

**WHAT MAKES GARMENT(S) WORK? GENDERED LABOUR AND
NETWORKS OF STRUGGLE IN THE GARMENT INDUSTRY OF
DHAKA, BANGLADESH**

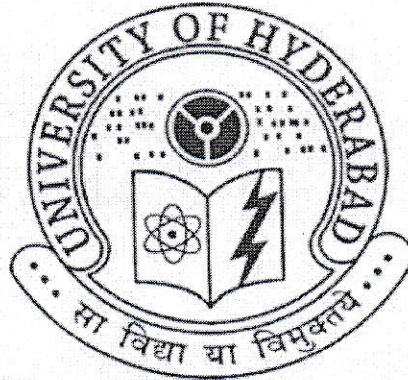
*A thesis submitted to the University of Hyderabad in partial fulfilment of the
requirements for the award of the degree of*

**DOCTOR IN PHILOSOPHY
in
SOCIOLOGY
by
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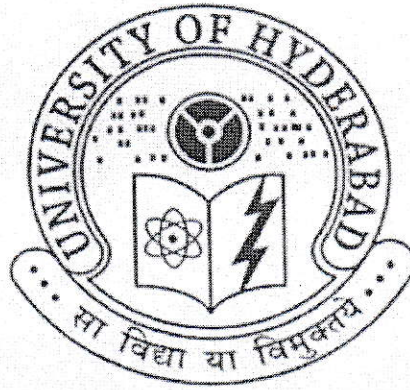
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This is to certify that Mitaja Chakraborty (Regd. No. 14SSPH09) has carried out the research work in the present thesis entitled "What Makes Garment(s) Work?: Gendered Labour and Networks of Struggle in the Garment Industry of Dhaka, Bangladesh" in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the award of the Doctor of Philosophy degree in Sociology, under the supervision of Prof. Aparna Rayaprol. This thesis is an independent work and does not constitute part of any material submitted for any research degree here or elsewhere.

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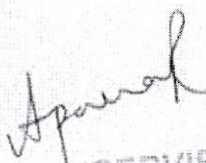
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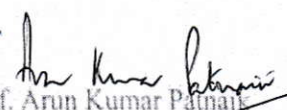
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DECLARATION

I hereby declare that the research in the present thesis entitled **“What Makes Garment(s) Work? : Gendered Labour and Networks of Struggle in the Garment Industry of Dhaka, Bangladesh”** is carried out under the supervision of **Prof. Aparna Rayaprol**, Department of Sociology, School of Social Sciences, University of Hyderabad, Hyderabad, for the award of the degree of Doctor of Philosophy, is an original work of mine and to the best of my knowledge no part of this thesis has been submitted for the award of any research degree or diploma at any university. I also declare that this is a bonafide research work which is free from plagiarism. I hereby agree that my thesis can be deposited in Shodhganga/INFLIBNET.

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Dedicated to all the women who have taught us that while the world may celebrate revolutionary men, it is the resilience and labour of countless women that has kept the struggle for liberation alive.

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Abbreviations

AFL-CIO	American Federation of Labour and Congress of Industrial Organisations
AL	Awami League
BCWS	Bangladesh Center for Worker Solidarity
BDT	Bangladeshi Taka
BGMEA	Bangladesh Garment Manufacturers and Exporters Association
BGIWF	Bangladesh Garments and Industrial Workers Federation
BGWTUC	Bangladesh Garment Workers Trade Union Center
BILS	Bangladesh Institute of Labour Studies
BKMEA	Bangladesh Knitwear Manufacturers and Exporters Association
BMP	Bangladesh Mahila Parishad
BNP	Bangladesh Nationalist Party
BRAC	Building Resources Across Communities
CBC	Canada Broadcasting Corporation
CCC	Clean Clothes Campaign
CEDAW Women	Convention for the Elimination of all forms of Discrimination Against
EPZ	Export Processing Zone
FGD	Focussed Group Discussion
FTZ	Free Trade Zone
GAD	Gender And Development
GCC	Global Commodity Chain
GDP	Gross Domestic Product
GPN	Global Production Network
GSOF	Garments Sromik Oikyo Forum

GSS	Garment Sromik Sanghati
GVC	Global Value Chain
IBC	Industrial Bangladesh Council
ILRF	International Labour Rights Forum
ILO	International Labour Organisation
IMF	International Monetary Fund
LPT	Labour Process Theory
MFA	Multi Fibre Agreement
NGWF	National Garment Workers Federation
RMG	Readymade Manufacturing Garments
SAP	Structural Adjustment Programme
SGSF	Sammilito Garments Sromik Federation
SKOP	Sromik Karmochari Oikyo Parishad
UFGW	United Federation of Garment Workers
USD	US Dollars
WAD	Women And Development
WCW	World Conference on Women
WID	Women In Development
WRC	Workers Rights Consortium

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Chapter 1 - Introduction

Quite like the world, I had woken up to the news of the Rana Plaza collapse in April 2013 in absolute bewilderment and distress. The nine-storey building had crumbled down to only two floors even after workers had noticed and complained about the cracks just a day prior. It was later reported that the collapse was due to the illegal construction on a marshland that could not withstand the heavy and complex machines used in garment manufacturing. More than 1100 workers were crushed to death, thousands more were injured permanently. Heart-wrenching photos of families of garment workers holding their passport size photographs to collect their bodies were relayed in all the news portals. Lists of names of workers whose bodies could be recognised were hung on the gates of the complex. Compared to the length of the list, there were more families waiting for their kins' bodies to be discovered from the rubble. Many bodies were beyond recognition. More photos began coming, two rescuers holding a paper from the second floor which read "Machine/tools required to cut arms and limbs" to rescue workers who had arms and legs stuck under fallen pillars, photos of a man and a woman holding each other under the debris while accepting death, and many more that screamed how fragile and equally disposable were these lives that laboured 14 hours a day to clothe the whole world.¹

Of course, working in garments meant living by the threads to earn. The conditions under which these families survived were so deplorable that family members began claiming unrecognisable bodies to avail the compensation announced by the

¹ The Death of a Thousand Dreams by Taslima Akhter. (Appendix 3.1)

government. This was a desperate attempt at recuperating from the loss the families had suffered due to the death or disability of their bread-earners. Such were these lives that lived and died in oblivion, while some were claimed and some remained missing. One of the photos that came to my notice was in May, a month after the collapse. Two lean women, their heads covered with dupattas, screaming at a policeman during a protest demonstration against the abysmally low wages in the garment industry. Upon digging further, I found another inspiring picture from 2010 protests of a woman pushing against a policeman by his shield, the right hand of the policeman raised with a baton that was about to hit the woman in the head. To shield herself, the woman held her left hand up in preparation for that blow, all this while pushing against the policeman. My research journey began here with a single uncomplicated question - who were these militant women? The interest to dig deeper into the industry was to explore this image which stood in contradiction to the usual image of the helpless working-class woman. This study is an attempt to contextualise this militancy, to go behind these images and look at it historically. The more I read about Bangladeshi garment workers, the more it became essential to find the key to what led to those militant protests. Of course, the answer was livelihood! But once we read into the everyday spaces that Bangladeshi women tread through, the precarious life of garment workers, the militant workers shine as the necessary image. The social conditions that configure the working class endlessly reproduce the working class through opportunities or the lack of it in terms of access to education, public health service, social security, employment opportunities and so on. The rise of the financial capital has not ceased to extract value from (post) industrial workers. It has instead found novel ways to extract surplus value to ensure its survival.

The question that I wanted to pursue, in this context, was not just to understand industrial workers or how they live, but more importantly, how do they resist and what makes them resilient. In order to understand labour movements, it becomes imperative to understand work and its relations to working lives in all its forms. Consequently it became essential to explore the Bangladeshi garment industry in the complicated and gendered meanings of skills and employability, in its length and breadth, and in lives and death.

Delineating work and labour

What Makes Garment(s) Work?, the title of the thesis, is framed in such a way to open up two enquiries. One, that explores how garment work and the production process has shaped up the industry and its workforce. Two, that explores the reasons external yet critical to the production system that ensures its survival historically, therefore looking at what sustains the global garment industry.

In sociological research, work has been explored with respect to processes, technological development, markets and so on, differentiating the modes of inquiry as per the fields of- industrial sociology, labour process theory, labour market approach and the like. Industrial practices have evolved over time as craft production has transitioned into mass production. From Babbage's operation management, Taylor's scientific management to Ford's assembly line production, industrial practices have been the centre of inquiry for scholars working on labour.

Concerned primarily with the quest for higher production, efficiency and control

over workers' resistance, labour process theory grew as a separate field of research that looked at the processes of production in all its details. Marx's *Capital* precisely looked at the mode of production and labour process organised under capitalist mode of production. Acknowledging capitalism and the capitalist mode of production as a reality, Marx understands labour as the basis of all social life that 'not only create goods; it also produces itself and the worker as a commodity, and indeed in the same proportion as it produces goods' (Marx, 1844 as cited in Bottomore, 1985).

Labour, therefore, is instrumental in organising social relations under the capitalist mode of production. Braverman (1998), in his seminal work, outlines the processes through which degradation of work capitulates to the demands of capital. The distinction between planning and execution forms the basis for such degradation where the division of labour materialises. In contrast to the social division of labour, it signified the breakdown of industrial processes where technical changes correspond to the needs of the capital - economy of time. However, it is the social aspect of the division of labour that marks the distinction between qualified workers with special skills and those who are seen as a waste of social resources. The advent of Taylor's scientific management as a model to establish control and organisation of labour is seen to be corresponding with the needs of the capital. Control over labour power - a means of management over the actual performance of each labour activity was quickly approved by industrialists across the world. Germans termed it 'rationalisation'. The model was based on three principles. The first principle was dissociation of the labour process from skills of the workers to rely entirely on practices of management. Thus skills were based on training unlike craft

workers who possessed it. The second principle was based on the dehumanisation of the labour process that reduced workers to the animal form by separating conception from execution. This rendered labour as a property of the capital where workers lose control over their labour and its performance. The third principle commanded the monopoly of the management over knowledge. Taylor, in this sense, effectively transformed the relations and roles of the management while the labour remained unchanged. The separation of conception and execution or mental and menial work systematically destroyed skills and created newer occupations and skills that would serve the capitalist mode of production (Braverman, 1998).

In this process, labour power becomes a commodity as its uses are organised around the needs of capital and not the workers, the bearer of that labour power. Special knowledge and training are reduced to simple labour. On the other end of the pole are those whose knowledge and training are free from the obligations of simple labour - the management. Every component of the process is turned into an instrument. Technical advancement unfolds in consonant with the needs of the capitalist process. Thus, machinery also functions as an instrument for the accumulation of capital. This degradation, in Braverman's argument, completes when the control over machines by direct producers, i.e., the worker is also seized by the management and owners of capital. The control is strengthened further through coercive consent that binds the worker to the machine and restricts labour agency.

The concern with labour agency and labour movements is a determining factor to

assay the role, position and relations of labour in the production process. In the South Asian context, labour relations have been understood in the binaries of free and unfree labour. Like a worker is assumed to be free, in Marx's terms, under capitalism to choose the form of labour, in postcolonial context, distinctions have been drawn from earlier forms of bonded labour and slavery to connote the freedom of choice. However, labour historians have proposed an evaluation of labour relations beyond this binary of free and unfree labour into the multiple forms of labour that the region witnesses leading to 'multiplicity of workers practices and identities' (De Haan, 2001 as cited in Van Schendel, 2006). The politics surrounding labour emerging within the specific social, cultural, historical and spatial contexts becomes imperative to understand labour in the South Asian context. The studies on the industrial working class, in terms of labour process and history, hold the pre-industrial character as a formative element in working class politics. Thus, we witness Chandavarkar's (1981) stress on neighbourhood *mohallas* in the Bombay textile mills in understanding how strikes take forms in the shifting identities and subjectivities of mill workers. In the studies on jute mills in Bengal, Chakrabarty (1981) looks at the communal nature of the working class that takes precedence in his theorisation of working class anger that is not solely based on the workplace. Chitra Joshi (1985), similarly, draws the relations of communitarian identities formed through the recruitment and labour practices in the Kanpur textile mills. In all these studies, concentrated mainly in India, the migrant industrial working class is perceived as a complicated category as they bear their pre-industrial character while forging new identities and communities in the industrial cities. Although preconceived notions of difference remain consistent, the forging of new social identities through work

provides a vocabulary to understand political action. The post-liberalisation era has led to shifts in labour mobility from the rural to urban areas into casual and contractual employment in the informal economy. Changes in the labour practices in the developing economies is witnessed as flexible and casual labour rise to prominence in the increasingly unorganised/ private sectors. Consequently, labour control through surveillance, casualisation and precariousness increases, and political action becomes complicated as risks become more personal while the structure remains untouched owing to its informal nature (De Neve, 2019).

While the Labour Process Theory does find its roots in similar concerns, the possibilities and forms of labour movements are overlooked. Over the years, the attention on labour processes has been incorporated in the studies on labour geography that propounds the role of labour in shaping the contours of capital through both individual and collective actions. The Global Production Network framework, which takes labour geography as inspiration, engages with governance systems in the global value chains and extends its approach to uncovering the multidimensional layers of economic activity in analyses of global economic processes. How labour geography becomes an integral part of this framework in delineating the role of labour in reconfiguring the geographies of capital, its processes and strategies provide a fresh perspective into the social relations of labour and labour agency (Rainnie et al., 2011; Henderson et al., 2002; Coe et al., 2008). The GPN framework argues for a labour agency contingent on experiences outside of the workplaces that equally shapes up capital's response to the labour actions.

In understanding the labour process, the GPN framework explores the structures of global economic processes through the role of local actors and structures vis-a-vis the transnational actors. It notes the condition of the network and spatial embeddedness that organises and restricts the movements, transactions and processes between the actors engaged in global economic relations. The analysis and role of the labour agency hold a central role in examining how these networks of production are organised. In these networks, actors are seen relationally as well as in their specific contexts that allow for a detailed understanding of the asymmetrical power relations that organise production relations across geographies. The governmental authorities and their related institutions engage in the discursive practices that actively shape these networks of production (Coe and Kelly, 2002). It is these horizontal relationships that make the coordination and control within the production networks legible. Thus, the networks and labour agency become determinants of the turns the global economic processes take.

What makes women's work

Women as a class came to be researched through the work of Marxist and socialist feminists in defiance of the lack of recognition of women as indispensable constituencies in Marxist circles. Heidi Hartmann's (1979) *Unhappy Marriage of Marxism and Feminism: Towards a more progressive union* is a seminal work that discusses patriarchy and capitalism, critiquing the assumption of leftist politics that places men and women as equally oppressed under capitalist relations.² Following

² Lydia Sargent's *Women and Revolution*, published in 1981, presents an interesting debate on the essay "Unhappy marriage of Marxism and Feminism" by several Marxist feminists. Debating for and against Hartmann's arguments, these essays provide a comprehensive view of the role of Marxist feminists to

Marxist analytical logic, Socialist and Marxist feminists critically evaluate the structural conditions that contribute to women's oppression. Marxist feminist scholars rooted the oppression of women not only on economic power but sexual power. This called for a structural analysis of power that was not restricted to the labour market but within households, in marriages and families. Patriarchy, therefore, complimented capitalism in maintaining power and control over women's bodies that would ensure the smooth functioning of the economic and social system. Capitalism, on the other hand, exploited the sexual power differentials in organising its processes across societies and particular historical moments (Mitchell, 1966; Eisenstein, 1977; Beneria and Sen, 1981; Hansen and Philipson, 1990; Fraser, 1997). In addition, women's reproductive roles and domestic work were understood as another indication/site of women's oppression. Understood as an essential contributor to the needs of the capital, the unpaid housework did not only hold use value but exchange value as well. The reproduction of labour performed by women could be further exploited by capital and remain unremunerated (Federici, 1975, 2013; Vogel, 2000).

We have witnessed the preoccupation with women's economic role in the discussions on welfare, development, employment, and poverty-alleviation. In the development discourse, the Women in Development (WID) and Gender in Development (GAD) approaches have alluded to the invisibility of women in any analysis of development and pushed for including women as an important analytical category mainly in measuring the status of Third World countries in terms of economic development.

ensure recognition of women's struggles within the new left circles and beyond to push for progressive feminist politics.

Emerging in the early 1970s, Women in Development (WID) approach proposed to look at women as a contributor to the economy through the economic analysis of women in unorganised sectors and agricultural societies that sustained national as well as international economic processes. Colonialism and industrialisation were viewed as the contributors to the subjugation of women, which could be remedied through education, employment and material benefits (Boserup, 1970; Moghadam, 1995). The same decade also witnessed the emergence of the Marxist feminist approach which looked at the consequences of capitalist accumulation on labour and women's work (Beneria and Sen, 1981). The link between capitalist accumulation and patriarchal subordination put forth the argument that structural constraints hinder the progress towards achieving equal rights for women. By the 1980s, the Nairobi Conference facilitated a dialogue between feminists located in the West and the Global South, which led to the inclusion of gender as an analytical category in development analysis (Parpart, 1993). From the role of women in economic development, power differentials rooted at gender relations and social constructions of gender became the centre of analysis in the Gender And Development (GAD) approach. The shift to GAD symbolised the awareness of the inequalities embedded in the policy-oriented approach that was gender-blind while transcending the colonial lens that perceived third world women as only the objects of development. Thus, it undertook the need to examine the gender division of labour, including the invisible work women do, in its particular contexts and patterns to locate the structural and ideological conditions that maintain gender hierarchy across the inequalities of class and race (Moghadam, 1995). However, it also signalled that from agricultural societies, home-based economies, to domestic household work, women's

labour was finally essential to the organisation of economies (Federici, 1975, 2004; Mitter, 1985, Mies, 1998; Enloe 2014). These discussions around women's contribution to and role in the economy led to mainstreaming of gender into the development discourse.

In the current regime of neoliberal globalisation/capitalism, the debates on women's work have reinvigorated questions within academic and feminist circles on how work reconfigures the labour force, women's lives and eventually labour rights movements. The new international division of labour that ushered in with the globalised economic processes prepared the ground for the production of 'women's work', which was distinct and separate from work that men did. The gendered division of labour pushed women into low wage low skilled work and engendered subjugation and oppression of women in their homes and outside. The patriarchal assumptions that restricted women to the space of the domestic led to skill being equated with men's work. Inevitably, a worker is always a male, and work is organised around the functions and priorities of the male worker and their masculinity (Mies, 1986; Phillips and Taylor, 1980; Acker, 1990, Sen, 1999). The needs of the capital employed the rhetorics of femininity which defined certain jobs as appropriate for women. These specific jobs in export-oriented industries required docile bodies, nimble fingers and precision that were possible only by women who would not protest and work at low wages (Elson and Pearson, 1981; Nash and Fernandez Kelly, 1983; Sassen, 1996; Salzinger, 2001). These jobs not only produced women as the unskilled labour force, but as workers who could be disposed off when they lost their docility or precision (Wright, 2006). Thus, cheap labour

and gendered codes of behaviour led to what was called the feminisation of labour (Standing, 1989, 1999; Caraway, 2005). Primarily seen as secondary earners, these women were flexible workers recruited in informal work at lower rates as production moved to the developing nations in the south. In Marxist terminology, what was the reserve army of labour gradually became a dominant labour force in the manufacturing industries that were mainly organised under practices of subcontracting.

Integral to this organisation of production were the relations of colonialism when newly independent countries were compelled to engage in export-led industrialisation through structural adjustment programmes (SAPs). The relations between capitalism and colonialism became prevalent in such circumstances where the third world woman was drawn into low skilled low waged work. The beginning of neoliberal development imposed by international financial institutions required open economies with no regulations and laws to allow unfettered transactions between companies based in the north with those of the south. In these endeavours, women became the measure of emancipation who were able to access livelihood options in the city while their villages offered none. The impoverishment and restrictive traditional gender codes that their village lives pulled them in could finally be escaped through these city-based employment options (Feldman, 2001; Kabeer, 2000).

