following section are treated in greater detail in Afsar, 2000a.

15. This discussion is based on Afsar, 2000a.

16. Wide-bodied auto-rickshaw which can accommodate about 10 to 15 persons at a time. Although highly polluting, it is one of the cheapest and fastest modes of intra-city group transportation.

17. In Kalapani area, a young girl was kidnapped by the *mastaans* while coming home alone at around 10 o'clock at night. Next morning, they left her in the same place after raping her. She was badly injured and was under treatment for some time. After her recovery, she felt too embarrassed to work in the same garment factory and live in the same area. Hence, she left the factory and the area. They also cited another rape case in Madhya Badda, the eastern fringe of Dhaka city.

18. From her latest survey, the author found that one in every five garment factory workers, irrespective of gender, knew about a STD affected co-worker

19. This finding is consistent with Rahman's (1993:103) results.

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# 5

## **Becoming a garment worker: The mobilization of women into the garment factories of Bangladesh**

*Nazli Kibria*

### **I. Introduction**

In Bangladesh, relatively low rates of women's participation in wage employment have traditionally been understood as a reflection of cultural factors unfavourable to such participation. Recent developments, however, challenge the notion that women in Bangladesh, whether due to cultural or other factors, are disinclined to enter the wage labour market. Since the 1980s, an export-based garment industry has mushroomed in Bangladesh. Perhaps the most notable feature of this industry is its heavy use of women workers; an estimated 70-80 per cent of those employed in the industry are women (Majumdar and Chaudhuri, 1994).

The rapid development of the garment sector, along with its mobilization of women workers, has made it a popular issue of concern among a wide variety of groups in Bangladesh, including policy makers, activists and scholars. Despite this attention, many basic questions about the industry's workers remain unanswered, hampering the effective assessment of the impact of macro policies on the sector. This chapter looks at the factors and processes that underlie the mobilization of women into the garment labour force. How and why do women come to seek and enter into jobs in garment factories? The materials for this chapter are drawn from a qualitative

study, based on 70 in-depth interviews with women garment workers and members of their households, in Dhaka and various rural parts of Bangladesh.

The garment sector in Bangladesh has helped to create a new group of women industrial workers in the country. Studies indicate that many of the women who work in the sector have had no prior wage work experience (Bangladesh Garment Manufacturers and Exporters Association, 1992; Majumdar and Chaudhuri, 1994). In explaining this development, employer preference and global tradition are clearly important points to consider. In export-production factories around the world, women have emerged as preferred workers; employers often cite the lower costs, and the docility and nimbleness of women in comparison to men (Elson and Pearson, 1981; Lim, 1990). However, a full understanding of the movement of women into the garment factories of Bangladesh requires us to consider not only the “pull” but also the “push” factors that underlie this trend. What has driven or enabled women to respond positively to the expanded job opportunities?

Analyses of women's entry into wage employment in Bangladesh often emphasize the role played by extreme poverty and the related dynamic of male unemployment and desertion in driving women into the wage labour market. Since the 1970s, growing numbers of rural women in Bangladesh have sought wage employment in agriculture, as well as in earth-cutting, brick-breaking, construction and road maintenance. Mahmud (1992) notes that two groups of women have been particularly likely to engage in these jobs: women in low-income male-headed households, and women heads of household. Thus impoverishment and the absence of a male breadwinner are two characteristics of the wage-seeking women. An emphasis on these “push” factors is in many ways consonant with the notion that cultural barriers have been critical in deterring women's wage employment. That is, it is only under the tremendous pressures of extreme poverty that women violate cultural proscriptions against their involvement in paid employment, particularly in jobs that require them to be in male-dominated public spaces.

To what extent are extreme poverty and male-absent family structures behind the movement of women into the garment industry? Available studies of women garment workers in Bangladesh suggest that, while these are relevant factors, they are not sufficient explanations for the movement. Kabeer's (1995) work points to the complexity and diversity of the economic motivations of women



garment workers. She asserts that while for some the job is a matter of basic survival, for others it is a way of improving their standard of living, or of earning money for personal accumulation and expenditure. While not exploring the issue of economic or other motivations per se, the findings of Majumdar and Chaudhuri's (1994) survey study also affirm the diversity of women garment workers. Diversity in socioeconomic background is suggested by the levels of household income reported by the workers as well as the range of occupations of household members. While only an approximate indicator of the presence of a male breadwinner, the survey's findings on marital status also show women garment workers to be a variable group in terms of this characteristic.

These findings suggest that poverty and the absence of a male breadwinner are not adequate or complete explanations of why women enter into garment work. One of the goals of this paper is to explore the conditions and motivations that underlie entry into garment work without blurring the lines of diversity among women.

In what follows I describe the methods of this study and provide some basic information on the socio-demographic characteristics of the sample. Following this, I analyse women's accounts of how and why they entered into garment work, paying particular attention to the context of the household in these accounts. The final section is an analysis of the role played by the community in mediating the process of becoming a garment worker.

## **II. Methods and a brief profile of the workers**

This chapter is based on interviews with women garment workers and members of their households. All of the interviews for the study were guided by an open-ended questionnaire. Most of the interviews were tape-recorded, and interview tapes were later transcribed.

Seventy in-depth interviews were conducted with women garment workers, defined as those currently or recently (within the past two months) employed in export-oriented garment factories. The sample of women workers was generated through "snowball" sampling techniques. We began by visiting three garment factories located in different parts of Dhaka city. During these visits we identified garment workers willing to participate in the study. We then visited these workers in their homes and conducted interviews with them. During the visits to the homes of the workers, we recruited

additional respondents for the study. That is, we located other garment workers in the neighbourhood and enlisted their participation in the study. The final sample of garment workers that resulted, while not randomly generated, included women from a range of neighbourhoods and factories.

In the second phase of the study we conducted 30 household case studies. We visited the homes of garment workers and interviewed family members. Twenty-two of these case studies were conducted in the rural areas of Bangladesh, including the districts of Comilla, Gazipur, Kishoreganj, Mymensingh and Sirajganj. Eight were conducted in the family homes of garment workers located in Dhaka city. The selection of the household case studies occurred in the following manner. Eight garment workers who were living with their families in Dhaka but who were otherwise a diverse group (in terms of marital status, socioeconomic background, household structure) were selected. For the rural household case studies, we began by identifying *thanas* and villages that were important areas of origin among the garment workers interviewed. We then selected five rural areas that appeared to vary (as indicated by our interview respondents) in the extent of the flow of women into garment work in the city. Following this, we travelled to the villages of the respondents who originated from these rural areas to conduct household case studies. On a scale of high to low in terms of the flow of workers, the five areas rank as follows: Gazipur, Mymensingh, Sirajganj, Kishoreganj and Comilla. Other rural districts from which some of our interviewees originate — but not selected for intensive case study — include Faridpur and Barisal (high-sending areas), and Khulna (low sending area).

The majority of the workers in the sample were between the ages of 15 and 25, with a substantial minority falling below and above this age range (see Table 1). As shown by Table 2, of the 70 women workers, 35 were never married, 14 were currently married, 19 were separated/abandoned/divorced and two were widowed. As far as education (see Table 3), 17 women have no formal education, 33 have two to four years, 13 have five to seven years, and seven have eight or more years of education. Most of the women are helpers (17) or operators (42), with very few having job titles such as “quality inspector”, “folder” and “finisher” (see Table 4). As shown in Table 5, most of the women had been involved in garment work for a relatively short period of time — under four years. Also of note is that of the 70 women interviewed, 37 had sending family households that were urban; 33 had sending family households located in rural areas.

**Table 1: Age of workers**

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| Age      | Number of workers |
|----------|-------------------|
| Under 15 | 11                |
| 15-20    | 32                |
| 21-25    | 18                |
| 26-30    | 6                 |
| Over 30  | 3                 |
| Total    | 70                |

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**Table 2: Marital status of workers**

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| Marital status          | Number of workers |
|-------------------------|-------------------|
| Never-married           | 35                |
| Married                 | 14                |
| Separated/<br>abandoned | 15                |
| Divorced                | 4                 |
| Widowed                 | 2                 |
| Total                   | 70                |

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**Table 3: Years of schooling of workers**

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| Years of schooling | Number of workers |
|--------------------|-------------------|
| 0                  | 17                |
| 1-4                | 33                |
| 5-7                | 13                |
| >8                 | 7                 |
| Total              | 70                |

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**Table 4: Job post of workers**

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| Job post          | Number of workers |
|-------------------|-------------------|
| Helper            | 17                |
| Operator          | 42                |
| Folder/finisher   | 3                 |
| Ironing           | 2                 |
| Quality inspector | 6                 |
| Total             | 70                |

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**Table 5: Years of work in garment industry**

| Years of work | Number of workers |
|---------------|-------------------|
| <2            | 21                |
| 3-4           | 32                |
| 5-6           | 11                |
| >7            | 6                 |
| Total         | 70                |

To sum up, the collective profile of the workers that emerges is of a young group of women, large numbers of whom are unmarried. On average, they have had some primary education, although some have no education and some have secondary-level education. The low number of women with more than primary education may be a reflection of the dominance of operators and helpers in the sample, rather than jobs requiring a higher level of education, such as quality inspector or supervisor.

### **III. Becoming a garment worker: Garment work explanations, histories and the household**

Three types of explanations were apparent in women's accounts of why they had entered into garment work. In what follows, I turn to an in-depth analysis of these explanations, and the household conditions and processes that underlie their construction. With few exceptions, women make the decision to enter into garment work in the context of their position as a member of a household. The dynamics of garment entry are thus shaped by the particular conditions, resources and constraints that such membership places on the women workers. In looking at how women experience the garment entry process as members of households, I draw on conceptualizations of the household that recognize the reality of both intra-household co-operation and conflict (Sen, 1990). The vast literature on "household strategies" has brought to our attention the ways in which households co-operatively work or strategize to realize collective goals. This emphasis on co-operation has however not been accompanied by a recognition of the concurrent reality of conflict and division within the household. As feminist scholars have pointed out, these assumptions of democracy, altruism and consensus reflect an idealized

view of the household — one in which age and gender do not create basic distinctions in the experience and interests of members (Wolf, 1992). An effective consideration of the household in relation to the garment entry process must take into account the dynamics of both co-operation and conflict that are a part of household life.

In looking at the processes by which women enter into the garment industry I pay particular attention to the role of what I call the “sending family household”. I use this term to refer to the household unit that the worker identifies with most closely, regardless of whether or not she currently resides in that household. To put it another way, the sending family household is the unit that the worker sees as the centre of her family. Thus for an unmarried worker living with other single women in a “mess” in Dhaka, her sending family household may consist of parents and siblings living in the village home. In contrast, for a married woman living with her husband and children in Dhaka, the sending family household is synonymous with the household in which she resides. The sending family household, I suggest, is likely to play a crucial role in the process of garment entry.

1. “I entered garment work for my family’s survival.”

The most widespread explanation offered by the informants was that they had entered garments in order to ensure their family’s survival. While this was an explanation offered by women of varied marital status, it was largely confined to women who were residing with their sending family households, which were based in Dhaka city.

In consonance with the understanding that garment work was a matter of family survival were the particular areas in which the woman’s pay was expended: food, rent and the repayment of pressing loans incurred by the household. The fact that the woman’s pay was absorbed into the household economy for basic needs did not, however, mean that there were not varied income-management practices among these women. In some cases the woman’s pay was earmarked for a specific purpose such as rent, while in others it was absorbed more amorphyously into a collective household pot. Some women simply handed over their pay to the household head, while others spent the money themselves.

In general, the women who talked of their garment work in family survival terms came from sending family households that can be characterized as poor. Notwithstanding the economic variations among them, for all of these households meeting subsistence needs

was a difficult task. Virtually all of these households had monetary debts, and few had assets or savings. The most common occupations of adult males in these households was rickshaw-pulling and small-scale trading (e.g. selling *pan*, vegetables). However, equally common was the absence of a male wage-earner. Many of the women lived in households in which fathers or husbands were seasonally employed. There were also many cases in which men, due to death, divorce or desertion, were simply not present in the household.

What was the process of garment entry like for the women who identified family survival as a primary motivating factor? Two types of garment work entry histories were recounted. The first related a shift from other types of income-earning activities into garment work. In some cases, the woman herself had moved from a different job into garments, while in others the change had been an intergenerational familial one, with the mother and/or older sister of the worker being involved in another employment sector. But for all of these women, the process of becoming a garment worker was clearly not one that involved negotiating the question of whether or not to have a job. Rather, the issue at hand was that of what type of job to pursue. Among the prior occupations mentioned by the women, in descending order of significance, were domestic service, paid agricultural work (in rural areas), brick-breaking, ground-cutting, home-based sewing, making paper bags, and home tuition of primary school children.

The accounts of garment entry related by these women involved “making sense” of or explaining the occupational shift they had undergone. With the exception of the rare cases in which the woman’s prior occupation had involved the respectable tasks of sewing at home or home tuition, entry into garment work was generally seen as a movement of upward mobility. That is, working in garments, for all its many problems, was a better way to make money than what one had done in the past. Of those who had worked in paid jobs before entering garments, domestic service was the most common prior occupation. For Ruma, a 15-year-old working as a helper in a garment factory, a positive assessment of the advantages of garment work over domestic service was a vital part of how she came to enter garment work.

The household of which Ruma was a member struggled with the costs of food and of repaying spiralling loans. Ruma’s father worked periodically in construction jobs, while her mother broke bricks and occasionally worked as a cleaning woman (*jhi*).

*When I was young a relative [chachato dadi] 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've been working in people's homes. I couldn't stand it anymore. It's a lot of work, all day and 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 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 neighbourhood, said to my mother: "Your daughter has been working as a servant for a long time. Give her some relief, let us take her to garments." My salary now is 400 taka a month, which is more than what I got working as a domestic (Tk 100), although they also gave me food. The problem with garments is that sometimes I get the salary and sometimes I don't. Still I think this is better than working in people's homes. If I can become an operator then my salary will be higher and my family will be able to live better. In garments you don't have to work all the time, sometimes you get Fridays off, and sometimes you can finish work at 5 p.m.*

Besides occupational shift, another common theme in the garment entry accounts of these woman was the experience of a household crisis that served to propel the woman into employment, perhaps for the first time. Women entered into garments as a way to cope with crisis, perhaps to avert its most disastrous economic consequences. As Rahman (1995) has noted in his work on rural poverty, households in Bangladesh are routinely subjected to a variety of crises that make them vulnerable to downward mobility. The household crises mentioned by the women were of various sorts, including financial losses in business, unemployment, illness, death, divorce and abandonment. To take one example, Nargis, a 15-year-old sewing machine operator, had begun garment work after her father's small store was burned down and he went into heavy financial debt.

The crises mentioned by the respondents included shifts away from the male-headed structure of the household, either due to the departure of the male household head, or his inability to work due to illness or unemployment. The situation of Baby, a sewing machine operator in her late 20s, illustrates the tremendous vulnerability to poverty that is characteristic of female heads of household in Bangladesh (Hamid, 1995; Siddiqi, 1994). Baby began garment work about three years ago, shortly after the second marriage of her husband and his subsequent departure from the household. She lived with and supported her two sons (aged four and six) as well as her

elderly parents. Before joining garments, she had done various kinds of odd jobs, including baby-sitting and sewing work at home. Her husband, who had worked as a driver's assistant on a truck, had been the primary breadwinner of the household. Prior to her husband's departure, she had not seriously considered working in garments, being quite busy with her part-time odd jobs and the work of taking care of her young sons. She also mentioned that she had always thought that getting and doing garment work was much easier for young unmarried girls than for a mature married woman like herself. All of these considerations were, however, pushed aside when the household fell into dire financial straits with the departure of her husband.

Within this group of respondents, the role and attitudes of household members towards the women's entry into garment work reflected the conditions of poverty and crisis in the household. Not surprisingly, there was virtually no household opposition to the women's entry into garment work. In fact, on the contrary, several women spoke of being pressured by family members into taking a garment job, which if possible they would have preferred not to do. Given their limited economic resources, it was clearly in the interest of the sending family households to encourage the women's entry into garment work, since the resulting income was important to household survival. However, household members often interpreted or understood the women's garment work in ways that differed from the explanation of family survival offered by the woman herself. These differences highlight the contested character of understandings of the women's garment work within the household. For example, one comment I often heard from male household heads was that the women's income was supplemental to the survival of the household rather than essential to it. Also advanced was the idea that garment work was in the personal interest of the women rather than a benefit for the household as a whole. Thus with respect to single women, household members could emphasize that garment work enhanced the marriageability of the woman. Potential marriage partners would be attracted to her proven ability to generate income and perhaps even to the dowry that she had accumulated through her garment job. In a variety of ways, these interpretations could serve to reduce the significance of the status of the woman as an important income-earner in the household. As I have argued elsewhere (Kibria, 1995), the effects of women's income earning on family power relations are deeply affected by the meanings that are given to the income.



2. "I entered garments to improve my family's condition and prospects."

For a relatively small number of the women workers, entry into garment work was explained as a move that had been undertaken to enhance the economic situation of their sending family households. In their accounts of how they had come to work in garments, these women emphasized that it had been a matter of choice rather than necessity; they and their families could and in fact did survive quite well without their income. All of these women were residing with their sending family households. In contrast to the first group described above, none of the sending family households in this group were headed by women. Several of the households owned small businesses, while others contained multiple wage-earners or members in skilled and technical occupations (e.g. tailor, driver, typist/clerk).

The pay of the woman was spent on luxury expenditures or, more frequently, on investments designed to enhance the family's surplus income or financial security. Particularly common was the earmarking of income for the current or future needs of children or younger siblings. Many of the women indicated that their money would be spent to educate family members, or to set them up in business, send them abroad, or get them married. Once again, a variety of household income management practices operated here. In some cases, the woman spent or invested the money herself, while in others, the pay was handled by another household member. For the women who explained their employment in the framework of "family betterment", accounts of how they had entered garment work almost invariably contained reference to a moment of altruistic realization. That is, the worker came to recognize that the "sacrifice" of working in garments was one that would enable the household to improve its socioeconomic situation. Kin, friends and neighbours played a crucial role in bringing her attention to the financial benefits of garment work.

While the themes of altruism and sacrifice were prominent in the accounts of these women, there were other, less visible but important elements as well. Tulshi, a garment worker in her late teens, talked of how she had come to the decision to work in garments because of her desire to help her father expand his business. But her motivations for entering garment work also included a desire to expand her range of experience, and to gain a sense of financial independence. In the following, we also get a sense of how the social image of women garment workers may hold certain attractions for young women, representing a certain measure of social independence.

*We own a store, and we can get by quite well with that. But after passing class 8, I decided to find a job in garments. Some girls I knew were working in garments. From them I heard about how much money you could make. Because we had a sewing machine at home and I knew how to sew, I knew it wouldn't take me long to become an operator. [Why didn't you stay in school?] I thought it would be better to work, make some money for myself. My father would like to expand the store, and with my savings we can do that in the future. To tell you the truth I'm not an exceptional student. I didn't want to sit around at home, doing nothing. In garments, you can meet different people, learn about new things. I used to see the garment workers on the streets, walking to the factories together. I wanted to see what it was like to live that life.*

A sense of insecurity was another element in women's accounts of how they had come to work in garments. We see this in the account of Shilpi, a married sewing machine operator in her mid-20s. According to Shilpi, she had decided to seek a job in garments even though she had never worked in her life and her husband had not wanted her to get a job. She explained her decision to nonetheless enter into garment work in two ways. There was, on the one hand, a desire to work and generate savings that could finance a small business for her husband. But also notable in her account was a deep sense of insecurity about the stability of her marriage, due to the difficulties that she and her husband were experiencing in conceiving a child. The problem of infertility made her fearful that her husband would soon remarry. She had entered garment work partly out of anticipation of this possibility.

The opposition of family members to the decision to enter garments was a common element of the garment work history of these women. Such opposition was articulated in culturally expected ways: the woman's work was contrary to the norms of male/female segregation and respectability, and would thus threaten the reputation and honour of the family. While in some cases the opposition was not persistent or strongly presented, in others it was substantial enough to require much persuasion on the part of the woman. There were lengthy conversations in which women would try to convince family members that working in garments was the right thing to do; relatives and friends could be enlisted by the woman to support her case. Some women, in particular those who were unmarried, spoke not simply of a period of persuasion but actually of entering garments covertly, keeping it secret from the male household head for a period of time. Sharifa's father, for example, as indicated by his account below, found

out that his daughter was working in a garment factory one month after she started doing so. After being presented with it as a *fait accompli*, he came to accept the situation.

*When Sharifa asked me about working in garments, I said, "No, it's better that you stay at home". It's true that now there are many girls working in garments, many good girls, from respectable families. But still I didn't want my daughter to be in that environment; I didn't want that she have to work all day. Then I found out that she was working in garments. I was angry, but I didn't try to stop her. If she wants so much to work in garments, then I will not stop her.*

The issue of family opposition to garment entry was complicated in several cases by the fact that the decision to enter garment work had itself been triggered by the woman's conflicts with one or more family members, often over the allocation of household economic resources. In one case an informant entered garment work out of a sense of frustration with her father's decision to invest virtually all the household's assets into paying for her older brother to go as a worker to the Middle East. She felt that the heavy investment in her brother's passage abroad would eventually deprive her younger siblings of the chance to continue their education. She felt this way in part because of her assessment that her brother was unlikely to pay the family back with his earnings from abroad.

The dominant explanation of "family betterment" presented by these women was often different from that offered by household members. Household members were more likely to speak of the woman's wage work as an activity that was for her own benefit rather than for that of other family members. They spoke of how she could purchase personal luxury items from her wages. And in the case of unmarried women, her wages were to be accumulated and used for her future, perhaps for a marriage dowry.

3. "I entered garments to take care of myself, to make my own way in the world."

The third set of explanations offered for the decision to seek garment employment centred around the idea that this path was a way to take care of oneself financially and build one's own future, thus reducing the burden and responsibility of the family for one's upkeep and well-being. This framework was a prominent one among the 33 young single rural migrant women in the sample. These were women who did not live with their sending family households, which

were located in rural areas outside of Dhaka. Some had taken up residence with relatives in the city, while most shared living quarters (called “mess”) with other unmarried women garment workers.

The economic status of the sending family households of these women, as suggested by an analysis of patterns of land ownership, was poor. The majority (25 out of 33) came from landless or functionally landless households, while the remainder came from households that can be categorized as small or medium land-owning. An intriguing characteristic concerns the position of the worker within the sending family household. In a large number of cases, the rural migrant garment worker was the eldest sibling of the household.

Poverty and scarcity were common themes in the women's accounts of how they decided to come to the city and work in garments. Part of the decision to enter into garments was thus their assessment that such work was better than what was available to them in the village. The rural income-generating opportunities mentioned most often were agricultural wage work (e.g. threshing rice), domestic service, and various types of small-scale self-employment activities, including weaving baskets and mats, raising livestock and growing vegetables. According to the women, the major comparative benefit of garment work was financial — one could make far more money on a regular basis in garments than in other activities in the village. Besides the financial incentives, the nature of garment work and its social image seemed to hold some attractions over the more traditional forms of income generation in rural areas. As suggested by the remarks of one respondent from Barisal, garment work was perceived as less physically taxing, particularly in comparison to work in the agricultural sector. Garment work, with its bureaucratic routine, was also seen as new or modern in character.

*What I heard about garment 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 can 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.*

With assessments such as the one above, women came to see entering garments as an effective way to reduce the economic burdens on the household. Often as the eldest sibling of the household they felt a special sense of responsibility for the family's economic well-

being. The decision to go to the city and work in garments was seen as one that would alleviate the family's economic burdens in two ways. For one thing, the household would not face the burden of feeding and clothing the woman. But perhaps even more importantly, the burden of arranging and paying for the marriage and dowry expenses of the woman would be alleviated. It is worth emphasizing here that the dowry enhancement expected by garment work was not simply a matter of accumulated money that would be paid in cash or goods to the bridegroom. Dowry was also defined as the future earning potential of the woman. Some household members interviewed also mentioned that women garment workers had enhanced dowry in the sense of an expanded pool of marriage partners, due to their exposure to a greater range of persons in the urban environment. We see some of these considerations in the account of Feroza, a 17-year-old garment worker from Kishoreganj. Feroza was the oldest of seven brothers and sisters. Her household had no cultivable land, possessing only the small area on which the family home was located. Her father and uncles worked as agricultural wage labourers.

*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 maybe in some time I can pay for the education of my younger brothers and sisters.*

During interviews with the family members of single rural migrant garment workers, the problem of dowry emerged as a critical "push" factor. In the following, a father of a young garment worker, from a village in Mymensingh, talks of how his inability to meet dowry costs shaped his decision to allow his daughter to migrate and enter into garment work. His remarks suggest that the rising costs of a woman's marriage in Bangladesh, a general trend that has been noted by observers (including Lindenbaum, 1981), may be operating as a "push" factor.

*When I was younger there were families that were rich, there were families that were poor. But no one would consider sending their daughters to work in garments. Your responsibility as a father was to arrange your daughter's marriage. But now for those who are poor, there is no way out. All the marriage proposals that come ask for money or for other things. What can poor people do? It's better that your daughter go to work in garments rather than stay at home.*

Besides poverty and the problem of dowry, accounts of the garment entry process often contained reference to the “push” factors of threats and harassment from family and village members, as well as marital disruptions. Rejina, a 19-year-old sewing machine operator, had been working in the garment industry for four years. In her account of how she left her village in Bagerhat to come to Dhaka, both economic scarcity and harassment from a male cousin were important factors. Family members opposed her decision, but ultimately could do little but accept it.

