

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

Nazli Kibria

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**United Nations Research Institute
for Social Development
Palais des Nations
1211 Geneva 10
Switzerland**

**☎ (41.22) 798.84.00/798.58.50
Fax (41.22) 740.07.91**

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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.

Nazli Kibria is Assistant Professor of Sociology at Boston University. At UNRISD, the project on **Technical Co-operation and Women's Lives** is co-ordinated by Shahra Razavi.

March 1998

Cynthia Hewitt de Alcántara
Deputy Director

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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.¹ 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).² 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.³ 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.⁴

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

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