The subsequent production of sweatshops became inescapable in this process of industrial restructuring. Although it traps workers in an endless cycle of exploitation, it also offers momentary respite from the cultural prescriptions of proper gendered

behaviour leading to a paradoxical condition where exploitation and liberation coexist (Fernandez Kelly and Wolf, 2001). But as much as women have been able to transcend the boundaries of household and enter wage labour, the relations of oppression and subordination reconfigures in newer forms. In terms of the international division of labour, we witness the classification of women's work as unskilled, tedious and supplementary done by third world women who are poor, immigrant, single mothers, sole earners, or located in the developing/industrialising economies (Mohanty, 2003). At the same time, labelled as secondary earners, these women are negotiating the sexual politics that entails from the recolonisation by capital, nationalistic demands, gendered violence, and successive depletion of resources and lack of policy-level support from their governments. The trials do not end at the factory spaces. A significant share of women's labour goes into unpaid labour that not only supplies the capital with more labour in the form of reproduction of labour, but the creation of full beings referred to as social reproduction (Bhattacharya, 2017; Federici, 2019; Ferguson, 2019). The value that capital extracts from the women workers, apart from the surplus value from production, assumes the form of social reproduction that Fraser et al. (2019) call the 'making of people' predisposed with 'abilities, competencies and skills' that remains subordinate to the production of profit (Fraser et al., 2019, pp. 20- 21). Labour does not remain restricted to the physical, but extends to the realm of the intellectual, emotional and psychological, blurring the distinctions between the public and the private. Thus, women's labour outside the homes and inside form an important measure of how capital extracts value for increasing its profit and ensuring its survival.

Reading the garment industry - South Asia and beyond

As the labour costs rose in the industrialised countries, major clothing retailers shifted the production to the industrialising economies in the south that provided cheap imports. Responding to the increasing quantities of exports from these countries, the Multi Fibre Agreement of 1974 imposed an export quota at 6 per cent to regulate the growth of exports from the Third World countries. As the MFA imposed quotas on several South- East Asian countries, the manufacturers from the newly industrialising economies like Hong Kong, Singapore moved their production to quota-free countries like Bangladesh, Cambodia, Vietnam, Pakistan, India, Sri Lanka (Kabeer, 2000).

The beginning of the ready-made manufacturing garment (henceforth RMG) industry led to the initiation of the global south into the global market with assistance from the newly industrialising economies of the East. Simultaneously, under the structural adjustment programmes (SDGs) of the World Bank and International Monetary Fund (IMF), several restrictions were lifted that facilitated foreign trade by allowing free access of private capital into the local economy with the establishment of Export Processing Zones. Initially, the factories under the EPZs functioned as assembling units where materials were stitched together into the final garment. The production system was based on an assembly line system where workers would finish their section and pass on the garment to the next for completion. The raw materials were imported from threads to machines, thus making production labour intensive and buyer-driven. As neighbouring countries undertook garment production in the late 1970s, the competition was high due to quota restrictions. India and Pakistan, with their rich history in textile production,

organised their production relations according to the availability of resources. In India, the garment exporting industry functions in clusters located in Delhi, Kolkata, Ahmedabad, Bangalore and Tirupur. While Bangalore and Tirupur are organised as industrial areas with factories operating end-to-end functions from knitting to packaging, the centres in Delhi and Kolkata are primarily workshops undertaking smaller components of production like stitching or dyeing (Mezzadri, 2017). Owing to the differences in the production processes across the units, there are varied labour relations in these units that contribute in their capacities to the exporting business. While the industrial areas in Bangalore and Tirupur employ predominantly female labour, the workshop operations in Delhi and Kolkata are handled by male workers. In Pakistan, industrialisation began with the textile industry after independence, while garments began only in the 1990s mainly by the textile owners. As the textile industry was capital intensive, the owners did not know how to manage a labour intensive industry like garments. As a result, they outsourced their work to subcontractors by providing them with the fabrics and machines in return for lump-sum remunerations. Although the industry has shifted to assembly line production it remains tied to the subcontracting system, suffering after the quota phase out, with a slump in the knitwear rates. As a labour intensive industry, garment exporting countries hire salaried female operators, while in Pakistan men are hired at piece-rate wages and women as salaried sewing operators (Makino, 2012; Ayaz et al., 2019). The Katunayake FTZ in Sri Lanka, on the other hand, was seen as a prospective exporting country owing to the better working conditions it offered. As the industry relies heavily on imported raw materials and accessories, the cost of production is higher with a lack of backward linkages. It employs

women and men, the majority of them Sinhalese, from rural areas who migrate to the city to work. Although Sri Lanka has been a safer option for buyers due to its reputation of paying decent wages and some concessions for union activity, the industry is witnessing slow growth due to the higher costs of production (Dheeransinghe, 2009).

In contrast, Bangladesh, owing to its geographical location and a large pool of labour, has been able to capture the export market by offering lower costs of production. Although Bangladesh had initially undertaken only assembling operations, it has consolidated the industry that allows for end-to-end operations. The industry began with fewer than 12 garment firms in the late 1970s in the cities of Chittagong and Dhaka. Gradually, with access to back-to-back letters of credit from South East Asian companies and tax waive from the government, the landscape of the industry shifted to include more Bangladesh-based industrialists who established their garment factories. The industry saw rapid growth to 450 independent companies by 1985, 2400 by 1995 and close to 7,000 firms and subcontractors by 2013 (Khan 2001; Baumann-Pauly et al., 2015).³ The garment industry accounts for more than 80% of the country's total exports and employs around 5.1 million people (Khan 2009, Saxena 2007, Winterbottom et al. 2017; Saxena, 2019). (Appendix 1.1)

Bangladesh is the second-largest exporter of garments in the world, producing apparel for brands like Nike, Adidas, Walmart, Kik, S.Oliver and so on. With the

³ An upgraded map of the garment industry can be found on the website of Mapped in Bangladesh (MiB), a research initiative by the Centre for Entrepreneurial Development (CED) of BRAC University. Partnering with Bangladesh Garment Manufacturers and Exporters Association (BGMEA) and the Bangladesh Knitwear Manufacturers and Exporters Association (BKMEA) and funded by the C&A Foundation, it provides crowd-sourced information on the number of factories, workers and products made in the Bangladesh RMG industry. The map can be accessed at <https://map.mappedinbangladesh.org/>.

conflict-ridden history of emerging from a war-ravaged economy, Bangladesh has come a long way to be self-reliant and 'industrious'. The position of the second-largest garment exporter in the global apparel market draws its initial beginning from the recuperation process after the liberation war. Bangladesh has fought a bloody war of liberation to become the nation-state it is now. Prior to the liberation war in 1971, East Bengalis have also been active participants of the Indian independence struggle which eventually led to the separation of East Bengal and assimilation with Pakistan, becoming its Eastern wing. Thereafter, beginning from 1959, the struggle for autonomy for the Eastern wing of Pakistan led to continuous movements demanding Bengali as an official and instructional language over Urdu, to demands for regional autonomy in terms of resources sourced by West Pakistan from the eastern wing (Kabeer, 1988). The failure of the western wing to respond to these demands and the simmering anger within the eastern wing culminated into the war of liberation in 1971, spanning over the course of 9 months.

The Readymade Manufacturing Garment (RMG) industry of Bangladesh shares the post-war context when the Structural Adjustment Programmes (SAPs) made an inroad into the Bangladesh economy. As part of the international restructuring of the global garment industry, the new international division of labour opened the industries to women, who accounted for more than 90% of the five million workers. At the national level, the restructuring of the industry initiated a shift from the capital city to the north and south that were identified as industrial areas specifically for the garment industries. These Export Processing Zones (EPZ) provided access to gas, power and electric supply at reduced costs for industrial production of garments. The quick growth of the industry in a short span of time and the low cost mass production made Bangladesh the hub of

global garment production. The global restructuring of the economy led to a shift in production from the developed economies to the developing ones that favoured economies of scale. The cheap labour available in Bangladesh was soon explored and exploited ensuring the rapid growth of the industry. The RMG industry currently employs more than 4 million women, most of whom migrated from the districts outside of Dhaka.

The industry, classified into three tiers with varying levels of interaction with the buyers, is primarily divided into two kinds of factories: compliant and non-compliant. The ones inside the EPZs with direct links with the international buyers and house entire production from fabric to finished garment are mainly compliant. The next tier that has relatively weaker ties with the buyers and has provisions for handling large orders are outside of the EPZs. The ones that are outside of the EPZs and merge imperceptibly with the informal sector are the small low-grade factories with no direct link with the buyer. These factories take orders on the subcontracting basis from larger factories that are unable to fulfill large orders in a short period of time. These are outside of the purview of compliance rules set by international buyers. This distinction between the compliant and non-compliant factories within the industry informs the practices of production as well as the politics of labour rights. There were around 403 units within the EPZ in 2012 with 3,23,000 workers, which accounts for less than ten per cent of the total number of factories or workers in the entire industry (Ahmed and Nathan, 2014).

The power differentials between the buying and manufacturing countries in the global garment industry lay the rules of production processes. Accordingly, buyers

dominate the production from design to specific cloth requirements. Payments for the garments are made after the receipt of the consignments that often leads to manufacturing firms functioning on loans. As time and competition become determining factors for the survival of business, subcontracting becomes a standard practice where larger factories contract a share of production to the smaller factories outside of the EPZs to complete larger orders. As a result, buyers are free of accountability for problems concerning the subcontracting factories that are often constructed in violation of proper regulations. The global garment supply chain has therefore been witnessed to establish sweatshop-like conditions that are supported by the state through duty-free and tax-free production, largely exploitative conditions of work and bypassing legal codes on labour and employment.

Postcolonial futures and the ‘woman question’

Bangladesh emerged from a history of double colonisation, first by the British rule that ended with the partition of India in 1947, and second as the eastern wing of Pakistan that ended with the liberation war in 1971. As the eastern wing of Pakistan, Bengalis were subordinated to the rule of Pakistan as resources were exported from the eastern wing while it remained underdeveloped and in want of state services. What began as the *bhasha andolan* of 1958, gradually took shape as the movement for autonomy for the eastern wing.⁴ Over the years, this movement for autonomy culminated in the liberation war of Bangladesh - a civil war between the two wings of Pakistan and the international war between India and Pakistan (Saikia, 2004).

⁴ Language movement is referred to as *bhasha andolan* in Bengali.

The legacy of the liberation war overwrites Pakistan armed forces as perpetrators of violence and Bengali men as liberation warriors (*Mukti joddha*). However, the participation of women as fighters and the mass rapes of women during the war remained a forgotten memory for a long time. It was not a denial, rather shrouded in public secrecy - the thing that one needs to 'remember to forget' (Mookherjee, 2008). Postcolonial scholarship has demonstrated how women are considered as culture bearers of the nation that allows for the separation of the nation from the other (Chatterjee, 1989, 2010; Mohsin, 2016). The fate of *Birangona* has also been witnessed to share a similar silence induced by shame, of women being defiled by Pakistani men.⁵ After the war, the raped women were given the title of *birangona* by Sheikh Mujibur Rahman to initiate their rehabilitation into society. However, the title did not materialise into relief for the women as many were deserted by their husbands, or sold to prostitution, or simply silenced. It was only twenty years later that the raped women emerged in the public discussions through the efforts of Jahanara Imam in the form of a people's tribunal. Later, in 2015, a bill was passed in the parliament formally recognising *birangona* as freedom fighters. Forty one women were recognised in a gazette notification and acknowledged through honorarium, ration and medical services (Mohsin, 2016).

The politics relating to the recognition of the violence of rape by the Pakistani army and local collaborators was telling of the gendered landscapes of power that birthed the nation. While men were acknowledged for courage and sacrifice through honorary titles and awards and public service quotas, women underwent abortion and forced adoption to purge Bangladesh of Pakistani blood for the honour of the new nation

⁵ *Birangona* means woman warrior in Bengali.

(Mohsin, 2016; D'Costa, 2016). The power of the state was engraved on the bodies of these women that overrode consent and failed to facilitate the social rehabilitation of these women. On the other hand, the lack of recognition implied the impunity that the state held/sanctioned in terms of gendered violence in the actions of local army collaborators.

The attention of the state on the 'women question' emerged with the United Nations Decade for Women in 1975 that brought forth the role of women in economic development and responsibilities of the state. It meant that General Ziaur Rahman, the then head of the state, could access foreign aid as part of the UN initiatives on women's development (Kabeer, 1991, pp. 45). The initial projects were focused on the rural women and were primarily based on family planning, literacy and income-generating programmes which functioned as the efforts of the West to develop the Third World (Feldman and McCarthy, 1984; Kabeer, 2000). In the later years, it took the form of microcredit which allowed rural women to access banking facilities for entrepreneurial purposes. Called the grassroots globalisation, the microcredit facilities only exacerbated the inequalities that prevailed as 95 per cent of the loans were taken by the husbands under their wives' names. This meant that those women were to repay the loans which proved to be difficult in a society that functions under the logic of classic patriarchy (Kandiyoti, 1988, 2005; Karim, 2008).

Classic patriarchy, in this context, is the organisation of a community/society where the male head holds the decision making power over women as well as younger

men. The power relations are based on the patriarchal, patrilineal and patrilocal basis with religion, kinship and marriage regulating the lives of the women and men. The empowerment programmes unfolded in Bangladesh at the same time when violence against women became the central issue for women's movements. Organisations like Bangladesh Mahila Parishad, a left-leaning women's organisation, campaigned for proper legal provisions to ensure the safety of women in the households and community spaces. Emerging from the politics of *birangona*, women's issues in Bangladesh were located in the debates of equal rights enshrined in the Constitution. As the popular discourse of secularism predominated the history of the liberation war, women's groups mobilised against the overtly Islamic undertones of the actions of the government. For instance, the constitutional amendment by Ziaur Rahman declaring Islam as the state religion was objected by the women's groups which stressed the multi-religious and multi-class character of the country. The emphasis was not on the religious but the cultural identity of being a Bengali Muslim that shared cultural heritage with Hindus and the inclusion of indigenous communities as rightful citizens of Bangladesh. The push for secular politics also needs to be considered in terms of Muslim identity being seen as cultural, as opposed to religious. The demonstration of Islamic piety is not synonymous with the Muslim identity that can be witnessed among majority of the women in the country (Rosario, 2006, Huq, 2021). Thus, protests demanding reproductive autonomy and rights, protection of sex workers, prevention of custodial rape, domestic violence, and violence on women undertaken by women's rights and advocacy organisations focused primarily on the constitutional rights discourse and building an autonomous feminist politics (Azim, 2001; Chowdhury, 2005; Huq, 2005). Over the years, these local struggles have

compelled the state to pass laws that would allow justice for victims of gender and state violence that materialised into the Nari o Shishu Nirjatan Daman Ain, 2000 (Prevention of Repression of Women and Children Act).

In all these movements, shame and honour have been the determining principle of granting legitimacy to these issues. Shame, as a practice, is seen to be deeply connected with the everyday lives of women from all sections of society. The connections of the body with shame and honour find illustration in the dismissal of demands for reproductive rights, minimum wages, reservation in job opportunities, as well as in the arenas of work. Like *birangonas* were considered better dead than defiled, women in garments have been asked to join sex work for slight delays in completing daily targets. As can be seen, women exercising autonomy over their bodies are shamed into submission, if not by appeals to the traditional rules of morality. It becomes imperative, therefore, to uncomplicate the tensions between the binary of the empowered worker and a worker negotiating autonomy and agency in a patriarchal society. As Islamic belief and Bengali culture have shared a complicated relation since the liberation war, the negotiation that women enter into with the rules of seclusion are far from simple binaries of exploitation and empowerment.

Transnational images, local networks

As a Muslim democratic country integrating development initiatives in their policies, Bangladesh has been a focus of discussions on women rights and empowerment. While the initiatives on microcredit have been discussed above, there has been a

concerted effort at image-making that we discuss in this section. As this research explores garment work and related labour movement, I would focus mainly on the perceptions that form the registers for an international audience.

Essential to this discussion on Muslim women in garment work is the images portrayed on the international and national platforms of women's bodies that bear signs of progress and exploitation. Elora Chowdhury (2018) discusses two interesting images to point to the contradictions in narratives to mark progress of women involved with the global garment industry. First, an advertisement by American Apparels announcing its sweat-free garments that ran into a controversy in 2014. An employee with American Apparel and a Bangladeshi born American model, Maks, was seen posing for a jeans advert wearing unbuttoned jeans with "Made in Bangladesh" printed across her bare chest. The advertisement described her as a Muslim woman coming from a conservative family who explored her identity away from Islamic traditions after she migrated to California, in the United States. As her bare body declared her self-identification away from the Islamic tradition, it also symbolised the development of the woman worker through garments (Siddiqi, 2014). The other image with similar symbolism was sighted in one of the billboards published by the national daily, *Prothom Alo*, captured by Nafisa Tanjeem that projected the garment worker as the future of the country. In the poster a woman is seen carrying a tiffin box wearing a green and red dupatta, the colours of the national flag of Bangladesh with factories in the background. The poster reads, "As long as it is in your hands, Bangladesh will not lose its way", which mirrors the projection of women as bearers of economic development of the nation (Preetha, 2016). While Maks's

bare body and strong stance mark her departure from the backward culture, it also connotes the imperial gaze added to the demands of neoliberal capital and consumption (Chowdhury, 2018, pp. 65). The *Prothom Alo* poster, on the other hand, symbolises Bangladeshi women's role in upholding the traditional culture as well as economic progress. However, these two images function as representations of the modern independent women as narrativised by the state, clothing brands and the media. These representations become instrumental in creating discourses where the binaries of the rescuer and rescued, powerless and liberator, are drawn. As the poor woman from the global south is located in her backwardness, the woman from the developed economies is portrayed as one who has already realised her agency and potential.

A quick search on the internet leads one to countless reports on the global garment industry accessible on the news portals and websites of various international human rights and labour rights groups. Bangladesh features largely in all these reports published by the anti-sweatshop campaign coalitions that seek to uncover the details of the second-largest garment export industry. In addition to these reports are research studies undertaken by international human rights associations and global unions like the War on Want, International Trade Labour Federation, Asia Floor Wage Alliance, International Textile Garment Leather Workers Federation and others on the accidents of fire and collapse, working conditions, wages and so on. The two major industrial accidents that put the Bangladeshi garment industry on the map were the Tazreen fire in 2012 and the Rana Plaza collapse in 2013. The international audience/ readers are acquainted with the industry mainly through these accidents that have exposed the

organisation of the industry that relies predominantly on the practice of subcontracting (Padmanabhan et al., 2015; Anner et al., 2013; Muhammad, 2015). As a result, the low waged cheap labour of third world women in producing low cost but high volumes of garments became the main focus of the international campaigns. The third world women portrayed in these campaigns and outside become bodies for marking development narratives. The decline of the state's role in democratic functioning of state institutions legitimised the need for transnational initiatives that would supposedly democratise the institutional practices. The Accord after the Rana Plaza collapse is one such initiative. As much as the Accord has forced the brands to ensure sourcing from compliant factories, it has also motivated them to find newer ways to institute their own codes of conduct and evade Accord like agreements.

At the level of local networks, NGOs undertake donor-funded projects on savings, healthcare, sexual harassment and child care that fall under the responsibilities of the employer. The women participating in these projects then function as the images of progress and bearers of democracy that is perceived to be missing from the functioning of state institutions (Seidman, 2007). The garment worker who is trained to address abusive language in her factory becomes the marker of a liberated woman. What remains missing, however, in these portrayals is the self-articulation of garment workers of their roles as workers as well as change-bearers. Even as scholars map the contours of labour movements, the militant character of garment workers eclipses the need for a gendered understanding of labour unrests that are rooted in the question of value of labour.

In contrast to these images, the local unions play a decisive role in labour mobilisation. As will be discussed, the successive strikes under the direction of unions present a different picture of labour movements. The relative absence of women in unions reasoned as a result of the gendered codes of behaviour simultaneously implicates the absence of union involvement in the question of gender. On the other hand, the fairly visible presence of women in events like Mayday and Women's day through NGOs offer a different picture. In response to the restricted access to public spaces that are male dominated, women's outstanding visibility in rallies mark a distinct moment of paradox - of representational politics and emancipatory potential. This research is an attempt at uncovering these struggles of gender within the struggles of labour in male dominated activist spaces.

Research objectives

How do we understand women's work in the context of garment workers in Bangladesh, a postcolonial globalising economy? How do the women workers situate themselves in the larger network of production, vis-a-vis their social location? The historical past that entailed the becoming of a nation becomes imperative in approaching the gender question. The conflation of garment work as a duty towards the country by the government and industry owners becomes an important marker of that nationalism discourse which subsumes economic growth as a measure of nationalistic duty and contribution to national development.