*I am the eldest of six children. My father owns a small amount of land, but it is not enough for us to get by well. I left our home to come to Dhaka with my uncle (mama). [How did your mother and father feel about it?] They were not willing to let me go. But I scared them. I said, if you want peace then you will let me go. And if you don't want peace in this home, then you will stop me. So they didn't then stand in my way. It was best for them that I leave. I had a cousin (chachato bhai) who wanted to marry me. He would follow me around wherever I went. I was so scared I had to stay in the house, I couldn't go to school because of him. He and his parents are very greedy. They wanted him to marry me but they also wanted my father to give them the land that he has in exchange for the marriage. I couldn't accept that. I couldn't see my parents and brothers and sisters starve.*

Ironically, the problem of sexual harassment, although this time from other sources, continued to plague Rejina after she moved to Dhaka. Approximately one fourth of the women we interviewed, including Rejina, spoke of experiences of harassment from men in the workplace (co-worker, supervisor) as well as the neighbourhoods in which they lived. 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 unsavoury rumours and gossip about the sexual reputation of the woman.

A number of the rural migrant women had taken the decision to go the city and work in garments in response to a failed marriage. Quite typical was the account of Hosneara, a garment worker in her late teens from a village in Comilla. After her marriage ceremony, her husband and his family refused to take her home with them unless her family gave them Tk 10,000 and several items. Shortly thereafter, the marriage was legally dissolved. About seven months after the incident, Hosneara left her village for the city with a cousin who was already employed in garments. Economic scarcity was not a critical “push” factor in her case; her father owned enough cultivable land to

support the family. Rather, Hosneara was motivated to leave out of a desire to distance herself for a while from the village community, as well as to gain some new experience.

Family tensions and squabbles were sometimes another part of the history of garment entry for these women. Bokul, in her late teens, worked as a quality control inspector in a garment factory. She had left her village home in Comilla after a serious fight with her parents and older brother. A good and ambitious student, she was told a year before she was to take the secondary school certificate exam that the household did not have the resources to finance her schooling. Bokul was outraged by this announcement; she felt that the money had been diverted for other purposes. Her anger was so deep that she did not contact her family for almost a year after leaving the village home.

Like the women workers themselves, family members tended to explain the women's garment entry as a course of action that would enable them to take care of themselves and to make their own future. However, while the women tended to place these motivations within the larger goal of helping the family economically, household members were more likely to assess the work in individualistic terms, as an activity that brought benefits to the women themselves. In fact, patterns of economic exchange between the rural migrant workers and their sending family households suggest that at least in the short run, the women's garment work results in few new resources being added to the sending family household economy. Only a few women indicated that they remitted money to the village home, although occasional gifts of money, food and other goods during visits home were common. Given the generally short tenure (under four years) of women in the garment industry, it is possible that this pattern is one that shifts as involvement in the industry lengthens. However, for the single rural migrant women that we interviewed, the dominant flow of resources was in the other direction. Many of the women relied on their families to bear the initial costs of travelling to the city and getting settled with a job and a place to stay. Families typically continued to help out the woman with rice, money and clothes, particularly during the initial stages of her garment career.

All unskilled workers who enter the garment industry typically begin in job of helper, the low salaries (average of Tk 400-600 a month) of which make it difficult to meet one's own subsistence needs. However, even among women in the more highly paid job of sewing machine operator (average of Tk 1,000-1,200 before overtime), material assistance from sending family households was not uncommon. Most of the rural migrant women workers indicated that they had little or

no money left over from their salary after paying for the costs of food and rent. The sending family household thus operated as a critical safety net. This became quite evident during the national political crisis of 1996, when many garment factories closed their doors or stopped payment of workers' salaries. Unable to support themselves financially, a number of women went back to the village home during this time. Thus the garment work of the women cannot be understood simply as a strategy for enhancing the economic resources of the sending family household. As reflected in the understandings of the women and their families, garment work was a way of reducing the costs of maintaining the woman and paying for her marriage. The sending family household operates as an important economic safety net for the women.

#### **IV. Community support, opinion and garment work**

The process of becoming a garment worker is one that unfolds not only in the context of the household, but also the community in which the household is located. In this section I discuss some of the ways in which communities mediate the garment work entry process. I define community as the social circles and networks in which the worker and the sending family household are embedded, including kin, friends, neighbours and village folk. I focus on the sending community, or the community of which the woman is a part before she begins the process of becoming a garment worker.

One of the ways in which the community can affect the garment entry process is by extending practical support for becoming a garment worker. This practical support is of various kinds: information about the availability, salaries and conditions of garment jobs; assistance in finding a job, coming to Dhaka, and locating a place to stay. For those women based in Dhaka practical support was generally extensive, reflecting the fact that there are currently few low-income areas in Dhaka where there are not women who are engaged in garment work. Pakhi, in her early to mid-teens, had been working as a helper for about seven months. She, her parents and siblings had migrated from Potoakhali about a year ago, driven by landlessness. After coming to Dhaka, they settled into a *bastee* (squatter settlement) inhabited by people from their area of origin. Pakhi describes how neighbours led her towards garment work:

*After coming to Dhaka my mother and I broke bricks to make money.*

*There were some girls in the bastee working in garments. When*



*they first told us [mother and I] about it, I said, "Will I be able to do it?" I wasn't sure, because I never had a job (chakri) before. The girls said that I could do the work; you didn't need to be educated to work in garments. They said that first I would be a helper and then after I learned the work I could change factories and become an operator. My mother asked the girls to take me to the factory with them. They told me what to say and do during the interview. After going to two factories I found a job.*

For rural migrant women workers, the practical support required for successful entry into the garment labour force is necessarily more extensive than that needed by those living with their families in the city. Relatives and fellow village folk who were already involved in the garment business typically provided the rural women with the necessary information and assistance to make the transition successfully into garment work. For obvious reasons, such assistance was most likely in those villages with an established flow of persons into the garment industry. Where such an established flow did not exist, the process of garment entry was necessarily more complex. In a few cases women indicated that they had been recruited by garment factory owners who originated from their village areas. These owners were members of well-known, respected and prosperous families. In other cases of "pioneering" garment work, the process of garment entry began with a trip to Dhaka for purposes other than working in garments. Jahanara, for example, went to the city to visit her uncle (*chacha*). After arriving there, she found out about garment work and decided to try it. In another case, a woman came to Dhaka with the goal of living in her uncle's (*mama*) home and going to school. But soon after her arrival she found her uncle unwilling to pay for her upkeep, a situation that drove her into garment work. Thus in all these cases, the decision to enter garments began only after the worker arrived in the city, where she was exposed to the information and resources necessary to enter into garment work.

The experience of becoming a garment worker is shaped not only by the practical support extended by the community, but also by the community's attitudes and evaluations of the meaning of garment work for women. Virtually all of those interviewed indicated that a layer or segment of community opinion was extremely negative in its view of women's garment work. While such unfavourable ideas were present everywhere, they appeared stronger in areas where the population of garment workers was small rather than extensive. Objections to women's garment work were framed according to socio-cultural norms. That is, women garment workers were sexually loose

and immoral, or at least suspected of being so, because they worked with men; they did not respect and obey their family elders. Some other criticisms of the conduct of women garment workers are highlighted by the remarks of the brother-in-law of a garment worker in Comilla. According to him, the negative views reduced the value of unmarried women garment workers within the “marriage market” of the sending community.

*There are many who don't want to marry a girl who has worked in garments, because the environment is not good. Such a girl will not be attentive to the needs of the household (shongshari). We see the girls who come back to visit; they are different. They are not shy in front of people, they know how to talk to outsiders. They speak in good Bengali (shuddho bangla). When my sister-in-law comes home, she spends all her time outside the house. She wears salwar kameez, not saris. There are some neighbours (para protibeshi) who say the girls who work in garmentare bad, evil (shoytan).*

Community perspectives on women's garment work were not, however, only negative. The women's move into garment work could be justified by the evaluation that it had been taken out of desperation, as a measure of last resort. During a household interview in Mymensingh, a village elder remarked that no one thought badly of the girl since everyone knew why she had left to go and work in garments. The economic difficulties of her family meant that she had little choice but to do so. Thus dire economic or other circumstances (such as a marriage that had failed due to the misdeeds of the man) served to push aside or at least downplay negative judgements about women's migration and factory work. As I have noted in the discussion of the sending family household, attitudes towards women's garment work were affected by the problem of dowry in the community, too. That is, there was recognition among community members of the rising costs and difficulties of marriage for girls. It was acknowledged that families with limited resources would have difficulty arranging the marriage of their girls. In these circumstances, sending the girl to the garment factory was justified — it was an acceptable if not desirable course of action.

## V. Conclusions

### 1. Poverty and the mobilization of women garment workers

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

Women from rural households constitute an important segment of the garment labour force. In many ways the mobilization of these women is the most striking, given that it involves not only a movement into the world of industrial wage work, but also into the urban environment. Single rural women who migrate to urban areas alone have traditionally been destitute and impoverished — from the lowest socioeconomic strata of rural society. With the development of the garment industry, however, we are now seeing the solo migration of rural woman from a more diverse array of socioeconomic backgrounds. While many of the rural migrant women in this study came from landless households, there were also those with some land holdings. More importantly, while economic scarcity was a general condition of the rural sending family household, a number of other “push” conditions and factors operated to provide the critical impetus for the move. In other words, economic scarcity alone does not provide a sufficient picture of how rural women become garment workers. Economic scarcity operates in conjunction with other “push” factors, such as family conflicts, marital breakdown, problems of harassment and uncertain marriage prospects.

### 2. Marriage dynamics and the mobilization of women garment workers

The instability and uncertainty of marriage for women is an important dynamic underlying the mobilization of women into the

garment workforce. As I have noted, a significant proportion of the sending family households of the garment workers are female-headed, a condition that is related to the poverty of the households. Also, for some women, the decision to enter into garment work may be triggered by the experience of a failed marriage. A number of these marriages are dissolved immediately or shortly after they commence, often due to demands for dowry on the part of the bridegroom and his family. In general, the problem of dowry seems to play a critical role in the dynamics of garment work entry among single rural women. Further research and analysis is sorely needed on the issue of dowry inflation, in particular its causes and consequences for women.

In the event that the problem of dowry remains and perhaps even increases over time, it is possible that wage work before marriage may become a "normalized" life stage before marriage for a stratum of women in Bangladesh. That is, as is the case in some East Asian societies, it will come to be expected that young women work for a few years before marriage. Such a development will be more likely if employment opportunities such as that represented by the garment sector continue to develop. However, the achievement of a state of "normalization" of young women's garment work requires greater socio-cultural acceptance of garment work than is apparent at the present time. Particularly in the rural areas of Bangladesh, women's garment work continues to carry a certain stigma.

### 3. Community networks and the "pull" of garment work

It is perhaps stating the obvious to say that the entry into garment work does not occur in a social vacuum. Information and support from community members is a critical part of the garment entry process. Those who come from communities where garment work is an established course of action are more likely to enjoy the assistance of sending community members in the garment work entry process.

The information provided by community networks about garment work is effective in mobilizing women because of the distinctive opportunity that garment work represents for women. For many women in both urban and rural households, garment work is financially more lucrative than other available opportunities. But the perceived advantages of garment work cannot simply be understood in financial terms. Garment work has certain image and status connotations that make it attractive to some women. Garment work

is a job (*chakri*) or occupation; work is of more significance and status than informal income-generating activities. Few who actually work in garment factories would claim that these jobs are not taxing or restrictive in many ways. However, the accounts of garment workers suggest that garment work may be seen as less physically strenuous than other available employment opportunities. It has also developed a certain image and reputation that may be attractive to young women. Garment work connotes social and economic independence and, more generally, modernity.

#### 4. The absorption of women's wages into the household economy

As far as patterns of wage absorption into the household economy are concerned, a clear distinction is apparent between those workers who live with their sending family households and those who do not. For the former, wages are more likely to be absorbed into the collective household pot and used to meet household needs in a collective sense. Of course, this is not to say that conflicts over the control and use of wages are not part of the experiences of these women.

But for those who live apart from their sending family households, the pattern tends to be very different. In general, I found economic remittances to the sending family household to be a limited affair among the rural migrants. This is quite different from the situation noted by studies of "working daughters" in many other societies (Greenhalgh, 1988; Harevan, 1982; Ong, 1987; Tilly and Scott, 1978). As I have mentioned, this finding must be interpreted with caution, given the fact that most of the women interviewed have been working in the industry for a short period of time, usually under four years. Longitudinal studies that trace the remittances of workers over several years are needed. Nonetheless, I suggest that the absence of a pattern of regular remittances from the worker to her household reflects the attitudinal context in which rural migrant women tend to enter into garment work. An attitude of "she's taking care of herself" was a prevalent one. That is, the woman's entry into garment work is understood to be a means for her to take care of her own needs rather than those of the household.

Among garment workers, however, there is a widespread desire and even anticipation of eventually using earnings to help out the family. Perhaps a far more fundamental issue than attitudes is the fact that most of the women who did not live with their sending family

households had little left over from their paycheck after paying for their living expenses. In other words, even if they wished to send money home, they did not have the means to do so. Often neglected in current discussions of the garment industry is the point that becoming a garment worker, particularly for those who do not live with their families, requires some financial investment. The job of helper is essentially an informal apprenticeship for the position of sewing machine operator. Those who work as helpers can sustain themselves on their own income only with great difficulty. While the financial situation of women improves when they move into operator positions, most of those interviewed indicated that they had little or no surplus income, or money left over from their paycheck, once basic living costs were paid. Sending family households were thus an important economic resource and safety net for the rural migrant women. Also of note is that marriage continues to represent an important strategy of economic security for women.

## 5. Some policy implications

The mobilization of women into the garment industry in Bangladesh reflects the operation of deep-seated and long-term economic and socio-cultural shifts. In the coming years we are likely to see important changes in the garment industry, such as an increased demand for trained and skilled workers. Given the long-term and structural nature of the “push” factors that lead women to garment factory employment, it is recommended that steps be taken to ease the potential dislocation of women workers as a result of industry changes. Alternative wage employment opportunities as well as training and education programs can help to minimize the potential dislocation of women garment workers.

Many of the women who enter the garment industry are single rural migrants. Among the major problems faced by these women is that of safe and affordable housing in the city, as well as safe and affordable forms of transportation from the residence to the factory. Policy measures that address these concerns will contribute significantly to the well-being of the garment labour force. A related issue is that of sexual harassment in the workplace. It is recommended that factory managers institute a programme of education and enforcement of regulations against the harassment of workers.

## Endnotes

1. For a review and critique of how culture is emphasized as an explanatory factor in discussions of women in Bangladesh see Kabeer (1991) and White (1992).
2. Majumdar and Chaudhuri (1994) note that 49.1 per cent of the workers surveyed had been unemployed/at home prior to working in the garment sector, and 23.9 per cent had been students.
3. As far as household incomes, 15.3 per cent reported Tk 1,000 and below, 27.7 per cent between 1,000-2,000, 29.9 per cent between 2,000-3,000, 20.9 per cent between 3,000-5,000, and 7.5 per cent over 5,000. The occupations of household members included typist/clerk, garment worker, labourer (Majumdar and Chaudhuri, 1994).
4. Majumdar and Chaudhuri (1994:29) report 38.6 per cent of their respondents to be married, 54 per cent unmarried, 2.1 per cent widowed, 3.5 per cent divorced and 1.9 per cent abandoned.
5. It is theoretically possible for a worker to not live with her sending family household even when it is located in Dhaka, but this is rare.
6. While outside the scope of this paper, these different budgetary practices may have different implications for women's power, or the extent to which women derive power from their wage work (see Kabeer, 1995).
7. In this sample, seven of the women had mothers or older sisters who had worked as domestic servants, and 11 of the women had themselves worked as domestic servants.
8. The idea that the woman's income was being accumulated for her dowry expenses was presented despite the fact that the income of the women in all these cases was being used immediately to pay for living expenses. But the idea that the woman's income was used for a dowry savings pool also reflected the perception that when the family economic situation stabilized, the woman's income would indeed be diverted into such a pool, rather than being used for basic household expenses.
9. No one talked of keeping garment employment a secret from mothers or other older female family members. This is perhaps because men are more likely to be out of the home all day and thus do not miss the absence of the woman worker. It could also be because the opposition comes mainly from men rather than women family members.
10. For classifying categories of landlessness, I draw on those reported and used by the Analysis of Poverty Trends Project, BIDS as reported by Sen (1995). Landless households are those with less than 0.05 acres, functionally landless are those with 0.05 to 0.49 acres and marginal owners are those with 0.50 to 1.49 acres.

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# 6

## **Trade unions, gender issues and the ready-made garment industry of Bangladesh**

*Shamsul I. Khan<sup>1</sup>*

### **I. Introduction**

Various studies have pointed out that there has been a considerable expansion in female employment in Bangladesh during the last decade (Paul-Majumdar and Chaudhuri-Zohir, 1993; Bhuiyan, 1991; Wahra and Rahman, 1995). Female employment, due to both “push” and “pull” factors, has expanded in an unprecedented manner in the formal export-based sectors, particularly in ready-made garment (RMG) manufacturing. In July 1996, 2,357 garment factories were registered with the Bangladesh Garment Manufacturers and Exporters Association (BGMEA) (Nahar, 1996). The growth has indeed been phenomenal, since the ready-made garment industry began modestly as late as the 1970s.

However, the rapid growth in these female-labour-dominated, export-based manufacturing industries is now also raising new issues and concerns about evolving industrial relations in the RMG sector and their possible future consequences for wages and labour productivity in general and changing working conditions for the female labour force in particular. One particular reason for this concern is the possible organizational impact of the phasing out of the Multi-Fibre Agreement (MFA) on the workplace environment of the factories by the year 2005. One of the crucial factors behind the

boom in ready-made garment manufacturing in Bangladesh was the search by mostly East Asian countries, mainly in the late 1970s, for ways around the MFA. Through the MFA — first introduced in 1974 under the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT) — the United States, Canada and some West European countries sought to protect their own garment industries from cheap imports of garments from the developing countries.

Bangladesh, however, was able to escape the MFA import quotas because it was not perceived to be a particular threat to the industries of those countries. As a result, many East Asian firms, unable to export to countries like the US because their countries' quotas had already been exhausted, simply relocated to Bangladesh, either in the form of foreign direct investments (FDI), or as joint ventures, or even as “buying houses”. Instead of establishing backward linkages or developing indigenous raw material sectors, most of these firms preferred to import almost all their raw materials from their own countries. In other words, they used only the amply available cheap labour force of the country. These garments were then exported to the United States, Canada, and some West European countries as Bangladeshi goods, thereby avoiding import restrictions placed on goods from East Asian countries.

The owners of these enterprises utilized informalized labour recruitment and workplace policies, which included recruiting workers without proper “appointment letters” and providing the supervisory staff full authority to hire and fire semi-skilled casual workers (from other factories or unemployed) whenever necessary. Such practices enabled the owners to maintain their strong grip over management and labour relations and sought to rule out any kind of unionization.

Around the mid-1980s, when a new generation of Bangladeshi entrepreneurs — a majority of whom started operating primarily as local suppliers of these “buying houses” — joined the RMG manufacturing sector, they followed suit in terms of labour practices. With the exception of a few relatively new garment manufacturers, all preferred cheaply available imported raw materials. All of them also employed mainly unskilled teenage girls or young women, drawn primarily from the rural areas. There were three main reasons for this deliberate feminization of the work force: 1) it was perceived by the garment factory owners that, as Standing has already pointed out with reference to export-led industrialization in other Asian NICs, these poor women had been socially and economically oppressed for so long that they were certainly to have low “aspiration wages” when

they took up their jobs and also low “efficiency wages” once they were in employment (Standing, 1989); 2) since these women were already in a precarious situation due to their socioeconomic vulnerability, they were more likely than their male counterparts to work extra hours if necessary, and in case of any decline in their performances in terms of productivity, they were much easier to dismiss; 3) they were also perceived by most garment factory owners as docile, trustworthy, manageable, as well as less confrontational and therefore less susceptible to any anti-management propaganda by outsiders.

It would be interesting to note in this connection that, from the very outset, most RMG factory owners tried their best to keep the factory units as informalized as possible, because that would provide them with greater flexibility in terms of labour management, unit production and working hours, without significant social obligations to their workforce. Any kind of unionization, including in-house unionization, was also perceived as undesirable by most garment factory owners because, as they argued, at the formative phase of their manufacturing businesses they could not afford to be distracted by “unreasonable” workers’ demands and “unnecessary disruptions” by the trade union leaders who, at one point or other, “might try to pursue their own selfish agenda in the name of worker’s participation”. It is alleged by some trade union leaders that even in the very few factories where a kind of in-house unionization was allowed, the union leaders were hand-picked by the management who sooner or later became “the agents of the owners” in the name of “management-labour solidarity”.

It is with this backdrop that one has to analyze the future of labour-management relations in the RMG industries in Bangladesh in the new millennium and its consequences for labour productivity and gender equity. With the dismantling of the MFA and the consequent opening of the garment market to free trade, Bangladeshi garment manufacturers will have to compete in terms of price in the existing world market and will be likely to seek out additional cost-cutting measures. The possible consequences could be 1) locking the RMG sector, to a large extent, into a vicious cycle of low-wage, low-efficiency, and low-technology production; 2) a shrinking of the already scanty on-the-job training opportunities and other facilities for the predominantly female workers; 3) further deterioration of factory conditions.

However, the cost-cutting option could, in the long run, be like a Trojan horse for the manufacturers, since in an industrial sector

where labour costs are already among the lowest and where the working environment is in dire need of improvement, any such endeavour is bound to make the Bangladeshi manufacturer vulnerable to new types of non-tariff barriers in the name of humanitarian concerns, as happened earlier on the issue of child labour (Nahar, 1996). Therefore, for their enlightened self-interest, the RMG manufacturers from Bangladesh must find some ways of minimizing production costs without heavily clamping down on wages and guillotining the facilities available to the labour force. Their success in this respect would ultimately depend on whether or not they succeed in striking a balance between wage structures, the working environment and labour-management relations on the one hand, and labour productivity on the other. It is in this context that one has to consider the role of trade unions in the RMG manufacturing sector in Bangladesh. Although the post-Cold War debates on the consequences of globalization for trade and industrial policy reforms in developing countries seem to be far from settled, there is a growing consensus that those issues cannot be addressed in isolation from the broader debate on labour standards, trade unions and gender equity (Çagatay, 1996; Standing, 1989, 1990; Olukoshi, 1996; Khundker, 1997).

## 1. Relevance of the study

News reports published in leading vernacular and English dailies of the country in recent years suggest an increasing trend of physical assaults, *gherao*, demonstrations, rallies, work stoppages and lay-offs in the ready-made garment sector. Such “unhealthy” management-labour relations result in loss of wages for workers as well as loss of productivity. If no new *modus operandi* is evolved for institutionally resolving labour disputes, these could do incalculable damage to management-labour relations and the morale of both. Since it has not been possible, so far, to quantify the loss directly attributed to the existing poor industrial relations in the RMG sector, the specific impact of these deteriorating relations is still going largely unrecorded.

Despite the obvious problematic state of management-labour relations in the RMG enterprises in Bangladesh, no systematic effort has so far been made to understand the basic dynamics of industrial relations in the private sector in general and the problems of unionization in the female-dominated RMG sector in particular. There might be various reasons for an apparent lack of academic interest in management-labour relations in the private sector. However, the single most important reason seems to be that, so far, the role of the

trade unions in the private sector has remained quite peripheral in the overall political calculus of industrial management in Bangladesh. On the other hand, some large trade unions in the public sector, with their pervasive patron-client political nexus, play a dominant role in political decision making. In addition, the admixture of booty capitalism and patron-clientelism has created particular types of ruling elite in Bangladesh, known as neo-patrimonial, in which the power holders' arbitrary will has often become intermeshed with legal-rational organizations. This has, in effect, encouraged rent-seeking behaviour on the part of the ruling elite by granting special privileges to politically influential actors such as the trade union leaders in big public sector organizations who, in return, have served as support bases for those ruling elites both at local and national levels (Khan et al., 1996). Even nowadays, there is a general trend among the large trade unions in the public sector to remain affiliated, as long as it is possible, with different political parties so that they can use their political leverage in their courses of action whenever necessary.

Two important points must be noted here, however: one, this apparent politicization of trade unions in large public sector organizations has more to do with the structural ensemble of the Bangladeshi political parties — which have consistently failed to make the rent-seeking industry of Bangladesh subject to a diseconomy of scale — than with the functioning of the trade unions in the public sector. Therefore, the responsibility of transforming those affiliated trade unions in such a fashion that they become conducive to harmonious industrial relations lies primarily with the political leadership in Bangladesh. Two, not all the trade unions in the public sector are politically affiliated, and the percentage of formally unionized workers in the modern manufacturing sector is still between 5 and 7 per cent.

Given this background, it is no wonder that almost all the pioneering work on industrial relations in Bangladesh focuses specifically on issues related to the public sector (Sobhan and Ahmad, 1980; Ahmad, 1980; Quddus et al., 1982; Martuza, 1982; Islam, 1983; Mondal, 1992). In his paper on industrial relations in Bangladesh, Islam (1983) concludes that most problems in the labour front emanate from the government, which is both the law-maker and the largest industrial employer in the country. In the RMG sector, however, the government is culpable merely for remaining on the sidelines. In our view, the elastic supply of female labour, the threat of unemployment, and the negative attitude of management towards any kind of unionization are mainly responsible for the non-emergence of healthy

management-labour relations in this vital sector. Herein lies the point of departure of this work.

