

Becoming a Garments Worker: The  
Mobilization of Women into the Garments  
Factories of Bangladesh

Nazli Kibria

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## Preface

In preparation for the Fourth World Conference on Women, which was held in Beijing in September 1995, UNRISD initiated an Occasional Paper Series reflecting work carried out under the UNRISD/UNDP project, **Technical Co-operation and Women's Lives: Integrating Gender into Development Policy**. In view of the intensified efforts in the aftermath of the conference to integrate gender concerns into policy analysis and formulation, and the progress of the gender programme at UNRISD, the Institute intends to continue this Occasional Paper Series to facilitate dissemination of the findings from its gender-related projects. The present paper is based on research undertaken in Bangladesh as part of the **Technical Co-operation and Women's Lives** project focusing on the theme of labour-intensive industrialization and female employment.

Since the early 1980s an export-oriented garments industry has mushroomed in Bangladesh, with women workers constituting a significant proportion of its wage labour force. In explaining the reasons for the feminized wage labour force, considerable attention has been paid to the motivations of employers: the lower cost of young women workers, and their assumed "docility" and "nimbleness" in comparison to men.

However, as Nazli Kibria argues, a fuller understanding of the movement of women into the garments factories of Bangladesh also requires the consideration of the "push" factors that underpin it. Conventional understandings of women's entry into wage employment in Bangladesh have emphasized the role played by extreme poverty and the related dynamic of male unemployment and desertion — factors that are also explored in the present paper. But based on interviews with women factory workers in Dhaka, the author is able to suggest a more diverse set of factors underpinning their movement into the garments sector, which in a significant number of cases also entails individual rural-urban migration. Among the factors highlighted are family conflicts, marriage breakdowns, problems of sexual harassment, the pressures from rising dowry demands and uncertain marriage prospects. Rather than being uniformly a response to dire poverty, the paper argues that in some instances garments work provides the means for enhancing personal and/or household economic prospects, while in other cases it provides a measure of economic and social independence for the women concerned. Another point emerging from the paper is that the meanings that are attached to any kind of work are context-specific and thus highly variable: notwithstanding the exploitative nature of work in garments factories, the value that women workers in this particular context attach to garments work needs to be seen in the light of other livelihood options that are open to them, such as domestic service and arduous forms of agricultural wage work.

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March 1998

Cynthia Hewitt de Alcántara  
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## 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.<sup>1</sup> 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 garments 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 garments 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 paper looks at the factors and processes that underlie the mobilization of women into the garments labour force. How and why do women come to seek and enter into jobs in garments factories? The materials for this paper are drawn from a qualitative study, based on 70 in-depth interviews with women garments workers and members of their households, in Dhaka and various rural parts of Bangladesh.

The garments 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).<sup>2</sup> 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 garments 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 the areas of agricultural labour, as well as 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 garments industry? Available studies of women garments 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 garments 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 garments workers. Diversity in socio-economic background is suggested by the levels of household income reported by the workers as well as the range of occupations of household members.<sup>3</sup> While only an approximate indicator of the presence of a male breadwinner, the survey's findings on marital status also show women garments workers to be a variable group in terms of this characteristic.<sup>4</sup>

These findings suggest that poverty and the absence of a male breadwinner are not adequate or complete explanations of why women enter into garments work. One of the goals of this paper is to explore the conditions and motivations that underlie entry into garments 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 garments work, paying particular attention to the context of the household in these accounts. The final section of the paper is an analysis of the role played by the community in mediating the process of becoming a garments worker.

## **Methods and a Brief Profile of the Workers**

This paper is based on interviews with women garments 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 garments workers, defined as those currently or recently (within the past 2 months) employed in export-oriented garments factories. The sample of women workers was generated through "snowball" sampling techniques. We began by visiting three garments factories located in different parts of Dhaka city. During these visits we identified garments 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



garments workers in the neighbourhood and enlisted their participation in the study. The final sample of garments 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 garments 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 garments workers located in Dhaka city. The selection of the household case studies occurred in the following manner. Eight garments workers who were living with their families in Dhaka but who were otherwise a diverse group (in terms of marital status, socio-economic 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 garments 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 garments 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 are never-married, 14 are currently married, 19 are separated/abandoned/divorced and two are 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 garments 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.