- To understand gendered work in a postcolonial globalising economy situated within the networks of global production.

- To explore how labour transitions and configures outside the spaces of work.
- To understand the continuities and discontinuities between the discourses on sweatshop labour at the local and global levels.
- To understand the phenomenon of transnational networks of international activist spaces vis-a-vis the local networks.

From maquiladoras in Ciudad Juarez to factories in Phnom Penh and Dhaka, garment workers have been working in conditions that are not only deplorable but have also been essentially regulating the gendered codes of behaviour (Fernandez-Kelly, 1983, Wright, 2006, Salzinger, 2003, 2004; Mezzadri 2017). Leslie Salzinger's (2003) work on Mexico's shop floors explored how the production was designed around the tropes of femininity and masculinity where docility and dexterity were equated with productivity while masculinity was equated with sloth and disruption (pp. 10). She documents how 'managerial fantasies' centred on 'productive femininity' shaped the production system which often conflicted with and shaped the local gendered subjectivities. Likewise, the "myth of disposability" as proposed by Melissa Wright (2006) alluded to the managerial discourse that seeks to strengthen the role of management in a production system while workers, particularly women, are as a class assumed to be disposable within the domain of production. Documenting the industrial discourses and practices in China and Mexico, she demonstrates how structures of racism, sexism, nationalism and capitalism create myths that find illustrations in the managerial practices where the workers are produced before work begins. Her thesis comes to life with the narrative of Gloria, a former worker, who rises to the position of a manager in a firm dominated by American managers and their ideas of the modern. Gloria's managerial skills are seen to embody

the contradictions between Mexican values and American beliefs of productivity as her stint led to increase in efficiency while being rooted in the Mexican ideas around work and values (Wright, 2006).

The predicament of Bangladeshi garment workers bear similarities with women across the third world in industries that trivialise and extract women's labour for the production of profit. These factories employ a predominantly female labour force working alongside men with marked separation between what constitutes women's work and what is the arena of men. The distinctive feature of the garment workers in Dhaka is their status as rural migrants who have migrated from other districts to Dhaka looking for work. This migration has primarily been individual (without men) for the women who migrated to the city with the assistance of distant kins. The rising demand for unskilled, docile and well-mannered workers for assembling garments has been economically beneficial for the rural women as well as the factory owners. Owing to the perception that stitching, which requires precision and patience, is primarily a woman's job/work, the wages could be kept low while the labour pool remained massive. Simultaneously, the "available" nature of garment work and a lack of other livelihood options compelled the rural migrant to join garments. Coming from poor, farming families, garment workers join the factories due to lack of education or livelihood options. They work for more than 12 hours per day to sustain themselves and their families, are often sole earners and heads of their households. The factories that employ them value time more than their labour, and reprimand and punish any delay in fulfilling consignment orders. They earn less than they need to lead a dignified life and have limited opportunities for career advancement. The physical exhaustion from factory work and domestic labour leaves them under-

nourished as affording nutrient sufficient food becomes difficult due to the low wages. The repetitive, semi/unskilled and exhaustive work on the sewing machines leads to the slow decay of their bodies and loss of job as they reach around 45 years of age. They are neither adequately represented in unions, nor are able to join them due to lack of time.

If we had to chart out the characteristics of the workforce employed in the garment industry, they would be rural migrants, predominantly women, working in unsafe factory conditions, living in one-room quarters and in constant debt. Therefore, understanding conditions of work and life becomes a precursor to understanding garment work. Situated in the process of production at the end, a garment worker is not only at the end of the hierarchy in the workforce. She also functions within the hierarchies of gender relations. Historically, the garment workers have been examined through the binaries of exploited or empowered, one to be saved or one charting out the way for development. Their positionality as Muslim women in a third world/South Asian economy needing to be saved from the third world men and capitalist exploitation has also been amply explored to point to the problems of solidarity that transnational feminism espouses (Mohanty, 2003; Siddiqi, 2000, 2011). Garment work as an experience that informs everyday life and unrest has been contextualised in terms of its local particularities of the state and patronage politics (Rahman, 2011; Siddiqi, 2014, 2016).

This study extends these theses to attempt a local and social reading of the industry that looks at garment work in terms of what contributes to its emergence and continuation. It looks at the industry through three interlinked discourses: state and administration, buyers and owners, and the workers and the activist networks. The political economy of industrial policies and its relations with constitutional politics lays

the foundation for the preliminary reading of the industry since its initial stages. Building upon that context, this buyer-driven industry is understood through the power dynamics embedded in the global economic processes with the owners and management as important participants. This study then looks at the conditions of work, of everyday life, of political participation of the workers in the local labour movement that determines the course of the garment workers' struggles. As Third World feminists argue that the multiple points of oppression give rise to multiple feminisms, this research too approaches the women's question by 'reading up the structure' as an essential exercise to understand women's work within the context of the larger anti-sweatshop movement in Bangladesh (Mohanty, 2003). It, therefore, considers the false binary of the public and the private and looks at the labour that women put in to sustain their households, lives and movements.

In that effort, I have primarily focused on the scholarship by scholars from and based in Bangladesh. The salience of this decision lies in the precision and subtleties that these scholars offer and are crucial for understanding localised politics. The reference to scholarly work by scholars in and from South Asia, and especially Bangladesh, has provided for the distance as well as the proximity that one needs to reach clarity. Additionally, as the conditions and methods of the larger political movements, whether on labour union rights or women's issues, influence the course of garment workers' rights and struggles, the study seeks to contextualise the transnational images of garment work and workers in contrast with the local politics and history.

Chapter Outline

The thesis is divided into six chapters that begin with a detailed description of the

methodological approach that I follow to understand garment work, workers, industry and the activist networks. It is followed by a historical review of the rise of the garment industry as the main contributor to the GDP of the country. The subsequent chapters delve deeper into the legalities of labour that shape up the industry and the lives of the workers within, followed by a social reading of the industry through the everyday lives of workers within the factory and outside.

The chapter on methodology, ‘Notes and Dilemmas in Field Research’, explicates my entry into the field with a detailed description. Sharing of space between the researcher and the researched does not necessarily rid the field of its complex power dynamics with regard to the inequalities rooted in one’s nationality, class, religion, gender and politics. As a feminist research scholar, I record my own experiences as a field researcher with roots in Bangladesh to uncover the perceptions regarding my entry and presence in the field. It is followed by profiles of my respondents where garment workers and the representatives from unions, NGOs, women’s organisations are described in terms of their social realities. The following section records the documents collected on the global garment industry that are publicly available on the internet and gathered from the field become crucial registers for an exploration into the networks of activists engaged in the mobilisation of garment workers. It is followed by a discussion on the documentary films on the garment industry in Bangladesh that offer an analytical reading of the industry in terms of its organisation. The chapter ends with the complexities of exiting the field as a friend, ally and researcher.

In the third chapter, ‘Locating History, Locating Context’, I trace the history of the liberation war and thereafter through the local politics that has deeply influenced the policies and practices of the postcolonial state engaged in global economic processes. Simultaneously, the engagement of the postcolonial state with the discourse on women’s rights and development has shaped state agendas with regard to economic and political processes. It is mainly the promises that Bangladesh was seen to hold as a newly independent state that lays the context for the eventual rise and growth of the second-largest garment industry in the world. The first section deals with the imprints of colonial rule that forged the path for liberation of Bangladesh. It records the anti-colonial aspirations of the Bengalis in attaining statehood, wrestling autonomy to establish the new nation. The economic relations that govern the production process are central to this section, as Bangladesh transitions from a military state to a democratic government in the succeeding years and reconfigures its economy. I present the contours of the changes in the economic policies that the state followed as a remnant of colonial rule that is reflected in the industrial policies formulated by the state/government since its independence in 1971 till 2018. This research proposes that the production relations that the Bangladeshi garment industry embodies have developed out of the power dynamics among the state institutions, landed elites and metropolitan elites that characterised the former colony. We look at the state through the history of constitutional politics with overlaps between the influence of the military and the business elite and the contestations of claims over socialism, democracy, secularism embedded in the Constitution of Bangladesh as witnessed through the popular resistances. The third section looks at the rise of the constituencies of women as active members of society through questions of justice and

autonomy. Drawing from the recorded histories of the effects of the liberation war on women, this section discusses the politics regarding the figure of *birangona* entangled in the politics of shame in the debates on rape as a war crime and the disengagement of the state with the issues surrounding women's rights. As the development of the nation and women become synonymous in the state agenda, we explore the question of gender with respect to the women's movements that have charted the course of the nation. In the context of the predominantly female industrial workforce, the presence of women's rights movements hold importance in understanding the gendered relations of power that govern the garment industry in present-day Bangladesh. As the development discourse dominates the discussion on the status of women owing to the garment industry, this section ends with a discussion of women as bearers of the nation's economy.

The fourth chapter, "Garments world" discusses the comparative advantage of Bangladesh as the source of cheap labour is explored in terms of the production networks that characterise the industry. This chapter uncomplicates this journey of the garment industry from the first decade after liberation to the present day in terms of relations of production and labour that have endured successive governments and their policies. This responds to the questions of how global capital has organised itself locally in Bangladesh - through local elites and bureaucracy, laws and regulations that regulate labour and industry - to ensure its survival in these specific conditions. In this process, it becomes pertinent to situate the government and its institutions entrusted with the responsibilities of regulating the industry and ensure measures to augment the development project. From the role of political party members, involvement of the military and the state labour

institutions in influencing the early years of the industry to the government being dependent on the business representatives for sustaining the economy, Bangladesh assumes a crucial space in the discussion on postcolonial economic relations. Contingent on the political party in government, the industry has also seen changes in the industrial policies, labour laws and provisions that are aimed to support the interests of this emerging business elite. This chapter lays down the industrial practices that characterise the industry as part of a more extensive network of garment production that expands beyond the national boundaries of Bangladesh with buyers and suppliers located in the European nations, US and South East Asia. This chapter primarily collates the testimonies of garment workers, union members, NGO representatives, factory management and brand representatives available through the documentaries, campaign reports and field observations and interviews conducted during fieldwork. To facilitate the building of registers to understand how garment work shapes up the life of a worker, this chapter looks at the representations of the garment industry in campaign-related documents and examines them against the fieldwork findings through a mixed methods approach. How the garment industry produces workers who in turn embody the practices of labour and peculiarities of work life is explored in this chapter.

The fifth chapter, Mapping Movement Networks, is based on the international campaigns that focus on the images of ethical sourcing as brands try to portray in the international market. Consumer boycotts, in the circumstances, become the first action that seeks to target these brand images. The failure of state institutions in implementing conscious labour practices through legal provisions is cited as a reason to institute

initiatives that would facilitate transnational governance of the supply chains. The Bangladesh Accord on building and fire safety, in the context of the Bangladeshi garment industry, has been seen as one such attempt that offers possibilities of resolving the problems that ail the global garment industry. However, this chapter looks at these attempts historically and recentres the question of labour organising and struggles to the strike actions that have been a regular feature of garment workers' lives. It locates agency in the everyday instances of labour unrest in the industrial area which is beyond the direct purview of the brands but are intrinsically connected to it. The demands that are behind these strikes are located inside the factory life that operates outside the factory gates. So while brands remained outside the borders to be a liable body, the government remains the primary regulator of the industry inside. As a significant stakeholder in the industry, the interest of the government has been witnessed to be aligned with the local suppliers. On the other hand, the presence of the business class within the government has been noted to be rather ironic. Workers situated in this particular context cannot be read through only the international campaigns based on brand image. This chapter proposes to explore the many layers of the local context through the strike actions. It seeks to understand how local contexts aid or impede the shaping of political subjectivity and how this political subjectivity shapes struggles. So a worker is not merely a worker, they are differently placed from other social classes. The worker is a woman in a male dominated society which prescribes and proscribes her life through culturally coded gender norms and behaviour. The worker is often the only earning family member. She is forced to work abnormally long hours. She is located in a space where harassment and assault in the streets and the factory becomes an everyday experience. The worker is a parent, with

very scarce resources and no support from the government to contribute to their child's development. The worker is a union member who has been struggling with patriarchal codes that try to determine both factory and private life.

Finally, in the concluding chapter, the thesis looks at the political action by garment workers in a space that is riven with national discourses on respectability through seclusion and shame, individualisation of rights through donor-funded projects on women equality and financial autonomy through empowerment. As claims of empowerment run central to the industry and the opportunities it produces for women workers, the thesis looks at access and visibility within the historically male dominated movement spaces. From training programmes, advocacy campaigns to local labour strikes, the conflicts and overlaps between the international rights discourse and local movement spaces on garment work and workers become interesting focal points to map the labour movement. Focusing on garment workers, this chapter looks at the multiple forms of agency that emerge from within these spaces that are difficult to classify into neat boxes but shape the working lives and the labour movement in multiple ways.

As the RMG industry grew with subcontracting as a predominant practice, bodies of the women workers turned disposable with the predominance of the buyer brands determining the trajectories of the garment industry. In understanding the gendered nature of work and its incumbent relations with the political organisation of garment workers in Dhaka, this research undertakes the intersectional approach. The social relations and structural conditions that regulate the boundaries of factories, unions and homes and

produce the 'garments woman' become central to this project of anti-capitalist reading of power in the activist networks.

Chapter 2 - Notes and Dilemmas in Field Research

“Apnar jamai ki kore? Ashe nai?”

“What does your husband do? He did not accompany you?”

This was quite a common and oft-asked question during my time in the field. It was not the first time someone inquired about my marital status. However, while in India, I’ve been asked whether I was married or not, in Bangladesh, it was already assumed that I was married. My answer in the negative was usually met with surprise and disbelief.

Sandra Harding (1987, pp. 9) notes that a researcher is essentially “a real, historical individual with concrete, specific desires and interests” rather than a voice of authority existing invisibly. Therefore, the beliefs and behaviours of the researchers count as empirical evidence for or against the claims by the research which requires critical scrutiny. Sharing the space of being researched while researching puts forth ‘the issues of representation, history and retrospection, orientation, authenticity, power, and personal and academic responsibility as it becomes inextricably intertwined’ (Ahmed, 2001, pp. 50). Being an upper caste, middle-class woman in India, there are certain privileges that I have had in manoeuvring through the public space. Nonetheless, the structure and ideology of Brahminism and patriarchy that conditions our habits, practices and behaviours in the private as well as public spaces had shaped up my initial understanding of the world. Gradually, access to education and eventually higher education in a vibrant campus space has helped me defy certain traditionally set gender roles/norms. The

culture of discussing politics, autonomy of women and democratic principles that must embody our life-worlds has been a critical part of campus politics that has shaped my understanding of performance(s) of genders. This engagement has been instrumental in making me aware of the differences in our social locations and their intersections that determines how we inhabit and understand our immediate worlds. With this corporeal understanding of space and a belief in feminist politics, I embarked on the journey towards ‘knowing’ the field - Bangladesh - specifically the city of Dhaka, where the RMG industry is mainly located.

Chandra Talpade Mohanty (2003) advocates for a feminist methodology that looks at feminist scholarship as intricately linked to feminist politics and practice. Anti-globalisation struggles become a focal point around which the Third World feminists argue for an understanding of micropolitics of everyday life of women situated in Third World economies which change course according to the macropolitics of the global economic order. The necessity to engage in ‘locally grounded narratives’ becomes a crucial entry point to understand the relations of power that organise Bangladeshi society, in general, and the garment industry, in particular. Banu Ozkazanc-Pan (2012) articulates the need for a postcolonial feminist research approach that considers the challenges and complexities encountered on the field with respect to the representations, subalternity and reflexivity as opposed to the epistemological assumptions of Western feminist theories.

As Marnia Lazreg (as cited in Ahmad, 2003) argues for intersubjectivity within the research process that seeks to understand the field from the constructs emerging from the field, this research attempts to explore the concept of work and labour as understood by the garment workers and the labour activists present in the field. It seeks to understand

work in the backdrop of different forms of politics that inhabit the factory floors, households, public and movement spaces, and produces knowledge through such contexts, privileging what Harding refers to as standpoint epistemology (Harding, 1993). Understanding these spaces also entail exploring the representations of third world women workers that one comes across in academic disciplines and visual media narratives that simultaneously aims to dismantle and construct identities (Ozkazanc-Pan, 2012, pp. 575). As a field is produced through the discursive practices, the simultaneous and often conflicting narratives of a range of actors recreate social, political and spatial boundaries under different circumstances and specific political contexts (Nast, 1994 as cited in Ozkazanc-Pan, 2012).

In the context of garment work in Bangladesh, the everyday experiences and struggles of the garment workers in factories, households, training programmes, rallies and protest demonstrations develop into the epistemological device that allows for a more coherent understanding of how gendered realities organise the relations between work and labour (Hartsock, 1983). As third world women workers in a Muslim majority nation, garment workers embody the narratives of economic development, empowerment and liberation put forth by national and global actors ranging from the government, retailer brands to transnational activists. It becomes imperative, therefore, to look at how the state, government, business elites, garment workers, union leaders and transnational activists are placed in the social organisation of knowledge that still bears colonial imprints.

I argue for an exploration into the public life of a garment worker through her daily struggles and experiences within the larger global capitalist order that engenders the

garment industry and its processes. This exercise to understand how the public life of a garment worker shapes up requires us to look at the RMG industry in the context of the history of the liberation war and the consequent ‘becoming’ of a nation. In the daily struggles and experiences, the national and international discourse on empowerment holds a central position that regulates the lives of garment workers. Inevitably, “reading up the power structure” (Mohanty, 2003) helps locate the pluralities of power that dominate the labour and lives of garment workers. In this context, state discourses on women’s role in economic development work in conjunction with the international discourse on third world women liberation through wage work. Simultaneously, international anti-sweatshop movement networks build campaigns that hold Western brands accountable for unequal economic relations. At the local level, these narratives are complicated further to look at the functions of the state vis-a-vis the global economic order. This research looks at the discursive processes through which the garment workers are represented in each narrative. It centres on the questions of sexual division of labour that operate across the boundaries of the public and the private and looks at gendered labour as it unfolds in each space.

The field site

The city of Dhaka can be categorised into two sections: *Notun Dhaka*, or New Dhaka, and *Puran Dhaka*, the Old Dhaka. Hazrat Shahjalal International Airport in the north marks the boundaries of *New Dhaka* followed by the Dhaka Cantonment Railway Station where the trains from Kolkata, in West Bengal, India, arrive and depart from. There are intercity trains that pass by the Dhaka Cantonment Station, but the platforms are used only for the Maitree Express running between Kolkata Station and Dhaka

Cantonment. The cantonment area stretches 4 kilometres towards the south till Banani, Mohakhali and Tejgaon, areas which mainly house banks and other corporate offices and are usually busy during office hours. This stretch measuring around 10 kilometres consists of one flyover, thousands of public and private offices, colleges and universities. One of the prominent private universities operating in Dhaka, BRAC University, is also located in the Mohakhali area. The defining feature of this area consists of the numerous billboards and wall paints urging the youth of the country to join the army, navy and air force under the Bangladesh armed forces. Mottos of navy and army like “*Shantite shongrame samudre durjoy*” (In war and peace invincible at sea), “*Samare amra shantite amra, sorbotro amra desher tore*” (In war, in peace, we are everywhere for our country) adorn the walls of the cantonment compounds in this area and can be spotted at every circle. Apart from this, there are residential quarters for the armed forces officials lining the roads till Mohakhali. The cityscape however changes rapidly near the University of Dhaka area in Puran Dhaka with slogans of student political organisations on the walls of the hostels and institute buildings. The oldest and largest public university in Bangladesh, the University of Dhaka, had played a significant role during the war of liberation in 1971 and is spread over an area of 600 acres with busy public roads passing from within. The main protest square, Shahbag Square, the public library and Sheikh Mujibur medical college and hospital around Dhaka University is always vibrant. Another feature that separates the cityscape is the construction of buildings and residential areas around the university. Unlike the amply spaced buildings in the new Dhaka area, the buildings in this area, also popularly called the *Puran Dhaka*, or the old Dhaka, are more congested and tall, often without the plaster on the outside. The idea of this highly populated city

(population density of 23,234 persons per square kilometres) is very stark with unending queues of vehicles, both public and private, and hordes of people walking small stretches all across the city as vehicles hardly get the space to move due to severe traffic. Fares of autos and rickshaws are calculated depending upon the duration it takes to complete the journey. Currently the largest industrial city, Dhaka houses around 14.4 million people, comprising a large share of rural migrants who move to the city from in and around for better employment and educational facilities. Some migrants own property in both the city and back in their villages - mostly the middle-class. The concrete skyline with non-plastered buildings also suggests the pressure that Dhaka city has to accommodate the migrants and thus can also be seen in the process of becoming a vertical city (Appendix 1.2).