## 2. Methodology of the study

During the pre-testing, it was found that almost all existing and active trade unions were engaged in one way or other with some of the garment workers' federations. No unionization process was found that could sustain itself for a considerable period without the help of existing federations. The reasons were: 1) high turnover of basic unit workers and/or sympathizers — who are mostly female — from one factory to another for economic betterment; 2) inactivity of the basic unit workers and/or supporters after a certain period of time because of the fear of harassment by the management or due to inducement on behalf of the management for refraining from becoming supporters and/or members of any such union; 3) expulsion or dismissal of the basic unit union leaders by the management on flimsy grounds such as “misconduct”; and, 4) the so-called “voluntary restraint” shown by the unit union leaders after being “bought off” by the management or being threatened with physical violence by the hired ruffians of the owners.

We endeavored to interview the office bearers of all of the 72 RMG unit unions registered in the Dhaka Division by the office of the Registrar of Trade Unions of the Directorate of Labour, Government of Bangladesh. Despite our repeated attempts, however, we failed to interview any unit union leader directly on or around the factory premises. Most of the RMG factories remained open from 8 a.m. to 10 p.m., and very few factory workers were found free during that period. Almost all factories kept their gates locked during working hours, and their management would not allow us to talk to the workers, let alone union leaders, without prior permission from the owner. We therefore decided to follow a multi-stage sampling strategy, beginning with the federations.

However, since most of the federations, despite regulations, did not have proper sampling frames, i.e. office records of workers and/or units, we had to opt for non-random sampling. In this case it was a purposive sampling, and we took as many samples of the unit level unions from the federations as they could make available to us. The study was based on five types of samples: the first comprised the people who had been involved with the initiation of the unionization process in the RMG sector, namely, the office-bearers of both the garment federations and their unit unions; the second comprised the

people who were involved with the management in RMG enterprises, namely, the owners; the third comprised the officials of the Labour Directorate who were responsible for both monitoring and implementing various labour institutions and employment-related acts, as well as resolving those industrial disputes which could not be settled through collective bargaining procedures; the fourth comprised people from the compulsory dispute resolution machinery of the state who were primarily responsible for both arbitration and adjudication through formal judicial procedures; and the fifth comprised the “interested outsiders” who held positions of leadership in different working-class organizations. These organizations were found to be largely front organizations for various political parties. After carefully weighing all the merits and demerits of different kinds of interview techniques, we finally settled for non-formal interviews at each of the stages with different check-lists of queries. The interview process was concluded in October, 1996.

### 3. Plan of the study

This chapter consists of five sections. Following the introductory section, section II summarizes the history of the unionization process, the basic *ensemble* of the federations, as well as the role of the garment federations and their basic units in promoting the causes of the predominantly female labour force. Section III analyses general views as well as responses of the owners of various RMG enterprises to the initiatives of either the federations or of some workers in their respective factories for unionization. Section IV evaluates government policies towards labour in general, and towards the formation of federations of workers union and/or unit unions in particular. It also makes critical assessments of procedural activities as well as monitoring policies of both the offices of the Registrar of Trade Unions and Federations of Trade Unions, and the Chief Inspector of Factories and Establishments of the Directorate of Labour. In this connection, it also describes the legal framework for handling disputes with particular reference to the unionization process and issues related to the dismissal or other punitive measures taken against the office bearers of unit unions. The somewhat ambivalent relationship existing between the federations of the garment workers’ unions and the structured trade unions — meaning labour front organizations of various political parties — are illustrated in section V. Finally, section VI wraps up the study by bringing together the main conclusions derived from the previous sections.



## **II. David versus Goliath: Workers' mobilization and the unionization process**

### **1. Review of the federations of the garment workers' unions**

#### **a. The registered garment federations in Bangladesh**

As far as the office records of the Directorate of Labour is concerned, there should now be four registered federations of garment workers unions operating in Bangladesh. However, despite the existence of four federations on paper, our investigation suggested the existence of only two federations in reality, which we designate here as registered Federation A and registered Federation B in order to protect the confidentiality of our respondents. Registered Federation C is only partially active and is characterized by certain irregular labour-related activities, while registered Federation D seems to be defunct. It should be mentioned in this connection that after repeated attempts we failed to locate even the office of registered Federation D from the address that was submitted to the office of the Registrar of Trade Unions while applying for registration, and we failed to find out the whereabouts of its office bearers. All of the three active registered federations claimed to have sufficient numbers of unions at the unit levels. Most of the unit unions, they claimed, were established with their direct support. They extend, they stressed, all kinds of legal support to the workers of their unit unions in case of dismissal or any other wage or work-related disputes. They also claimed to have negotiated with the owners of some factories on behalf of their unit unions. Registered Federation A and registered Federation B further emphasized that they also provide paralegal and other job-related training to members and supporters at the unit union level.

#### **b. The non-registered garment federations in Bangladesh**

Beside the above-mentioned registered federations, we found from different sources, including newspaper reports, the names of 10 more non-registered federations which were purportedly involved with garment workers. However, we found that, among these 10 federations, only the one we designate non-registered Federation G was active on almost a full-time basis with various female labour-related activities — for instance providing medical facilities to female garment workers, running night and weekend schools, conducting paralegal and socio-political awareness-building programmes, extending legal support to individual workers and its affiliated unit

unions, etc. For four other federations, we failed, despite all our efforts, to trace either the office bearers or their offices or to find even one clue regarding their existence.

Of the remaining five non-registered federations, one is a comparatively new organization established by a former left-leaning female student leader, which had yet to start any significant activity at the time of the study. A federation we will designate non-registered Federation F is the second best organization among the non-registered federations in terms of organizational activity. Besides providing legal and institutional help to its unit unions, it also conducts, from time to time, it claims, various socio-political and paralegal awareness-building programmes for garment workers. The remaining three federations are mostly engaged in *mousumi* (seasonal) activities such as organizing rallies and demonstrations in front of factories or the National Press Club, arranging processions to the National Press Club, sending workers' delegations to the management on behalf of the garment workers in respective factories and so on in times of labour-management disputes.

**c. Interviews with office bearers**

We interviewed the Presidents and General Secretaries of the three active registered federations, whereas from the unregistered federations, we succeeded in interviewing the office bearers — Presidents or Vice-Presidents and/or General Secretaries — of only four federations. The reason for this is that the office bearers of some seasonally active (*mousumi*) federations were very busy with their work and other activities. This seemed to consist of participation in the election campaigns of different candidates contesting for national elections for the 7th Parliament at the time of our survey. Some others indirectly refused co-operation despite our repeated attempts to engage them. Consequently, we were able to interview the office bearers of only seven federations altogether. They are designated as the following:

1. Registered Federation A
2. Registered Federation B
3. Registered Federation C
4. Non-registered Federation E
5. Non-registered Federation F
6. Non-registered Federation G
7. Non-registered Federation H

**d. Tapping the gender issues within the federations/unions**

Besides the office bearers of the federations, who were mostly male, we also sat independently on several occasions with only the unit union leaders, who were mostly female, as well as other female members and supporters of the federations in or outside their office premises. During our group discussions with female members and supporters we asked particularly to what extent their own issues and sentiments — such as, for example, ensuring separate toilets and changing room facilities at the work place, fighting against sexual harassment, ensuring personal security and safety both in and outside the workplace, overcoming various hazards of long working hours, ensuring health and childcare facilities and so on — were echoed in the activities and demand charters of the federations.

We also wanted to verify whether any gender subordination existed in the hierarchy of the federations in terms of decision making. While most of the workers spoke positively about the inclusion of “all feasible women’s issues” in the activities and demand charters of the unions, their responses on issues related to gender subordination within the unions were varied. Some were quite ambivalent in their expression of opinions. Some accepted the prevalence of male domination within union leaderships as inevitable given the existing socio-political conditions in Bangladesh which, to their mind, were not conducive to women’s leadership, particularly when it came to industrial dispute resolution. For them, industrial disputes in Bangladesh are always confrontational, and therefore male leaders are better equipped to withstand the management in times of crisis. Some argued that given the opportunity and perhaps a little outside support, women workers would be equally able to lead their unions or federations. In support of their argument they pointed to the fact that both the President and the General Secretary of non-registered Federation G — a federation established with support from an American-based NGO — were women. For the majority of them, however, the issue of leadership within unions or federations did not really matter because the women workers constituted more than 90 per cent of their total membership.

**e. The garment federations: Formation and network**

During our interviews with both the federation leaders and general female members, the first thing we wanted to know was how their federations were established and whether there was any political or NGO connection during the inception of any of the federations. The reason for this query was our *a priori* assumption that the nature

of the predominantly female garment workers in the RMG sector was such that they were not in a position to provide their own leaders, be they at the federation or at the unit union level, because of their lack of experience as new entrants into formal employment, societal vulnerability, and the threat of unemployment, so that it would have been relatively difficult for them to form federations or unit unions without having some interested “outsiders” as their patrons. This assumption seemed to be supported, because legal, political and other support from either various political quarters or from a particular NGO seems to have played a vital role in the formation of most federations. Even the two out of seven federations which grew out of workers’ movements were initially backed by supporters of one left-leaning political party and a left-leaning structured trade union.

**f. Socio-political background of the founding leaders**

In order to have a clearer picture of the role played by interested male outsiders in the formation of these federations — whose membership comprised almost exclusively female garment workers — we wanted to know next about the socio-political background of the founding leaders. We were not surprised to find that very few garment workers, particularly female workers, were able to establish federations themselves. Among our seven respondent federations, only in one case (non-registered Federation G) did the leadership come originally from the garment workers themselves, and these leaders, incidentally, were female. However, we must reiterate here that a foreign NGO played a significant role, both in terms of finance and organizational support, in promoting the above-mentioned female leadership. In six other cases, the leadership came either directly from former and active male political activists of various centrist or left-leaning political parties, or from former student leaders or activists (again, mostly male) affiliated with student front organizations of different political parties.

It is interesting to note here that none of these political activists and former student leaders had anything to do with the RMG sector or the garment workers until they decided to get involved in garment federations. Some of them were interested in a new kind of trade unionism in this particular export-based private sector out of political conviction, and joined the union movement because of their interest in organizing the female workers oppressed in the labour process and improving labour conditions. However, others joined union organizations, as we understood, with long-term career ambitions in mind, and with the hope of being able to use these federations as

springboards for reaping the political-economic benefits resulting from increasing international support for NGOs in the developing world.

Other leaders, as per our observations, ventured into this new avenue of labour politics primarily to gain political advantage in their own political parties or in the student or labour front organizations of those parties where, otherwise, their status as activists and leaders would have remained rather marginal. The secondary reason for their venturing into RMG labour politics is, again, economic. With the possibility of the emergence of a larger private sector in the horizon, these leaders, by becoming a part of labour-management relationship in that sector, also want to have a say in the state of affairs of the country, where politics has already become a kind of business with two methods of exchange: money and connection. In fact, during interviews, most of the federation leaders blamed each other for misusing their labour organizations for their own personal interests. Some even called the other federations' leaders *agents provocateurs* of owners.

**g. Sources of finance of the federations**

Our next area of interest was the sources of finance of garment federations. We hypothesized that a vulnerable financial base might have been one of the reasons that federation leaders, as it is often alleged by some of the federation leaders themselves, readily fell for graft. During interviews, we were repeatedly told by most federation leaders that the overall financial situation of the federations was not very sound, but were also told that they had been extending various legal and other material support to their unit unions.

During our interview, when we asked the seven respondent federations how they met the costs incurred for supporting unit unions, non-registered Federation E mentioned annual subscriptions by worker-members as its only source of financial earnings. Registered Federation B and registered Federation C identified workers' subscriptions along with financial contributions from friends and well-wishers as its sources of finance. Non-registered Federation F stated membership fees as its only source of finance, while registered Federation A and non-registered Federation H reported that their money came from friends and well-wishers. Only non-registered Federation G reported that it received financial assistance regularly from a US-based NGO. Its leaders expect this NGO to continue to support it financially until it completes the development of its institutional infrastructure and becomes financially solvent.

Two points seem to be worth noting here. First, although four federations mentioned worker's contributions and annual subscriptions as their main sources of finance, the amount, as is clear from their modes of subscription discussed below, is so meagre that it hardly accounts for their stated activities and amount of incurred expenditures. This suggests that they must be receiving funds from elsewhere that they do not want to disclose. Second, though half of our respondent federations were established through the direct initiative and support of various political organizations and their affiliated trade unions, none of them gave any indication of receiving any amount of financial help from those political organizations. When we asked them directly about the source of the money needed to meet their regular expenses, most were vague. Pressed, almost all of them mentioned that they receive, from time to time, certain amount of financial assistance from what they called "friends" and "well-wishers". They, however, categorically refused to reveal the names and whereabouts of these donors.

In order to have a clearer picture of the sources of finance of our respondent federations, we asked additional questions regarding the mode of subscription of the members of those federations. We found out at this stage that the mode of subscription varies from federation to federation. Non-registered Federation G, for example, takes Tk 10 per person as admission fee from all workers. Non-registered Federation E, on the other hand, claims that it charges a monthly subscription fee for general members. However, both the President and the General Secretary of this federation would not reveal the exact amount of the subscription, saying only that it was a "pittance". Registered Federation B usually takes monthly subscriptions at a rate of Tk 2, but in times of any financial crisis of the workers, the federation accepts any "token amount" as subscription.

Unlike these federations, registered Federation C and non-registered Federation H do not have any hard and fast rules regarding subscription from its workers. They normally charge membership fees and a "small amount of subscription" while granting new membership to a garment worker. Although there is a provision for annual subscription afterwards, it is not binding for members. Non-registered Federation F also has a provision for an annual membership fee at the rate of Tk 10. However, its President made it clear to us that, due to the poverty of the workers, the federation hardly collects any subscription from its members. As for registered Federation A, it does not have any provision whatsoever for collecting subscriptions from workers. As its General Secretary pointed out, considering the grave

financial conditions of most garment workers, one could hardly expect them to pay membership fees and/or subscriptions.

Obviously, most of the federations are reluctant to demand significant membership fees from garment workers. Most leaders of federations are of the opinion that garment workers might consider the provisions for membership fees as well as subscriptions as added burdens on their lives which, in turn, might discourage them from seeking memberships in federations. Almost all the leaders of our respondent federations agreed that the membership fees and subscriptions in their respective federations were merely a token, which they were obliged to keep at least on paper for submitting their yearly returns as per the requirements of the Industrial Relations Rules, 1977 [Section 5 (a & b)]. During audits, we were told by those leaders, what they present as membership fees or subscriptions to the officials of the Department of Labour are actually “donations” or “help” which they receive from time to time from their “friends” and “well-wishers”. The federations normally do not keep any official document on such donations.

#### **h. Problems of formation and sustainability: Examples of our respondent federations**

Starting with merely nine clothing factories in 1977, the number of Bangladesh's garment industries reached the impressive figure of 2,400 by the year 1995. However, until recently there has not been any significant trade unionism in this particular export-oriented sector, despite the fact that the Industrial Relations Rules of 1977 clearly provided a *modus operandi* as well as legal guidelines regarding the formation of both the federations of trade unions and their unit level representations. The reasons for this rather slow growth of unionism in the RMG industries could be numerous: lack of job security of the garment workers due to the non-issuing of proper appointment letters by the owners, the heavy workload of the workers, widespread illiteracy, lack of consciousness, particularly among the female workers regarding their legal rights, lack of professional attitude, professional background of the garment owners, and so on. In addition, as we were told by the federation leaders, numerous bureaucratic impediments make the formation of unions very difficult. In this context, they particularly mentioned the problems they faced while trying to get their federations registered. Registered Federation A, for example, was formed in 1982 but was registered as a federation only in 1984. The second oldest federation, both among the registered and non-registered categories, seems to be non-registered Federation

E which was formed sometime in the mid-1980s. When we asked them why this federation could not get registered as a federation with the Directorate of Labour despite its formation such a long time ago, they put the blame squarely on the officials of the Directorate of Labour. On the other hand, the Labour officials claimed that it did not even try to get the registration since it did not have sufficient unit unions as required under the Industrial Relations Ordinance, 1969 [Section 3 (d)] for getting registration as a federation.

Among the two other federations that have existed for little more than five years, the registered one, registered Federation B, has not yet completed its five years of existence “officially”, while the non-registered one, non-registered Federation F, has been existing, as its leaders claimed, for more than six years. Here too, when we asked the leaders why it was not yet registered, its leaders cited some unspecified “procedural difficulties” but added that it would get registration soon. Of the remaining two, the registered one, registered Federation C, obtained its registration only in early 1996 though, according to its leaders, it had been functioning for quite some time before that. Non-registered Federation G, on the other hand, at first tried to form a “National Federation” combining all the federations; but its attempt failed, its leaders claimed, due to the objections of the leaders of other federations. Currently, it is in the process of forming various unit unions before it emerges as a registered federation.

**i. Current unit unions under each respondent federation**

According to the office records of the office of the Chief Inspector of Factories and Establishments, Directorate of Labour, there are more than 2,000 RMG factories in Dhaka city, while the current number of the existing unit level trade unions in Dhaka is, according to the figure provided by the office of the Registrar of Trade Unions, only 72. Assuming that there is only one trade union in each factory, this means that only around 3.6 per cent of RMG factories in Dhaka city have registered unit unions. However, the statistics given by the federations regarding their existing unit level trade unions, which is around 130, does not tally with the above-mentioned figure. Our respondent federations claim that they have around 92 unit unions in Dhaka whereas the records of the office of the Registrar of Trade Unions put the figure at around 22.

One can, of course, raise questions regarding the validity of the statistics provided by the office of the Registrar of Trade Unions. There may be more than one union in some factories, since having a 30 per cent representation of workers in a factory is enough to form a unit



**Table 1: Current unit unions under each federation**

| Name of respondent federations | No. of unit unions that federations claim | No. of unit unions as per Labour Office records |
|--------------------------------|---|---|
| Registered Federation A        | 27  | 11  |
| Registered Federation B        | 11  | 5   |
|                                | (Altogether 17 in BD)                     |   |
| Registered Federation C        | 28  | 6   |
| Non-registered Federation E    | 13  | no Office record available                      |
| Non-registered Federation F    | 7   | no Office record available                      |
|                                | (Altogether 10 in BD)                     |   |
| Non-registered Federation G    | 3   | no Office record available                      |
| Non-registered Federation H    | 3   | no Office record available                      |

union. There may also be some genuine unions in some factories which have not been properly recorded by the office of the Registrar of Trade Unions. Even then, the number is still quite low, given the fact that there are already quite a few garment workers' federations operating in and around Dhaka city. This indicates that, although most of these federations maintain some contacts with garment workers in many factories, and though they might have some members and supporters in some of those factories, only a few federations have been able to muster enough support to form unit unions in those factories. However, since the federations do need to show the enrollment of some unit level unions to get themselves registered with the Directorate of Labour as federations, a few non-registered federations might be naming at the same time some unit unions as their own.

**j. Federation-unit union interactions: A general picture**

Our next area of interest during the survey was to find out how and to what extent our respondent federations were interacting with the garment workers in general and with their basic units in particular. Table 2 contains information regarding the modes of contact of the federations with their unit union.

As will be evident from the table below, most of the federation leaders communicate with the workers and unit union leaders, most of whom are female, either by meeting them near their factory premises during their lunch breaks or by visiting them at their houses during their free time. However, it becomes quite difficult to meet workers and unit leaders when they work from 8 a.m. to 10 p.m. In that case, the workers and unit leaders can come to the federation offices only on Fridays and other holidays. In fact, these long working

hours often keep many female workers away from any union-related activities and act as a hindrance to the workers' participation in union-related activities. Only in some factories where they are not required to work for more than one shift, do those female workers come to the federation offices regularly (normally in the afternoons). However, most of the female unit union leaders we met during our interviews were "temporarily" out of work — they had either been sacked or were forced by the management to give up their jobs for being involved in union-related activities.

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**Table 2: Modes of contact with general workers and/or unit union leaders**

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| Modes of contact  | No. of respondent federations |
|---|-------------------------------|
| 1) Making door to door contacts; plus 2) Meeting workers and unit union leaders at different venues near their factories during their free time; plus 3) Workers and unit union leaders come to meet federation leaders at some stipulated places on Fridays. | 2                             |
| 1) Making door to door contacts; plus 2) Meeting workers and unit union leaders near factory premises during their free time; plus 3) Workers and unit union leaders come to federation offices during their free time  | 2                             |
| 1) Making door to door contacts; plus 2) Meeting workers and unit union leaders near factory premises during their free time; plus 3) Workers and unit union leaders come to federation offices during their free time or whenever they require any help.     | 1                             |
| 1) Meeting the workers and unit union leaders near factory premises during their free time; plus 2) Workers and unit union leaders make their own contacts whenever necessary.  | 2                             |

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The next thing we wanted to know from the federations was what type of help they have so far rendered to their unit unions. Their responses are summarized in Table 3.

According to the federation leaders, all the respondent federations have provided legal help to the unit union members. All of them have also provided institutional support to the unit union members in organizing labour movements. These were, as we were told later by our respondent unit union members, the two most

important factors which have influenced the unit union members as well as other garment workers — particularly female workers — to look at the federations for support in times of crisis: be it unlawful dismissals, labour-management disputes, or even lay-offs. In all probability, it is this access to organized institutional support that has influenced general garment workers, as will be explained in Table 4, to seek the support of federations while forming unit level unions. According to the federation leaders, three of the seven respondent federations have provided financial assistance to the unit union leaders in times of crisis, while five of the seven have also negotiated or have tried to negotiate with the owners on behalf of their unit union leaders and members.

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**Table 3: Kinds of help federations rendered to unit unions**

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| Types of help   | No. of respondent federations |
|---|-------------------------------|
| 1) Legal help; plus 2) Financial help; plus 3) Providing institutional support in organizing labour movements; plus 4) Educating the general workers and unit union leaders regarding relevant labour laws in Bangladesh; plus 5) Negotiating with owners on behalf of the workers and unit unions. | 3                             |
| 1) Legal help; plus 2) Providing institutional support in organizing labour movements; plus 3) Negotiating with the owners on behalf of the workers and unit unions.  | 2                             |
| 1) Legal help; plus 2) Providing institutional support in organizing labour movements.  | 2                             |

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However, not all female unit union members are happy with the idea of delegating their right to negotiate to the federation leaders. In fact, this has remained the most controversial aspect of federation-unit union relations. On the one hand, most female garment workers feel technically too weak to negotiate, both individually and through their unit unions, because owners are often quite autocratic and patrimonial in handling industrial disputes. Female garment workers thus welcome the intervention of federation leaders on their behalf in disputes with the management, both in bipartite negotiations and extended conciliation, as well as compulsory adjudication. On the other hand, many female garment workers and unit union leaders confessed to the author that they are apprehensive about some male middle-class federation leaders, who might be pursuing their own

interests rather than pursuing the interests of the female garment workers and their unit unions.

Some garment factory owners have labelled some federation leaders as “trade unionist brokers” who “milk” both sides — the RMG workers and/or their unit unions and the owners — in the name of solving industrial disputes. According to them, in times of industrial conflicts, some of these federation leaders take money from the owners to “buy off” the prospective male troublemakers among the garment workers (interestingly, most of the owners have confessed to the author that it is much easier to bribe a male leader than a female one). At the same time, they also try to squeeze money from mostly female workers by promising them protection from harassment from members of the law enforcing agencies or the hired musclemen of the owner.

Although some of our respondent federations reported that they try to educate female garment workers and their unit union leaders regarding their legal rights and obligations through various workshops, group discussions and other means, during our survey we observed only non-registered Federation G to be conducting weekly classes on various legal, social, and other issues related to female workers. The leaders of this federation, however, confessed that they often encountered difficulties in getting enough female garment workers to participate in the courses.

#### **k. Formation of the unit unions**

Unit unions in the RMG sector in Bangladesh are formed in two ways. One, the federations try to form unions in as many factory units as they can, so that, as umbrella bodies of various unit unions, they can emerge as legitimate bargaining agents in this specific area of the private sector. In this process, the federation leaders themselves organize the workers in various units, secretly obtaining the signatures of 30 per cent of workers interested in joining unit unions and doing all the necessary legwork (including, they claim, bribing the officials at the office of the Registrar of Trade Unions). Unit unions can also be formed subsequent to the involvement of federations in non-unionized labour disputes: for instance, when workers of a factory face problems such as delay in payment of wages and overtime benefits, scrapping of holidays, or deterioration of the factory environment, they come to the federations for assistance. The federations then provide various kinds of assistance, such as organizing demonstrations and moving the matter to relevant labour courts and so on. Thereafter, they slowly explore the possibility of forming unit unions in the factory, and then

try to persuade workers to join by explaining how easy it would be for them to handle industrial disputes if they had their unions there. When the workers become interested, they explain to them the required procedures for obtaining registration, and if necessary, provide them legal, institutional and other support. Two of our respondent federations reported forming unit unions through federation initiatives only, while seven reported that unit unions were joint initiatives of both the federation and unit levels.