<b>Table 1</b>	
<b>Age of Workers</b>	
Age	Number of Workers
Under 15	11
15-20	32
21-25	18
26-30	6
Over 30	3
Total	70

<b>Table 2</b>	
<b>Marital Status of Workers</b>	
Marital Status	Number of Workers
Never-married	35
Married	14
Separated/abandoned	15
Divorced	4
Widowed	2
Total	70

<b>Table 3</b>	
<b>Years of Schooling of Workers</b>	
Years of Schooling	Number of Workers
0	17
1-4	33
5-7	13
8+	7
Total	70

<b>Table 4</b>	
<b>Job Post of Workers</b>	
Job Post	Number of Workers
Helper	17
Operator	42
Folder/Finisher	3
Ironing	2
Quality inspector	6
Total	70

<b>Table 5</b>	
<b>Years of Work in Garments Industry</b>	
Years of Work	Number of Workers
2 or fewer	21
3-4	32
5-6	11
7 or more	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.

## **Becoming a Garments Worker: Garments Work Explanations, Histories and the Household**

Three types of explanations were apparent in women's accounts of why they had entered into garments 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 garments work in the context of their position as a member of a household. The dynamics of garments 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 garments 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 garments 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 garments 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.<sup>5</sup> To put it another way, the sending family household is the unit that the worker sees as the center 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 garments entry.

**“I entered garments 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 garments 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 amorphously into a collective household pot. Some women simply handed over their pay to the household head, while others spent the money themselves.<sup>6</sup>

In general, the women who talked of their garments 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 garments entry like for the women who identified family survival as a primary motivating factor? Two types of garments work entry histories were recounted. The first related a shift from other types of income-earning activities into garments 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 garments 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.<sup>7</sup>

The accounts of garments 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 garments 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 garments factory, a positive assessment of the advantages of garments work over domestic service was a vital part of how she came to enter garments 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 neighborhood, 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 (100 taka), 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 garments 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 garments 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 garments 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 garments 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.

The role and attitudes of household members towards the women's entry into garments 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 garments work. In fact, on the contrary, several women spoke of being pressured by family members into taking a garments 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 garments work, since the resulting income was important to household survival. However, household members often interpreted or understood the women's garments 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 garments 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 garments 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 garments 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 garments job.<sup>8</sup> 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.

**“I entered garments to improve my family’s condition and prospects.”**

For a relatively small number of the women workers, entry into garments 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 garments 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 socio-economic situation. Kin, friends and neighbors played a crucial role in bringing her attention to the financial benefits of garments 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 garments 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 garments 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 garments 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

garments 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 garments 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 garments 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 garments 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 honor 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.<sup>9</sup> Sharifa's father, for example, as indicated by his account below, found out that his daughter was working in a garments 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 garments entry was complicated in several cases by the fact that the decision to enter garments 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 garments 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.

**“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 garments employment centered 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 garments 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.<sup>10</sup> An intriguing characteristic concerns the position of the worker within the sending family household. In a large number of cases, the rural migrant garments 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 garments work was financial — one could make far more money on a regular basis in garments than in other activities in the village. Besides the financial incentives, the nature of garments work and its social image seemed to hold some attractions over the more traditional forms of income generation in rural areas. As suggested by the remarks of one respondent from Barisal, garments work was perceived as less physically taxing, particularly in comparison to work in the agricultural sector. Garments work, with its bureaucratic routine, was also seen as new or modern in character.

What I heard about garments work was that it was easy for girls without much education to find a job. I heard about the pay; the pay is higher than what you 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. Garments work is difficult, but it is easier on the body than cultivating crops, and you get paid every month. Garments 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 garments 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 garments 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 garments 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 garments workers, the problem of dowry emerged as a critical "push" factor. In the following, a father of a young garments 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 garments 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 garments 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 garments 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 neighborhoods 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 garments 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 10,000 taka 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 garments entry for these women. Bokul, in her late teens, worked as a quality control inspector in a garments 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 garments 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 garments 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 garments 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 traveling 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 garments career.

All unskilled workers who enter the garments industry typically begin in job of helper, the low salaries (average of 400-600 taka 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 1,000-1,200 taka 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 garments 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 garments 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, garments 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.

## **Community Support, Opinion and Garments Work**

The process of becoming a garments worker is one that unfolds not only in the context of the household, but also the community in which the household is located. In this section of the paper I discuss some of the ways

in which communities mediate the garments 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 garments worker.