The southern part of Dhaka also derives its dynamic nature from the fact that this area accommodates the government buildings, such as the Supreme Court, National Press Club, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Bangladesh Secretariat, Ministry of Labour and Employment and Ministry of Land, among many others. Right at the corner stands the Bangabandhu Stadium followed by a major bus port in Gulistan connecting further south towards Munshiganj and Narayanganj. The National Press Club area among the above mentioned is also the location of most of the protests organised by the opposition parties and organisations. Right across the street, offices of various trade and labour unions are located in the narrow by-lanes followed by approximately ten to twelve storied four buildings for corporates and traders offices. Puran Dhaka, therefore, houses a mix of middle and working class populations working in various industries and corporations, respectively.

One of the striking features of the city consists of the constant reminiscing of the liberation war of 1971 through memorials at every circle and crossing. There is an abundance of references to Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, regarded as the founding father or *Jatir Janak* of the People's Republic of Bangladesh and fondly remembered and celebrated as *Bangabandhu* (Friend of Bengal). The overwhelming presence of the national flag also suggests a strong sense of association with the liberation war, when Bangladesh attained independence from Pakistan and fought against the "Urdu-only" policy of Pakistan demanding official status to the Bengali language, asserting a Bengali national and cultural identity. The Bengali script can be found all over the city, in slogans, mottos of the armed forces, billboards, signboards, registration number of vehicles and so on. The signboards of the offices of many private commercial banks like Dhaka Bank, Pubali Bank, Dutch Bangla Bank, BRAC Bank and so on are a frequent sight while travelling in and around Dhaka. While men take up various jobs, ranging from government jobs to corporate offices, women are generally seen joining the banking sector or technology-based jobs. However, there is a strange disparity among the number of women and men seen on the streets. While men are quite evidently visible using public transport and loitering on their own, women are generally accompanied either by male or female friends and acquaintances. This is primarily true for the middle-class Bengali crowd of the city, which aspires to clinch private and public sector jobs. The presence of international and private universities in Dhaka also stands testimony to the access that Bangladesh provides to the private companies and organisations inside the country post-liberalisation policies undertaken since the 1970s.

The visibility of garments is apparent on the signposts of small garment factories, dealers and sellers in the city, as well as in terms of markers in simple conversations. The garment industry of Bangladesh is spread all over the city of Dhaka, with the largest concentration in Narayanganj popularly called the ‘BSCIC’, short for Bangladesh Small and Cottage Industries Corporation; and Gazipur located in the north of Dhaka. The other areas where garment factories are concentrated are Savar, Ashulia, Malibagh, Kalyanpur, Kachpur and Tongi, located in and around the main city of Dhaka. The major export-based factories are situated in Narayanganj and Gazipur. While the former has hundreds of factories in one colossal complex, the latter has factories scattered in clusters in the area. Within the capital city, the factories are spread across the length and breadth from New Dhaka to Old Dhaka. There is a clear presence of many garment retailers in the New Dhaka area with small factories spanning Banani to Tejgaon. The stretch from the Old Dhaka area (Gulistan) to the outskirts of the city has small factories or workshops where mainly stitching takes place. The factories and workshops resemble other buildings in Old Dhaka, which are more than 7 storeys with un-plastered walls, small windows and high beam tube lights hanging from the ceiling. The high beam lights are generally stressful for the eye but are a distinctive feature in these sweatshops, where the stitching takes place, to increase precision by the owners/ manufacturers (Appendix 3.2).

The evening I reached and was en route to *Puran Dhaka*, the first image of the city for me was a few women in colourful hijabs, carrying vanity bags waiting at the Banani bus stand to return home from the banks and corporate offices. While on the other side was a crowd of women clutching their bags to their chests and heads covered in dupatta waiting to cross the road to catch buses for home. As I peered a little further on

that side, I could see a few women waiting on the footpath for their colleagues coming out from the buildings with white walls and big exhaust machines jutting out. The factory/industrial areas were different in their elementary constitution. The most striking characteristic was the lighter traffic that is a rare phenomenon in the main city.

The industrial areas of Tongi, Gazipur and Savar lie far up to the north of the Shahjalal International Airport area, even beyond the northern ends of Uttara. The cityscape also shifts towards fewer high rises and more quarter-type settlements. The roads are shabby and littered, with poor drainage systems across the highway. With the entry of garment factories in the suburbs of Dhaka, the quarters also came up with owners living in one room while renting out other rooms to garment workers with shared washrooms. Eventually, the pattern of housing emerged as quarters of flats ranging in prices from BDT 2000 Tk to BDT 5000 Tk. On average, three people shared a flat or a house, married couples with or without children, or relatives who work together in the garment industry. The factories are located near the highway that connects to the city and the neighbourhood in the interiors. As walking is the most common mode of movement, the visibility of women commuting on the streets is relatively higher as compared to the city. Additionally, as women in suburbs work to support their families, women shopkeepers and vendors are also more visible as compared to Dhaka. This visibility was conducive for my transit within the areas as I could travel unidentified and unnoticed within and across the city and suburbs.

Phases of fieldwork

I have undertaken three field visits, first being a pilot study which spanned for around 12 days in the capital city of Dhaka in December, 2017. My first access to the field were students from Dhaka University who are active organisers in the garment workers' struggle. As research undertaken by the Bangladesh Institute of Labour Studies - BILS (henceforth BILS) forms a part of secondary materials, I contacted their office to access their archives and request access to the representatives from garment unions working with them. BILS was located in the old posh locality of Dhanmondi at a distance of hardly fifty metres was Sheikh Mujibur Rahman house where he was murdered. It has now been turned into a memorial museum. Evidently, this area was heavily policed due to its location as *Bangabandhu's* memorial. This meeting culminated in an internship opportunity at the BILS office during the next field visit, where I was able to access BILS archives and references for conducting interviews with labour organisers in the garment sector.

I further gained access to Fakir Apparels, a compliant factory located in the Narayanganj BSCIC area, through Prof. Shahidur Rahman from BRAC University, who has been researching the garment industry and interacted with a couple of executive heads of garment manufacturers. My visit to Fakir Apparels constituted a tour of the production system guided by one of their managers, a Sociology graduate from one of the city colleges. This tour included a visit to all the sections beginning from knitting, washing, dying, cutting, and stitching, followed by the medical and crèche facilities available to the workers and a training programme for the newly recruited unskilled workers.

In the next visit which spanned for a little more than three months from April - July 2018, I contacted independent unions, both registered and unregistered, and labour activists working with the garment workers. As I was working as an intern at BILS for that duration, I accompanied researchers from the institute for a session conducted to study decent wages among the garment workers. Apart from this, I have personally undertaken focussed group discussions with garment workers in Gazipur, Tongi and Mirpur, located in and near the capital city of Dhaka. One of the project coordinators at BILS, who eventually became a friend, helped me gain access to the full-timer at the Garment Sromik Oikyo Forum through her association with the affiliated organisation - Gonotantrik Biplobi Party - a Leftist political organisation. As most of the left-leaning organisations and unions work together, I established contacts with my respondents through snowball sampling. I also interviewed women organisers in both women's and garment workers' NGOs, namely Bangladesh Mahila Parishad, Naripokkho, Karmojibi Nari and Awaj Foundation, to which I gained access through BILS.

During this phase, I stayed in a private women's hostel that was located at Farmgate, a walking distance of half an hour from the BILS office. I resided in the main city of Dhaka and travelled to the industrial belts, which were a little farther from the city, nearly 20 kilometres away in the north and south, through private bus services. My field site expanded from a particular area in the city to the industrial belts where the garment factories and workers quarters are located as the garment industry is spread over the city and the adjoining suburbs.

In the next phase, which spanned a little more than two months from February - April 2019, I contacted the union representatives from unregistered but politically

affiliated unions. I also undertook visits to the industrial areas of Gazipur and Tongi with the help of these union organisers where I met local union members of Garment Sromik Oikyo Forum and Garment Workers Trade Union Center. This phase was crucial as I went back to some of the interviews I had conducted in the earlier phase and resumed the discussion. I also met a few more representatives from Naripokkho who are currently working on a project on sexual harassment at the workplace for garment workers. Simultaneously, I met academics who have extensively worked on and participated in the women's movement in Bangladesh.

Additionally, research work, pamphlets and booklets on the labour movement, garment industry and women's empowerment in Bangladesh published by the unions and NGOs in question form my registers for understanding the nature of involvement and programmes undertaken by these groups as well as the context for determining the forms of solidarity that are at play. A large section of secondary research material constitutes campaign and research reports published by the Clean Clothes Campaign, Human Rights Watch, War on Want, International Labour Rights Forum, Solidarity Center and various international unions like International Trade Garment & Leather Workers Federation. The working and discussion papers published by ILO and GLU on the labour rights conditions and trade situation in the garment industry worldwide and Bangladesh also provide a crucial document for secondary analysis into the kind of research that has been undertaken till now on garment production. Additionally, there are a few documentaries made on the garment industry in Bangladesh that also serve as important registers to map the system of production and the conditions at the workplace since the inception of the industry. Basic contextual understanding of the labour relations in Bangladesh is drawn

from the theoretical work and essays on the political economy of Bangladesh and the course of the labour rights movement by the academicians invested in studies of labour and activism. The study undertakes the mixed-method approach to corroborate the information gathered inside and outside the field, on the Bangladeshi garment industry and its stakeholders.

Data Sources

Profile of unions

As crucial units of analysis in the study, both registered and unregistered unions working in the garment sector were contacted. Out of the five, three of the unions are Left-leaning in terms of their ideological stance. The remaining two are independent unions affiliated with the global union called IndustriALL Bangladesh Council (IBC). There are around 13 unions, specifically in the garment sector, that are affiliated with the IBC (Appendix 2.1 and 2.1.1).

Garments Sromik Oikyo Forum was formed by the labour leader Moshrefa Mishu. She was active during the war of liberation in student politics that led her to work with the workers in the garment sector. GSOF functions as a federation with unions in different factories in Savar, Ashulia and Gazipur area and individual membership from several factories. Affiliated to the Gonotantrik Biplobi Party, GSOF conducts weekly reading circles in the industrial areas where labour law and history of labour movement is elaborately discussed. The initial response towards a conflict between workers and management is generally negotiation with the management and owner. If unresolved, workers and union representatives *gherao* the BGMEA office or owners' residence to

negotiate. GSOF is still awaiting registration from the Ministry of Labour and Employment. One of the main reasons for this delay lies in the fact that GSOF works under the leadership of Moshrefa Mishu, who has been imprisoned under false charges during successive democratic labour movements from 2006 to 2018. There are a few pro bono lawyers who assist in legal aid for the workers and work in association with the union without membership or sponsorship.

Garment Workers Trade Union Center is affiliated with the Communist Party of Bangladesh and began functioning in 1994 as the garment labour wing. GWTUC recently acquired registration after fighting for the past twelve years, including a legal case for seven years in the Dhaka high court. They have regional union offices in Savar, Ashulia, Gazipur and Tongi industrial belts that hold weekly meetings and reading groups on labour law and other labour movement literature. The organisation's structure consists of a central committee, followed by a general body of members, formed by members from offices in the different industrial belts.

Garments Sromik Sanghati is another unregistered union under the larger political organisation, Janasanghati Andolan. As the organisation aims to engage politically with the workers to strengthen the garment workers movement, they do not want to register as a union/federation with the Ministry of Labour. Their activities among garment workers range from study circles in various industrial areas and negotiation with the management in times of unrest. They also approach the labour courts when negotiations fail by hiring lawyers who work with little remuneration. The membership strength is roughly 5000-6000 workers.

United Federation of Garment Workers is an independent union registered with the IndustriALL Bangladesh Council (IBC). It began working in 1986 and was able to register only in 1997. The membership strength is more than 50,000 workers with solidarity members who are not workers but work with the union. UFGW conducts training programmes with IBC, 3F, BILS and FNV which provide funds and training materials.

Bangladesh Garment and Industrial Workers Federation is an independent union federation affiliated with the IndustriALL Bangladesh Council. Established in 2003 by three former garment workers, BGIWF began working through training programmes focusing on labour law, collective bargaining and factory unions. Currently they work with various international labour rights organisations like the Workers' Rights Consortium, International Labour Rights Forum, Clean Clothes Campaign and AFL-CIO. Locally they work with NGOs, like Bangladesh Center for Workers Solidarity, BLAST and BILS. With a membership of more than 29000 workers, BGIWF works with the 52 factories on leadership training for collective bargaining.

Profile of Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs)

Several non-governmental organisations (NGOs) are equally involved in the garment sector in direct assistance, lobbying and advocacy for labour rights (Appendix 2.2 and 2.2.1). Among the many, the following NGOs have been the focus of the study as they are directly involved in labour rights advocacy with respect to the garment industry and have been engaging with the workers through training projects.

Naripokkho began in 1983 as an organisation to establish the rights and dignity of women in the household, society and the nation. It is a voluntary organisation that has evolved into a formal bureaucratic office for functioning and holds onto their initial practices of holding a discussion that takes place every Tuesday where all members meet to debate on women's issues. Naripokkho believes in an autonomous women's movement and hence allies on issue basis with other organisations. They have recently undertaken a training project on sexual harassment in workplace that involved holding training on raising awareness on the forms of sexual harassment at the workplace and redressal for the same. They have an office in the Dhanmondi area and operate their site in Bengali.

Karmojibi Nari began working from 1st May 1991 to establish the identity of women as workers. Karmojibi Nari translates to working women which connotes their engagement with the formal and informal sector workers, especially women, in strengthening leadership capacity and effective implementation of laws for the working women. KN is headed by Shirin Akhter, Member of Parliament from the Jatiyo Samajtantrik Dal, who is also the founder of the organisation. It is registered with the NGO Bureau and the Department of Women's Affairs of the Government of Bangladesh. The head office of KN is located in West Rajabazar in the southern part of Dhaka with a local office in Mirpur. They work with international forums like the Clean Clothes Campaign, Asia Floor Wage Campaign and Committee for Asian Women, and locally, they are members of Sromik Nirapotta Forum, Domestic Workers Rights Network. Many of their members are part of the labour wing, Jatiyo Sromik Jote.

Bangladesh Mahila Parishad is one of the oldest women's rights organisations which began functioning before the war of liberation. It was launched under the

leadership of poet Sufia Kamal in April 1970 and many members have been involved in the liberation war as organisers as well. BMP's main focus has been gender equality in terms of participation in local government to strengthen democratic processes. It has an executive body with separate departments for legal, development and education related work while the membership is voluntary. It is registered under the Society Act of 1960 and NGO Affairs Bureau and is a member of the Economic and Social Council of the United Nations.

Awaj Foundation was founded by former garment worker Nazma Akter with the vision of realising decent work, dignified lives and gender equity in the industrial sector in Bangladesh. Awaj translates to voice in Bengali which connotes the training of workers on rights and responsibilities under the international and local legal rights framework. They receive technical and financial help from international development agencies and function through the 17 offices and community centres in 12 industrial clusters of Dhaka. Awaj also runs a crèche service for the children of garment workers where they receive primary education supported financially by international donors.

Bangladesh Legal Aid and Services Trust was founded in 1993 by advocate Kamal Hossain to undertake extensive criminal defence work, while specialising in family, land and labour law for the poor and disadvantaged sections in Bangladesh. There are four ways BLAST works, advice, referral, mediation, litigation. Around 2300 lawyers work with BLAST providing services pro bono. They are in regular coordination with the local administration, judiciary and civil society organisations.

Bangladesh Institute of Labour Studies - BILS is an apex organisation formed by 13 national federations of unions. The executive body comprises leadership from all these national federations. The institute is involved primarily in training on capacity building of trade unions, training programmes for union representatives. BILS also has a research wing that has conducted and published studies on wage, skills, employment security of workers from all the informal sectors. BILS is also supported technically and financially by international donor agencies and unions. It is registered with the NGO Bureau.

Union organisers and NGO representatives

The union representatives, from the unions mentioned above, are located primarily in the main city of Dhaka. The interviews with the union leaders and NGO representatives were held in their offices located in Dhaka and the industrial areas. The duration of the interviews ranged between 90 minutes to 2 hours. The interviews were not questionnaire-based but unstructured that included the history, membership and activities of the organisations and their roles within the organisations. The forms of engagement and functioning were the central concerns with a focus on how the organisations managed their work in terms of financial resources.

The representatives are mainly from two backgrounds, one who have formerly been a garment worker, or the other, who have been a part of labour organising from a very young age initiated into organising by their relatives or friends. Among the representatives interviewed for my research, the former garment workers hailed from various industrial areas and eventually moved to Dhaka for organisation work. There are only a few who stay near or travel to the industrial areas daily. Although the union sector

is male-dominated, I have tried to contact an equal number of women and men organisers.

In the NGO sector, there are more women compared to men among the representatives. However, none of them has had any prior experience of garment work, except one, Khadija Akhter, who is also a founder member of Awaj Foundation. Most of the representatives have regular interactions with the garment workers due to their advocacy functions or training programmes. All the representatives are located in Dhaka and conduct their project activities with the women workers in and around the city.

Garment workers

As I gained access to the garment workers in the industrial areas through the union representatives I interviewed, I conducted interviews and focussed group discussions (FGDs) with the garment workers located mainly in Tongi and Gazipur industrial areas. I also conducted FGD with some workers based in Mirpur during one of the visits to the Naripokkho office. One of the important distinctions between these areas was their location with respect to the main city of Dhaka. While Tongi and Gazipur are located in the Gazipur district under Dhaka division, Mirpur falls under the district of Dhaka and is located in the north of the main city (Appendix 2.3).

The workers in the Tongi and Gazipur areas I met were involved with the left-leaning unions in some or the other form. For instance, many were members of the area committees of Garments Sromik Oikyo forum and Garment Workers Trade Union Centre or knew these organisers through personal relations. Two of the garment workers I spoke to were distant cousins to Mominur Rahman Momin who is a central committee member

of Garment Sromik Oikyo Forum and a former garment and sweater worker. On the other hand, the workers in the Mirpur area were involved in some or the other form with the cafes established by Karmojibi Nari and Awaaj Foundation.

As individual interviews were not possible due to time constraints, most of the conversations with the workers were held in groups. Group discussions also helped break the ice and initiate conversations around their lives inside and outside their respective workplaces. As part of focussed group discussions, the conversations were not structured and focused on their experiences of work - working hours, factory conditions, maternity and other social benefits. Workers were also asked about their lives outside of factory spaces including among other things, their lives before joining the industry, living conditions, access to medical care and educational opportunities, long term plans, commuting around factory spaces and their domestic lives.

Documents

As the research follows the mixed methods approach, several documents function as secondary texts that provide an initial understanding of how the RMG industry functions. Documents in the form of campaign materials, fact-finding and research reports have been collected before and during the fieldwork.

Most of the fact-finding and campaign reports published by the Clean Clothes Campaign, War on Want and are available publicly, online. I have also consulted research reports from ILO, Asia Floor Wage Campaign, International Labour Rights Forum and Solidarity Center Bangladesh. The Bangladesh Labour Act, 2006 and its

amendment in 2013 form a critical text to understand the rules and regulations enshrined in the labour law and NGO Bureau Act of Bangladesh (Appendix 2.4).

I have also collected documents collected during field work from various NGOs and unions that include undated booklets, pamphlets and materials used for training workshops. I have consulted research reports, monthly, quarterly and bi-annual journals from NGOs, political organisations and unions that help to map out the functions and activities of these organisations engaged with the garment sector. These documents provide a crucial entry point into the local movement and international campaigns as they are used in the advocacy and training programmes across the industry. Additionally, non-fiction books by activists and academic scholars that are primarily commentaries on the larger political situation prevailing in the country and research-based accounts of the workers in the garment industry form important registers for understanding the socio-political, economic and cultural context (Appendix 2.4.1).

Documentary movies as secondary texts

Denzin (2004) argues that documentaries and films as part of a mixed-method approach in social science research that portrays images of the society, of the real. The visual representation of the society only serves as records of the past that cannot be recreated. Reading documentaries involves analysing four texts or meaning structures - the visual text, the audio text, the narrative that links the visual and audio text into a coherent story and the interpretations and meanings that the viewer brings to the visual, audio and narrative texts.