Theoretically speaking, of course, the workers of any factory can form their unit unions independently if they can muster support from 30 per cent of the workers of that factory and get their signatures on the "Form D" before submitting it to the office of the Registrar of Trade Unions. The Registrar, on being satisfied that the signatories have complied with all the requirements of the Industrial Relations Ordinance of 1969 for being registered as a trade union, is supposed to register the trade union in a prescribed register and issue a registration certificate in the prescribed form within a period of 60 days from the date of receipt of the application. However, as can be seen from our survey, this procedure has rarely taken place in Bangladesh, first because very few of the garment workers, most of whom are females and rural migrants, are aware of the procedures regarding the formation of trade unions. Second, even if they know the procedure, they are worried about possible harassment from the management. Nevertheless, the author can attest that some workers did try in certain factories to form independent trade unions. But after some time, they were forced to seek the assistance of different federations for various reasons, including the bureaucratic hassles involved in unionization. It is, therefore, no wonder that five of our seven respondent federations were formed through the joint initiatives of both the general unit level workers and federations. In the second part of this section we will venture to elaborate different issues related to unit level unions.

## 2. Review of the unit level unions

### a. **The respondent unit unions of our survey**

As was mentioned in section I, we tried to interview as many female unit union leaders as could be made available to us by the federations. Since all but one of our respondent federations claimed to have more than seven unit unions in Dhaka, we at first decided to interview at least seven unit unions from each federation. However, we were able to interview the office bearers of only 28 unit unions.

Some cancelled their appointments again and again, while many unit union leaders simply did not turn up for interviews. Table 4 indicates the number of unit unions of our respondent federations that we were able to interview.

**Table 4: Unit unions of our respondent federations**

| Name of respondent federations | No. of unit unions interviewed |
|--------------------------------|--------------------------------|
| Registered Federation A        | 5                              |
| Registered Federation B        | 5                              |
| Registered Federation C        | 3                              |
| Non-registered Federation E    | 3                              |
| Non-registered Federation F    | 7                              |
| Non-registered Federation G    | 4                              |
| Non-registered Federation H    | 1                              |

**b. Formations of the unit unions and their current status**

We hypothesized that one of the most important reasons that female garment workers could not form independent unit unions was their reluctance to be involved in any kind of organized industrial dispute with management unless they were forced to do so. We were proven to be correct on this account. The reason is very simple. Coming from different rural backgrounds marked by pervasive poverty, widespread illiteracy, and various kinds of social exploitation, most of the female garment workers were quite happy at the beginning merely to get jobs in various urban and suburban localities which, for the first time, provided them with the hope of leading decent lives. That is why, at the beginning, it did not bother them much that their wages were quite low, and their working environment not very congenial, nor were they troubled at not having proper appointment letters. Being unaware of modern industrial concepts such as job security, they simply tolerated the prevailing unhealthy working conditions, hoping to get better wages later by working overtime and, in the process, acquiring on-the-job training. But when these hopes were dashed by the attitudes of some garment factory owners, they started thinking of organizing against the management in order to take certain collective action like *gherao*, demonstrations, and/or work stoppages. It was at this stage that they started contacting the federations, some of whom were already in touch with some of their compatriots, to seek support for their future course of action, including the secret formation of unit unions.

Two thirds (19) of our respondent unit unions were formed with the direct initiative and support of the federations. Even those unit unions (nine) which tried to form their unions independently at the initial stage, had to seek the help and support of a federation at one stage or other. Only one succeeded in getting registration but even it could not sustain the union for long because the owners simply fired the office bearers on charges of “misconduct”, even though the Industrial Relations Ordinance of 1969 (Section 15) protected their jobs as trade union leaders. Subsequently, the office bearers, with the help of a federation, non-registered Federation F, filed a case at the First Labour Court. The case is still awaiting judgment.

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**Table 5: Present conditions of the respondent registered unions**

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| Present conditions of unit unions            | Number of registered unit unions |
|--|----------------------------------|
| Still active                                 | 2                                |
| Still registered but not active              | 8                                |
| Claim to be registered but have no committee | 1                                |
| Cases pending in labour courts               | 2                                |

---

The federation and unit union leaders indicated in interviews that, among the 28 respondent unit unions, only 13 unions (12 from the 19 federation-initiated unions and one from the nine independently formed unions) were able to complete the full registration process and had succeeded in getting registration (Table 5). In the two factories where the units unions were still found to be active despite continuous harassment on the part of the management, the unit union leaders were successful in getting recognition from their owners as legitimate collective bargaining agents. Not only that, they have also successfully negotiated with the owners on behalf of the workers on issues related to timely payment of wages and improvement of the working environment in their respective factories.

Among the 14 unit unions where registration procedures were claimed to be fruitless by the federation and unit union leaders, in five cases the registration procedure was stopped due to “harassment” by the owner. In the remaining nine cases, the applications for registration were rejected by the office of the Registrar of Trade Unions on what the federation and unit union leaders called “flimsy grounds”.

The primary reasons for inactivation and non-existence of nine unit unions, as portrayed in Table 6, were both the voluntary migration (for better job prospects) and forced migration (due to the fear of harassment) of the office bearers of various unit unions.

**Table 6: Causes of inactivation of the unit unions**

| Causes of inactivation   | No. of respondent unions |
|--|--------------------------|
| Migration of the office bearers for better job prospects                                   | 2                        |
| Owners forced the office bearers to leave the factory through various intimidation tactics | 1                        |
| Office bearers “voluntarily” became inactive due to the fear of harassment by the owner    | 4                        |
| Transfer of factory ownership and/or the venue of the factory                              | 1                        |
| Office bearers were bribed by the owner to become inactive                                 | 1                        |

**c. The formation, activities, and achievements of the unit unions**

It is clear from Table 7 that most garment workers became interested in forming unions mainly to achieve their legally sanctioned fundamental rights, including timely wages, proper remuneration for overtime, maternity and other leave, etc. Since, in the absence of proper collective bargaining bodies, they were left at the mercy of the owners for realizing their goals, they found no other way but to form unions with or without the help of the federations. Their unionization process, therefore, is different from that occurring in the public sector, where political calculations are crucial.

**Table 7: Events that led to the formation of unit level unions**

| Causes of formation   | No. of respondent unit unions |
|---|-------------------------------|
| 1) Delaying the payment of monthly wages; plus 2) Non-payment of bonus and overtime benefits; plus 3) Deterioration of working environment; plus 4) No provision for holidays, maternity and sick leave; plus 5) Physical and verbal harassment by the owner. | 12                            |
| 1) Delaying the payment of monthly wages; plus 2) Non-payment of bonus and overtime facilities; plus 3) Deterioration of working environment; plus 4) No provision for holidays.  | 8                             |
| 1) Delaying the payment of monthly wages; plus 2) Deterioration of working environment.   | 8                             |



Among the 13 registered unit unions, only seven were able to place any demand charter to their management. The other six unit unions not only failed to place any demand charter but also became inactive within a short span of time. In the above-mentioned seven units, the demand charters were placed before the management on many occasions. The main demands were:

- 1) Payment of wages and overtime remuneration in due time;
- 2) Payment of two Eid bonuses and other regular due incentives;
- 3) Provisions for maternity leave with half payments for a period of three to six weeks depending on the health conditions of the female workers;
- 4) Provisions for childcare facilities for the female workers;
- 5) Provision for sick and casual leave with and/or without half payments depending on the nature of urgency of the matter;
- 6) Improving hygienic conditions and working environment in the factories;
- 7) Ensuring adequate toilets and dining facilities for the workers;
- 8) Provisions for security for female workers while returning home at night;
- 9) Issuance of appointment letters and ensuring job security;
- 10) Payment of wages according to the tripartite charter if on minimum wage scale;
- 11) Re-appointment of workers who were fired during industrial disputes with the management in factory units.

In two factories, after the submission of the demand charter, the owners not only rejected the charter outright but also purged the workers whom they thought were behind the formulation of the charters. In five factories, the owners, after long struggle and a few *gherao* and work stoppages, met some demands of the charters. Those demands were timely payment of wages and overtime remuneration, payment of two Eid bonuses, improvement of hygienic conditions, providing adequate toilet and dining facilities, and re-appointment of fired workers. In one factory, the owner even agreed to provide childcare facilities and to issue appointment letters. However, in most cases, after a certain period of time, owners reneged on the agreement. Nevertheless, in three factories the workers were successful, through agitation as well as litigation, in forcing the owners once more to meet some of their demands. No owner, however, agreed to provide maternity leave to female workers with half payment. They agreed, at best, to grant unpaid leave to pregnant female workers and to ensure

that their jobs would be restored should they decide to come back to the factory again.

**d. Federations' and unit unions' opinions regarding linking wages with labour productivity**

According to the leaders of our respondent federations and unit unions, wages in the private sector are supposed to be fixed through the collective bargaining process. However, due to the inadequacy of the collective bargaining procedure in the RMG industries, wages must be fixed by the Minimum Wages Board (MWB) established in 1957 and reconstituted in 1961. Most of our respondent federations and unit unions did not object to the idea of linking the wage structure to the labour productivity ratio. But they emphasized that one of the preconditions for that would be to ensure first of all that the garment workers are paid what they called a "fair wage" which should on no account be less than the minimum wage. In other words, while the lower limit of the "fair wage" must be the minimum wage, the upper limit could be determined by the level of efficiency of the workers on the one hand, and a fair return on capital to the management on the other. It is only within this framework that they are willing to accept wages on an "out piece" basis.

### **III. Battling the hydra: The owners' response to unionization in the RMG sector**

It goes without saying that the structure of ownership and management determines both the structure of trade unions and the mechanisms for resolving industrial disputes. In the emerging formal private sector of Bangladesh, particularly in the field of RMG industries, the owners, who generally tend to be patrimonial as a class, still try to resolve industrial conflicts through autocratic and unilateral decisions. One reason for this could be a historically sustained in-built authoritarianism in all spheres of Bangladesh's entrepreneurial class. The earlier dominance of the semifeudal and large land owners has influenced the attitudes of most of the industrialists of Bangladesh in their dealings with subordinates and workers. Just as the agricultural workers were treated as virtual serfs on the landed estates of *jamindars* a few decades ago, so workers in the RMG enterprises, with a few exceptions, are still dealt with by a mixture of authoritarian and paternalistic managerial practices. Against such a backdrop, it is no wonder that most garment factory owners do not have a positive

attitude toward unionization in the RMG industries.

The industrialists' apprehensions are also based in part on their perceptions of industrial conflicts in the public sector, particularly in terms of the workers' organizational strength and the militancy of some of their professional trade union leaders, which is in turn linked with these leaders' political aspirations. It would not be inappropriate to mention here that the workers and their unions in the public sector industries of Bangladesh often display the characteristics of early industrial development, including multiplicity of unions, serious inter-union rivalries, and allegiance of workers to different unions (Khan, 1986). But then, the reason for the multiplicity of unions as well as inter-union rivalries may partly lie, as Khundker correctly points out, in the management structure of the public sector industries, which is often centralized and is normally in the hands of civil servants. Civil servants are generally perceived as being unsympathetic to labour causes by union leaders. And this, along with a somewhat restricted collective bargaining mechanism — since wages and other benefits are determined by National Pay Commissions (for government and public sector employees) and National Wages and Productivity Commissions (for industrial workers in the public sector) — influence the trade union leaders to rely heavily on political parties in pursuing their objectives (Khundker, 1997).

There is also another factor which one needs to take into consideration in discussing the state of affairs of the unions in both public and private sectors — their lack of funds. In Bangladesh, workers generally pay their union dues only at those times when their demands are being raised. Some union leaders therefore try to raise disputes simply for the purpose of refurbishing their union funds.

At any rate, in order to cross-check the information provided by the federation and unit union leaders regarding the issues related to unionization, as well as to get an impression of their possible response in this sensitive matter, we tried to interview the owners of all of our 28 respondent factory units. However, we were able to interview only 11 garment factory owners. Ten owners flatly refused to give any appointment for interviews. Nor were they interested in either contradicting or confirming the information provided by the federation and unit union leaders regarding industrial disputes in their respective factories despite our sending that information to them in writing. Two owners indirectly refused to give interviews by not keeping appointments. Five owners were out of the country during our survey and could not be contacted.

## 1. Emergence of industrial conflict: unions vs. the owners

### a. The unionization process and the owners

Labour-management relations in the RMG industries are affected by a lack of mutual trust between union leaders and owners. That is why union leaders always try to pursue their unionization process as secretly as possible, while the garment factory owners always try to find out what the federations and garment workers in respective factories are up to. In fact, most of the male federation leaders as well as female unit union leaders whom we interviewed claimed that in order to remain informed of the activities of the federations and their activists, most garment factory owners place people in crucial places both in the factories and at the Directorate of Labour. Tables 8 and 9 explain at what stages and how the owners — according to the federation and unit union leaders — came to know about the unionization processes of our 28 respondent federations and unit unions. It should be mentioned here that none of our respondent owners contradicted the information provided in Tables 8 and 9, which was provided by the federation leaders. In other words, the owners implicitly corroborated the information of Tables 8 and 9 regarding the unionization process.

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**Table 8: The stage at which the owner came to know about the unionization**

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| Stage that owners learned about unionization  | Number of respondent unit unions |
|---|----------------------------------|
| Before submitting the application to the office of the Registrar of Trade Unions        | 7                                |
| After submitting the application to the office of the Registrar of Trade Unions         | 15                               |
| After getting Registration Certificate from the office of the Registrar of Trade Unions | 6                                |

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Table 8 supports the contention of our respondents that in seven factories the owners had employed *agents provocateurs* so that they could know beforehand which workers of their factories were trying to form unit unions, in order to force those workers out from the factories before they could even submit applications for registration to the office of the Registrar of Trade Unions. It was important for the

owners that, if they had to go for this kind of pre-emptive attack, they did so before the submission of the application for registration, because once the application for registration was submitted, it would have become not only more difficult for the owners to stop the process of unionization but any attempt to do so could have also made them subject to legal prosecution for misconduct under Article 15 of the Industrial Relations Ordinance, 1969. As Table 9 further reveals, the owners also had their informants in the office of the Registrar of Trade Unions, who informed the owners as soon as they learned about the submission of the applications for registration. In most cases, the owners then traced the office bearers who were involved in the unionization process and tried to stop the process in various ways.

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**Table 9: How the owners came to know about unionization procedures**

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| Channels through which owners came to know about unionization                      | No. of respondent unit unions |
|--|-------------------------------|
| Through the agents of the owners among the workers                                 | 7                             |
| Through unofficial channels of the office of the Registrar of Trade Unions         | 15                            |
| Informed by the union leaders themselves after obtaining Registration Certificates | 6                             |

---

We were informed by federations and/or unit level leaders that in the cases that the owners were not informed beforehand of the unionization process, either the office bearers of the unit unions or the federations bribed officials at the Registrar of Trade Unions, or the federations had such political backing that the officials of the Registrar of Trade Unions did not dare to disclose the information to owners. The general response of the owners, as described to us by the federation and unit union leaders, are discussed in Table 10. The majority of our respondent owners did not agree with the information provided in Table 10. Some owners did not contradict the authenticity of the information, but claimed that they themselves never resorted to any such activity.

The findings below clearly show that owners used all sorts of possible methods to stop the unionization process, and also to destroy, wherever they could, the unit unions. To achieve their goals, they first tried to employ pressure tactics, including verbal threats, physical

assault, and intimidation through hired musclemen. If these pressure tactics failed to bear any fruit, they tried to stop the process simply by bribing influential federation and/or unit union leaders. When that ploy did not work, they started filing criminal charges against union leaders so that they could harass them with the help of the police. Since most of the unit union leaders were female and also often poor, they could not withstand such pressure indefinitely. In the end, many unit leaders left the factories. The unions, if constituted but not yet registered, ceased to exist. In other cases, the owners simply dismissed union leaders. It was often quite easy for owners to dismiss union leaders because many union leaders did not have proper appointment letters, and hence no proof that they were working in a particular factory. If the unions were registered, the owners sometimes

**Table 10: Immediate response of the owners toward unionization process**

| Owners' reactions to unionization process   | Number of respondent unions |
|---|-----------------------------|
| 1) Verbal threats; plus 2) Physical assaults; plus 3) Threatening through hired musclemen; plus 4) Filing false criminal charges; plus 5) Dismissing main leaders without compensation on charges of "gross insubordination".       | 6                           |
| 1) Verbal threats; plus 2) Physical assaults; plus 3) Threatening through hired musclemen; plus 4) Firing the main leaders with compensation on charges of "misconduct".  | 3                           |
| 1) Verbal threats; plus 2) Physical assaults; plus 3) Bribing the main leaders.   | 2                           |
| 1) Verbal threats; plus 2) Physical assaults; plus 3) Threatening through hired musclemen; plus 4) Police harassment with false criminal charges; plus 5) Compelling the main leaders, through various means, to give up their jobs | 4                           |
| 1) Verbal threats; plus 2) Physical assaults; plus 3) Threatening through hired musclemen; plus 4) Firing the main leaders with compensation on charges of "misconduct"; plus 5) Fulfilling some demands.                           | 5                           |
| 1) Laying-off.  | 3                           |
| 1) Transferring ownership and/or selling factories.   | 2                           |
| 1) Forming counter unions.  | 3                           |

tried to fire union leaders with packages of three months' wage compensation. However, in some cases where the unions were very strong and the general workers were united, the owners either declared a lock-out of the factories or met, at least for the time being, some demands of the workers.

**b. The owners' attitudes toward trade unions**

Irrespective of their educational, socio-cultural and economic background, most of the garment factory owners seem to have a very negative attitude toward the existing garment federations and their affiliated unit unions. The root cause of this negative attitude seems to be grounded in their perceptions of trade unionism which, again, emanates from what they have seen of the activities of the trade unions in the public sector. According to most of our respondent owners, the Bangladeshi entrepreneur involved in RMG industries at the moment faces a few common labour-related problems. These are: 1) lack of discipline among workers, 2) workers not committed to productivity, 3) illegal and unreasonable demands placed by representatives of garment workers, 4) an unfavourable labour code that specifies privileges but does not spell out duties of workers, 5) politicization of trade unions, 6) multiplicity of federations and unit level unions, and consequent rivalries between them, and 7) too many work stoppages.

Under these conditions, according to some of our respondent garment factory owners, the situation is not yet ripe to allow full-fledged unionism in a nascent industrial sector like RMG. However, three of our respondent owners claimed that they would have no objection to unit unions if they were formed independently, and not through what they called the instigation of outsiders or "professional trade unionists". But before these unions are formed, the workers must be properly educated regarding existing labour laws, basic rights, and inalienable obligations so that they cannot easily be manipulated by "professional unionists" with vested interests. These owners suggested that NGOs might like to develop awareness-building programmes for female garment workers which could provide education about their legal rights. They also suggested that there should be provision for on-the-job training programmes for garment workers but that these should be linked to their duration of service.

Most of our respondent owners admitted that many garment factories do not have a proper working environment and adequate facilities for workers. But for that they squarely put the blame on the "corrupt" inspectors from the office of the Chief Inspector of Factories

and Establishments. According to those owners, the inspectors are busier collecting “tolls” from the garment factory owners than checking the real conditions of the factories. In this connection, one owner compared the role of the Inspectors of Factories and Establishments with the inspectors of the Bangladesh Road Transport Authority who are responsible for providing “Fitness Certificates” for automobiles. He added that no inspector would issue a “Fitness Certificate” even for a brand new car unless he received something in cash from the owner of the car. Likewise, no Inspector of Factories and Establishments would be satisfied with the prevailing conditions and working environment of any factory — however excellent the condition of that factory might be — until and unless he receives a significant cash contribution from the owner. Consequently, as he argued, for some garment factory owners it really did not matter whether or not the working conditions in their factories were up to the standard, for they would have to pay a few thousand taka monthly to the inspectors in any case.

Most of our respondent owners refuted the allegations of the federation and unit union leaders that they resorted to all kinds of intimidation tactics to sabotage the unionization process in RMG industries. Rather, they mentioned the preoccupation of the garment workers, and their high turnover rates as the two most important factors hindering the process of unionization. As far as existing labour-management relationships in the garment industries are concerned, most of the owners indicated that they maintained contacts with the general workers primarily through the floor supervisors and/or production managers. Only two owners claimed that they sat with the workers in general meetings at least once a month. Two other owners claimed that they always encouraged the general workers to come to them, with prior appointments, whenever necessary.

Regarding the linkage of wages with labour productivity, most garment factory owners opined that the RMG industries’ capacity to pay the workers a minimum wage should be linked to their profitability, which, again, depended on the prices of their products relative to material input prices, and on labour productivity trends. However, the owners were divided on the issue of providing wages on the basis of piece rate work. Some favoured the idea but others expressed apprehensions that this would increase the cost of supervision. The reason for this is the fact that in RMG industries the workers work in an assembly line according to their job specialization, and a piece rate work wage system would require much better coordination in terms of speed and specialization. Federation leaders



and garment workers were also equally divided on the issue of piece rate work. For some garment workers, the main benefit of a piece rate work was that it would make their work more quantifiable in terms of production performance and therefore would make it easier to link performance with the wage structure as well as the pay for overtime. It would also help to take into consideration the existence of different levels of expertise in the work force, and the value of overtime work could then be measured in terms of production rates instead of time frames. Others, however, argued that the piece rate wages would work to the disadvantage of workers because, in the name of differentiating between different levels of expertise in the work force, the owners would simply manipulate the principle of "equal wages for equal work" to their advantage and, if and when necessary, try to play one worker against the other.

#### **IV. Watching from the sideline: The so-called resolution of rights disputes**

Rights disputes relate to conflicts over matters of rights resulting from contractual relationships, which may include grievances with respect to unfair treatment, denial of entitlements as well as unjustified punishments (Pakistan Labour Policy 1969). Such disputes may be either individual or collective, but more frequently these are individual cases. As far as unionization in RMG industries is concerned, two state machineries are involved: 1) the Directorate of Labour, and 2) Labour Courts.

##### **1. Directorate of Labour**

In conformation with the requirements of ILO Conventions No. 87 and 98, Bangladeshi workers and employers have been granted the right to establish and join associations of their choice without permission from any authority. Further, they have the right to draw up their own constitutions, to elect their representatives in full freedom, to organize their programmes, and to establish and join federations, confederations and international organizations of workers and employers. There are no restrictions or requirements to form and organize an association. It is only when an association is to be registered as a trade union that certain requirements must be met. Among these requirements, the most important one, under the Industrial Relations Ordinance of 1969, is that it must have a minimum

membership of 30 per cent of the total number of workers employed in the establishment or group of establishments in which it is formed. The Industrial Relations Ordinance of 1969 also stipulates that non-worker trade unionists cannot become members or office bearers of any trade union unless it is a federation of trade unions.

After an application on behalf of a federation or union is submitted, if the Registrar of Trade Unions is convinced that the federation or union has complied with all the requirements of the Industrial Relations Ordinance of 1969, including the minimum membership of 30 per cent, he/she will issue the Registration Certificate. Before issuing the Registration Certificate, the inspectors of the office of the Registrar of Trade Unions will normally try to verify all factual evidence by going to the garment factories. There are allegations that it is at this stage that the owners try to sabotage the whole process of unionization. The Registrar of Trade Unions did not rule out the possibility that some garment factory owners might try to bribe the inspectors so that they do not write positive reports regarding the federations' and/or unions' fulfilling all their requirements for obtaining Registration Certificates; however, he claimed that his office always tries to cross-check those reports through other factual evidence before deciding whether or not to issue any such Certificate.

The controversy, however, does not end there. The Industrial Relations Ordinance of 1969 also stipulates that the registration of any trade union can be cancelled by the Registrar of Trade Unions after obtaining permission from the Labour Court if, among other things, the membership of that trade union falls short of 30 per cent of the workers of the establishment or group of establishments for which the union was formed. Now, there are also allegations that the owners always try to keep the inspectors in "good humor" so that they always look for excuses to prove that the membership has fallen short of the required 30 per cent. When the author raised this issue with the Registrar of Trade Unions he did admit the possibility that his office may not be in a position to monitor the activities of the trade unions all the time. But he added that if there is a dispute regarding the current legal status of a federation or unit union, his office attempts to resolve the dispute in accordance with the law and to the satisfaction of the parties concerned. If, however, the efforts of his office prove to be futile in resolving union-management disputes, the Directorate of Labour issues a certificate to that effect, and then the concerned parties are free to seek remedies through other legal and judicial procedures.

## 2. The Labour Courts

In the event of failure of efforts for resolution of union-management disputes regarding the formation of unions or dismissal of union workers, the Labour Courts are responsible for their disposal following more formal judicial procedures. The verdict of a labour court in a rights dispute is termed a "decision". All decisions of the Labour Courts are final and cannot be called into question in any manner by, or before, any other court or authority. But the main problem with the compulsory adjudication of the Labour Courts, as some of the garment federation and unit union leaders have pointed out, is that the adjudication can take a long time. In at least three cases for which we were able to trace the final stages of the courts' proceeding in the 1st and 3rd Labour Courts of Dhaka, the proceedings took seven to nine years before they came to a decision. The reasons for this long delay can be attributed to the enormous number of cases that the three Labour Courts of Dhaka are required to deal with. During the period from August to September in 1996, there were more than 3,000 cases pending in the 1st and 3rd Labour Courts only. Moreover, the penalty for non-compliance with the courts' orders seems to be very minimal: a maximum three months simple imprisonment or a fine of maximum Tk 1,000. Therefore, many garment factory owners do not take the verdicts of the Labour Courts seriously.