One of the ways in which the community can affect the garments entry process is by extending practical support for becoming a garments worker. This practical support is of various kinds: information about the availability, salaries and conditions of garments jobs; assistance in finding a job, coming to Dhaka, and 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 garments 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 garments 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 garments 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 garments business typically provided the rural women with the necessary information and assistance to make the transition successfully into garments work. For obvious reasons, such assistance was most likely in those villages with an established flow of persons into the garments industry. Where such an established flow did not exist, the process of garments entry was necessarily more complex. In a few cases women indicated that they had been recruited by garments factory owners who originated from their village areas. These owners were members of well-known, respected and prosperous families. In other cases of "pioneering" garments work, the process of garments 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 garments 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 garments 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 garments work.

The experience of becoming a garments 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 garments 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 garments work. While such unfavourable ideas were present everywhere, they appeared stronger in areas where the population of garments workers was small rather than extensive. Objections to women's garments work were framed according to socio-cultural norms. That is, women garments workers were sexually loose and immoral, or at least suspected of being so, because they worked with men; they did not respect and obey their family elders. Some other criticisms of the conduct of women garments workers are highlighted by the remarks of the brother-in-law of a garments worker in Comilla. According to him, the negative views reduced the value of unmarried women garments 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 garments are bad, evil (*shoytan*).

Community perspectives on women's garments work were not, however, only negative. The women's move into garments 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 garments 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 garments factory was justified — it was an acceptable if not desirable course of action.

## **Summary Conclusions**

### **Poverty and the mobilization of women garments workers**

Among the different groups of women that the garments 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 garments sector to recruit such women has stemmed from the relative attractions of garments work in comparison to the other types of unskilled employment available to women with low levels of education in urban areas. Besides women from poor urban households, the garments sector has also mobilized into its ranks women who would quite likely not be engaged in wage employment if jobs in garments were not available. For these women, garments work is a way to enhance personal and/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 garments 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 socio-economic strata of rural society. With the development of the garments industry, however, we are now seeing the solo migration of rural woman from a more diverse array of socio-economic 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 garments workers. Economic scarcity operates in conjunction with other “push” factors, such as family conflicts, marital breakdown, problems of harassment and uncertain marriage prospects.

### **Marriage dynamics and the mobilization of women garments workers**

The instability and uncertainty of marriage for women is an important dynamic underlying the mobilization of women into the garments workforce. As I have noted, a significant proportion of the sending family households of the garments workers are female headed, a condition that is related to the poverty of the households. Also, for some women, the decision to enter into garments 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 garments 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 strata 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 garments sector continue to develop. However, the achievement of a state of “normalization” of young women’s garments work requires greater socio-cultural acceptance of garments work than is apparent at the present time. Particularly in the rural areas of Bangladesh, women’s garments work continues to carry a certain stigma.

### **Community networks and the “pull” of garments work**

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

The information provided by community networks about garments work is effective in mobilizing women because of the distinctive opportunity that garments work represents for women. For many women in both urban and rural households, garments work is financially more lucrative than other available opportunities. But the perceived advantages of garments work cannot simply be understood in financial terms. Garments work has certain image and status connotations that make it attractive to some women. Garments work was a job (*chakri*) or occupation; it was work that was of more significance and status than informal income-generating activities. Few who actually work in garments factories would claim that these jobs are not taxing or restrictive in many ways. However, the accounts of garments workers suggest that garments 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. Garments work connotes social and economic independence and, more generally, modernity.



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

As far as patterns of wage absorption into the household economy, 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 garments work. An attitude of "she's taking care of herself" was a prevalent one. That is, the woman's entry into garments work is understood to be a means for her to take care of her own needs rather than those of the household.

Among garments 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 garments industry is the point that becoming a garments 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.

## **Some policy implications**

The mobilization of women into the garments 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 garments 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 garments workers.

Many of the women who enter the garments 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 garments labour force. A related issue is that of sexual harassment in the workplace. It is recommended that factory managers institute a program of education and enforcement of regulations against the harassment of workers.

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## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> 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).

<sup>2</sup> Majumdar and Chaudhuri (1994) note that 49.1 per cent of the workers surveyed had been unemployed/at home prior to working in the garments sector, and 23.9 per cent had been students.

<sup>3</sup> As far as household incomes, 15.3 per cent reported 1,000 taka 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, garments worker, labourer (Majumdar and Chaudhuri, 1994).

<sup>4</sup> 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.

<sup>5</sup> 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.

<sup>6</sup> 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).

<sup>7</sup> 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.

<sup>8</sup> 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.

<sup>9</sup> No one talked of keeping garments 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.

<sup>10</sup> 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.