The authenticity of truth claims that the documentary makes has always been subject to debate when considering documentaries as texts for social science research. While it is crucial to approach documentary evidence as representations of the real, it becomes essentially integral to look at its reception to demarcate its claims to truth. Apart from functioning as a discourse of the real, documentaries also stand as an assertion by the maker/director where meaning passes from image to narrative (Currie, 1999) and therefore locating the documentary as a reading than a text becomes important (Eitzin, 1995). In this context, documentaries not only represent reality but locate and address critical theoretical questions that are interwoven with circulations of power. How a documentary is perceived and interpreted by its audience involves how the discourse around the arguments of the documentaries are built. In this study, I look at the documentaries as texts as well as sources that locate the discourse around anti-sweatshop labour and rights. Ranging from short documentaries to investigative journalism, these media representations about the global garment supply chains are directed and presented by activists located in different parts of the world, mostly the buyer countries. As the study looks at the labour rights discourse built by the international solidarity groups and activists, these documentaries become a crucial source of underlining the arguments regarding gender, work, labour, and rights.

The discourse that the international campaigns have built around garment work and industry, or sweatshop labour is explored through the exercise of power (Eitzin, 1995). The reference to power in this situation notes the inequalities of power that allow for solidaristic actions. The labour rights bodies located in the buyer country hold a significant amount of power to put pressure on their government to review trade

agreements with the supplier countries through consumer awareness campaigns, boycotts and demonstrations. Similarly, Bangladeshi/non-Bangladeshi activist movie makers or investigative journalists located in the global north are able to film the conditions of work and labour in the garment industries due to the access to resources. The difference in locations attests to the form of storytelling that the documentaries undertake. The attention to power, therefore, becomes an essential point of analysis and entry into the garment industry. The testimonies of garment workers, union members, NGO representatives, factory management and brand representatives available through the documentaries, campaign reports and field observations and interviews conducted during fieldwork facilitate the building of registers to understand how garment work shapes up the life of a worker. ‘Meaning making’ becomes possible through the signifiers which are constructed through language or a set of codes in a culture. The means of representation that the documentaries and documents undertake help uncover the discursive practices emerging through the interplay of knowledge, truth and power (Foucault as cited in Hall, 1997).

The documentaries consulted for this research approach the garment industry through the testimonies of workers, designers, brand representatives, farmers, union representatives and human rights advocacy groups involved in the sector.⁶ A brief summary of the documentaries consulted for the study that looks at the garment industry through mainly three questions - who makes them, who wears them, and what the stakeholders are doing? An important narrative is built through these documentaries and put forth to the global consumer market with the crucial question of - “Are you wearing

⁶ The list of documentaries is mentioned in a tabular form in the Appendix (2.5).

blood?”⁷ These documentaries remain integral to the study as a thorough understanding of how international campaigns are built becomes easier to explore.

Zoned for Slavery - Produced as a campaign to end child labour in sweatshops, the short documentary looks at the free trade zones in Honduras that produce for the US-based garment/apparel brands. *Zoned for Slavery* looks at the degrading effects of garment factories on the health and dignity of women workers, especially younger women who join as child labour. Young girls who have completed till the sixth standard had to leave schools to work in these factories; the work schedule often runs beyond 12 hours with only 2 to 3 hours of rest. The documentary stresses the gradual erosion of one's person when working in a garment factory in abusive conditions and living in squatters in the vicinity with no proper water and electricity facilities. It brings to light that the degradation does not end with the work and living conditions but extends to their reproductive system as well. Women workers are made to consume contraceptive pills by the management to avoid providing maternity leave and benefits. If they still get pregnant, the management provides them with a shot that would facilitate the abortion or make them buy expensive medicines for the same. *Zoned for Slavery* raises concerns about the long term consequences of such industrial practices that affect the lives and bodies of young, teenage garment workers.

Hidden Face of Globalisation - After a short introduction to the documentary by Charles Kernaghan of the National Labour Committee, “what the corporations do not

⁷ “Are you wearing blood?” comes from the campaign against fast fashion and advocates for a more sustainable fashion. The campaign advocates for the use of brands that declare commitment to ethical sourcing, factories that enforce safe working standards. This campaign culminates in the demands of accountability from the brands. (<https://www.trustedclothes.com/blog/2016/01/28/fast-fashion-are-you-wearing-blood/>)

want us to know” splashes on the screen as the narration begins. The documentary begins at a factory floor, catching the rhythm of garment work as time transitions into capital. From stitching 750 buttons to 60 pieces an hour, the documentary explores the inhumane production practices and strict surveillance over the garment workers by the management and owners. Hidden Face of Globalisation documents the living conditions of garment workers, which prove contrary to the claims by brands like GAP and Walmart that 11 to 18 cents an hour is sufficient for Bangladeshis to survive. The documentary presents testimonies of workers of Shah Makhdum Company who worked with Disney but have lost their business to workers protests and strikes. The demands by the workers that led to the termination of the business contract were lack of adequate health and safety conditions, sufficient holidays, maternity leave and benefits, abusive behaviour by the supervisors and management and decent wages. This becomes a stark reality when brands like Disney and Walmart make more profits than the revenue collected by the government of Bangladesh while reaping tax benefits and further reducing their cost of production. As a call to the American consumers to actively pressurise the brands to source ethically, this documentary ends with appeals from workers towards Disney to resume the contract and the union members to the consumers that would ensure an end to the slave labour in the sweatshops.

Fault Lines: Made in Bangladesh - Produced by Laila Al-Arian for Al Jazeera English, *Made in Bangladesh* is a short documentary report on the Tazreen fire that led to the death of 115 garment workers in 2012. It begins with a snippet from the Walmart event/ convention held in 2013 with chants of “Who’s first? The customer always!”. That event is graced by famous actors like Hugh Jackman, Tom Cruise and musician John

Legend. The stadium is filled with American customers of Walmart while executives boast of the year's revenue that ran up to 400 million. The host is seen as constantly claiming that Walmart has effectively produced garments at low costs to deliver clothes at cheap prices. Focusing on subcontracting practices in the global garment industry, Anjali Kamat traces Walmart's business in Bangladesh through the multiple layers of suppliers and contractors who fulfil their orders. Kamat interviews Walmart's supplier factories in Bangladesh who have previously fulfilled Walmart orders and are currently on the list of 240 companies Walmart has cut ties with post the fire. Fault Lines attempts to trace the consequences of the subcontracting in terms of child labour in the garment factories, poor condition of factories, lack of health and safety precautions to the refusal of the big brands to take responsibility of their sourcing factories and workers. The documentary looks at this denial of accountability towards the endless victims of the garment industry by brands like GAP, Walmart as sustaining the subcontracting practices in the global supply chains.

Made in Bangladesh - The documentary 'Made in Bangladesh' produced by the CBC, a Canadian Public Broadcasting Service, is an investigative journalism report on the garments sourced by the Canadian brands like LuluLemon, HBC, Walmart, exploring the question of 'consumption of clothes without a conscience'. The Fifth Estate, under which the documentary is broadcasted, is an investigative documentary program that began in 1975 with Adrienne Clarkson, Warner Troyer and Peter Reilly beginning the tradition of fearless and provocative journalism. It brings to table the questions of ethical sourcing post the collapse of Rana Plaza in 2013 and the accidents and fires preceding the collapse. Made in Bangladesh investigates the 'wild west of the global garment industry'

in terms of the production system and its lapses and the conditions of working through 4 individuals.⁸ Barry, a Canadian factory owner who shifted production post the fall of the Canadian garment industry to Bangladesh; Sujeet Sennik, a former employee of Walmart whose designs were stitched by the Bangladeshi garment workers in the Rana Plaza building; Aruti, a former garment worker who lost her limbs in the Rana Plaza collapse; and, Atiqul Islam, businessman and the then President of BGMEA. The role of the government in all this was seen to be making efforts to showcase the country as a safe place to do business. Payment of compensation for the Rana Plaza victims and their families was a step towards the goal. Towards the end, *Made in Bangladesh* appeals to the consumers through the survival struggles that garment workers have to undergo in terms of risking their lives for earning a livelihood. The documentary won the International Emmy award for Current Affairs Programming in 2014.

Udita – Arise - Directed, shot and produced by Hannan Majid and Robert York, *Udita- Arise* is a documentary on garment work and its consequent effects on workers and families. It is produced by Rainbow Productions, which is founded by Hannan Majid, a Bangladeshi himself and Richard York from London. Apart from *Udita*, there are a few more documentaries by Rainbow Productions on the life of a garment worker in the massive global garment industry.

In *Udita*, the life of a garment worker is shown through the narratives of five women involved in garment work and organising. The documentary also records the activities and rallies organised by the National Garment Workers Federation, a registered

⁸ Barry, a Canadian owner of Bangladeshi garment factory, refers to Bangladesh as the ‘wild west of global garment industry’ connoting the favourable and low cost of labour in Bangladeshi garment industry.

union federation working in the garment sector. Garment as the only option is the premise on which the directors document the struggles of these women inside and outside the factories. The five women interviewed are also captured in their regular, daily activities like washing clothes, preparing meals, getting ready for work, opening union offices for meetings and so on. While the interviews take place, images flash by of the conditions at visibly compliant factories, contrasted with the living conditions in the workers' colonies. The increasing number of accidents in garment factories is one of the rallying points for implementing labour law and accountability. The documentary archives the memory of fire and collapse victims from the day of the accident. The voice of Tazreen victims/survivors narrating the experience from the day of the accident with simultaneous images of the Tazreen fire is shown with demands of buyer accountability, compensation, and punishment for the owner that would deter other owners. This is followed by a series of news clippings from the Rana Plaza collapse, its aftermath and the current scenario. The documentary ends with videos of a rally taken out by NGWF during a protest demonstration in the Supreme Court – Press Club area for a hike in minimum wages.

The True Cost - The True Cost, directed by Andrew Morgan, follows the clothing industry through three questions, who wears them, who makes them, and what happens to the clothes and the labour eventually. It can be classified as a traditional documentary comprising video footage, flash images and interviews with organic cotton farmers in Texas, garment workers in Bangladesh and Cambodia, fashion designers based in developed countries, journalists, human rights activists and academicians working on areas related to the fashion and garment industry. While the focus of this documentary

remains on the environmental and social impacts of the fashion industry, it elaborately looks at the global supply chains and their systems of production which are engineered by the demands of fashion in different locations across the globe. The True Cost looks at the current conditions of work, effects of the production systems on the environment and puts forth the possibilities for an alternative in farming and industry. While The True Cost raises specific questions on brand accountability and response from the government to workers struggles, it aims to stir the consumers to own up to their responsibility towards sustainable fashion and workplace conditions.

Sramik Awaaz - Produced by Law @ the Margins, a law and media non-profit based in New York, *Sramik Awaaz* (Workers' Voices) holds the question of labour rights and gender at the centre of its narration.⁹ The documentary records the experiences of the lives of workers inside the factories and outside through the prism of labour union rights and situation in the industry. The narration is heavy with interviews of women union workers affiliated with several unions such as the Sammilito Garments Sromik Federation, Bangladesh Garment and Industrial Workers Federation, National Garment Workers Federation and Bangladesh Center for Workers' Solidarity. True to its name, the documentary features only a few known labour leaders, like Nazma Akhter and Babul Akhter from Awaj Foundation and BGIWF, respectively, while a significantly larger duration of the movie maps out the lives of garment workers. Since the beginning, images of factory spaces and industrial areas mark the visibility of workers in the narrative upheld by the documentary. The women interviewed speak on the theft of wage and overtime pay by managers, abuse and threat faced on the factory floor, struggles of

⁹ Law @ The Margins was founded by Chaumtoli Huq, a Bangladeshi-American who is also a law faculty at the CUNY. She is also a regular writer on news columns on the issues of labour and employment.

sustaining their families, intra-household relations and problems in accessing medical care. As it is focused on labour unions, a large share of the screen space includes protest demonstrations and speeches, rallies, union training sessions and songs on labour rights. The documentary maps the awareness of workers regarding the role of the unions and alludes to the prospective changes that union membership has brought into the lives of the workers in the form of a stronger voice in cases of wage theft. The interviews illustrate how women as union leaders perceptively try to connect their personal concerns with their actions as union members actualising the slogan, personal is political. The documentary concludes with closing comments by union leaders' concerns for stronger organising activities. They also point to the need and possibilities of international alliances with workers and unions located in other manufacturing countries.

These documentaries record the representation of garment work and workers through their testimonial narratives as well as interviews with brand, union and NGO representatives involved in the sector. Garment work, as can be witnessed, is described through low wages, overtime theft, workplace abuse, threat to unionisation and early retirement due to ill health. The abusive working conditions often extend to pressurising workers to sign on blank papers that are later used to frame false resignation letters to avoid paying legally sanctioned termination wages. In addition to the lack of job security, garment workers suffer from ill health owing to the long hours of working in a fixed posture and lack of affordable medical care. For women garment workers, it symbolises the struggle between preserving dignity as workers and departure from the traditionally set gendered roles that prescribe female domesticity as a desirable attribute.

Indian meye, Banglar meye¹⁰: notes on self-reflexivity

To recall the differences in social locations that produce distinct markers for identification in a space, I presume I easily came off as a non-Bangladeshi either through my physical identity/appearance or the way I travelled unaccompanied in buses instead of rickshaws, unlike a lot of young Bangladeshi middle-class women. My polished/official Bengali and an interest in garment workers, unions and political movements piqued interest as well as disinterest among different classes of people.¹¹ While my distant relatives were intrigued by the fact that I travelled to Bangladesh for a study when students in Bangladesh looked forward to going abroad for higher studies, the union members and garment workers saw me as another foreigner wanting to know and write about the Bangladeshi garment industry. Although it is true that I trace my roots to Bangladesh, my citizenship in a country that is comparatively at an advantageous position in terms of geopolitics complicates my presence and position in the field in demarcating my position as an insider or an outsider to the community (Rayaprol, 1997).

As the field site was diverse in terms of its spatial boundaries, I interacted with a range of people located across the city. Apart from the industrial belts where my research was located, the women's hostel I stayed in, the office I interned at and the student activists I met provided a meaningful understanding of Bangladeshi society. Inevitably, the questions of friendliness and friendship in research emerged in the interactions that took place in the course of the fieldwork. The inherent power hierarchies that exist in the

¹⁰ Meye is used to refer to a girl or daughter in Bengali.

¹¹ My way of speaking Bengali is the way Bengali is spoken in formal institutions and government orders, while the Bangladeshis spoke it in a different way that is familiar to me as my grandmother and father conversed in the Bengali we understand as "Bangal" - of those who migrated from Bangladesh.

field research dominated the dynamics that also shaped up these interactions (England, 1994; Kirsch, 2005). While I was aware of the differences in the social locations that we embodied, I was also concerned with the kind of friendships I indulged in with my respondents. The women in the hostel were from across religious, class and social backgrounds - some preparing for the “difficult to crack” Bangladesh Civil Services Examination (BCSE), some working in media houses and corporate offices, and a few university students who were unable to get hostel accommodation in the university. Although there were commonalities of experiences when it came to aspiring to be financially independent and autonomous in our respective patriarchal societies, the differences were stark in terms of the exposure and autonomy I have had compared to my fellow hostel mates. The hostel floor had fifteen women in total - three Hindu women from Chittagong Hills and Bandarban and twelve Muslim women from other districts - who shared one kitchen and two washrooms. The rooms were 10ft by 4ft in size with thin ply walls, which allowed no privacy. Naturally, everyone was aware of and eventually uninterested in the details of others’ lives. Initially, I was a point of interest for a group of women on the hostel floor who asked me a range of questions from what I did for my subsistence to how I thought of Bangladesh as my field of study. My dressing sense was intriguing for many as I was casually dressed while women my age took efforts to look prim and proper which often led to me being stopped on my way out to see what I was wearing. There was also an equal disinterest in my meals as they were simpler in taste and mostly vegetarian while the middle-class women students and professionals usually had meat or fish incorporated into their meals. Like any other space, there were conflicts within the floor with the working women and BCSE aspiring women due to the scarcity

of resources like hostel food, kitchen facilities and bathrooms. While I was oblivious to the existing conflicts, it was only later that I realised that I was friends with the women who were preparing for BCSE. These friendships were made outside of the boundaries of ethical research as they were not directly the women I wanted to speak to, but they nonetheless were integral to understanding the social fabric better. Similarly, I was casual in my interaction with student activists in universities who knew about my political background in India and who helped me get acquainted with the ways of the Bangladeshi society. The conflict regarding whether to engage in friendship was rendered much simpler in these interactions as the questions of hierarchies of research were relatively absent. Also, the similarities in our political involvement in our respective social circles helped build the trust for cordial and compassionate interactions, with intermittent criticisms of both governments.

Coming to the interaction with the members of unions and NGOs, maintaining the boundaries between friendliness and friendships was not difficult as they were aware and accustomed to the goals of my research. Being warmly addressed as *apa*¹², I was often asked questions about my engagements with workers' rights politics on this side of the border. There were mainly two distinct responses I received from the union members in terms of sharing information. The union members from largely leftist unions were willing to share information with me and seemed often prepared with answers, probably due to the constant interactions with international researchers on the garment industry. They were equally curious about my work and were interested to know what politics I upheld to know my exact intentions. Likewise, they were also helpful in connecting me to other

¹² *Apa* is a colloquial address in Bengali, meaning elder sister.

union members they worked with in the industrial areas under different forums. On the other hand, members of independent unions were alarmed and measured in their responses and did not show much interest in the intentions of the research. There were some candid responses when it came to their organisational structures or the government that were answered in brief. As I spoke to them within their official premises, there was less time and hence very pointed conversations. However, some showed interest in the intentions of the research to map local organising among garment workers.

The difficult terrain as a feminist researcher was my interactions with the garment workers. One of the unforgettable memories among the welcoming ones was Rahima's response to my visit. She entered the Gazipur union office of Garments Sromik Oikyo Forum and upon knowing about my intentions to have a conversation about their life, angrily said, "What good will it do? A few months back we spoke to one *bideshi* about our lives, but nothing changed. We are still there. Why should I talk to her?"¹³ Before I could respond to her confirming the futility of it in terms of prospective change in her life, she sat down and clarified that her comment was not personal. This, however, kept ringing in my ears as a reminder of the responsibilities of a researcher exploring the lives of garment workers from a privileged vantage point.

I have had a range of interactions with garment workers over the course of my fieldwork. Most of the time, if not all, they would respond to my queries as quickly as possible about their lives and work and ask about me, my home, my life and family back in India. The setting of these interactions often moulded the responses I received. The

¹³ Bideshi means foreigner in Bengali. It is used for anyone outside of the country. Generally, a substantial number of international scholars working on projects conduct fieldwork in the industrial areas.

women workers at Karmojibi Nari cafes were more willing to speak with me and placed a certain hope and authority in me to help their situation - acknowledging and somewhat accepting the hierarchies between the international researcher and the working-class women. Despite the clarifications from my side with regard to the ends of the research that are mainly academic and less of an intervention into their lives that would be beneficial, they placed an immense hope on me as a messenger of their voice to the Indian scholarship. The women I met through the unregistered unions, in Gazipur, were welcoming with their invitation to their homes, feeding me the extra meals and often offering their homes to me.¹⁴ Some even took my number to be able to make video calls to me when I return home, in India. I could strike a chord with the workers owing to the blurring distinctions in my conduct as a participant observer as I attended protest demonstrations and rallies with the workers in the industrial areas and in the city during the Mayday and international working women's day celebrations. There was, therefore, the blurring of the distinctions on who becomes the insider and who remains an outsider when the hierarchical relations of fieldwork collapsed into relations of solidarity.

Interestingly, interactions with men and women in the field were not significantly different in terms of intensity but often differed in terms of content. There was, however, a shared and uniform understanding of what to say to a researcher when it came to both men and women in the field, ranging from workers to union organisers and NGO officials.

¹⁴ I visited the industrial areas after lunchtime on Fridays as these were the only holidays in a week for the garment workers. Some often had to work without a holiday for three or four months at a stretch only to be partially compensated for it during Eid holidays. Eid is the only time in a year that Bangladeshi establishments close work for a week's time. Majority of the garment factories also go on holiday for a week, unless there are urgent consignments or last orders - are also used as excuses to not shut down production.