## V. No easy partners: The structured trade unions and the garment federations and unions of Bangladesh

Since the early 1980s, the Government of Bangladesh has adopted a series of structural adjustment programmes. One major effect has been a somewhat lopsided emphasis on the private sector with the hope that, through its profit maximization policies, private enterprises will be able to raise the level of efficiency in industrial management. The major political parties of Bangladesh are now putting more emphasis on the private sector than on the public one. Even the Awami League, the pioneer of the nationalization programme in the early 1970s, has now acknowledged the importance of the private sector, though its party manifesto is still quite vague on issues related to trade unions and labour laws. Equally vague is the party manifesto of the Bangladesh Nationalist Party on issues related to trade unions,

though it claims to be a champion of an open market policy. Consequently, most of the country's structured trade unions — which are essentially front organizations of various political parties, and are active mainly in the public sector — are still figuring prominently in the calculus of Bangladesh's domestic power politics.

Since most of these front organizations have yet to take cognizance of the phenomenal growth of the RMG industries with their predominantly female labour force, they have not been able yet to formulate a coherent policy on industrial relations in this particular sector. It is no wonder then that, although political connections play an important role in the life cycle of most of the garment federations, they still do not enjoy high esteem in the political hierarchy of structured trade unions. The reason for this comparatively low esteem in which garment federation leaders are held could be that most of the leaders of major structured trade unions still take pride in controlling the largest enterprises of the public sector. Furthermore, it became obvious to us during our survey that most of the politically connected garment federations leaders actually come from the lowest strata of the structured trade unions. In other words, the advent of the garment industries provided some of the marginalized leaders of the structured trade unions with new opportunities to rise into political prominence. Although the structured trade union leaders do not take the garment federation leaders seriously, they do not mind bestowing on them their political blessings, because they think that it could benefit them in the long run. In a sense it is a kind of marriage of convenience for both parties; for the federation leaders, the support of the structured trade unions is important because it will provide them with the political clout that will enable them to prevail upon the garment factory owners, whereas for the structured trade unions this relationship marks a turning point in broadening their sphere of influence in a hitherto uncharted territory.

## VI. Conclusion

The salient points that emerge from the foregoing discussion are: 1) in Bangladesh, industrial conflicts in the private sector, particularly in the RMG industries, have so far been resolved through autocratic and unilateral decisions of garment factory owners; 2) there has not been a healthy growth of trade unionism from within the RMG industries, and this has led to the creation of a pervasive patron-clientelist nexus of interested male outsiders and mostly female

garment workers; 3) although the existing male-dominated garment federations have not been successful in addressing the main concerns of the female workers — such as, for example, the calculated exploitation of the societal vulnerability of female labourers in order to undermine existing labour standards, the lack of security both in and outside the workplace and sexual harassment — the female union leaders and workers have so far generally failed to launch their own women's unions; 4) despite the fact that labour laws are generally not observed by most employers in the garment industries, and in some cases the laws themselves have become outdated and hence inadequate, the Bangladeshi state apparatus, increasingly driven by export-oriented economic policies, has kept its role limited to watching from the sideline.

As is obvious from the points mentioned above, most Bangladeshi garment factory owners have failed to see any causal connection between labour standards and productivity outcomes. Therefore, for many of them, being competitive has so far meant being “cost effective”, mainly by lowering labour standards and taking advantage of opportunities for low-wage employment due to the abundance of a young female labour force. As a consequence of their economic priorities, many of them have become virulently anti-trade union because, according to them, as “market distorting entities” trade unions would not only raise production costs and create industrial disorder, they would also eventually offset Bangladesh's comparative advantage by dismantling the low-wage employment structure of the female labour force.

However, the contention of this chapter is that the position taken by most Bangladeshi garment factory owners on the issue of unionization in the RMG industries is too simplistic and destructive. Contrary to their arguments, there are numerous examples establishing a causal connection between labour standards and productivity outcomes where standards enhanced productivity and encouraged the adoption of new technologies (Çagatay, 1996). There is also clear correlation between unionization and productivity and gender equity. In an example from the industrializing economies, Standing has found that in Malaysia the unions have contributed both to productivity enhancement and a narrowing of the gender gap in wages (Standing, 1990). Unionization and on-the-job training can also be helpful in checking high labour turnover in the RMG industries. There is evidence from Malaysia that unionized firms had working environments that encouraged trained workers to stay and to undertake further training and productivity improvement (Standing,

1990). With this example in mind, it is argued here that the time has now come for the garment factory owners in Bangladesh to look at the issue of unionism from a different angle. Instead of turning the industrial relationship of this new area of our most important private sector into a kind of “legitimate oligarchy” — leaving no scope for industrial peace due to an ever-increasing conflict between management and unions — both the owners and the unions should now follow, for the sake of their own enlightened self-interest, new avenues for predominantly female workers’ participation in management.

The Industrial Relations Ordinance of 1969 provides various avenues for workers’ participation in management. At the level of the undertaking, works councils, joint consultation committees, and other systems of workers’ participation in decisions within undertakings provide the basis for a more active involvement of workers in the running of the enterprise with a view to developing their potential and improving the efficiency of the enterprise. At the national level, the principle of tripartitism in making policies affecting labour has been accepted in most developed countries (Khan, 1986). But, so far, such participation schemes have largely failed to produce the desired outcome in the private sector of Bangladesh. In the garment sector, as discussed above, the owners are emphatically against such types of workers’ participation because, rightly or wrongly, most garment factory owners fear that at some stage it would inevitably lead to an unhealthy collusion between political parties and trade unions which, in turn, would be prejudicial to improvements in productivity and the creation of a congenial working environment.

Under these circumstances, the most useful way for facilitating female workers’ participation in industrial disputes in the RMG industries could be resorting to a kind of constitutional management on the part of the government, which could be attained, at least for the time being, through a variety of labour legislation and some other extra-constitutional measures. These could include the proper enforcement of the freedom of association in the RMG industries through various binding and non-binding contracts between the Department of Labour, federations of trade unions and the garment factory owners, enactment of anti-discrimination law and enforcement of equal pay for equal work provisions, and the introduction of a tax rebate for the RMG industry owner for implementing on-the-job training. However, whether or not such legislation and other measures would mark a dynamic change in the tangential situation of female garment workers is contingent upon the extent of their

gradual socio-political empowerment as well as their ability to attain a level of participation that constitutes a distinctive “women’s voice” (not merely as women in unions) in labour-management disputes.

## Endnotes

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2. *Bhorer Kagoj*, 5 March 1994, 18 May 1994, 19 February 1995, 27 February 1995, 3 April 1995, 7 August 1995; *Dainik Sangbad*, 20 February 1994, 27 May 1995, 6 January 1996; *Banglabazar Patrika*, 24 July 1995, 27 January 1996; *Dainik Janakantha*, 11 February 1995, 13 February 1995; *Dainik Ittefaq*, 3 June 1995, 9 September 1995, 2 January 1996; *The Daily Star*, 19 August 1995.

3. Typically done under section 18 of the Employment of Labour (Standing Orders) Act, 1965, although such an action amounts to by-passing the legal protection extended to union leaders by the Industrial Relations Ordinance, 1969 (Section 15).

4. Federations are obliged to maintain, under the Industrial Relations Ordinance of 1969, a register of members showing particulars of subscriptions paid by each member, an accounts book showing receipts and expenditures, and a minute book for recording the proceedings of meetings.

5. See rule 4(2) of the Industrial Relations Rules, 1977.

6. We were rather surprised to find out that despite its virtual non-existence for a considerable period, this federation’s registration had not been cancelled. This suggests negligence on the part of the office of the Registrar of Trade Unions in monitoring the activities of the registered federations of trade unions, which it is legally obliged to do. Evidence suggesting such negligence tends to support those owners and workers who regularly complain about the prevalence of widespread corruption both in the offices of the Registrar of Trade Unions and the Chief Inspector of Factories and Establishments.

7. However, one person who was named as the General Secretary of both a federation and a union was reported to have organized, in his individual capacity, a few demonstrations of garment workers in the Mirpur area when there were lay-offs or labour-management conflicts in some factories of the locality. Although we did locate this person once, we failed, despite repeated attempts, to get any appointment for an interview.

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# 7

## **Female employment under export-propelled industrialization: Prospects for internalizing global opportunities in the apparel sector in Bangladesh**

*Debapriya Bhattacharya and Mustafizur Rahman*

### **I. Introduction**

#### **1. Issues of concern**

Current adjustment policies in Bangladesh, coupled with ongoing industrial restructuring, are expected to create employment opportunities in export-propelled activities. Data on the short-run impact of recent industrialization efforts in Bangladesh indicate that women constitute the majority of the incremental labour absorption in the country's export-oriented manufacturing enterprises. Available information also suggests that conventional measures of gender bias (such as wage gaps, access to employment and lack of job security) are relatively inconspicuous in this organized segment of the manufacturing sector (Bhattacharya, 1994). This is true for manufacturing units located in both export processing zones (EPZs) and the domestic tariff area (DTA). It is characteristic of the labour force of foreign-owned units in particular — which tend to have the most advanced technology and the highest productivity levels in the country (Bhattacharya, 1998).

Notwithstanding such ostensibly positive features of part of the country's evolving labour market, concerns have been raised about the real nature and prospects for sustainability of these trends. It is

widely held that “cheap and readily employable” labour underpins the competitive advantage of the country’s export sector. To begin to understand the nature of women’s industrial employment in Bangladesh, the pull and push factors that have contributed to the feminization of trade-oriented manufacturing employment must be examined. Concretely, it is important to analyse whether it is the gender gap in the effective wage structure that underpins the growth of female labour in export-oriented industries. In other words, given the low opportunity cost of female labour in Bangladesh, is female labour attractive because women are paid less than men for similar jobs — even when productivity differentials are accounted for? This particular concern is heightened by the fact that entrepreneurs prefer to employ young, single, literate women in export-oriented units. Accordingly, non-wage factors (such as social docility and amenability to repetitive process functions) prompt entrepreneurs to opt for a distinctive set of female labour. Thus non-wage factors clearly influence employment patterns as well.

From a neoclassical perspective, one would expect that economic reforms leading to deregulation and liberalization would cause prices in the various factor markets in different countries to converge over time. Accordingly, stimulated by an increasingly competitive labour market, a gender-neutral equilibrium price of labour would gradually evolve, particularly in the export-oriented industrial sector, since this sector is relatively more exposed to the dynamics of factor prices in the global market. However, the pattern of structural changes in employment in the export sector may inhibit the gradual evolution of gender-neutral wage levels expected from global integration. This rigidity may be accentuated by women’s lack of occupational mobility. For example, the introduction of new technologies may affect women’s employment through automation, de-skilling of workers and/or increased skill requirements in key jobs. Admittedly, the effects of such technological shifts have not been uniform either for women or for men. But persistent functional gender segregation in export-oriented units may prevent transformation of the structure of the female labour force, reinforcing a possible gender-based wage differential.

The sustainability of current trends in female labour absorption in the organized manufacturing sector is linked to the broader issue of competitiveness of Bangladesh’s industry. The major source of creation and protection of industrial competitive advantage in the global economy lies in the adoption and diffusion of new technologies, which lead to growth in the productivity of factors of production. It

is thus important to endow women workers with basic education and vocational training (including computer literacy). Female-oriented investment in human resource development may therefore be the most dependable deterrent to technological redundancies. Alternatively, with the changing nature of national competitive advantage, a mismatch may emerge between the skill and quality endowments of female labour and the skill and quality endowments demanded. Under these circumstances, if certain supply-side constraints are not addressed through public policy interventions (e.g., in the areas of skill development and health care), female employment in the export sector cannot be maintained and enlarged — in absolute or relative terms.

One also needs to take into account the fact that the level of export-supported female employment is vulnerable to fluctuating global demand. This may be reinforced by the “footloose” nature of foreign investment (one of the major sources of female employment), which may shift production locations in search of cost-effective sources of labour, usually for their “old” technologies. While global demand may be an exogenous variable (predicated largely on the economic activity rate in the developed countries), the extent to which an exporting country can create a niche for itself depends on the availability of a quality workforce within a conducive policy framework.

It is thus important to look beyond the immediate benefits accruing to women workers in Bangladesh through increased access to wage employment as a result of trade expansion. A new set of issues with far-reaching implications for the industrial employment of women in the context of economic globalization requires attention. While women’s short-term material interests are served by such employment opportunities, fulfilment of longer term strategic gender interests may only be evaluated in terms of continued access to such opportunities in the future, coupled with enhanced gender equity in the labour market.

## **2. The nature of the study**

### **a. Objective and scope**

The primary objective of the present chapter is to assess the adjustment dynamics of the export-oriented manufacturing sector in Bangladesh in view of the opportunities and constraints created by changes in technology and the economy. This line of investigation has been pursued in the concrete context of the apparel industry in

Bangladesh, which, with a predominantly female labour force, has experienced significant growth in the recent past.

An attempt has been made to identify structural changes in Bangladesh's manufacturing sector, and in apparel in particular, and their implications for the burgeoning female labour force. In this context, the chapter examines the firm-level behaviour of ready-made garment and knitwear producers and its implications for the welfare of women workers. Apart from the domestic factors underpinning the prospects for female industrial employment growth, the analysis also considers the impact of global demand for textiles. Finally, the chapter highlights the micro-macro linkages of public policies that affect the sustainability of female industrial employment in Bangladesh.

#### **b. Data and methodology**

The study builds on analysis of the available empirical information as well as new evidence on the ready-made garment (RMG) sector in Bangladesh. In particular, sectoral estimates generated by two independent research studies have been adapted to trace the inter-temporal changes in operational behaviour in the RMG sector. Projections prepared at the Ministry of Commerce and the Ministry of Textiles, as well as data maintained by the Bangladesh Garment Exporters and Manufacturers Association and Export Promotion Bureau, have been extensively used in the study. Sources of secondary data also include various publications of the Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics and the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT).

Primary data on the RMG sector were collected for the present study through micro surveys and debriefing of key informants. A survey carried out in February 1997 elicited information on employment structure and wage rates for different types of jobs in the country's RMG industry. To generate the required data, a checklist was completed by the chief executives of 10 RMG units of average size (i.e., approximately 400 workers). Information provided by the chief executives was cross-checked through focus group discussions involving 126 randomly selected workers (mostly female) in the sample RMG units.

#### **c. Structure**

The chapter is divided into six sections. Section II analyses the general features of female employment in Bangladesh's manufacturing sector. Section III takes a closer look at the growth trends in the country's apparel industry and their implications for

female employment. Section IV considers adjustment behaviour of the RMG units and its consequences for female employment. Future prospects for female employment in Bangladesh's export-oriented apparel sector are assessed in section V, taking into account the evolving international trade regime and the projected global demand for textile products. The concluding section draws out some policy implications.

## **II. Female participation in industrial employment in Bangladesh**

### **1. Participation rate**

Compared to their male counterparts, women's participation in the formal economy has remained low in Bangladesh. This mirrors the general trend observed in the labour markets of developing countries. According to the most recent Labour Force Survey (1995-96), women's share in Bangladesh's total labour force (i.e., the economically active population over 15 years of age) is around 38 per cent, or 19 million (see Table 1). The labour force participation rate (LFPR) of women is lower in the urban areas (26.1 per cent) than in rural areas (40.6 per cent), where women are extensively involved in household-based and agricultural activities.

However, women's LFPR increases, particularly in urban areas, in the 15-19 and 20-24 years age categories: 36.4 per cent compared to the overall urban average of 26.1 per cent. Information on the female economic activity rate (EAR) reveals a similar trend: the 20-24 years age group in urban areas demonstrates the highest female EAR — 33.1 per cent — in comparison to the overall urban average of 30.4 per cent. This implies that the rate of female labour absorption is perceptibly higher among younger women in urban areas, where manufacturing units in Bangladesh are concentrated.

Less than a quarter (22.6 per cent) of the total number of employed females in Bangladesh are engaged in non-agricultural activities. While almost 15 per cent of the total number of employed females belong to the services/commerce sector, only a little over 7 per cent are involved in manufacturing activities. According to the 1995-96 Labour Force Survey (LFS), more than 1.5 million women were engaged in the manufacturing sector, including both formal and informal activities. The present study is more concerned with female employment in the organized manufacturing sector — to which

almost all the export-oriented processing units in the country belong. Before we turn to this subject, it may also be noted from Table 1 that the proportions of women occupying professional-technical and administrative-managerial positions in Bangladesh are 34.7 per cent and less than 5 per cent, respectively, of total employment in these categories.

Table 1 provides a static picture of the state of female participation in Bangladesh's labour force in 1995-96. Have these indicators registered any improvement over time? Unfortunately, frequent changes in the definition of the categories used in the LFS do not readily allow comparisons. In spite of data discrepancies, however, LFS data do suggest that women's LFPR in the national economy in general, and in non-agricultural and manufacturing activities in particular, has increased in recent years.

**Table 1: Participation indicators of women's employment (1995-96)  
(per cent)**

| Indicators  | Age group (years) |       |       |       |       |
|---|-------------------|-------|-------|-------|-------|
|   | 15+               | 15-29 | 15-19 | 20-24 | 25-29 |
| Women's Labour Force Participation Rate*  | 37.77             | 43.28 | 37.50 | 48.39 | 44.00 |
| Rural   | 40.63             | 45.45 | 37.74 | 50.98 | 47.54 |
| Urban   | 26.09             | 33.33 | 36.36 | 36.36 | 28.57 |
| Women's Economic Activity Rate**  | 55.65             | 55.73 | 47.59 | 59.14 | 60.04 |
| Rural   | 63.60             | 64.03 | 54.61 | 67.27 | 69.26 |
| Urban   | 30.44             | 30.80 | 28.99 | 33.14 | 30.56 |
| Share of female employees in total employment (10+ years)                                       |                   |       |       |       | 38.10 |
| Share of female employees in total female labour force (i.e., not managerial or administrative) |                   |       |       |       | 97.73 |
| Women's share in non-agricultural labour force  |                   |       |       |       | 23.38 |
| Women in non-agricultural activities: share in total employed female                            |                   |       |       |       | 22.60 |
| Women's share in total manufacturing labour force   |                   |       |       |       | 36.59 |
| Female-male gap in manufacturing labour force (female per 100 male)                             |                   |       |       |       | 57.69 |
| Women in manufacturing: share in total employed female  |                   |       |       |       | 7.04  |
| Women's share in total employed persons in service sector                                       |                   |       |       |       | 20.81 |
| Women in services/commerce: share in total employed female                                      |                   |       |       |       | 14.90 |
| Women's share in total employed persons in agriculture  |                   |       |       |       | 46.67 |
| Women in agricultural sector: share in total employed female                                    |                   |       |       |       | 77.40 |
| Women's share in total professional-technical personnel   |                   |       |       |       | 34.72 |
| Women's share in total administrative-managerial personnel                                      |                   |       |       |       | 4.92  |

\* Share of women in respective age cohort in total labour force.

\*\* Share of economically active women in respective age cohort.

Source: BBS, 1996b.

## 2. Manufacturing employment

According to the Census of Manufacturing Industries (CMI), approximately 200,000 women were employed in the manufacturing sector in Bangladesh in 1991-92 (the latest reference year for which information on sectoral aggregates is available from an official source). The CMI essentially covers formal sector registered enterprises with 10 or more employees. These are usually located in urban areas. However, in addition to being quite dated, the census estimate suffers from serious undercoverage. For example, in 1991-92, the RMG sector alone employed 700,000 female workers (as we will see later), whereas the comparable CMI (1991-92) figure is 150,000. In the absence of more reliable aggregate estimates, we may still analyse the CMI data assuming that it provides a representative set of cross-section information.

According to the figures presented in Table 2, women accounted for 15.3 per cent of the total number of manufacturing sector employees in Bangladesh in 1991-92. More than 88 per cent of the women engaged in the sector were regular production workers ("operatives", in CMI terms) and another 9.6 per cent constituted hired casual workers. Less than 1 per cent of the women employees were involved in administrative and clerical activities, and about 0.3 per cent belonged to the entrepreneur category.

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**Table 2: Trend in female employment and wage in the manufacturing sector**

| Indicator                              | 1988-89 | 1989-90 | 1990-91 | 1991-92 |
|--|---------|---------|---------|---------|
| Women's share in total mfg employment  | 14.1    | 14.20   | 15.72   | 15.30   |
| Women's share in total operatives      | 16.41   | 16.55   | 17.76   | 18.06   |
| Female-male wage ratio (all employees) | 0.40    | 0.55    | 0.52    | 0.52    |
| Female-male wage ratio (operatives)    | 0.46    | 0.51    | 0.47    | 0.57    |

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*Source:* BBS, 1996a.

On average, a manufacturing enterprise in the organized sector in Bangladesh has seven women employees. Female employment is highest in joint ventures (56 female employees per unit), followed by state-owned enterprises (more than 12 female employees per unit).



The figure for the exclusively locally-owned private sector units is a little above seven. The overwhelming majority (98.7 per cent) of the women employees are located in private sector enterprises (local and joint ventures taken together).

It may be observed from Table 2 that, between 1988-89 and 1991-92, women's share in total manufacturing employment increased from 14.1 per cent to 15.3 per cent, whereas operatives increased from 16.4 per cent to 18.1 per cent. The share of female workers in total manufacturing employment registered a fall between 1990-91 and 1991-92, but the extent to which this is a statistical artefact or a reflection of recent reform measures affecting the manufacturing sector remains to be seen.

### **Sectoral distribution**

The sectoral distribution of female manufacturing employment in Bangladesh remains highly skewed, as shown in Table 3 and annex Table 1. The wearing apparel sector, categorized under Bangladesh Standard Industrial Code (BSIC) 323, alone employs about 85 per cent of the female industrial employees (which is about 12.9 per cent of total manufacturing employment). This is followed by textile manufacturing including cotton, synthetic and jute textiles (BSIC 321 and 322), which account for about 6 per cent of female industrial employees or approximately 1 per cent of total manufacturing employment. The third most important provider of female employment is food processing (BSIC 311 and 312), which account for just over 3.2 per cent of female industrial employees or 0.5 per cent of all manufacturing employment. Wood work, cigarette manufacturing and pharmaceutical industries employ about 1.84 per cent, 1.47 per cent and 0.58 per cent of female industrial employees respectively. Annex Table 1 shows that this pattern of sectoral distribution for all types of female employees also holds true for female production workers.

The current state of industrial statistics, unfortunately, does not allow us to readily relate the market orientation of the enterprises with the gender composition of their labour force. Nonetheless, it is quite evident from the above figures that at least 91 per cent of female manufacturing employment is concentrated in enterprises that either produce for direct export (e.g., garments and jute), or that produce outputs "deemed exports", because they constitute export linkage industries.