As much as the city was welcoming to a descendent of Bangladesh, the distinction drawn between an Indian woman and a Bangladeshi woman was clear and visible. Often, the confidence that I myself lacked in managing directions in a completely new city was replaced by that of my colleagues who often remarked, “*O Indian meye, o thik parbe khunjte location-e pouchhe jete!*”/ “She’s an Indian (girl), she would easily be able to find and reach the location”. That Indian women are smarter, thereby drawing another distinction from the Bangladeshi woman was implicit through such instances. Contradictorily, associations with my Bangladeshi lineage were also drawn in some interactions. For instance, I was often introduced by the union members and BILS officials (in the field) as “*India theke eshechen, edike purbo purush ra thakten*”/ “She has come from India. Her ancestors were from this side of the border”.

Exit from field

My entry into the field began with my father tracing his roots on the other side of the border, exploring the places and spaces of the stories he grew up listening to. It began with tracing memories in their intangible forms. Exit for me, therefore, becomes a complicated process when the field becomes a part of one’s memory and history.

In the course of my research, I have not only become intimate with my respondents but also shared the vision of transformation into a democratic egalitarian future. Simple, everyday conversations with them have eventually helped me grasp and understand the ways of Bangladeshi society better. Similarly, exchanging numbers and Facebook emails with the garment workers to keep in touch only makes the formal exit difficult. To begin from a state of awe of the militant women in factory unrests and reach

a relation of proximity and solidarity with the garment workers struggle goes beyond the boundaries of the national borders and research projects.

There are, however minor, differences in terms of the relations that we as citizens have with our respective states, but there are similarities in the vision of reaching a democratic state that each of us hold. Reminders from the field, in the form of posters, pamphlets, interviews, and books with their presence in the room and mind transcends the strict boundaries of research as I relate to the people on the field in terms of the commonalities of language that we speak and histories that we embody.

I have visited Bangladesh more than four times by now. Seeing my frequent trips, the immigration officials at both sides of the border often remarked, “Eto bar keno jaan?”/ “why do you travel so many times?” Earlier I only stopped at saying I have relatives on the other side of the border. However, over time it has changed to “I have many friends on the other side of the border”. As much as I have had difficulties in contacting family on this side during my stay, I also keep looking forward to travelling to Bangladesh, meeting people who I have befriended over the years, and revisiting the places I have discovered. While I keep Kirsch’s (2005) caution in mind about demarcating friendliness with friendships in the research process, I often am left to wonder if exit is even possible when the distinctions of one’s nationality become blurred in the “ancestors’ land”?

Chapter 3 - Locating Context, Locating History

The exercise of charting the history of the garment industry in Bangladesh involves tracing the histories of colonial rule and the war of liberation that marks the process of the becoming of Bangladesh. This becoming of the nation follows a rather interesting trajectory as it unfolds at the geopolitical level. After the partition in 1947, the administrative authorities based in West Pakistan engaged in exploitative practices similar to the British government - extracting resources from the Eastern wing while disregarding its infrastructural needs. The discord grew sharper as the Western wing imposed Urdu as the state language while the Eastern wing recognised Bangla as their mother tongue. The conflict between the two wings on the question of autonomy found roots in the lack of shared common cultures, including language, which culminated into the *bhasha andolan* and eventually took shape as the war of liberation. The overwhelming influence of powerful nations during the war alludes to the international political climate that left an imprint on the nation that arose. The procedural understanding of the course of negotiations and the state formation thereafter has mapped the social and political history of the postcolonial nation. In the context of the ready-made manufacturing garment industry, the histories of colonial rule and war have charted the way to explore the interests and disinterests of the state in labour as a corollary to the interests of the state in the global market.

Divided into three sections, this chapter traces the history of the liberation war and thereafter through the local politics that has deeply influenced the policies and

practices of the postcolonial state engaged in global economic processes. Simultaneously, the engagement of the postcolonial state with the discourse on women's rights and development has shaped state agendas with regard to economic and political processes. It is mainly the promises that Bangladesh was seen to hold as a newly independent state that lays the context for the eventual rise and growth of the second-largest garment industry in the world. The first section deals with the imprints of colonial rule that forged the path for liberation of Bangladesh. It records the anti-colonial aspirations of the Bengalis in attaining statehood, wrestling autonomy to establish the new nation. The second section looks at the struggles of the state in stabilising a war-ravaged economy. The economic relations that govern the production process are central to this section, as Bangladesh transitions from a military state to a democratic government in the succeeding years and reconfigures its economy. We look at the state through the history of constitutional politics with overlaps between the influence of the military and the business elite and the contestations of claims over socialism, democracy, secularism embedded in the Constitution of Bangladesh as witnessed through the popular resistances. The third section looks at the rise of the constituencies of women as active members of society through questions of justice and autonomy. Drawing from the recorded histories of the effects of the liberation war on women, this section discusses the politics regarding the figure of *birangona* entangled in the politics of shame in the debates on rape as a war crime and the disengagement of the state with the issues surrounding women's rights. As the development of the nation and women become synonymous in the state agenda, we explore the question of gender with respect to the women's movements that have charted the course of the nation. In the context of the

predominantly female industrial workforce, the presence of women's rights movements becomes integral in understanding the gendered relations of power that underlie/govern the garment industry in present-day Bangladesh.

Colonial imprints and the struggle for autonomy

East Pakistan emerged in 1947 under the administrative and economic authority of West Pakistan. In a bid to promote development of the new nation, the state overtook the administration of economic and military aid that was intrinsically linked with imperialist interventions in post-colonial societies. In postcolonial societies, the unity between the local elites, metropolitan elites and landed classes that represented anti-feudal and anti-colonial ideas accommodated their differences to sustain the established social order that served their capitalist interests.

On the Eastern front, the administrative control was held by the West Pakistanis that exploited the labour and resources for export trade from East Bengal (Dutt, Dasgupta and Chatterjee, 1973). As India and Pakistan formed separate nations, Pakistan lost the access to raw materials as Punjab and Bengal served as sources for the Bombay and Calcutta textile industries. The jute producing areas in East Bengal were left without the mills that predominated in the West Bengal region. This was remedied through the establishment of mills in the region when jute became the major export item of Bangladesh (Ahmed, 1976 as cited in Rahman, 2015). The need for building an industrial base was foremost to establish the economy through import substituting industrialisation under the industrial policy of 1948. Differentiated tariffs, import rationing and licensing and allocation of credit through publicly owned financial institutions facilitated the entry

of foreign agencies in the country through the merchant capitalists. Potential investors from India, Burma and East Africa arrived and settled near Karachi owing to shared linguistic and cultural affinities as well as access to the government offices.

Concentration of power among a few families laid the way for administrative control under the military which sought to establish a new industrial capitalist class (Khan, 2000). The civil servants who continued working in the new government held the bureaucratic end for the military power establishing bureaucratic-military oligarchy. These civil servants and officials earlier assumed the role of instruments of colonial power that only regulated the industrial activities and ownership. Various credit institutions were set up to promote industrial development, provide equity and financial and managerial support (Ahmad, 1978). As politicians were crucial to maintain the facade of democracy, they were manipulated and installed or thrown to legitimise the bureaucratic-military oligarchy. They participated in the performance of the role of mediators and preservation of relative autonomy of the state apparatus.

Prior to 1958, the military installed and removed governments which ended with Ayub Khan seizing power through a coup d'état. In 1969, military rule was re-established as Ayub Khan resigned from his office and handed over the government to General Yahya Khan. Yahya Khan in return successfully protected Ayub Khan from retribution. The link between the military and politicians was provided by the metropolitan and indigenous elite who owned industries. The network between businessmen and military stemmed from the need to acquire deals with foreign powers which the military was relatively more powerful in accessing, than the heads of the state. According to the Chief economist report to the Government of Pakistan, 22 families owned 66 percent of

Pakistan's industry, 79 percent of its insurance, and 80 percent of its banking (as cited in Maniruzzaman, 1971). The report also noted that most of the rest were owned by foreign companies. The intrusion of foreign powers entered public policy through the bureaucratic-military oligarchy. Influence on state policy through foreign aid and corruption of bureaucratic officials helped to further the agendas of the metropolitan countries.

However, the simmering frustrations of the Bengalis with the Pakistan government began with their lack of representation in government offices, education and administrative systems while they acted as a resource pool for the state. The quasi colonial relations reflected in the revenue generated and foreign aid received that were exhausted in the Western wing while the Eastern wing remained deprived of the instruments and infrastructures for development. The first discord began with the Yahya Khan government imposing Urdu as the official language while Bengali was widely spoken, understood and used in the Eastern wing. The language movement of 1952 was not simply anti-Urdu, but also mobilised around the questions of secularism, non-communalism and anti-imperialism. This movement was predominantly carried by students and workers which then translated into a six point program. The six demands were, Constitution that provided for a federation of Pakistan with a Legislature directly elected through universal adult franchise; representation of the Eastern wing in offices with government at the helm of defense and foreign affairs; separate convertible currencies for different wings with different fiscal policies suiting the wings, tax and revenue system under federating bodies, separate account of foreign earnings for the wings and a separate military or paramilitary force for the security of the Eastern wing.

The then Awami League under the leadership of Maulana Bhashani took up the responsibilities of fulfilling these demands and forged a stronger unity against the Western wing. The popularity of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman led to a widespread acceptance of Mujibur as a leader and referred to as *Bangabandhu*. The demand for internal autonomy of East Pakistan led to the opposition leaders in Western wing brand Mujibur as a separatist. As a result, in a conference in Lahore for ousting Ayub Khan from his 10 year rule in the government, this proposal demanding autonomy for Eastern wing was rejected.

The demand for autonomy had gathered immense prominence and support among the Bengalis. Although Sheikh Mujibur Rahman was agreeable to a settlement, the widespread support compelled him to take it further and gain independence as a separate nation. The rising dissent took the form of an 11 point program including demands from students for fee waiver, jobs and autonomy of educational institutions; nationalisation of banks, insurance, jute and large-scale industries; reduction in land revenue; release of all political prisoners (students, workers, peasants, political activists and leaders). As the Pakistani government remained hostile to the demands and instead arrested Sheikh Mujibur Rahman under the Agartala Conspiracy case, Eastern wing erupted in anger which led to the war of liberation in 1971 that saw widespread participation of Bengalis from all walks of life.

Srinath Raghavan (2013) documents the dynamics between the countries in the Indian subcontinent through the Liberation years when the conflict between India and Pakistan brought the world powers at the same place with their negotiations on the freedom of Bangladesh, formerly East Pakistan. The significance of the accounts from

the liberation war delineates the influence and interaction between the world powers such as the United States and China and the control they exercised over the newly independent nation like India and the nation undergoing partition Pakistan. The dissidence between the Pakistan government and Bengalis lied in the exploitation of East Pakistan by the Western wing which was referred to as colonial in nature. Further, the Indo-Pakistan war of 1965 strengthened the resolve of the Bengalis to vigorously demand regional autonomy as the war proved to be difficult for the Bengalis being cut off from the government and the world (Maniruzzaman, 1988).

The politics of partition was apparent through the process of lobbying among the member countries of the United Nations to conclude the conflict between Pakistan aided by the United States and India which was assisting Bangladesh during the war of liberation. India mobilised opinion for intervention in the light of a war with Pakistan complaining about the inflow of migrants from East Pakistan. It received the support of Russia which nevertheless took the position of non-intervention and peaceful resolution. On the other hand, Pakistan gained the support of the United States which allied with them to gain access to the Chinese government.

After a round of failed negotiations with the member states, Pakistan Army launched 'Operation Searchlight' against the people of East Bengal in March 1971. Under the leadership of Prime Minister Indira Gandhi, India offered assistance to the then popular Awami League Party to fight the war of liberation. Many leaders were given safe passage across the border along with the army troops for training in Indian techniques. The war witnessed the involvement of not only army troops but also the widespread participation of common people from all parts of Bengal who took up arms without any

prior experience to ensure and declare independence. In the course of the war, Pakistani army and local collaborators engaged in mass murder, deportation and genocidal rape. According to rough estimates, around three million people were killed and more than 2,00,000 women underwent genocidal rape by the Pakistan armed forces in coalition with the local collaborators. After the nine months long war against the Pakistani military forces, on 16th December Pakistan signed the instrument of surrender. Bangladesh finally became a nation with the Awami League leader Sheikh Mujibur Rahman at the leadership.

State, polity and economy

Post war Bangladesh witnessed consecutive shifts from an authoritarian and military state to parliamentary democracy with changes in the economic policies and adoption of export-oriented strategy of economic growth to build the war ravaged nation. From the role of political party members, involvement of the military and the state labour institutions in influencing the early years of the industry to the government being dependent on the business representatives for sustaining the economy, Bangladesh assumes an integral space in the discussion on postcolonial economic relations. Contingent on the political party in government, the industry has also seen changes in the industrial policies, labour laws and provisions that are aimed to support the interests of this emerging business elite.

Prior to the creation of Pakistan in 1947, the trade, commerce and industry was dominated by West Pakistani entrepreneurs and non-Bengali Muslims. Development of industry in East Pakistan lacked infrastructure, management know-how and skilled

labour, capital and credit. It was further hindered by the rigidities of the regulatory system created by the government of Pakistan (Kochanek, 1996). During Ayub Khan's regime, there were 3120 registered factories in an industry dominated by consumer goods producers. Out of 3130, Bengali Muslims capital owned 2253 factories but represented only 18 percent of the total industry assets, while the non-Bengali Muslims controlled around 47 percent. The major share of the industry was owned by Pakistan based traders and entrepreneurs which took off after the liberation war in 1971 (Ahmad, 1978). The consequent nationalisation of abandoned industries and Bengali Muslim assets left only trade, real estate speculations and constructions as the last resort for the Bengali Muslim entrepreneurs.

Initially the Mujib-led government nationalised all industrial enterprises and banks. The industrial enterprises abandoned by Pakistani entrepreneurs and the jute and textile mills owned by Bengali entrepreneurs were nationalised. The nationalisation drive included insurance, raw jute export, import trade and most of the inland water transport as well. As a larger share of industries were owned by non-Bengalis, their departure created a vacuum in the Bangladeshi economy as Bengali entrepreneurs were negligible in strength and lacked entrepreneurial expertise. Further, the lack of an efficient management system led to a dominance of political party members in the management of these nationalised enterprises (Rahman, 2015). This moment is also noted as the initial stages of mismanagement and corruption taking roots in the economy. The mismanagement reflected in lack of incentives leading to low production also incurred huge losses in the economy.

The first Industrial Investment Policy was instituted by the Mujib government in January 1973 announcing the nationalisation of all medium and large scale industrial policies. Riding high on the victory of the war and electoral mandate, Sheikh Mujibur Rahman deemed it right to begin working on the principles of socialism he based his campaign on. The factories and properties abandoned by Pakistani elites were handed over to the Bengali business owners and the allies of the Awami League government. The privately owned enterprises were nationalised and owners were compensated to uphold the socialist principles that the economy was supposed to be based on. As it proved unfeasible soon, the policy suffered some amendments. The ceiling limit for private investment was increased as foreign investment was seen as performing an important role in promoting economic development of the country. The resulting changes in the policy regulations were tariff protection for investing companies, liberal incentives and concessions for exports. The promotion of private investment for economic development was complemented with increasing disinvestment of public/state enterprises. In such a situation, the preoccupation of the government was to develop facilities for private investment companies. Unfortunately, the next year changed the course for the socialist ideals Mujib had envisioned to follow as a deadly famine struck Bangladesh. The floods of 1974 had washed away a sizable population in the south of Bangladesh. The famine, on the heels of the floods and displacement, led to the death of more than 1 million people (Hossain, 2017, pp. 88). Simultaneously, at the ideological level the military phase signified a change from a pro-India to anti-India reflecting in its shift toward the global Islamic community and western capitalists.

The turn towards neoliberalism began early for the newly independent Bangladesh. The hardships during the famine of 1974 compelled the then government under the leadership of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman. Although Mujibur Rahman had declared the adoption of parliamentary democracy for the functioning of the government with “socialism through democratic means” as enshrined in the Constitution, the acceptance of aid from Soviet bloc and India had irked the self-proclaimed Islamic community (Siddiqi, 1996). Eventually, Mujib was compelled to form links with the global Islamic community by attending the Lahore summit in 1975, rehabilitating wartime collaborators, and allowing the re-establishment of the Islamic foundation in Dhaka (Alam, 1990 as cited in Siddiqi, 1996). The government under Mujib however failed to implement the principles of redistribution that it vowed to follow. Soon, he banned all other political parties, extended aid patronage and licenses for export to Awami Leaguers, and took action against the left wing groups. Twenty newspaper dailies were shut down and two were nationalised to eliminate criticism of the government. Simultaneously, he had distanced the army by forming his own military outfit, Rakkhi Bahini. The country was divided into 65 districts from pre-existing 19 districts. Out of 55,000 repatriated, 28,000 people held conservative outlook. To sustain the legitimacy and power of the rule, Mujib approached developed countries for aid to be able to manage the food crisis. In order to access aid, Bangladesh was to open itself to the global market that influenced the future course of development for the country. Due to the limits of its location, Bangladesh was seen as a country that would require aid for a long period of time that simultaneously made it a sustainable option for foreign investment. On the other hand, the food crisis motivated the government in the long run to formulate policies

that focused on food security. However, in the attempt to access foreign aid, the New Industrial Investment Policy was announced in July, 1974 that sought to encourage private sector investment in manufacturing with reduction in the role of the public sector through disinvestment.

However, the increasing dissatisfaction with the Awami League government led to a military coup by a few junior army officers assassinating Sheikh Mujib and 16 members of his family in August 1975. The anti-Indian sentiment among the armed forces inevitably translated into anti-Mujib sentiment. The conflicting factions within the Awami League and the opposition from the army successfully displaced the participatory democracy rhetoric that gained support under Mujib's authority. After a series of military coups, Ziaur Rahman took charge of the government in the latter half of 1975. Zia shaped his economic policies influenced by the capitalist and pro-western agenda. Liberalising the economy, denationalisation of public sector institutions and promoting export-oriented manufacturing were the first economic decisions he took after assuming power. This was followed by radical reconfiguration of the national identity by replacing the term 'Bengali' with 'Bangladeshi' in the official discourse. His sympathies with the Pakistan army came to the fore with the presidential proclamation in 1977 dropping the principles of socialism and secularism and replacing them the clauses on "absolute trust and faith in Almighty Allah" and commitment to 'economic and social justice' (Siddiqi, 1996; Karim, 2004). Consequently, politics based on religion made a comeback and his allegiance forged with the Muslim oil producing states and Western capitalist nations.

Private investment was welcomed properly through the Revised Investment Policy in December 1975, formulated under General Zia's regime as the World Bank

pushed for the promotion of private industry and disinvestment of public enterprises. This Revised Industrial Policy emphasised on private sector led growth, large scale de-nationalisation of industrial enterprises, boosting export sector, private sector investment increase through DFIs and liberal credit policies offered by commercial banks. Many former Civil Service of Pakistan officials who were removed after Mujib took over the government were reinstated by Zia to fashion the economic growth under liberalisation as an extension of the government's functions. The Bangladeshi elite emerged post-1975 policy in the form of a family based industrial class. The size of the new industrial elite was 100-200 business groups, of which 15-25 were relatively large and the remainder small but growing business houses. Most of the groups started in jute and textiles and then diversified. Their fast rate of growth was dependent on government patronage in the form of contracts, loans and credit. Most of the groups are politically well connected and interconnected through family, marriage and business relationships. The leaders of the new industrial elite are active in politics and business associations and heavily dependent on political connections with the regime. In an amendment to the Constitution in 1977, 'socialism' was replaced with 'economic and social justice' and 'secularism' with 'absolute faith in Almighty Allah' to gain the trust of the Middle East countries and the religious conservatives in the country (Maniruzzaman, 1988).

His successor, General H. M. Ershad took forward the policy of capitalist industrialisation and gradual Islamisation during the 1980s. The increasing debt forced Bangladesh to generate foreign currency and adopt the structural adjustment programs (SAPs) to meet the obligations by the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank. The New Industrial Policy introduced by Ershad opened the economy to international

trade and further liberalised industrial policies (Kabeer, 1988; Siddiqi, 1996). According to the policy, 650 industrial and commercial enterprises were transferred from public to private sector by 1986 dropping the share of the industrial sector under public ownership to hardly 40 percent (Bhaskar and Khan, 1995). The highly placed officials were favoured when it came to state patronage which prompted Ershad to elevate *thana* to the level of sub-districts/*upazilas* to gain hold over the newly elected councilors.

With the military takeover in 1982, Ershad announced the New Industrial Policy in June, 1982 that stressed on stimulating industrial development through the private sector, announced large-scale denationalisation of enterprises and incentives for foreign direct investment through export processing zones (Hossain, 2017; Kabeer and Mahmud, 2004). Private foreign investment was entering into commerce instead of industrial and economic development as it promised. The access to private investors required the simplifying of sanction procedures, and the decentralisation of sanctioning bodies providing unlimited access to the private foreign industrialists, traders and businessmen. The New Industry Policy extended tax benefits and tariff protection to investors (Hossain et al., 1990). The establishment of Export Processing Zones for industrial development and accessing foreign exchange began in 1983 as the Bangladesh Export Processing Zone was formally established. The same year that witnessed the end of Ershad's regime in Bangladesh. The political system of Bangladesh till this point was embroiled in successive military coups, successful and unsuccessful.

Ershad had strengthened his position through a control over the military and had forced the opposition to remain powerless in national politics through martial law. The first task that Ershad undertook after assuming power was to build up his constituency -

the armed forces. Apart from increasing the armed forces from 60,000 in 1975-76 to 101,500 in 1988-89, Ershad also increased the defense budget by 18% while the yearly budget increased by only 14%. The salary and prerequisites of army personnel were increased to almost double of the real income of corresponding civilians. A number of civilian posts were also taken over by the military. Of the 22 large corporations, 14 were headed by serving or retired members of the armed forces (Maniruzzaman, 1992, pp. 204).

Already at loggerheads, Ershad struggled hard to gain legitimacy within civil society as much as he had been able to gain in the military. The first experience of the opposition took place when Ershad passed the new education policy which allowed higher educational opportunities to only “talented students”’. Reading this as a move as a long term plan by the government to create a small ruling class, Dhaka University students staged their protests. In the ensuing agitation, several Dhaka University students were killed. As a result, Ershad suspended the implementation of the new education policy but student agitations against his regime continued unabated. The second group that came in sharp conflict with the Ershad government was the lawyers of Dhaka Supreme Court. Ershad established permanent benches for the High Court’s division of the Supreme Court at Dhaka, Comilla, Rangpur, Jessore, Patuakhali, Barisal, Chittagong and Sylhet on June 8, 1982. This irked the lawyers who believed this was a ruse to diminish the political relevance of the lawyers in the capital city. The lawyers boycotted the Supreme Court sessions initially. Later on they boycotted the court of Chief Justice F. M. M. A. Munim who had collaborated with Ershad on the establishment of High Courts. The boycott continued till seven years later ending with the retirement of Justice Munim

while the Bar Council continued demanding the resignation of Ershad through seminars, conferences and meetings (Maniruzzaman, 1992, pp. 205). The third group that Ershad alienated was the Sromik Karmachari Oikyo Parishad - SKOP (United Front of Workers and Employees). The demands of SKOP to the government consisted of setting a minimum wage, amendments to the regressive laws on trade unions, stoppage of privatisation of industries and reopening of closed industries which the government promised to accept but did not act on.

Ershad's conflict with the other political parties was clearly visible in the formation of his Janata Party which included former members from both the Awami League and Bangladesh Nationalist Party but still could not thwart the political mileage that both these parties possessed. The opposition political alliances - eight party alliance of secular political parties under Sheikh Hasina of AL, seven party alliance of some of anti-Indian political parties led by Khaleda Zia of BNP and five party alliance of pro-Beijing leftists - called for *hartals* (general strike) demanding the resignation of Ershad and a free and fair election to be conducted under a neutral government. During the months of hartals, thirty eight people were killed in Dhaka and Chittagong. Eventually Sheikh Hasina withdrew from the alliance stating that her party did not want any bloodshed and decided to overthrow Ershad through election.

However, this culminated into the failure in dislodging the Ershad regime. The year 1990 was the year of mass upheaval in Bangladesh politics as students became the initiating force in forming an opposition to the Ershad regime. With the election of Jatiyatabadi Chhatra Dal (student wing affiliated with the BNP) in the Dhaka University students election and in 273 of 300 colleges in the country, all twenty two students

organisations formed the All Party Students Unity to overthrow the Ershad government with the demand of free and fair national elections. This shamed the political parties into action which led to the joint statement by three coalitions on November 19, 1990 with the following demands: that the Ershad should appoint (under Article 51 of the constitution) a new vice-president acceptable to the three alliances and that Ershad himself must resign and hand over power to the vice-president (under Article 55 of the constitution) so that the vice-president could act as the acting president. The acting president would then form a neutral government to hold free and fair elections (Baxter, 1992; Maniruzzaman, 1992, pp. 207). In the meantime the opposition parties had found district wide councils holding demonstrations and strikes against the government. The decisive moment came with the killing of Dr. Shamsul Islam Milon, assistant secretary of Bangladesh Medical Association by gunmen of the regime in the Dhaka University campus. Shortly after the killing of Dr. Milon, Ershad declared a national emergency and a curfew in Dhaka. Maniruzzaman (1992) notes, “The people were so enraged that they violated the curfew en masse: journalists stopped publication of newspapers while others such as entertainers and writers, irrespective of ideological affiliations, joined the movement. The doctors of Dhaka Medical College, teachers of Dhaka University and Bangladesh University of Engineering and Technology resigned from their jobs. The senior civil servants now joined the movement. The businessmen in Dhaka brought out a procession denouncing Ershad's government”. During the moment, it was reported in BBC and VOA that Japan and Great Britain would decline any transfer of aid if the Ershad government did not revoke the declared emergency. On December 4th 1990, almost a month after the demonstrations, senior army officers led by Lieutenant General Noor Uddin Khan

informed Ershad of the withdrawal of the army's support to Ershad as president. Ershad resigned with a plan to establish a martial law regime which eventually failed as Lt. Gen. Noor Uddin Khan, who Ershad wanted to consult, did not turn up for the meeting. On December 5th Ershad handed over power to the Chief Justice of the Supreme Court, Justice Shahabuddin who also held the mandate of all opposition parties as the caretaker till elections were to be held. Thus, civil society was seen to attain triumph over the armed sector of the state.

In the financial year 1982-83, Bangladesh registered a growth rate of 3.7 percent with agriculture accounting for the larger share of the GDP. Imports declined and the balance of payments registered a surplus. The main export crops, rice and jute, suffered loss due to the drought in the beginning of the year followed by downpour in May and June that devastated the lives of more than 30 million people, roughly one-third of the population. (Bertocci, 1985, pp. 165). This moment in the history of Bangladesh revealed the role of business elites in enhancing their position in the political situation in the country.

The formation of the business class was a derivative of the foreign aid that Bangladesh received since its independence. Bangladesh received a total foreign aid of 22.46 USD during the period December 1971 to June 1991 in the form of grants and concessional aid. This helped foster the growth of a class of beneficiaries who acted as private intermediaries gaining commission from the foreign suppliers of goods and services. The aid-financed Development Financing Institutions (DFIs) and the industrialists who ran their business on foreign exchange benefitted from the program aid to finance recurring imports. This emerging class has been termed as bureaucratic

bourgeoisie by Maniruzzaman (1988) that exhibited a very low rate of saving, high rate of conspicuous consumption and lack of productive investment. Simultaneously, they engaged in capital export, particularly the Middle East, where investments were lucrative. Many invested money in luxury housing in the country which was to be rented out to the foreign community at profitable rates.

The 1991 election results ensured a predominance of this new moneyed class into the legislature, with limited experience in politics/legislature, to lobby with the donor countries and remain relevant in the bureaucracy to sustain their businesses. To that effect, the Industrial Policy was announced in July 1991 which made the goal of achieving a market based competitive economy prominent. The lack of experience stemmed from the insufficient time a member had to acquire ministerial/political acumen as every change in the government led to the entry of new groups of politicians into the legislature. However, Khaleda Zia's government succeeded to an extent Bangladesh's transition to democracy and keeping the military in the background. The economic policies of the government enabled Bangladesh to meet the targets set by IMF and World Bank, increased tax revenues, savings and investment, brought down inflation and government deficit, decreased interest rates and pushed foreign exchange further. But it still failed to register an economic growth rate from an average of 4 percent to the targeted 6 percent. Economists argued that the reasons for the slow growth were insufficient savings, low levels of investment riddled with poor political management and political upheaval.

In the meantime, Awami League generated a major political challenge to BNP by winning municipal elections in Dhaka and Chittagong which were the strongholds of

BNP. Surprisingly, in a by-election held two months after the municipal elections, BNP won in a traditional AL stronghold that turned the political environment hostile. Refusing to accept defeat, AL charged that BNP had rigged votes. This charge galvanised into widespread opposition to the results and demand for a neutral caretaker government to run parliamentary elections to be held in 1996. The BNP led government refused that led to a stalemate situation that led to economic crisis and political uncertainty and intervention of the business community. Maniruzzaman (1992) alludes to the reconfiguration of the social forces in Bangladesh through the election patterns since 1954 to 1991. While the election of 1954 witnessed a fair share (55 percent) of lawyers in the parliament, post independent it stood at 19 percent in the 1991 elections. On the other hand, the number of businessmen and industrialists which stood at 4 percent in 1954 rose to 24 percent in 1973 and further jumped to 53% in the 1991 elections. Additionally, the number of former army officers who were now businessmen and industrialists, if added, would take the percentage further up to 59.

The industrial elite assumed a central role again in the 25 months long political crisis in 1994 (Kochanek, 1996). With the BNP government in power, the Federation of Bangladesh Chamber of Commerce and Industry (henceforth FBCCI) entered into negotiations to create a favourable climate for business and enhance the role of FBCCI in the political process. In a convention held in August 1993 by the Dhaka Chamber of Commerce and Industry, Islam Group, BEXIMCO and Arab Bangladesh Bank and Bangladesh Garment Manufacturers and Exporters Association, the President's address demanded acceleration of privatisation model, shift of regulatory powers from government to business associations, labour discipline, government aid to sick industries

and higher protection for the domestic industry. The poor political management and inability to control the bureaucracy was cited as a roadblock to actualising the progress of the industry. In October 1994, Salman Rahman of BEXIMCO won the FBCCI elections and urged the government and opposition to enter a dialogue under FBCCI sponsorship to resolve the hartals and strikes which had led to slow economic growth and hurt efforts to attract foreign investment. This represented the first intervention of the business community to hold the political elite responsible for their actions and its effects on the economy. Despite all efforts the deadlock proved to remain. Finally, after 25 months Khaleda Zia dissolved the government after 147 MPs from opposition parties resigned from Parliament.

Khaleda Zia, however, did not heed to the demand for elections under a neutral caretaker government which again prolonged the delay to conduct elections. The elections were held in February where BNP swept the polls amid complaints of widespread rigging. As the political impasse continued, FBCCI and BGMEA issued a 72 hours ultimatum to the government demanding fresh elections. This call was supported by the non-governmental organisations and a wide array of professionals. The events of the year finally took a turn when officers and employees of the government issued an ultimatum to the government to hold elections or face strike, repeating the history of the anti-Ershad movement. Khaleda Zia finally resigned and Chief Justice Habibur Rahman was sworn in as the chief advisor of a caretaker government. In the elections held next year, the Awami League emerged victorious with 146 out of 300 seats out of 74 percent vote polled. Sheikh Hasina formed the government which was recognised as legitimate

both nationally as well as internationally. This signaled the end of militarised politics in Bangladesh and the beginning of democracy.

The next parliamentary election witnessed the return of Khaleda Zia led BNP in the government. However, her second term as the head of the state was again embroiled in controversies, charges of corruption and challenges by opposition for abetting the rise of religious militancy.¹⁵ The next year, as Khaleda Zia's tenure ended, Bangladesh was to witness another parliamentary election under the caretaker government of President Iajuddin Ahmed. Amidst claims of rigging by the Awami League with the help of the caretaker government and the Election commission which allied with the BNP, President Iajuddin Ahmed declared a state of emergency with military backing. The government then launched investigations into corruption charges and arrested more than 170 members of the ruling elite and more than 15,000 arrests were made of political leaders, government officials, business on charges of corruption and tax evasion. Similar cases were registered against both Khaleda Zia and Sheikh Hasina who were house arrested. The emergency rule ran smoothly till evidence of military backed arrests, tortures, mass detention and murder were made public. On the other hand, protests against the emergency rule had taken a shape in universities and spread beyond the campuses (Hagerty, 2008). Under the pressure of mass protest and directives of international

¹⁵ During Khaleda Zia's tenure, series of murders, abduction and bombings reached a height when assassination attempts were made at Sheikh Hasina in a rally called by the Awami League through planned grenade attacks. Hundreds were injured and twenty members of the Awami League were killed. Humayun Kabir, a prominent writer known for his critical views of Islamists was attacked. The British High Commissioner and several high profile individuals were also attacked. The threats resulted in the departure of the World Bank country director who returned after the government ensured additional safety for her. Grenade attacks in shrines, cinema halls and other public places were common. In one instance, police seized rocket launchers, hand grenades, AK 47 rifles and bullets but failed to arrest the perpetrators (Riaz, 2005; 2006). 2 As the government was pressurised into looking at the law and order situation to be able to access aid, Khaleda Zia banned two organisations, Jagrata Muslim Janata Bangladesh and Jama'atul Mujahideen Bangladesh (JMB) that claimed responsibility for the attacks.

diplomats, the EC declared the next elections where Awami League emerged victorious beginning its second term which continues till today.

Amidst this threat and chaos, the economy survived on increased export demand and a good harvest. The foreign exchange reserves were at an all-time high due to increased remittances and growth in export earnings. That year Bangladesh experienced the worst floods that caused loss of hundreds of lives, homelessness for 30 million people, and widespread devastation. It also experienced a steep decline in foreign aid, increasing debt from private banks and rising budget deficit. Bangladesh witnessed a steady growth in export in this decade as percent of imports increased from 46 percent to 73 percent. The real GDP increased by 52 percent between 1991 and 2000 (Al Faruque, 2009). The industrial policy of 1999 announced by the government further clarified the goals of reaching an industrial sector where manufacturing would account for 25 percent of GDP and 20 percent of the employed workforce.

As the entry of private investment attained bigger proportions, the Industrial policy of 1999 aimed at diversifying the export base with providing incentives to both local and foreign investors for establishing export-oriented enterprises. The export-led strategy was aimed to fasten the industrialisation process for the developing economies through export of goods which was considered as having ‘comparative advantage’. The export led strategy also gained ground as international finance institutions such as the World Bank (WB), International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Trade Organisation (WTO) favoured this strategy as a condition for sanctioning development aid and loans. The increasing privatisation, open market, government support and low tariffs turned Bangladesh into a cheap source of labour. The reforms introduced in the

1980s were influenced by the SAPs of the World Bank and the IMF. The government inaugurated an Export Processing Zone in Chittagong in 1983 with 100 percent ownership of foreign owned and Bangladeshi owned factories. The 1990s were dominated by market based policies pushed by the government to increase market growth through rapid liberalisation. This phase was marked by gradual lowering of tariffs and reduction of bureaucratic control over private investment, abolition of import permits and reduction in import controls. More recently, the Industrial Policy of 2010 proposed an integrated strategy of growth through rapid industrialisation. The commitment to achieving the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) by 2015 was an avowed goal implicated in the policy. There were short and long term measures devised to enhance policy implications. The policy proposed to provide for all necessary facilities for industries including gas, water, electricity with an emphasis on developing small, medium and large scale cottage industries and women employment. Under this policy, Public Private Partnership was sought as a key element in constructing infrastructural facilities, like highways, flyovers, underground rail, monorail and other transports. Although the policy was formulated in a way that provided security to the local industries, the dependence on the private sector for rapid industrial growth demanded a freeway for the private investors. As a result the economy registered a GDP growth rate from 2.14 percent in the 1970s to 6.0 in 2009-2010. The GDP share of manufacturing stood at 29.95 percent in 2009-2010 surpassing the share of agriculture which had registered a fall from 49.5 percent in 1972 to 20.16 in the same period (Rahman, 2015). The successive industrial policies passed in 2005, 2009, and 2010 were equally focused

on strengthening the export manufacturing sector with a private sector led industrialisation strategy.

The predominance of patronage based politics since Pakistan rule was prevalent in all these election phases interspersed with phases of martial law and demand for parliamentary elections. Over the years, election debates pertaining to the issues of parliamentary democracy, secularism, socialism and religion have also taken varied forms under different regimes. From Mujib's declaration of socialism and secularism as a basic tenet in Constitution, to Zia's privatisation initiatives and constitutional amendment making Islam as the state religion, the deliberations over religion and its relation with the state remained crucial to the contestations within constitutional politics. The inclinations of the state in consolidating institutions to foster the growth of the economy under debt since the war (in 1971) and the consequences of successive floods that caused massive food crises can be understood through these transitions. As the state took note of the crises through incentives to the agricultural sector to manage the food crises, the industrial sector was provided with enough incentives to implement the export oriented industrialisation and restructure the economy with a strong private sector. As Quadir (2000) argues, since General Zia's regime, the program for restructuring the economy has been undertaken with alliances with the military, bureaucratic and business elite. In that effort, incentives have been extended to the allies of the regimes that would consolidate the power of the state in the industrial sector and vice-versa. As a corollary, systems of production and administrative role have also transitioned where concerns over efficiency and productivity have taken over technological changes in the industrial sectors. The rise of private capital is representative of the continuing access that political party members

have to the functioning of bureaucracy. It is estimated that around 65 parliament members have garment factories with their family members in executive boards of the companies. The benefits were received by the members of political parties that formed the government. To draw an example, the Awami League government during its tenure diverted government assistance and bank loans to Awami League members. Similarly, licenses were distributed to their members who were not professional traders. Likewise, the successive governments have extended these measures to command their support and allegiance among the party members and establish their legitimacy. In the course of these procedures, the creation of a business elite class takes place where families begin to operate industries. The industrial class emerged from mere commercial interests and not exclusively focused on the industrial development of the economy. Therefore, we witness the shifts in industrial policies that extend state patronage to the entrepreneurs, both foreign and domestic, that has ensured the survival of the industry. The growth of a successful garment export industry is also witnessed in these efforts of economic consolidation that are aimed at securing the interests of the business elite. However, in between these negotiations, boycotts and hartals of political parties, there has existed a politics of the crowds demonstrating against the colonial rule, in pre-liberation Bangladesh, to the martial laws of successive regimes in the democratic state of Bangladesh (Umar, 2006). The public protests against state repression, martial law, inflation, governance policies are the issues that have been instrumental in shaping the course of political resistance in Bangladesh.

Bangladeshi women: from *Birangona* to embodiment of development

As has been noted, women become the bearers of the nation in the state's discourse in postcolonial economies. Women as a constituency have been crucial to this discussion from bearing the markers of nationhood to economic development in the later stages. In contradistinction, women have been engaged in the process of defining their socio-cultural and political position located in their contexts that often conflict with the state discourses. The historical material realities guide us in understanding the multi-layered category of women that has emerged in their struggles with the polity and economy of the state.

In colonial Bengal, the discourse around women was dominated by the Hindu nationalist discourse and imagination. The reform period initialised by the western educated Hindu elites saw the constructions of Hindu women through the discourse on domesticity, education, motherhood and attire (Sarkar, 1984; Bannerji, 1994; Nair, 1990; Bagchi, 1990). As a result, the ideal Bengali woman became the symbol of goddess akin to the nation who was a nurturing mother and an ideal companion to her husband. Educated middle class Hindu women who actively supported reform also adhered to these ideas and in turn upheld the ideals of domesticity. The uncritical acceptance of the status and role of Hindu middle class women did little to challenge the constructions of gender relations that nevertheless existed at the time.

In this discourse, however, there has been a certain invisibilisation and vilification of Muslim women and men who gradually emerged as the 'other' – men as violators and women as subjugated by their men (Sarkar, 2001). In *Visible Histories, Disappearing*

Women, Mahua Sarkar (2008) enlightens us on the social production of Muslimness during the same period where Muslim middle class men and women appealed for an independent and pluralist India through their writings in several journals (Sarkar, 2008, pp. 102-103). Identifying two groups, one of revivalists and the other opposed to Islamic orthodoxy, Sarkar documents how gender becomes central to the discourse on Muslim women in the distinction between the practice of purdah and system of seclusion among the Muslim middle class.