**Table 3: Share of women in employment and wage bill in the manufacturing sector**

| Ind Code | Sub-sectors                 | Total employees (no.) | Female as % total mfg employment | Total operatives employee (no.) | Female as % of total operatives | Total wage bill (000 Tk) | Share of female in total wage bill (000 Tk) | Total operative wage bill (000 Tk) | Share of female in total operative wage bill (%) |
|----------|-----------------------------|-----------------------|----------------------------------|---------------------------------|---------------------------------|--------------------------|---|------------------------------------|--|
| 311      | Food mfg.                   | 44005                 | 0.30                             | 32609                           | 0.34                            | 774081                   | 0.12  | 448017                             | 0.16   |
| 312      | Food mfg.                   | 62099                 | 0.19                             | 42649                           | 0.19                            | 1777793                  | 0.14  | 1071183                            | 0.10   |
| 313      | Beverage ind.               | 1715                  | 0.01                             | 873                             | 0.01                            | 55071                    | 0.00  | 20026                              | 0.01   |
| 314      | Cigarettes                  | 32829                 | 0.22                             | 30240                           | 0.26                            | 358954                   | 0.04  | 296521                             | 0.06   |
| 315      | Animal feeds                | 63                    | 0.00                             | 42                              | 0.00                            | 886                      | 0.00  | 416                                | 0.00   |
| 321      | Textile mfg.                | 563969                | 0.80                             | 500750                          | 0.90                            | 12634680                 | 0.49  | 10001408                           | 0.60   |
| 322      | Textiles mfg.               | 19203                 | 0.11                             | 16390                           | 0.13                            | 348607                   | 0.04  | 280379                             | 0.05   |
| 323      | Wearing apparel             | 215838                | 12.9                             | 201074                          | 15.18                           | 2865818                  | 6.78  | 2428562                            | 9.45   |
| 324      | Leather & its prod.         | 10802                 | 0.00                             | 8807                            | 0.00                            | 244659                   | 0.00  | 156023                             | 0.00   |
| 325      | Footwear except rubber      | 5290                  | 0.01                             | 4224                            | 0.01                            | 281313                   | 0.00  | 157641                             | 0.00   |
| 326      | Ginning pressing            | 3997                  | 0.00                             | 3188                            | 0.00                            | 63968                    | 0.00  | 38576                              | 0.00   |
| 327      | Embroidery of textile goods | 529                   | 0.04                             | 510                             | 0.05                            | 3240                     | 0.01  | 3156                               | 0.02   |
| 331      | Wood & cork prod.           | 13252                 | 0.28                             | 11357                           | 0.32                            | 213588                   | 0.10  | 156371                             | 0.13   |
| 332      | Furniture mfg.              | 2304                  | 0.00                             | 1930                            | 0.00                            | 41841                    | 0.00  | 30897                              | 0.00   |
| 341      | Paper & its prod.           | 16743                 | 0.02                             | 11138                           | 0.01                            | 945490                   | 0.26  | 516360                             | 0.00   |
| 342      | Printing & publishing       | 15447                 | 0.01                             | 10646                           | 0.00                            | 442984                   | 0.01  | 263093                             | 0.00   |
| 351      | Drugs & pharma.             | 18103                 | 0.09                             | 7847                            | 0.09                            | 913031                   | 0.19  | 316354                             | 0.22   |
| 352      | Industrial chemicals        | 9766                  | 0.03                             | 5609                            | 0.01                            | 572957                   | 0.16  | 266581                             | 0.02   |
| 353      | Other chemical products     | 15306                 | 0.03                             | 11794                           | 0.03                            | 688702                   | 0.05  | 363504                             | 0.04   |
| 354      | Petroleum refining          | 889                   | 0.00                             | 620                             | 0.00                            | 150157                   | 0.00  | 98366                              | 0.00   |
| 355      | Misc. petroleum prod.       | 204                   | 0.00                             | 113                             | 0.00                            | 5019                     | 0.00  | 2243                               | 0.00   |
| 356      | Rubber prod.                | 3663                  | 0.00                             | 3057                            | 0.00                            | 69042                    | 0.00  | 54466                              | 0.00   |
| 357      | Plastic prod.               | 3214                  | 0.00                             | 2391                            | 0.00                            | 90918                    | 0.00  | 59752                              | 0.00   |
| 361      | Pottery & chinaware         | 3387                  | 0.00                             | 2598                            | 0.01                            | 57128                    | 0.00  | 36040                              | 0.00   |
| 362      | Glass & its prod.           | 2051                  | 0.02                             | 1746                            | 0.02                            | 72664                    | 0.01  | 43214                              | 0.01   |
| 369      | Non-metallic mineral prod.  | 20567                 | 0.03                             | 18054                           | 0.02                            | 260746                   | 0.02  | 153156                             | 0.01   |
| 371      | Iron & steel basic indus.   | 14795                 | 0.00                             | 10689                           | 0.00                            | 590386                   | 0.00  | 392604                             | 0.00   |
| 372      | Non-ferrous metal ind.      | 459                   | 0.00                             | 324                             | 0.00                            | 15772                    | 0.00  | 10410                              | 0.00   |
| 381      | Structural metal prod.      | 13155                 | 0.01                             | 10949                           | 0.01                            | 219282                   | 0.00  | 161279                             | 0.00   |
| 382      | Fabricated metal prod.      | 6155                  | 0.00                             | 5342                            | 0.00                            | 121005                   | 0.00  | 89123                              | 0.00   |
| 383      | Non-electrical machinery    | 6594                  | 0.01                             | 4366                            | 0.00                            | 241794                   | 0.01  | 128283                             | 0.00   |
| 384      | Electrical machinery        | 13021                 | 0.03                             | 9733                            | 0.03                            | 359781                   | 0.04  | 214736                             | 0.04   |
| 385      | Transport equipment         | 12588                 | 0.00                             | 9530                            | 0.00                            | 434463                   | 0.01  | 248502                             | 0.00   |
| 386      | Scientific precision, etc.  | 172                   | 0.00                             | 130                             | 0.00                            | 3328                     | 0.00  | 2481                               | 0.00   |
| 387      | Photographic optical goods  | 117                   | 0.00                             | 91                              | 0.00                            | 1764                     | 0.00  | 1204                               | 0.00   |
| 389      | Mfg of sports goods         | 198                   | 0.00                             | 170                             | 0.00                            | 3920                     | 0.00  | 3238                               | 0.00   |
| 391      | Decorative handicrafts      | 135                   | 0.00                             | 120                             | 0.00                            | 1279                     | 0.00  | 1088                               | 0.00   |
| 393      | Other mfg. industries       | 3312                  | 0.09                             | 2870                            | 0.11                            | 41913                    | 0.03  | 32234                              | 0.04   |
| 394      | Other mfg. industries       | 286                   | 0.00                             | 220                             | 0.00                            | 4139                     | 0.00  | 2806                               | 0.00   |
| Total    |                             | 1156222               | 15.30                            | 984790                          | 17.76                           | 25972163                 | 8.52  | 18550293                           | 10.96  |

Source: BBS, 1996a.

### 3. Wage differentials

A little more than 8.5 per cent of the total wage bill in Bangladesh's manufacturing sector is attributable to all female employees, while the corresponding figure for women production workers is about 11 per cent (see Table 3). These shares compare unfavourably with their respective employment shares (15.3 per cent and 17.8 per cent). The divergence between shares of female employment and their wage bill is an explicit indication of the female-male wage differential prevailing in the sector. The compensation packages for female employees are systematically low across the sub-sectors. The average female-male wage ratio in Bangladesh's manufacturing sector in 1991-92 was 0.52 for all employees and 0.57 for production workers, suggesting a smaller gender differential in wage determination among production-related workers. The time series data presented in Table 2 indicate that while the female-male wage ratio for production workers improved somewhat between the late 1980s and early 1990s, the ratio in effect remained stagnant (or deteriorated) when all employees are accounted for.

It is also worth noting that female-male wage differentials are much lower in export-oriented industries. While we return to this issue later, it may be pointed out, based on data presented in annex Table 2, that in the wearing apparel industry (BSIC 323), female wages as a share of male wages constitute 70 per cent in the case of all employees and 90 per cent in the case of production workers — both these proportions are higher than their respective sectoral averages.

### 4. Growth patterns

Prospects for growth in women's industrial employment are clearly conditioned by the pattern of manufacturing growth in Bangladesh. Bakht's 1993 study of the performance of the country's manufacturing sector in the 1980s found that the top 10 sub-sectors in terms of growth in value-added were the following (in descending order of their trend rate of growth): ready-made garments, silk and synthetic textiles, dyeing and bleaching textiles, compressed liquefied gas, soft drinks, fertilizer, hand and edge tools, china and ceramic wares, fish and seafood, and tanning and finishing. In the best-performing sub-sector (RMG) women constituted 70 per cent of all employees, while in most other sub-sectors female employment was negligible.

In sum, the economic activity rate of women in general, and the

share of women in manufacturing employment in particular, are quite low in Bangladesh. However, there is evidence that both these indicators are experiencing an up-turn, particularly in the urban areas, and among relatively young women. The sectoral distribution of female manufacturing employment remains highly concentrated in RMG, although virtually all sub-sectors demonstrating growth in recent years are important from the point of view of the female-intensity of their labour force. There are substantial female-male wage differentials in the country's manufacturing sector, but these gaps are lower in the export-oriented industries. Wage differentials are also lower among production workers, and there are indications that the situation is improving. It is possible that such apparently positive trends in industrial employment of women in Bangladesh are a result of the increasing integration of the national economy into the global trade circuit. This, in turn, has been propped up by the deregulation and liberalization measures that characterize current macroeconomic policies. The mechanisms that have led to such positive outcomes must be identified rather than assumed.

### III. Bangladesh's apparel sector: Growth correlates

#### 1. Genesis

Female workers in Bangladesh were traditionally linked to global markets through export of tea and raw jute. It is only with the emergence of the RMG sector in the late 1980s as Bangladesh's leading export industry that the country's female labour force was integrated into international markets in a more direct and intense way. The transition from traditional to non-traditional export-oriented activities is of considerable significance, because it brings out some critical dimensions of the evolving pattern of female employment in Bangladesh. First, export-oriented RMG, a manufacturing activity, differs from the previous agro-based exports. Second, RMG units are concentrated mostly in urban areas, whereas earlier female-intensive processing activities were located in rural areas. Third, the rapid growth of the apparel sector and its increasing share in the export basket testifies to the importance and potential of female employment in exports, as well as industrialization, in Bangladesh. These three distinguishing features, *inter alia*, have important implications from a gender perspective, particularly in terms of employment opportunities, skill development and wage level.

Bangladesh's RMG industry has come a long way since 1977 when Reaz Garment made its first shipment of products to France. The Desh-Daewoo collaboration in 1978 catapulted Bangladesh's unknown RMG industry onto a trajectory of fast growth. Several factors contributed to this remarkable success. In 1980, the Bangladesh Bank (the central bank of the country) granted "back-to-back" letters of credit (L/C) and bonded warehouse facilities to RMG producers/exporters, decreasing their working capital requirements and allowing duty-free access to inputs for the sector. Quotas imposed on some neighbouring countries compelled intermediate buyers to shift sourcing of RMG products to countries like Bangladesh where prevailing low wages ensured competitive prices. Moreover, in the US and Canadian markets quotas imposed on imports of apparel meant guaranteed access for developing countries like Bangladesh, while in the countries of the European Union preferential treatment under various schemes, such as the General System of Preferences (GSP), provided crucial price support and, consequently, a competitive edge for RMG exports from Bangladesh.

According to a recent study (Bhattacharya, 1996b), knit and woven RMG accounted for 7 per cent of units, 11 per cent of fixed assets, 21 per cent of annual investment, 30 per cent of the employment and wage bill, and 23.5 per cent of gross value added and returns on capital attributable to the private manufacturing sector in Bangladesh in 1992. More than 95 per cent of the output of the RMG units and about 90 per cent of that of the knitwear units catered to foreign markets.

**Table 4: Inter-temporal compound growth rates of RMG exports (1987-1997)**

| Exports   | FY 1987-FY 1997 | FY 1990-FY 1997 | FY 1992-FY 1997 |
|-----------|-----------------|-----------------|-----------------|
| Woven RMG | 21.6%           | 19.5%           | 14.7%           |
| Knit RMG  | -               | 75.5%           | 45.0%           |
| Total RMG | 25.4%           | 24.4%           | 19.4%           |

*Source:* Computed from Export Promotion Bureau (EPB) database.

Annex Table 3 shows that, in just over 15 years, the share of RMG in total exports increased from less than 2 per cent to about 66 per cent. Table 4 provides information on export growth rates registered by Bangladesh's RMG sector. Between 1987 and 1997, the compound growth rate of RMG exports was more than 25 per cent.

The annual compound growth rate of exports between 1992 and 1997 was a robust 19.4 per cent, four times higher than the GDP growth rates registered in the country over the same period.

## 2. Employment growth

The rapid growth of Bangladesh's RMG exports also meant a very high rate of employment expansion. In 1995-96, about 1.3 million workers were employed in approximately 2,350 RMG factories in the country. Table 5 presents information about the growth of employment in the RMG sector between 1981/82 and 1995/96. In 1991-92 (the most recent year for which activity-specific data are available), about 92.4 per cent of all employees in the RMG sector were production workers. It is of critical significance that women constitute the majority of this workforce. According to the Bangladesh Garment Manufacturers and Exporters Association (BGMEA), in 1996 almost 1.2 million female workers (i.e., 90 per cent of total employment in the industry) were employed in the export-oriented RMG units.

As can be seen from Table 6, in 1994-95 about 46.7 per cent of the total workers employed in the textile sector of Bangladesh were women. It is interesting to note here that in almost all countries, irrespective of the level of economic development, women on average constitute almost three fourths of the total labour force in the textile sector. In contrast, in Bangladesh it is only in the export-oriented RMG industry and the silk sub-sector that women constitute the majority of the workforce: 9 out of 10 in the export-oriented RMG sector and almost 1 in 2 in the silk industry. The other notable female-intensive sub-sector is the handloom sector, where women constitute a little less than half of the workforce. In the spinning and knitting sub-sectors, the female participation rates are not significant.

A substantial discrepancy in the female participation ratio is discernible between local and export-oriented RMG (see Tables 6 and 7). This is explained by the fact that in Bangladesh the RMG units catering to the local markets are mainly small tailoring outfits with a majority of male workers, while the export-oriented RMG units are relatively large units with a predominance of female labour.

Table 7 also shows that between 1991-92 and 1994-95, the share of women in total employment registered an increase from 5 per cent to 10 per cent in spinning and from 4 per cent to 14 per cent in knitting. Ministry of Commerce projections (presented in section V) envisage a substantial increase in the share of women in the workforce of these sub-sectors in the near future. But given the relatively low share of

**Table 5: Growth of employment in the RMG sector**

| Year    | Workers | Supervisors | Managers | Total     |
|---------|---------|-------------|----------|-----------|
| 1981-82 | 4,200   | 315         | 28       | 4,543     |
| 1982-83 | 6,400   | 480         | 44       | 6,924     |
| 1983-84 | 24,000  | 1,800       | 172      | 25,972    |
| 1984-85 | 99,350  | 7,451       | 720      | 107,521   |
| 1985-86 | 323,200 | 24,240      | 2,348    | 349,788   |
| 1986-87 | 346,850 | 26,014      | 2,520    | 375,384   |
| 1987-88 | 362,250 | 27,169      | 2,632    | 392,051   |
| 1988-89 | 391,950 | 29,396      | 2,848    | 424,194   |
| 1989-90 | 405,700 | 30,428      | 2,948    | 439,076   |
| 1990-91 | 514,050 | 38,554      | 3,736    | 556,340   |
| 1991-92 | 729,100 | 54,683      | 5,300    | 789,083   |
| 1992-93 | -       | -           | -        | 804,000   |
| 1993-94 | -       | -           | -        | 827,000   |
| 1994-95 | -       | -           | -        | 1,200,000 |
| 1995-96 | -       | -           | -        | 1,294,000 |

Source: BGMEA.

**Table 6: Gender composition of employment in the textile sector (1991-92 and 1994-95) (million person-years)**

| Sub-sectors         | 1991-92 |        |       | 1994-95 |        |       |
|---------------------|---------|--------|-------|---------|--------|-------|
|                     | Male    | Female | Total | Male    | Female | Total |
| RMG                 |         |        |       |         |        |       |
| Local               | 0.720   | 0.080  | 0.800 | 0.752   | 0.084  | 0.836 |
| Export-oriented     | 0.080   | 0.720  | 0.800 | 0.120   | 1.080  | 1.200 |
| Dyeing/finishing    | 0.200   | 0.004  | 0.204 | 0.212   | 0.005  | 0.217 |
| Weaving (powerloom) | 0.191   | 0.006  | 0.197 | 0.100   | 0.003  | 0.103 |
| Handloom            | 0.572   | 0.455  | 1.027 | 0.409   | 0.324  | 0.733 |
| Silk                | 0.100   | 0.100  | 0.200 | 0.110   | 0.120  | 0.230 |
| Knitting/hosiery    | 0.043   | 0.002  | 0.045 | 0.044   | 0.007  | 0.051 |
| Spinning            | 0.115   | 0.006  | 0.121 | 0.120   | 0.013  | 0.133 |
| Total               | 2.021   | 1.373  | 3.394 | 1.867   | 1.636  | 3.503 |

Source: Ministry of Commerce, Government of Bangladesh, 1996.

**Table 7: Share of female employment in total employment of the textile sector (1991-92 and 1994-95)**

| Sub-sectors           | 1991-92 | 1994-95 |
|-----------------------|---------|---------|
| RMG                   |         |         |
| Local market-oriented | 1/10    | 1/10    |
| Export-oriented       | 9/10    | 9/10    |
| Dyeing & finishing    | 1/50    | 1/50    |
| Weaving (powerloom)   | 3/100   | 3/100   |
| Handloom              | 11/25   | 11/25   |
| Silk                  | 1/2     | 13/25   |
| Knitting & hosiery    | 1/25    | 7/50    |
| Spinning              | 1/20    | 1/10    |

Source: Ministry of Commerce, Government of Bangladesh, 1996.

female workers in the non-export-oriented sub-sectors in Bangladesh's textile industry, these must be viewed with some scepticism.

### 3. Wages

Female participation in the RMG sector in Bangladesh is confined mainly to the low-paid segments of the production process. In general, the level of wages in the RMG sector is low, for both males and females. The daily wage rate of RMG workers compares unfavourably with that of similar categories of workers in both the public and private sectors. Low wages go a long way in explaining the attractiveness of Bangladesh-made garment to foreign buyers. Table 8 gives an indication of comparative wage levels in the RMG sector in some of the major textile producing countries. As can be seen from the table, Bangladesh's wage level is relatively low, even by South Asian

**Table 8: Average hourly wage rates in the RMG sector across countries**

| Country     | Wage/hour (US\$) |
|-------------|------------------|
| Germany     | 25.00            |
| USA         | 16.00            |
| South Korea | 5.00             |
| Mexico      | 2.40             |
| Poland      | 1.40             |
| Sri Lanka   | 0.45             |
| China       | 0.35             |
| India       | 0.35             |
| Nepal       | 0.30             |
| Bangladesh  | 0.15             |

Source : *The Financial Express*, 15 June 1995, Dhaka.



standards. For instance, the average hourly wage in the RMG industry in Bangladesh is 50 per cent, 42 per cent and 33 per cent of those of Nepal, India and Sri Lanka respectively.

Abundant, readily available labour and its low opportunity cost lead to low wage levels, providing a comparative advantage to female labour in particular operations in the RMG production cycle. At the same time, inter-industry wage differentials indicate a depressed wage situation in the export-oriented RMG sector. This needs to be interpreted in the light of structural rigidities (e.g., enforcement of national minimum wages) that characterize the wage determination process in other formal manufacturing units, particularly in the public sector. In other words, wage rates in the RMG sector can be interpreted as market clearing wages established in a more or less flexible labour market.

Substantial differences in wage levels between male and female workers for comparable jobs are not discernible in the RMG sector. However, there is a caveat to this observation. In RMG production, female workers are predominantly concentrated in “low-skill, low-wage” operations and, thus, are low paid. As shown in Table 9, most women are either production workers or “helpers” (female workers constitute 40-60 per cent of the total workforce in the latter category). Women employed as production managers, supervisors, finishing and machine operators, and “in-charges” (drawing salaries varying from 2-10 times that of the average operator, depending on the type of operations) are extremely rare.

Export-oriented RMG entrepreneurs in Bangladesh argue that low wages in the RMG sector reflect the low productivity of workers in the sector. Yet it is noteworthy that the overwhelming majority of the workforce in the RMG sector are non-unionized women, which has also enabled entrepreneurs to keep the wage levels depressed. Moreover, workers in RMG factories in the export processing zones (EPZs) are barred by law from organizing trade unions of their own. Workers often try to complement their low wages by working overtime, which, in effect, is a mandatory practice in Bangladesh's RMG factories. As labour standards and labour rights are gaining prominence on the WTO's agenda (in addition to that of the ILO, which has long treated such issues), the working environment in Bangladesh's RMG sector is likely to undergo substantial changes. Furthermore, complaints by some US NGOs and the Harkin Bill (which calls for sanctions on imports to the United States from countries using child labour) forced Bangladesh to take urgent measures to enforce a Memorandum of Understanding on the phase-

out of child labour in the RMG industry. The threat of similar sanctions and measures underscores the need to implement policies to improve the working environment for all RMG employees in Bangladesh.

The global textile and apparel markets are becoming fiercely

**Table 9: Gender intensity of participation and wage rates in export-oriented RMG**

|                     | Wage/pay per month<br>(Tk) | Average female<br>participation rate |
|---------------------|----------------------------|--------------------------------------|
| Production workers  |                            |                                      |
| Plain and overlock  | 1,200-1,600                | 80-95%                               |
| Flat lock           | 1,500-1,800                | 40-60%                               |
| Helper              | 500-700                    | 40-60%                               |
| Supervisors         | 2,000-3,500                | 10-20%                               |
| Finishing in charge | 4,000-5,000                | 0-5%                                 |
| Production manager  | 12,000-25,000              | Extremely rare                       |

*Source:* Based on 1) debriefing of chief executives of 10 RMG units and 2) focus group discussions involving 126 RMG workers (mostly female). The survey was carried out for the present study.

competitive. In the coming years Bangladesh's reliance on low paid labour-based, low productivity-induced, low value-added intensive exports, such as RMG, will be severely tested. With countries such as China, India and Vietnam with higher productivity, albeit with somewhat higher wage rates, expected to offer stiff competition in the quota-free post-Multi Fibre Agreement (MFA) phase, Bangladesh must ensure the competitiveness of its RMG exports through critical policy interventions and firm-level adjustments.

#### **IV. The performance of Bangladesh's apparel sector and female employment: Dynamic aspects**

Growth of the apparel sector in Bangladesh has been supported by a regulated international trade regime and a proactive domestic policy framework. But there is growing concern that in a more liberal trading environment, as envisaged by the post-Uruguay Round provisions, Bangladesh's RMG sector may not be able to sustain and enhance its export capacity. The other concern for the sector relates to the fact that the potential for Bangladesh to assert its cheap labour-based competitive advantage is circumscribed by the modest share

of labour in the cost structure of RMG products and the marginal presence of backward linkages in processing activities. The present section identifies changes in the RMG sector in the face of competitive pressure; the implications for the sector of further globalization will be discussed in the subsequent section.

## 1. Strategic choices

Bangladesh's RMG sector is encountering growing competition on a number of fronts: the threat of new entrants, the bargaining power of suppliers and buyers, and rivalry among existing competitors. If the country is to retain its competitive advantage (and, by implication, female industrial employment is to grow) Bangladesh will need to restructure its RMG sector at an accelerated pace. This would entail developing appropriate backward and forward linkages; substantially improving its capital, labour and managerial efficiency; and formulating and implementing product and market diversification strategies. In truth, prospects for expanding female employment in the RMG sector lie in implementing any or all of the following corporate approaches:

- 1) a marketing approach (i.e., more international subcontracting and transition to direct sales abroad);
- 2) a product approach (i.e., more production for the profitable high-value international apparel market and diversification into leather- and silk-based garments);
- 3) a production approach (i.e., increasing value added by decreasing dependence on imported raw materials, particularly fabrics).

It has been argued elsewhere (Bhattacharya, 1996b) that current structural changes in the RMG sector encompass elements of all three approaches. Analysis has revealed that the competitiveness of RMG firms in Bangladesh is being shaped more than ever before by their ability to exploit modern technologies. In other words, the ability of Bangladesh's RMG sector to improve its global market share will largely depend on the technological capability of firms to build the human skills required to set up and operate industries efficiently over time. Clearly, generating such technological capability implies endowing female workers, who constitute the overwhelming majority of the workforce, with the necessary capacity.

## 2. Production costs

Sample surveys show that RMG units in Bangladesh have experienced robust growth during the 1990s in terms of number of employees and wage bill, stock and flow of capital, and output. It is also documented that growth in the cost of employment exceeded the rate of employment expansion, indicating an increase in the wage level. The high levels of investment and export growth suggest substantial capacity expansion and some technological upgrade (Bhattacharya, 1996b).

Such positive trends in employment, output and gross capital formation are usually underwritten by changes in the structure of production costs, such as economies of scale and increased technological endowment per unit of labour. Consistent time series data tracing the evolution of firms are lacking, but the two sector studies referred to earlier can be used to trace adjustments in the RMG sector in Bangladesh. Table 10 presents the shares of different items in the gross value of output as revealed by the two surveys.

**Table 10: Cost structure and profit margin of RMG units**

| Indicators                         | ISS study<br>(1991-92) | BIDS study<br>(1994-95) |
|------------------------------------|------------------------|-------------------------|
| Value of output                    | 100.00                 | 100.00                  |
| Costs                              | 87.00                  | 76.00                   |
| Industrial costs (excluding wage)* | 73.00                  | 64.00                   |
| Non-industrial costs**             | 03.00                  | 05.00                   |
| Employment cost (wage bill)        | 11.00                  | 07.00                   |
| Gross value added                  | 23.00                  | 31.00                   |
| Profit margin                      | 13.00                  | 24.00                   |

\*Industrial costs include expenditures on raw materials, packaging materials, fuel and electricity, spares and sub-contracting.

\*\* Non-industrial costs include expenditures on overheads, i.e. costs other than direct material and labour expenditures. These costs include advertisement and facilitation expenses, selling and distribution costs, interest payments and taxes.

Source: Adapted from the survey results of 72 RMG units in 1992 (ISS, 1993) and 38 RMG units in 1995 (Bhattacharya, 1996b).

Table 10 indicates that between 1992 and 1994, the proportion of costs in the gross value of output decreased from 87 per cent to 76 per cent, leading to an increase in the profit margin from 13 per cent to 24 per cent. Concurrently, the share of industrial cost (excluding salaries and wages) fell from 73 per cent to 64 per cent, resulting in a

growth of the share of gross value added from 23 per cent to 31 per cent. During the corresponding period, within the gross value of output, the share of non-industrial cost increased from 3 per cent to 5 per cent.

The shift towards a higher share of non-industrial costs is characteristic of products of high market value, which is corroborated by the increase in the share of value added. The fall in the share of employment costs does not signify a decrease in the wage rate in real terms, but it does point to an intra-firm redistribution of income from workers to owners. Since owners tend to be males and workers mostly females, there would also appear to be an inter-gender redistribution of income in the RMG sector, away from females. The cost structure comparison reveals the price-restraining measures deployed by firms and a concomitant increase in both capital and labour productivity, though they remain low in comparison to regional and global standards. Once again, this price restraint appears to have been largely realized by denying the teenage female labour force wage gains commensurate with productivity growth.

**Table 11: Trend in factor intensity and factor productivity of RMG units**

| Indicator   | ISS study<br>(1991-92) | BIDS study<br>(1994-95)* |
|---|------------------------|--------------------------|
| Capital-labour ratio**<br>(000 taka/worker)         | 31                     | 29                       |
| Gross value added capital<br>ratio (dimensionless)  | 1.34                   | 3.5                      |
| Gross value added labour<br>ratio (000 taka/worker) | 40                     | 79                       |

\* In 1991-92 constant price.

\*\* Capital cost excludes value of land and building.

Source: ISS (1993) and Bhattacharya (1996b).

### 3. Factor productivity and factor intensity

Comparison of the two surveys reveals that the factor intensity, or capital-labour ratio, may have gone down marginally in the RMG units in the early 1990s. It is worth noting that the samples drawn for the 1992 survey were biased toward larger firms (in terms of employment), which explains why upward movement of the output-labour ratio was not associated with a similar change in the capital labour ratio. But a higher rate of capacity utilization may also explain

the situation. Higher factor productivity of the units sampled for the 1995 survey may also reflect performance behaviour by size class following a path shaped like an inverted U. In other words, productivity registers growth as the scale of production increases and then falls for enterprises beyond a certain size.

Analysis of the time-series data on investment, employment and output generated by the two surveys reveals that the firms producing RMGs for export have replenished and expanded their capital stock, leading to higher partial factor productivity. However, in regard to changes in the two measures of partial factor productivity, the gains accruing to capital were notably higher than those accruing to labour. From a gender perspective, the relative growth in the capital- and labour-output ratios suggests that the redistribution of incremental income did not favour women workers.

#### 4. Wages

Evidence of increasing wage rates in various skill categories is shown in Table 12. During the period 1991/92-1994/95, the average monthly employment cost in a RMG unit increased from Tk 1,608 to Tk 1,717 (in constant terms) — implying a real increase in unit employment cost of about 6.8 per cent. In fact, wages across various categories of employees increased by the same extent (just over 6.7 per cent). This suggests that, while benefits to female labour may not have been proportional to growth in the RMG sector, the modest rise in real wages may have marginally mitigated the situation. But it is

**Table 12: Average monthly employment cost per person by skill level in RMG units (taka per month)**

| Category                | ISS study<br>(1991-92) | BIDS study<br>(1994-95)* | Growth rate (%) |
|-------------------------|------------------------|--------------------------|-----------------|
| Professional            | 5,643                  | 6,025                    | 6.74            |
| Skilled worker          | 1,781                  | 1,901                    | 6.74            |
| Semi-skilled worker     | 1,377                  | 1470                     | 6.75            |
| Unskilled worker        | 923                    | 985                      | 6.71            |
| Clerical staff          | 2,665                  | 2,846                    | 6.79            |
| Support staff           | 1,932                  | 2,063                    | 6.78            |
| Workers outside factory | 772                    | -                        | -               |
| Labour-all types        | 1,608                  | 1,717                    | 6.78            |

\* In 1991-92 constant price.

Source: ISS (1993) and Bhattacharya (1996b).

not possible to infer from the data whether these increases have been eroded by the longer working hours demanded of these workers. Nonetheless, with the large reserve of unskilled labour in Bangladesh, real income growth is certainly a “pull” factor, influencing female employment expansion in the RMG sector.

Statistical evidence thus points to some positive processes at work in Bangladesh's RMG sector, although reality is a bit more complex. For example, favourable changes in wage rates have been accompanied by restructuring of employment composition in terms of skill categories of the workers.

**Table 13: Trend in nominal and real wage in garment by skill category (taka per month)**

| Worker category | 1980 | 1985 | 1988 | 1990 | 1993 | 1997 | (%)<br>change<br>(1980-1997) |
|-----------------|------|------|------|------|------|------|------------------------------|
| Trainee/helper  |      |      |      |      |      |      |                              |
| - Nominal       | 130  | 300  | 400  | 500  | 500  | 500  | -                            |
| - Real          | 195  | 300  | 267  | 337  | 296  | 242  | 24.10                        |
| Semi-skilled    |      |      |      |      |      |      |                              |
| - Nominal       | 300  | 500  | 600  | 800  | 1000 | 1000 | -                            |
| - Real          | 423  | 500  | 420  | 540  | 591  | 484  | 14.42                        |
| Skilled         |      |      |      |      |      |      |                              |
| - Nominal       | 500  | 800  | 1000 | 1500 | 1800 | 2200 | -                            |
| - Real          | 760  | 800  | 762  | 1012 | 1064 | 1065 | 40.13                        |

Note: Figures indicate the highest wage offered to different category of workers, and real wage rates are in 1984-1985 constant price.

Source: Based on memory recall of 17 chief executives and senior executives of 10 RMG units. The interviews were carried out in 1997 for the present study.

In their bid to retain markets in the face of competitive pressures, RMG entrepreneurs in Bangladesh have made both price and non-price adjustments to their products. Because exogenous factors (e.g., the state of infrastructure) influence non-price adjustment behaviour (e.g., timely shipment of goods), entrepreneurs seem to have opted for a more active price adjustment strategy. The latter has entailed production of the existing range of outputs at lower cost, as well as product diversification in favour of high-value products. Both strategies precipitated an apparently contradictory situation in the RMG units. On the one hand, labour costs were kept down by hiring more unskilled workers and, on the other, demand for skilled workers increased due to the introduction of high-value products in the output range. Since the supply of unskilled labour is more elastic than that

of skilled workers, the latter group benefited more, at least in terms of wages and possibly also in terms of employment, from the restructuring process (see Table 13). Because female employment in the RMG sector is concentrated in low-skill jobs, the bulk of female workers could not benefit from restructuring at the firm level.

## 5. The gender implications of technological improvements

Recent changes in the composition of outputs in the country's RMG sector have led to a diffusion of technological innovations. These innovations, such as computer-aided design (CAD) systems for grading patterns and marking, have been concentrated in the pre-assembly (pre-sewing) phase of garment manufacture, where female employment is marginal. As a result, if gender segregation in the manufacturing process cannot be dismantled, women workers will simply be bypassed by the introduction of these new technologies. The key to breaking down this gendered division of labour lies in enhancing the skills of the female workers in the RMG sector, particularly through:

- 1) increased formal schooling (to improve language and mathematical skills);
- 2) enhanced availability of RMG-oriented training facilities at an affordable price (such as market-responsive, publicly funded training programmes); and
- 3) greater possibilities for on-the-job training (geared to facilitate upward occupational mobility).

Thus, developing the capacity of female workers will allow them to take advantage of the opportunities offered by the introduction of new technologies in garment manufacturing. For example, the computer-controlled automated cutting systems replacing manual cutting techniques are more gender-friendly but require special training. Such techniques diminish the need for physical strength and, thus, will not drive away female workers from this segment of the garment processing chain. Similar examples may be cited for the post-sewing phase.

In other words, enhanced educational qualification coupled with targeted skill development of the female workers in the RMG enterprises constitutes the real basis for sustained access to more remunerative jobs. Incidentally, success in the unfolding global economic scenario will increasingly require firms to foster such skills; those failing to do so will have to accept an erosion in their market share and depressed rates of return. The inability of entrepreneurs



(and the government) to elaborate forward-looking (positive) restructuring strategies based on enhancing the skills of female labour will lead to redundancy for their workers.

Thus the response to this fast-evolving situation in the RMG sector must come from both government and entrepreneurs. It is imperative that the government increase gender equity-sensitive allocations, particularly social sector expenditure targeted toward female education and skill development. The picture emerging in countries where industrial restructuring has taken place without attention to gender concerns is a swing back from female intensity in manufacturing, where women have been effectively replaced by male workers (Joekes, 1995; Pearson, 1998). Entrepreneurs, on the other hand, will have to appreciate that they tend to lose out in the long run by not investing in the capability development of women workers. However, entrepreneurs can argue for a cost sharing arrangement with the government in order to underwrite the risks of seeing trained female workers desert to their competitors.

## **V. The implications of globalization for female employment in Bangladesh's apparel sector**

As indicated above, the phenomenal growth of the export-oriented RMG sector has led to a high degree of feminization of formal manufacturing employment in Bangladesh. The sector retained its growth momentum in the face of stiff competitive pressure and, in fact, has been able to offer increased wage rates to its workforce over time. However, the female workers remain trapped in the low-skill, low-wage segment of processing activities in RMG factories. Whether current RMG growth rates will be sustainable in the future, whether women will be able to continue to access employment opportunities stimulated through such growth, and whether there will be transfer of technology and increase in productivity to the extent that will lead to wage increases in real terms are important issues of concern for Bangladesh's RMG sector. Some of them are taken up in this section.

### **1. The post-MFA textile and apparel trade**

The dynamics of global trade in textiles and apparel has important ramifications and implications for Bangladesh's export-oriented RMG sector. World trade in textiles and apparel developed since 1974 under the restraining rules of the Multi-Fibre Agreement

(MFA). The nine developed-country signatories to this agreement were Austria, Canada, the European Community (EC), Finland, Norway, Sweden, Switzerland and the United States. During negotiations of the GATT Uruguay Round, it was decided to integrate the MFA into the GATT (WTO) over a transitional period of 10 years (in four phases) beginning on 1 January 1995. According to the Agreement on Textiles and Clothing (ATC) of the Uruguay Round, the MFA phase-out schedule is as follows:

- 1) At the beginning of the first phase on 1 January 1995, each country would integrate products from the specific list in the Agreement accounting for not less than 16 per cent of its total volume of imports in 1990;
- 2) At the beginning of the second phase on 1 January 1998, products accounting for not less than 17 per cent of the 1990 import volume would be integrated;
- 3) In the third phase starting on 1 January 2002, products accounting for not less than 18 per cent of the 1990 import volume would be integrated; and
- 4) The remaining 49 per cent of the volume of 1990 imports would be integrated at the end of the transition period on 1 January 2005.

Following full integration, trade in these products will be governed by the general rules of the WTO. In each of the four phases, products for integration are chosen from the following categories: tops and yarns, fabrics, made-up textile products and clothing. Importing countries determine the schedule of integration.

During the transition period, quotas are increased for items remaining outside the integration process according to the following schedule:

- 1) From 1 January 1995, the annual growth rates applicable to these quotas would be increased by 16 per cent;
- 2) From 1 January 1998, the annual growth rates applicable to these quotas would be increased by 25 per cent; and
- 3) From 1 January 2002, the annual growth rates applicable to these quotas would be increased by 27 per cent.

In 1994, the GATT Secretariat projected phenomenal growth in world trade in textiles and apparel once the restraining rein of the MFA was phased out. Annual growth rates from 1.2 per cent to 4.3 per cent for textiles, and 4.1 per cent to 8.6 per cent for apparel are projected through 2005. As Table 14 shows, global trade in textiles and apparel combined is expected to increase from approximately US\$ 199.5 billion in 1992 (base year) to between US\$ 289.2 and 469.9

billion by 2005. The table also indicates that the global trade in apparel is expected to rise from around US\$ 105.6 billion (in 1992) to between US\$ 178.9 and 307.9 billion by 2005, and that of textiles from US\$ 93.9 billion to between US\$ 110.3 and 162.0 billion over the same period.

**Table 14: Expected annual growth rate of world trade in textiles and clothing (1992-2005)**

| Projections      | 1992<br>(billion \$) | 2005<br>(billion \$) | Growth rate<br>(percentage<br>change) | Annual growth<br>rate during<br>1992-2005 |
|------------------|----------------------|----------------------|---------------------------------------|---|
| <b>Version 1</b> |                      |                      |                                       |   |
| Textiles         | 93.9                 | 110.3                | 17.5                                  | 1.2                                       |
| Clothing         | 105.6                | 178.9                | 69.4                                  | 4.1                                       |
| Total            | 199.5                | 289.2                | 45.0                                  | 2.9                                       |
| <b>Version 2</b> |                      |                      |                                       |   |
| Textiles         | 93.9                 | 111.4                | 18.6                                  | 1.3                                       |
| Clothing         | 105.6                | 197.6                | 87.1                                  | 4.9                                       |
| Total            | 199.5                | 309.0                | 54.9                                  | 3.4                                       |
| <b>Version 3</b> |                      |                      |                                       |   |
| Textiles         | 93.9                 | 162.0                | 72.5                                  | 4.3                                       |
| Clothing         | 105.6                | 307.9                | 191.6                                 | 8.6                                       |
| Total            | 199.5                | 469.9                | 135.5                                 | 6.8                                       |

Source: GATT, 1994.

## 2. The future of apparel in Bangladesh

Will Bangladesh be able to share in the gains from the expansion of the global apparel market? This will depend, in part, on the extent to which MFA phase-out affects the performance of the country's textiles and apparel sectors. At present, a quota is imposed on Bangladesh's apparel exports in only two of the nine countries signatories to the MFA: the United States and Canada. Market access is restrained on 31 categories of RMG exports in the US market and nine categories in the Canadian market. These two markets currently account for about 60 per cent of total RMG exports from Bangladesh. Quota utilization in these countries has been around 85 per cent and 65 per cent respectively, indicating that the quotas did not have a restrictive impact on Bangladesh's RMG exports (World Bank, 1993). As a matter of fact, the quotas have played an important role in providing Bangladesh with a guaranteed market in these two countries.

With the phasing out of the MFA and the elimination of quotas on these major categories of exports, some of the traditional RMG exporters, such as Bangladesh, are expected to face serious competition from a number of newcomers, which, under the MFA, faced restricted entry in the US and Canadian markets (Blackhurst et al., 1995). Bangladesh's RMG firms currently import a large proportion of their raw materials (grey fabrics) from countries such as China, India and Thailand under back-to-back L/Cs. In a quota-free environment, however, these countries may increase exports of finished apparel to North American markets. Whether Bangladesh's RMG sector will be able to withstand the challenge from these countries in the post-MFA period is thus an issue of critical significance for the future of the industry. The key issue here will be the competitive strength of Bangladesh's textile sector in general, and its RMG sector in particular.

If we juxtapose the phase-out programme on the structure of apparel exports from Bangladesh, we find that most items of export interest are to be integrated into the WTO in the last year of the phase-out (2004). Bangladesh thus has about four years to prepare for the post-MFA trade regime.

Other market access problems may also threaten the future performance of Bangladesh's RMG sector. For example, Bangladesh's exports enjoy preferential access in many European markets under the EC's Generalized System of Preference (GSP) schemes. These provide Bangladesh access to the EC market at zero tariffs. It is notable that, although substantial across-the-board reductions in tariff rates were negotiated in the Uruguay Round, reductions on textiles and apparel were relatively shallow. For example, tariff rates on imports of textiles and apparel by EC countries have remained relatively high, at about 12.5 per cent. Preferential treatment under the GSP allows EC importers to claim a duty rebate equivalent to 12.5 per cent of import value on imports of garment from Bangladesh. In recent years this preferential treatment has contributed to robust growth of Bangladesh's apparel sector through substantial market expansion in the EC market. The EC accounts for about 35 per cent of Bangladesh's global exports of apparel.

However, problems of market access recently faced by Bangladesh indicate that such facilities cannot be expected on a guaranteed basis. For example, access to the EC's GSP scheme is subject to compliance with "rules of origin" (ROO) requirements. Under these requirements, a two-stage transformation is required for woven RMG and, for knit RMG, a three-stage transformation (cotton to yarn, yarn to fabric, fabric to RMG) is required. Since Bangladesh's

indigenous capacity in spinning is negligible (about 5 per cent of total requirement), it is not possible to comply with the three-stage criterion. At present, most of the yarn used by the knit RMG factories of Bangladesh is imported (mainly from India). Although the EC ignored this non-compliance until recently, it has had to revise its position under pressure from Bangladesh's competitors. In October 1997, the Government of Bangladesh reached agreement with the EC under which Bangladeshi entrepreneurs would refund the duties (amounting to about US\$ 60 million) previously waived by the EC. Although the EC has agreed to a flexible approach to this issue, the incident reveals the types of problems countries like Bangladesh may encounter in the global market — despite trends towards liberalization in the post-MFA phase.

There is every indication that Bangladesh's apparel sector currently stands at an important crossroads. As we have seen, the wages of RMG workers in Bangladesh are the lowest in South Asia. But because backward linkages in the RMG sector are few, the local value addition has so far been very small — only 25-30 per cent of gross exports. Bangladesh can produce locally only 4 per cent of the 2.2 billion square metres of fabric required by its RMG factories. With quotas phasing out, and preferential treatment for exports coming under threat, continued vibrant growth of Bangladesh's apparel exports hinges on the creation of backward linkage in the textile sector. It has been estimated by the Ministry of Textiles (1993) that the country needs to set up, by the year 2000, 146 yarn units to meet 40 per cent of related demand, 109 fabrics units to meet 100 per cent of domestic demand and 199 dyeing/finishing units to fully absorb locally made fabrics. This would require an investment of more than US\$ 4 billion.

Relevant in this context are the composite textile mills that have recently been commissioned by the private sector in Bangladesh. A number of export-oriented textile mills are also being set up. Import data supply evidence of this trend: in 1995-96, Tk 5,579 million worth of L/Cs were opened for textile machinery; the corresponding figure for 1996-97 was Tk 5,776 million. Between 1994-95 and 1996-97, Tk 12,061 million-worth of (both woven and knit) textile-related machinery was imported by the private sector (Centre for Policy Dialogue, 1998). This is an indication that the private sector is indeed responding to opportunities for enhancing backward linkages in the textile sector in Bangladesh. Furthermore, negotiations under the aegis of SAPTA (the South Asian Preferential Trading Arrangements) also envisage duty-free access of Bangladeshi products (including textiles)

to the SAARC countries, which may be expected to expand markets within the region.

The Ministry of Textiles projects that, if sufficient investment is made in the spinning and weaving sub-sectors, Bangladesh can build a competitive export-oriented RMG sector with strong backward linkages to the textiles sector. Bangladesh will thus need to pursue a pro-active industrial policy if such investments are to be realized by 2005. If Bangladesh is indeed able to make such investments, opportunities for absorption of additional female workers in the textiles and apparel sector can be expected to improve. In the absence of a proactive policy favouring establishment of backward linkage industries, however, Bangladesh may be marginalized in the global apparel trade, leading to an erosion of the country's current share in the global market. And because female employment has failed to expand in other sectors, collapse of the RMG exports would have a disastrous impact on female employment in Bangladesh.

### **3. Employment opportunities post-MFA**

From the above discussion, it is clear that withdrawal of the quota system, erosion of GSP margins, and increasing competition from both "old" (previously restrained by MFA) and "new" (such as China, Vietnam, Cambodia) competitors are three major factors with serious implications for Bangladesh's apparel sector in the foreseeable future. Capacity to translate the static comparative advantage of cheap labour into dynamic competitive advantage is severely constrained by the textile and apparel sector's narrow production base with low technological capacity.

However, there is also a brighter side to the story. Projections confirm that adequate investments in backward linkages in the textile sector have the potential to enhance Bangladesh's apparel exports significantly. Bangladesh can remain competitive in the global market, and potentially increase its share in the global textile and apparel trade, provided appropriate policy initiatives are undertaken.

In the above context and with competition likely to increase once the textiles sector is fully integrated under the WTO, enhancing the competitive strength of Bangladesh's apparel sector is critically important. When local value addition is low, the scope for reducing the cost of the final product by using cheap labour is limited — since the inputs that constitute the major part of the cost are sourced at global price. On the other hand, when backward linkages are established (in spinning and weaving) and inputs are produced at

lower prices domestically, the relatively low wage level of a country can play a more important role in enhancing competitiveness of the final product in the global market. However, this approach also requires taking adequate steps to raise the level of productivity in upstream activities.

The Ministry of Commerce (1996) recently carried out a study on prospects for the country's textile sector in the post-MFA period. The study made projections from two perspectives. In the "normal scenario", production in the sub-sectors of dyeing-finishing, weaving, handloom, silk, knit-hosiery and spinning is expected to grow at 5 per cent per year during 1995-2005, while consumption/use of fabrics in the export-oriented RMG industry is assumed to increase at the rate of 10 per cent per year during 1995-2000 and 5 per cent per year during 2000-2005. Under the "self-sufficiency scenario", 40 per cent of the domestic and export-oriented requirement of yarn will be locally produced by 2000; by 2005, the level of local sourcing will reach 100 per cent.

Estimates made by the Ministry of Commerce also show that employment in the textile and apparel sectors may rise from 3.5 to 6.2 million under the "normal" scenario, and to 9.7 million under the "self-sufficiency" scenario (see Table 15). A large part of this increase is expected to be constituted by women (see annex Table 4).

**Table 15: Projection of employment in textile sector under "normal" and "self-sufficiency" conditions (1995-2005)(million person years)**

| Sub-sectors          | 1995<br>(base<br>year) | 2000                 |                                    | 2005                 |                                    |
|----------------------|------------------------|----------------------|------------------------------------|----------------------|------------------------------------|
|                      |                        | Normal<br>conditions | Self-<br>sufficiency<br>conditions | Normal<br>conditions | Self-<br>sufficiency<br>conditions |
| RMG                  |                        |                      |                                    |                      |                                    |
| Local                | 0.836                  | 1.071                | 1.071                              | 1.366                | 1.366                              |
| Export-oriented      | 1.200                  | 1.935                | 1.935                              | 2.469                | 2.469                              |
| Dyeing-finishing     | 0.217                  | 0.279                | 0.634                              | 0.356                | 1.282                              |
| Weaving (powerloom)  | 0.103                  | 0.129                | 0.425                              | 0.165                | 0.991                              |
| Handloom             | 0.733                  | 0.938                | 0.938                              | 1.197                | 1.197                              |
| Silk                 | 0.230                  | 0.296                | 0.296                              | 0.375                | 0.375                              |
| Knitting and hosiery | 0.051                  | 0.065                | 0.065                              | 0.083                | 0.083                              |
| Spinning             | 0.133                  | 0.170                | 0.622                              | 0.217                | 1.985                              |
| Total                | 3.503                  | 4.883                | 5.986                              | 6.228                | 9.748                              |

Source: Ministry of Commerce, 1996.

According to projections, the share of female employment (90 per cent) in the export-oriented RMG sector will be protected, and the proportion of female workers would register some increase in the non-export-oriented RMG sub-sectors (see Table 16). As mentioned earlier, the proportion of women in the total workforce of the textile sector is very low in Bangladesh, even when compared to other developing countries. As most of the incremental labour force is expected to be employed in the upstream textile-related activities (part of which caters to local demand), women will not be able to fully exploit the potential employment opportunities if present patterns of female employment in the textile sector persist. By 2005, the share of female employment is projected to rise from 10 to only 20 per cent in non-export-oriented RMG, while in the dyeing/finishing sub-sectors the share is expected to rise from 2 to 10 per cent, in the knitting/hosiery sub-sectors from 4 to 30 per cent, and in the spinning sub-sector from 5 to 20 per cent. However, Ministry of Commerce projections do not say whether specific policies will be required to provide employment, or whether low relative wages are expected automatically to ensure enhanced female employment.

**Table 16: Projection of share of female labour in the textile/apparel sector (1995-2005)(percentage)**

| Sub-sectors          | 1995 (actual) | 2000 (projected) | 2005 (projected) |
|----------------------|---------------|------------------|------------------|
| RMG                  |               |                  |                  |
| Local                | 10.0          | 15.0             | 20.0             |
| Export-oriented      | 90.0          | 90.0             | 90.0             |
| Dyeing and finishing | 2.0           | 5.0              | 10.0             |
| Weaving (powerloom)  | 3.0           | 80.0             | 15.0             |
| Handloom             | 44.0          | 47.0             | 50.0             |
| Silk                 | 52.0          | 55.0             | 60.0             |
| Knitting and hosiery | 14.0          | 20.0             | 30.0             |
| Spinning             | 10.0          | 15.0             | 20.0             |

*Source:* Ministry of Commerce, 1996.

Ministry of Commerce projections also foresee female employment rising from 1.6 million (in 1995 base year) to between 3.4 million (under normal conditions) and 4.0 million (under self-sufficiency conditions) (see Table 15). However, for such projections to materialize, substantial resources will have to be directed toward the textiles sector through both public and private investment, and



foreign direct investment. Moreover, the protection of quantitative restrictions (QRs) on imports and high levels of tariffs may also need to be continued until 2005. Projections show that if QRs on imports of textile products are withdrawn (as stipulated in the ATC), then about 180,000 women workers will be retrenched immediately. Table 17 suggests that if the protection enjoyed by the textile sector is withdrawn, employment creation for women will be 250,000 less in 2000 and 360,000 less in 2005 compared to the projected figures of female employment in the textiles sector under normal conditions.

**Table 17: Impact of ATC on employment of women in the textiles sector (1995-2005) (million person-years)**

| Sub-sectors          | 1995<br>(Base<br>year) | 2000 normal<br>conditions |             | 2005 normal<br>conditions |             |
|----------------------|------------------------|---------------------------|-------------|---------------------------|-------------|
|                      |                        | with ATC                  | without ATC | with ATC                  | without ATC |
| RMG                  |                        |                           |             |                           |             |
| Local                | 0.084                  | 0.161                     | 0.161       | 0.273                     | 0.273       |
| Export-oriented      | 1.080                  | 1.742                     | 1.742       | 2.222                     | 2.222       |
| Dyeing and finishing | 0.005                  | 0.007                     | 0.014       | 0.018                     | 0.036       |
| Weaving (powerloom)  | 0.003                  | 0.005                     | 0.010       | 0.013                     | 0.025       |
| Handloom             | 0.324                  | 0.221                     | 0.441       | 0.300                     | 0.599       |
| Silk                 | 0.120                  | 0.147                     | 0.163       | 0.203                     | 0.225       |
| Knitting and hosiery | 0.007                  | 0.007                     | 0.013       | 0.013                     | 0.025       |
| Spinning             | 0.013                  | 0.026                     | 0.026       | 0.043                     | 0.043       |
| Total                | 1.636                  | 2.316                     | 2.570       | 3.085                     | 3.448       |

Source: Ministry of Textiles, 1996.

Bangladesh's policy makers are thus faced with a dilemma. If the phenomenal growth of the RMG sector is to be sustained, and if the scope for women's employment in the manufacturing sector is to be enhanced, resources must be found and committed to the development of the textile sector. The textile sector must also be given some protection in the interim period. As a least developed country (LDC), Bangladesh is granted some leeway as regards protectionist policies which are WTO-legal; however, such protection may become untenable in the medium and long term.

The projected investments also imply substantial transfers of technology into the country's textile-related sectors. Tomorrow's competitive factories in Bangladesh will require more skilled and semi-skilled workers, with higher literacy rates and the capacity to carry out mechanical operations and quality control in the production process (CPD, 1998). If conscious policy interventions and training programmes are not undertaken by the government to educate and

train women, they cannot be expected to fully exploit the opportunities which will open up in the backward linkage industries. Women workers are currently concentrated in the low skill-intensive operations, and the projected industrial restructuring will demand an important shift from this structure of employment.

Even if tomorrow's competitive factories do become more skill-intensive, there is no guarantee that women will be trained and hired for these more demanding jobs. In developing countries such as Bangladesh, gender norms and biases regiment the definitions of skilled and unskilled labourers, the value given to work experience, the delegation of workers for on-the-job training, etc. In such a context, there is genuine apprehension that women may be marginalized as technologies transform factories and working methods. Bangladesh will thus need to combine structural, institutional and human resource development strategies to ensure that current women workers, as well as new female entrants, possess the necessary skills and training to service the changing labour requirements of the emerging textile and apparel industries.

A concerted and conscious effort by both public and private sectors will be called for. The government will need to design appropriate incentive packages to encourage the private sector to promote gender-sensitive, action-oriented activities. Translating such an approach into macroeconomic policies is a challenging task in itself, but a few policy measures in this respect do present themselves.

First, there is a need to reconsider public expenditures with a view to a gender/equity-sensitive allocation pattern. Emphasis has to be placed on social sector expenditures targeted toward female primary education, as entrepreneurs prefer to hire literate and numerate female workers. The demand for basic educational competency will increase further as new technologies spread throughout the apparel sector. Such expenditures must be protected in the face of pressures to balance budgets under stabilization and adjustment policy requirements.

Second, a mechanism has to be devised to share the costs of on-the-job training of female workers between the government and entrepreneurs. The public contribution would underwrite the potential risk of workers leaving a firm after receiving training. It is unlikely that the task of skill enhancement of female workers would meet with success if left to any one of the two actors exclusively.

Third, the government's labour market policies will have to be guided by the goal of promoting flexibility. Under no circumstances should labour market intervention make female labour costlier to the

employer (e.g., by emphasizing maternity benefits and restrictions of women working at night) than male labour. However, this is not to underplay the need to enforce the current statutory provisions relating to female industrial employment.

Fourth, in order to counteract gender discrimination based on social prejudices, the government must step up the public information campaign aimed at changing people's perception of women's role in society, particularly in the workplace. Such an awareness-building exercise aims to counteract perceptions that contribute to a "compartmentalization" of female participation in production processes and perpetuate wage biases against female workers. Involvement of trade unions and NGOs should strengthen this sensitization exercise.

## VI. Conclusion

Large-scale entry of women into the labour market has been one of the most striking features of recent industrialization in Bangladesh. A supply of cheap and readily available female labour has provided Bangladesh with a competitive edge on which the success of its flagship export-oriented industry, RMG, was built. The growth rate of the RMG sector in the 1990s was about 20 per cent. Creation of employment opportunities, mainly for the women constituting about 90 per cent of the sector's workforce (i.e., about 1.2 million people) has been a striking feature of the rapid expansion of the RMG sector in Bangladesh.

However, the female labour in this sector is concentrated mainly in the low-skill, low-wage segment of the production process, limiting local value addition in, and future growth of, the sector. Globalization of the textile market is likely to test the limits of such low skill-intensive export-oriented manufacturing activities in developing countries such as Bangladesh. At the same time, unshackling of global markets provides Bangladesh with a unique opportunity to capitalize on expanding market access by restructuring its domestic apparel sector through introduction of new technologies. Diffusion of such technologies is expected to further increase the growth momentum of the RMG sector and, consequently, female industrial employment in the country.

The phasing out of the Multi-Fibre Agreement is expected to bring new challenges as well as new opportunities for Bangladesh in the medium to long term. Analysis shows that in order to remain

competitive in the apparel market, Bangladesh must build backward linkages in the RMG industry. And evidence suggests that investments in upstream activities have indeed been picking up in recent years. However, if female workers remain concentrated in the low-skill, low-wage segment of the production cycle, even if the number and share of female workers in the labour force increases, this is unlikely to result in income growth for the female workers. A conscious public policy package aimed at encouraging skill development, facilitating technology transfer and raising the productivity level of female workers thus needs to be put in place to translate Bangladesh's comparative advantage into competitive advantage. This will facilitate sustainable improvement of the earning opportunities of the female labour force in the country's textile and apparel sector.

The feminized labour force in the export-oriented RMG sector of Bangladesh is perhaps at a threshold between significant reduction in market share under pressure of competition and globalization, or enhanced market opportunities induced by a move towards higher value-added products. The actual outcome hinges on the efficacy of the policies implemented to steer the outcome in the country's medium- to long-run interest. Such interventions will have to embody women-oriented social sector allocations and must be supported by a conscious effort by the private sector to train the female labour force in order to raise their productivity and stimulate backward (e.g., spinning and weaving) and forward (e.g., fashion and design) linkages in the apparel sector. The effectiveness of these measures will depend on the ability of the government to develop policies aimed at dismantling the gender segmentation of the labour market. Our analysis has shown that, irrespective of humanitarian considerations, gender-sensitive interventions are justified because of the revealed comparative advantage of female labour in textile-related activities, which can be enhanced if appropriate policy inducements are put in place.

## Endnotes

1. The authors are grateful to Carol Miller, Shahra Razavi, Swasti Mitter and David Westendorff for comments on an earlier draft. Editorial comments provided by Jenifer Freedman are also acknowledged. The usual disclaimer applies.
2. One of the two studies reported the extrapolated results of a stratified sample survey of 1,220 private manufacturing firms, including 72 RMG units. The survey, sponsored by USAID, was carried out by the World Bank in 1992-93. For details, see ISS (1993). The other study, based on a sample survey of 38 RMG units, was conducted in 1995 by one of the authors. For details, see Bhattacharya (1996a).
3. According to LFS data, in 1995-96 the share of women in total manufacturing employment was about 36.6 per cent (see Table 1). This high estimate is attributable to inclusion of women involved in small and cottage level processing activities (e.g. handloom weaving).
4. The average employment size of a manufacturing enterprise in the organized sector is 50 (1991-92).
5. On average, a state-owned enterprise has a total of 1,335 employees, whereas the corresponding figures for joint ventures and domestic private units are 290 and 40 respectively.
6. Women constitute almost 90 per cent of all workers in the tea-plucking stage, while the percentage of women in processing and blending varies between 10-25 per cent. Women also account for a significant share (46.7 per cent) of the agricultural labour force.
7. Under the "back-to-back" letters of credit extended by commercial banks, the exporters of RMG are able to import inputs (i.e., fabrics and accessories) against the export orders placed in their favour by the RMG importers. Given this provision, Bangladeshi exporters do not need to invest their own resources to finance working capital.
8. Under the bonded warehouse facilities, the imported inputs can be cleared through the customs against export orders without paying any import duty. This ensures that the export-oriented RMG units can access imported inputs at zero-tariff.
9. For example, according to the wage data provided by the BBS (1995) we find that the average monthly wages of skilled factory workers in textile and other sectors is 1.4 to 2.0 times that of similar workers in the RMG factories.
10. However, it is to be noted here that there is a limit to the extent to which low wages can be translated into low unit costs of production. Since the productivity of labour is also relatively low in Bangladesh, the cost of production per unit of output tends to be on the high side despite low wages. Bangladesh's apparel sector enjoys comparative advantage mainly because the sector is labour intensive and low productivity is somewhat offset by low wages.
11. According to the tripartite agreement signed in January 1994 (Statutory Regulatory Order No. 14 - Minimum Wages Ordinance) workers in the RMG sector are categorized into seven grades. Most of the female workers are concentrated in Grades 5 and 6 (junior sewing and knitting machine operators, and general sewing and knitting operators). Minimum wages fixed for these two types of operators are Tk 1,000 and Tk 900, respectively.
12. A technical evaluation of a joint ILO/UNDP project (BGD/85/153) computed that person-minutes required per basic product in Bangladesh's RMG sector is 25.0, while it is 14.0 in the United States, 19.7 in Hong Kong, 20.7 in the Republic of

Korea and 24.0 in Sri Lanka.

13. For details, see Bhattacharya (1996b).

14. See ISS (1993) and Bhattacharya (1996a).

15. For example, according to ISS (1993), the sample RMG enterprises invested towards gross capital formation an amount equivalent to 19.13 per cent of annual output. More than 70 per cent of this amount was attributable to investment in machinery and equipment.

16. The EC agreed to a two-stage conversion (the so-called derogation). However, the derogation will be time-bound. Moreover, there is a possibility that a quota will be imposed on exports exceeding a certain amount. For details, see Rahman (1997).

17. For example, under the current rules of SAPTA, a 40 per cent local value addition is required to benefit from a preferential import tariff.

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## Annex Tables

**Annex Table 1: Gender composition of manufacturing sector (1991-92)**

| Ind. Code | Industry name               | All employees |       |        |       | Operative |       |        |       |
|-----------|-----------------------------|---------------|-------|--------|-------|-----------|-------|--------|-------|
|           |                             | Male          |       | Female |       | Male      |       | Female |       |
|           |                             | No.           | %     | No.    | %     | No.       | %     | No.    | %     |
| 311       | Food mfg.                   | 40575         | 4.14  | 3430   | 1.94  | 29239     | 3.61  | 3370   | 1.93  |
| 312       | Food mfg.                   | 59892         | 6.12  | 2207   | 1.25  | 40744     | 5.03  | 1905   | 1.09  |
| 313       | Beverage ind.               | 1569          | 0.16  | 146    | 0.08  | 731       | 0.09  | 142    | 0.08  |
| 314       | Cigarettes                  | 30232         | 3.09  | 2597   | 1.47  | 27661     | 3.42  | 2579   | 1.47  |
| 315       | Animal feeds                | 63            | 0.01  |        | 0.00  | 42        | 0.01  |        | 0.00  |
| 321       | Textiles mfg.               | 554762        | 56.65 | 9207   | 5.21  | 491853    | 60.73 | 8897   | 5.09  |
| 322       | Textiles mfg.               | 17903         | 1.83  | 1300   | 0.73  | 15106     | 1.87  | 1284   | 0.73  |
| 323       | Wearing apparel             | 66062         | 6.75  | 149776 | 84.68 | 51584     | 6.37  | 149490 | 85.4  |
| 324       | Leather & its prod.         | 10786         | 1.10  | 16     | 0.01  | 8791      | 1.09  | 16     | 0.01  |
| 325       | Footwear except rubber      | 5155          | 0.53  | 135    | 0.08  | 4089      | 0.50  | 135    | 0.08  |
| 326       | Ginning pressing            | 3986          | 0.41  | 11     | 0.01  | 3177      | 0.39  | 11     | 0.01  |
| 327       | Embroidery of textile goods | 17            | 0.00  | 512    | 0.29  | 7         | 0.00  | 503    | 0.29  |
| 331       | Wood and cork prod.         | 10004         | 1.02  | 3248   | 1.84  | 8163      | 1.01  | 3194   | 1.83  |
| 332       | Furniture mfg.              | 2303          | 0.24  | 1      | 0.00  | 1930      | 0.24  |        | 0.00  |
| 341       | Paper and its prod.         | 16512         | 1.69  | 231    | 0.13  | 11060     | 1.37  | 78     | 0.04  |
| 342       | Printing and publishing     | 15368         | 1.57  | 79     | 0.04  | 10639     | 1.31  | 7      | 0.00  |
| 351       | Drugs and pharma.           | 17079         | 1.74  | 1024   | 0.58  | 6981      | 0.86  | 866    | 0.50  |
| 352       | Industrial chemicals        | 9474          | 0.97  | 292    | 0.17  | 5475      | 0.68  | 134    | 0.08  |
| 353       | Other chem.- products       | 14947         | 1.53  | 359    | 0.20  | 11487     | 1.42  | 307    | 0.18  |
| 354       | Petroleum refining          | 875           | 0.09  | 14     | 0.01  | 620       | 0.08  |        | 0.00  |
| 355       | Misc. petroleum prod.       | 204           | 0.02  |        | 0.00  | 113       | 0.01  |        | 0.00  |
| 356       | Rubber prod.                | 3635          | 0.37  | 28     | 0.02  | 3029      | 0.37  | 28     | 0.02  |
| 357       | Plastic prod.               | 3185          | 0.33  | 29     | 0.02  | 2363      | 0.29  | 28     | 0.02  |
| 361       | Pottery and chinaware       | 3336          | 0.34  | 51     | 0.03  | 2547      | 0.31  | 51     | 0.03  |
| 362       | Glass and its product.      | 1835          | 0.19  | 216    | 0.12  | 1534      | 0.19  | 212    | 0.12  |
| 369       | Non-metallic mineral prod.  | 20250         | 2.07  | 317    | 0.18  | 17858     | 2.21  | 196    | 0.11  |
| 371       | Iron and steel basic indus. | 14781         | 1.51  | 14     | 0.01  | 10689     | 1.32  |        | 0.00  |
| 372       | Non-ferrous metal ind.      | 459           | 0.05  |        | 0.00  | 324       | 0.04  |        | 0.00  |
| 381       | Structural metal prod.      | 13086         | 1.34  | 69     | 0.04  | 10880     | 1.34  | 69     | 0.04  |
| 382       | Fabricated metal prod.      | 6113          | 0.62  | 42     | 0.02  | 5300      | 0.65  | 42     | 0.02  |
| 383       | Non-electrical machinery    | 6526          | 0.67  | 68     | 0.04  | 4366      | 0.54  |        | 0.00  |
| 384       | Electrical machinery        | 12671         | 1.29  | 350    | 0.20  | 9426      | 1.16  | 307    | 0.18  |
| 385       | Transport equipment         | 12543         | 1.28  | 45     | 0.03  | 9530      | 1.18  |        | 0.00  |
| 386       | Scientific precision etc.   | 162           | 0.02  | 10     | 0.01  | 120       | 0.01  | 10     | 0.01  |
| 387       | Photographic optical goods  | 117           | 0.01  |        | 0.00  | 91        | 0.01  |        | 0.00  |
| 389       | Mfg. of sports goods        | 198           | 0.02  |        | 0.00  | 170       | 0.02  |        | 0.00  |
| 391       | Decorative handicrafts      | 120           | 0.01  | 15     | 0.01  | 108       | 0.01  | 12     | 0.01  |
| 393       | Other mfg. industries       | 2276          | 0.23  | 1036   | 0.59  | 1834      | 0.23  | 1036   | 0.59  |
| 394       | Other mfg. industries       | 286           | 0.03  |        | 0.00  | 220       | 0.03  | 174909 | 0.00  |
|           | Total                       | 979347        | 100.0 | 176875 | 100.0 | 809881    | 100.0 | 174909 | 100.0 |

Source: BBS, 1996a.

**Annex Table 2: Level of wages and salaries by sex in manufacturing sector (1991-92)**

| Ind Code | Industry name               | Total wages and salaries paid (000 Tk) |         |           |         | Per employee (Tk) |           |           |          |
|----------|-----------------------------|--|---------|-----------|---------|-------------------|-----------|-----------|----------|
|          |                             | All employees                          |         | Operative |         | All employees     |           | Operative |          |
|          |                             | Male                                   | Female  | Male      | Female  | Male              | Female    | Male      | Female   |
| 311      | Food mfg.                   | 743914                                 | 30167   | 418845    | 29172   | 18334.29          | 8795.04   | 14324.87  | 8656.38  |
| 312      | Food mfg.                   | 1740736                                | 37057   | 1052188   | 18995   | 29064.58          | 16790.67  | 25824.37  | 9971.13  |
| 313      | Beverage ind.               | 54066                                  | 1005    | 19085     | 941     | 34458.89          | 6883.56   | 26108.07  | 6626.76  |
| 314      | Cigarettes                  | 347791                                 | 11163   | 285531    | 10990   | 11504.07          | 4298.42   | 10322.51  | 4261.34  |
| 315      | Animal feeds                | 886                                    |         | 416       |         | 14063.49          |           | 9904.76   |          |
| 321      | Textiles mfg.               | 12506641                               | 128039  | 9889202   | 112206  | 22544.16          | 13906.70  | 20106.01  | 12611.67 |
| 322      | Textiles mfg.               | 338586                                 | 10021   | 270714    | 9665    | 18912.25          | 7708.46   | 17920.96  | 7527.26  |
| 323      | Wearing apparel             | 1104935                                | 1760883 | 675294    | 1753268 | 16725.73          | 11756.78  | 13091.15  | 11728.33 |
| 324      | Leather and its prod.       | 244381                                 | 278     | 155745    | 278     | 22657.24          | 17375.00  | 17716.41  | 17375.00 |
| 325      | Footwear except rubber      | 280916                                 | 397     | 157244    | 397     | 54493.89          | 2940.74   | 38455.37  | 2940.74  |
| 326      | Ginning pressing            | 63886                                  | 82      | 38494     | 82      | 16027.60          | 7454.55   | 12116.46  | 7454.55  |
| 327      | Embroidery of textile goods | 182                                    | 3058    | 127       | 3029    | 10705.88          | 5972.66   | 18142.86  | 6021.87  |
| 331      | Wood and cork prod.         | 188808                                 | 24780   | 132548    | 23823   | 18873.25          | 7629.31   | 16237.66  | 7458.67  |
| 332      | Furniture mfg.              | 41784                                  | 57      | 30897     |         | 18143.29          | 57000.00  | 16008.81  |          |
| 341      | Paper and its prod.         | 877810                                 | 67680   | 515957    | 403     | 53161.94          | 292987.01 |           | 46650.72 |
| 342      | Printing and publishing     | 440940                                 | 2044    | 262831    | 262     | 28692.09          | 25873.42  | 24704.48  | 37428.57 |
| 351      | Drugs and pharma.           | 863469                                 | 49562   | 276255    | 40099   | 50557.35          | 48400.39  | 39572.41  | 46303.70 |
| 352      | Industrial chemicals        | 532667                                 | 40290   | 263471    | 3110    | 56224.09          | 137979.45 |           | 48122.56 |
| 353      | Other chem. products        | 675147                                 | 13555   | 356217    | 7287    | 45169.40          | 37757.66  | 31010.45  | 23736.16 |
| 354      | Petroleum refining          | 149312                                 | 845     | 98366     |         | 170642.29         |           | 60357.14  | 158654.8 |
| 355      | Misc. petroleum prod.       | 5019                                   |         | 2243      |         | 24602.94          |           | 19849.56  |          |
| 356      | Rubber prod.                | 68743                                  | 299     | 54167     | 299     | 18911.42          | 10678.57  | 17882.80  | 10678.57 |
| 357      | Plastic prod.               | 90585                                  | 333     | 59468     | 284     | 28441.13          | 11482.76  | 25166.31  | 10142.86 |
| 361      | Pottery and chinaware       | 56188                                  | 940     | 35700     | 340     | 16842.93          | 18431.37  | 14016.49  | 6666.67  |
| 362      | Glass and its product.      | 70954                                  | 1710    | 41687     | 1527    | 38667.03          | 7916.67   | 27175.36  | 7202.83  |

**Annex Table 2 (cont'd)**

| Ind Code | Industry name               | Total wages and salaries paid (000 Tk) |         |           |         | Per employee (Tk) |          |           |          |
|----------|-----------------------------|--|---------|-----------|---------|-------------------|----------|-----------|----------|
|          |                             | All employees                          |         | Operative |         | All employees     |          | Operative |          |
|          |                             | Male                                   | Female  | Male      | Female  | Male              | Female   | Male      | Female   |
| 369      | Non-metallic mineral prod.  | 255789                                 | 4957    | 151611    | 1545    | 12631.56          | 15637.22 | 8489.81   | 7882.65  |
| 371      | Iron and steel basic indus. | 589925                                 | 461     | 392604    |         | 39911.03          | 32928.57 | 36729.72  |          |
| 372      | Non-ferrous metal ind.      | 15772                                  |         | 10410     |         | 34361.66          |          | 32129.63  |          |
| 381      | Structural metal prod.      | 218736                                 | 546     | 160733    | 546     | 16715.27          | 7913.04  | 14773.25  | 7913.04  |
| 382      | Fabricated metal prod.      | 120519                                 | 486     | 88655     | 468     | 19715.20          | 11571.43 | 16727.36  | 11142.86 |
| 383      | Non-electrical machinery    | 239340                                 | 2454    | 128283    |         | 36674.84          | 36088.24 | 29382.27  |          |
| 384      | Electrical machinery        | 349662                                 | 10119   | 207543    | 7193    | 27595.45          | 28911.43 | 22018.14  | 23429.97 |
| 385      | Transport equipment         | 432524                                 | 1939    | 248502    |         | 34483.30          | 43088.89 | 26075.76  |          |
| 386      | Scientific precision, etc.  | 3238                                   | 90      | 2391      | 90      | 19987.65          | 9000.00  | 19925.00  | 9000.00  |
| 387      | Photographic optical goods  | 1764                                   |         | 1204      |         | 15076.92          |          | 13230.77  |          |
| 389      | Mfg. of sports goods        | 3920                                   |         | 3238      |         | 19797.98          |          | 19047.06  |          |
| 391      | Decorative handicrafts      | 998                                    | 281     | 842       | 246     | 8316.67           | 18733.33 | 7796.30   | 20500.00 |
| 393      | Other mfg. industries       | 35072                                  | 6841    | 25393     | 6841    | 15409.49          | 6603.28  | 13845.69  | 6603.28  |
| 394      | Other mfg. industries       | 4139                                   |         | 2806      |         | 14472.03          |          | 12754.55  |          |
| Total    |                             | 23759744                               | 2212419 | 16516907  | 2033386 | 24260.80          | 12508.38 | 20394.24  | 11625.39 |

Source: BBS, 1996a.

**Annex Table 3: Growth of RMG exports (1977-1997)**

| Year      | RMG exports (million US\$) |          | Share in total exports (%) |          |
|-----------|----------------------------|----------|----------------------------|----------|
|           | All RMG*                   | Knit RMG | All RMG                    | Knit RMG |
| 1976-77   | 0.07                       | -        | 0.02                       | -        |
| 1979-80   | 0.67                       | -        | 0.09                       | -        |
| 1982-83   | 10.8                       | -        | 1.58                       | -        |
| 1984-85   | 116.2                      | -        | 12.44                      | -        |
| 1986-87   | 298.7                      | -        | 27.81                      | -        |
| 1989-90   | 624.1                      | 14.8     | 40.95                      | 0.97     |
| 1992-93   | 1,444.9                    | 204.5    | 60.64                      | 8.58     |
| 1994-95   | 2,228.2                    | 393.3    | 64.17                      | 11.32    |
| 1995-96   | 2,547.1                    | 598.3    | 65.61                      | 15.41    |
| 1996-97** | 3,001.2                    | 763.3    | 67.92                      | 17.28    |

\* Exports include both woven and knit-RMG.

\*\* Exports of 1996-97 are estimates based on export performance between July-April, FY 1997.

Source: Export Promotion Bureau, Annual Report (various years).

**Annex Table 4: Projected female employment in textile and apparel sectors under normal and self-sufficiency conditions (1995-2005) (million person years)**

| Sub-sector of textiles/<br>apparel industry | 1995<br>(Base year) | 2000   |                                    | 2005                 |                                    |
|---|---------------------|--------|------------------------------------|----------------------|------------------------------------|
|   |                     | Normal | Self-<br>sufficiency<br>conditions | Normal<br>conditions | Self-<br>sufficiency<br>conditions |
| <b>RMG</b>                                  |                     |        |                                    |                      |                                    |
| Local                                       | 0.084               | 0.161  | 0.161                              | 0.273                | 0.273                              |
| Export-oriented                             | 1.080               | 1.742  | 1.742                              | 2.222                | 2.222                              |
| Dyeing and finishing                        | 0.005               | 0.014  | 0.032                              | 0.036                | 0.128                              |
| Weaving (powerloom)                         | 0.003               | 0.010  | 0.034                              | 0.025                | 0.149                              |
| Handloom                                    | 0.324               | 0.441  | 0.441                              | 0.599                | 0.599                              |
| Silk  | 0.120               | 0.163  | 0.163                              | 0.225                | 0.225                              |
| Knitting and hosiery                        | 0.007               | 0.013  | 0.013                              | 0.025                | 0.025                              |
| Spinning                                    | 0.013               | 0.026  | 0.093                              | 0.043                | 0.397                              |
| Total                                       | 1.636               | 2.570  | 2.679                              | 3.448                | 4.018                              |

Source: Ministry of Commerce, 1996.