One of the main pioneers of this phase was Rokeya Shakhawat Hossain who hailed from a traditional landlord family married to a “modernist” civil servant. She authored *Sultana’s Dream* that fervently critiqued the system of purdah through a portrayal of an imagined world where men lived in seclusion and women handled traditionally male jobs. She was the first woman to establish a school in Calcutta for Muslim girls which began operating with 8 students. She also established a women’s organisation, Anjuman-e-Khawatein-Islam that financially supported widows and provided education to young girls. This phase, called the first phase of women’s movement by Rounaq Jahan (1975) also saw the emergence of several educated Muslim middle class women like Mrs. Masuda Rahman, Faziltunnessa who themselves defied social conventions and strongly criticised the system of seclusion that truncated the existence of the other half of the society - the Muslim women (Akhtar and Bhowmik, 2008).

After her death in 1932, there was a vacuum in the women’s movement for a considerable time before the second phase began. The second phase (1947-1979) saw the growth of women’s organisations in the urban areas when the movement per se did not

take off, but there were considerable instances of emancipation as a result of the modernisation process. The All Pakistan Women's Association (APWA) developed in this phase where wives of powerful political and administrative figures came together. APWA leadership changed as their husband's position changed in the bureaucracy. In Dhaka, the position of the president was alternated by the wife of the chief minister and the wife of the governor (Jahan, 1975, pp. 24).

Confined to the concept of women's clubs, APWA organised social and cultural get-togethers, ran schools and managed sewing and handicraft centres to facilitate meeting of middle class Muslim women who has to observe strict purdah. The decade of the 1950s and 1960s witnessed a rise in women's literacy and school enrollment. In addition to APWA, nine other women's organisations were established - Gandaria Mahila Samity (1950), Wari Mahila Samity (1954) and Purana Paltan Ladies Club. These women's organisations had functions similar to that of APWA - improving the socio economic condition of lower middle class and poor women, and consisted of a similar demographic of women from established and affluent neighbourhoods of Dhaka. Apart from these, there were two organisations for non-Bengali and non-vernacular speaking Bengali women, the Annuman Falah Muslim Khawateen and Biatul Athfab-e-Sabiyya, orphanage for Muslim girls). In the 1960s, women's organisations came up that had specific goals, like the Business and Career Women's Club which had the interests of career women that were realised through establishment of hostels and child care centres for working women and mothers. They also took up training programs to encourage women from lower class groups to take up an occupation. Their leadership consisted of mostly non-Bengali women and different from the Mahila Samitys who were mostly

housewives or rarely career women (pp.27). A Housewives Association was also formed in the 1960s to facilitate a space for housewives to meet and share their experiences.

There were two other organisations - Women's Voluntary Association (WVA) and the Zonta Club - which were formed by wives from the diplomatic community focussed mainly on raising funds for social work. They did not hold regular social or cultural get-togethers but met specifically to discuss projects. These latter groups were dominated by non-Bengali and upper middle class women in consonant with the shifts in the political landscape that underwent a change with Bengali politicians being replaced by non-Bengali bureaucrats.

With the post war restructuring of the nation, Bengali women political activists experienced a truncated existence owing to the partition of India in 1947. The widespread participation of women in the anti-colonial agitations becomes an important tool to understand the subsequent agitations that have taken place. Certain principles find prominence in all these subsequent agitations. While most of them are nationalistic in their many articulations, some keep reminding the colonialities of power that still operate. As much as the war was a testimony to the people's uprising towards colonial aggression, it was also a watershed moment for women's rights in Bangladesh. The third phase of the women's movement began in post-liberation Bangladesh marked by an increasing awareness of women's problems. Although no concrete programs for the movement or leadership existed, the rape and violence on Bengali women during the war had laid the foundation for a deeper engagement with the question of "shelter" that women were supposed to be bestowed with. The departure of non-Bengali women prompted Bengali women to reorganise the organisational leadership. The APWA was renamed Bangladesh

Mahila Samity with Awami League women assuming the leadership positions. Similarly, Bengali women filled up the positions left vacant by the non- Bengali women in the Business and Career Women's Club and the WVA.

One of the first illustrative moments of an autonomous women's movement in the newly independent nation was redefining the recovery from the war from the standpoints of women who were survivors of the systematic rape as a weapon of war (Hossain & Mohsin, 2016). The nine months that turned every district into a people's militia on the call of liberation also witnessed the participation of a large number of Bengali women. As much as men joined the war who were later conferred the title of *Muktijoddha* or liberation warrior, women were seen as participating in more than two forms, of a victim or a carer. There were a substantial number of women who helped rescue women held captive by the Pakistani army and their East Bengal collaborators. The war estimates reveal that around 200,000 women suffered systematic rape by the Pakistan army and the local collaborators. On the other hand were the women in the many political formations that fought the war of liberation like Pritilata Waddedar, Bina Sen and others (Hossain and Mohsin, 2016; Saha, 2019). Post the war, there have been instances of taking stock of the effects of the war in various forms, from bringing war criminals to justice, to rehabilitating the war women or the *Birangonas*. At the national level discourse, the participation of women in the war of liberation has figured prominently in the discussions on war crimes.

It took several years to account for the damaging effects on women that pressured the government to confer the title of '*birangona*' to the raped women during the liberation war. Contrary to the claims of the government to accord the status of

'birangona' to the raped women to rehabilitate them in the society, the women's movement witnessed a disregard of the raped women in the society. One of the defining moments was the hushed and quick adoptions facilitated by the government for the pregnant women which remained concealed from even the mothers. The silence around rape as something that must be forgotten pushed the rehabilitation even further away from realisation (Mookherjee, 2008).

Eventually during the movement on war crimes tribunal, the autonomous women's movement took up the cause of rehabilitation of *'muktijoddha nari'* into the society that accorded bodily purity of women a respectable status. The silencing and forgetting of rape as war crime was addressed in the process. Simultaneously, the movement took up questions of women's honour outside the bodies of women and into the legalities of what constituted as individual (human?) rights situated in a democratic nation-state. Azim (2005) and Huq (2003) document the struggles of Naripokkho, a voluntary women's right organisation, in establishing connections within the women's movement on the questions of bodily autonomy.

As violence against women became an arena of mobilisation for women's rights, many women's organisations came together to address the instances of dowry deaths, domestic violence, acid attacks and so on (Azim, 2001). Although the discord among the women's groups were beginning to appear on the question of representation, there were successful mobilisations undertaken on the question of violence against women, custodial rapes, acid attacks, reproductive rights, and against the declaration of Islam as state religion. There were certain misconceptions as well that made it difficult for the

organisations to work and extend their activities, but the discussion based approach made issue based coalitions possible.

Few mobilisations which were landmark for their approach and success were the campaign on acid attack that was undertaken by Naripokkho by gathering the survivors of acid attack along with their families to find a supportive group. Consistent activism on the acid attack survivors helped build the relations between women's rights and control of men. The disfiguring of women over refusal of marriage proposals or due to local quarrels brought forth the question of women's bodies as objects to be controlled and manipulated. While women's organisations were united in the demands for punishment of acid attack perpetrators, the fissures were clear during the eviction drives of sex workers (Azim, 2001). Firdous Azim recalls how the involvement of Naripokkho with the sex workers protest led to the organisation's understanding of sexual labour and how the industry was organised. Over the course, sex work was legalised within the precincts of the brothel with an assurance of government protection (Azim, 2005). However, gendered power relations within families were the focus of Naripokkho at that time, which often functioned as a mediator as well as an autonomous group on the larger discourse on development.

Nation-state and economy: marking the contours of women empowerment

“Feminist explorations of the functioning of the economy have enabled the demonstration of the ways in which power embedded in socially constructed differences affects and is affected by the sexual division of labour in society, by the manner in which

resources get distributed in the household, in the community and through the policies of the state” - Kannabiran and Swaminathan, *Representing Feminist Methodologies*, 2017.

Rounaq Jahan (1975) probably is one of the first researchers to document the position of women in Bangladeshi society. She begins her essay with a background of how rural and urban lives of women are shaped up by the practice of purdah and how it takes different roles. Patience and sacrifice, she deplored, become the markers of a good Bengali woman according to the society. As she proceeds to lay out the differences between the urban and rural populace, one interesting fact surfaces. Citing a study undertaken in two localities, she finds that 70 percent rural men and 80 percent urban men as opposed to 39 percent urban women believed that it was natural for women to have inferior status than men. On the other hand, when asked about women's participation in politics, 55 percent of rural men and 64 percent of urban men approved. It is pertinent to mention here that 52 percent of women approved the same (Jahan, 1975).

Women from middle class families enter jobs which are seen as acceptable - doctor and teachers - as women doctors and teachers are sought for medical treatment and education of women, respectively. Very few women enter jobs which are traditionally regarded as men's jobs. In terms of occupations, Jahan notes that a relatively small share of women entered jobs which were outside of the boundaries of what was regarded as women's jobs. She notes, "In 1961, while there were 3,541 female teachers and 2986 nurses and midwives, there were only 11 architects and engineers, 13 scientists, 200 physicians, 11 lawyers and judges, and 20 public service administrators." Further, very few Bengali women entered business compared to their South East Asian counterparts. There were only 185 women owners and managers of industrial and business offices

compared to 30,627 men in 1961. Similarly, only 67 women were engaged in retail trade compared to 15,707 men. It is also noted that men often registered businesses in the names of their wives or sisters to conceal ownership (Jahan, 1975, pp. 19). Women's participation is also highly restricted in administrative offices or decision making posts, owing to the bar on women during the Pakistan government. Administration and planning therefore remained an all-male affair. In terms of recruitment in educational institutions, only 86 women worked as faculty in the University of Dhaka in 1972-73. While only 2 occupied positions of chairpersons in departments, there were no women deans. Even recently, during the course of my fieldwork, I gathered that women never were appointed to the Vice Chancellor's post in any university and that Farzana Islam was the first woman to be appointed as a VC in the Jahangirnagar University.

Jahan (1975) further notes that women's participation in mainstream politics was also marginal. While Bengali women won the basic political right to vote, during the British colonial government at the same time as Bengali men, their participation in political parties were restricted to the women's wings. The highest post that one could achieve was the post of secretary within the women's wing. Additionally, of the 15 seats reserved in the Bangladesh Parliament, women were elected into them by the other 300 male members of the parliament and not the female electorate (pp.20). The provision of reserved seats deters political parties from nominating women for general seats. This directs us to look at the social sanctions that shape up the lifeworlds of women in Bangladesh. Papanek (1971, as cited in Jahan, 1975) argues that purdah regards women as vulnerable and in need of shelter. This relates to the need to control their impulses which is often done through the mechanism of shame. Historically speaking, shame

became a defining mechanism that is also witnessed in the aftermath of liberation when West Pakistani forces and East Pakistani men raped more than a million women. While they were honoured with the title of *birangona* and later *muktijoddha*, the Bangladeshi state and society has demonstrated failure in rehabilitating the women back into the society.

At the same time, the then government capitalising on the international aid had promised to be committed to the women's question in the quest of development. Development as a buzzword with women as beneficiaries or targets of development programmes began in the mid-1970s (Azim, 2001). As Women In Development (WID), approach gave way to Gender And Development (GAD) where women's issues were seen to be part of the larger framework of gender subordination, the operative word became 'empowerment'. The result of the commitment of the state was seen in the rise of NGOs that aided the government institutions in dispensing the duties of a welfare state recovering from a war. Banu (2015) argues the UN Convention for the Elimination of all forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) & World Conference on Women (WCW) marked the unfolding of global feminism in Bangladesh that simultaneously turned the local struggles into NGO-ised and project based work. In such context, how the state, international and local worked out the woman's question laid the way for the women's movement.

The emergence of NGOs as parallel government institutions led to their functioning as not merely service providers but as producers of social meanings and self-making possibilities for various groups both internal and external to the state (Leve and Karim, 2001; Nazneen 2009). In a span of eight years, from 1990 to 1998, the number of

NGOs increased from 382 to 1245 altering the meaning of governance and welfare (Leve and Karim, 2001, pp. 54). Micro-credit finance was extended to rural women for self-employment that would empower women as entrepreneurs (Karim, 2004; Nazneen and Sultan, 2009). Targeted mainly as employment generation and poverty reduction measures, loans were extended to women in rural Bangladesh who would repay after setting up a sustainable means of self-employment (Kabeer, 1994; Karim 2004; Hossain 2017). However, later studies have attempted to demystify the myth of empowerment that microcredit has extended (Karim, 2008). Several studies have found that husbands often took the loans while their wives were left to make the repayment. As the loans are extended on a group basis, the failure to repay on time has led to the group building pressure in the form of shaming. The loan recovery often includes loss of property, household items and equipment of livelihood that the group takes away to gather loan money. If there are no items to sell, the group indulges in what is called '*ghor bhanga*' where the house is ransacked. Karim (2008) refers to this practice as the 'economy of shame' that signifies the family failing to repay loan as bad investment and disrupting their social relations. Mahmud (2003) notes that although the claims of empowerment remain unfulfilled, it is important to acknowledge the existing relations of gender hierarchy that remain irrespective of the system of microcredit. Therefore putting focus back on the relations gendered relations that are integral to any analysis of empowerment. What holds importance in the current discussion is the significance of the debates around empowerment that builds at the nation-state level.

The notion of empowerment similarly holds a central space within the autonomous women's movement as well that has launched legal battles focusing on the

issues of violence on women, in real physical and socio-cultural terms, and basic human rights as citizens (Azim, 2000; Chowdhury, 2007; Banu, 2015). Women's condition and women's position; private public; multifaceted and non-linear empowerment; feminist critique leading to women's NGOs alternative approaches to the instrumentalist discourse (Nazneen et al., 2011) - focus on women's agency, incorporating definitions of empowerment based on the domestic political traditions,

The discussion on empowerment took a new turn with the rise of the Readymade Manufacturing Garment (henceforth RMG) Industry. As an export substitution strategy, the garment industry began its operation in the late 1970s owing to the progressive privatisation of state owned enterprises and liberalisation of the market. The garment industry began taking roots in 1978 with a five year agreement between Desh Garments in Bangladesh and Daewoo Corporation in South Korea - recorded as the first garment enterprise to begin its operations. Under this agreement, the South Korean textile producer Daewoo Corporation extended training facilities to the workers of Desh Garments on how to manufacture shirts and market them in return for royalty and commissions amounting to eight percent of the sales. In addition to the training, Daewoo Corporation also extended bonded warehouse facilities, machinery, fabric and back to back letters of credit which allowed Desh Garments to obtain low cost financing by positioning the sales as collateral (Davis, 2013). Eventually, Desh Garments Ltd. began their operations in 1980, although by that time many had left and established their own factories. These collaborations between major global suppliers of garments to the world markets - Hong Kong, South Korea, Singapore, Taiwan, Thailand, Malaysia, Indonesia, Sri Lanka and India, and manufacturing factories in Bangladesh were possible due to the

constraints imposed by their major buyers like USA, Canada and European Union in terms of quota restrictions. The Multi Fibre Agreement (henceforth MFA) signed in 1974 by the major garment suppliers limited their sales to the developed economies. As a result, they relocated their production to Bangladesh which was free from quota restrictions and also had trainable cheap labour at its disposal. In the next few years, the garment industry attained a high profile in terms of foreign exchange earnings, export, and industrialisation and recorded a growth rate of 82 percent (Uddin and Jahed, 2007). Experiencing huge success in limited time, the government focused on the industry through consolidation.

As cheap labour and low prices became the defining feature of Bangladesh's comparative advantage, we saw large scale recruitment of women in these factories. The lack of resources in the rural household led to the migration of women to the cities. Women were employed in manual and repetitive tasks which were unskilled and low-paying. As the ideology of domesticity proscribed women from entering into waged work, the job involving stitching was classified as women's job. Classified as a feminine skill that required patience and dexterity, garment jobs became women's work and inevitably halted any changes in the conditions of work for working class women. Skill became an ideological category that provided justification for the recruitment of women and children in functions that were predominantly manual and low-skilled. The requirement of cheap labour meant large-scale recruitment of women in the factories as capitalist forces sought to exploit the conditions of patriarchy. The women and men who migrated were pushed due to the lack of livelihood options in their villages. Women increasingly shifted to waged work for the promises the industry made for a better life

and opportunities. These factories were initially set up by the foreign companies which gained access to the resources for setting up an industry. Gradually, the single factories expanded into Export Processing Zones (henceforth EPZ) with the approval and facilities provided by the government to foreign capital under bilateral agreements.

Premised on the anti-colonial yearnings of Bengalis harping on the identities associated with Bengali language, the liberation war of 1971 exuded the possibilities of a secular identity and citizenship that would define the new nation. In that context, the post-war phase of rehabilitation has often been described as the struggle of a nation to ‘become’. As the governance of the country underwent changes from military authoritarianism to parliamentary democracy, the economy has also witnessed a transition from operating on socialist ideals to embracing the regime of neoliberalisation. In a nationalist fervour to establish the state, Bangladesh engaged in the rebuilding of the economy through development aid and opening up its economy as a call to rebuild the nation through ‘early and sustained commitment to economic liberalism’ (Hossain, 2017, pp. 3). This entailed gradual privatisation of public institutions and increasing foreign investment into the economy through relaxation in legal rules and regulations by the government. In the same vein, the rise of the garments industry in Bangladesh was also likened to this phase of “becoming” where one could witness the formation of the nationalist consciousness for the Bangladeshi identity, economy, and eventually, the nation.

Chapter 4- “Garments world”

In a documentary by National Labour Committee on FTZ garment workers, Jorge Sierra points, *“For a 15 year old girl who has not yet completely formed a personality, has not yet completely developed physically, who is just beginning to feel life, who is opening her eyes to so many new things important to any human being - love, friendship, living with other people - to fall into a maquila is to fall into a deep dark well. She must cease to be a person. She must become a cog in a wheel which is only important to the degree that it makes the great machine of the maquila function.”*¹⁶

Heavily guarded by security and tall metal gates, the free trade zones of Honduras and El Salvador barred the entry of those who have no business inside. At the peak of eye-hand coordination, teenage girls were the most preferred employees for these factories which set a daily target of 1100 pieces a day for each worker. Majority of these girls were under 15 years of age with incomplete education and no other option other than garments to support their family members. Workers were made to work for more than twelve hours, kept at company overnight if large orders were received that often extended their shifts to almost 23 hours. Refusal to complete shifts led to pay cuts. Inside the factories guarded by high security, workers testified to deplorable conditions with verbal and physical abuse, no breaks for water or bathroom, and control of bodies

¹⁶ Quoted from an interview with Jorge Sierra from Committee for the Defense of Human Rights in Honduras in the documentary ‘Zoned for Slavery’ made by National Labour Committee during the NLC - GAP Campaign against child labour in 1995.

through birth control pills. Many live with families in squatters near the factory that have no electricity or water supply and subsist on low nutrition food.

Two decades later, Hasan Ashraf, while documenting the production practices during his experience of working in a garment factory in Mirpur, Dhaka writes, “...garment industry, as a distinct world, a “garment world”, separated from the rest of Bangladesh not only by walls and guards, but also by the “garment time”, that rules within it” (Ashraf, 2017, pp. 84).

The constitution of this ‘garments world’ was a momentous juncture in the history of Bangladesh that led to the gradual restructuring of the economy shortly after the liberation war. As has been evidenced in the previous chapter, the World Bank and IMF-initiated Structural Adjustment Programs (SAPs) had facilitated the rise and growth of the Bangladeshi garment industry. Simultaneously, the neoliberal advocates succeeded in legitimising the accompanying privatisation of state resources to access the labour markets in post-colonial countries as the road to development. Hailed as a comparative advantage, Global South nations with cheap labour became promising for the foreign private capital. This was accompanied with a prospect of access to the global market in exchange of the cheap but large pools of labour consisting mostly of women and children under the ‘new international division of labour’. For the local elites in Bangladesh, this acted as a strategy to gain power and acquire international business links, in the name of building the nation. As much as this rebuilding was essential for the nation to survive, the dependence on foreign aid also came to be seen as the only way to grasp the much discussed economic development.

In this chapter, accordingly, we focus on the political economic conditions and labour practices followed locally in the garment production processes while locating the industry in its global context of market relations. We look at the frameworks through which certain documentaries represent the garment industry and examine them against the fieldwork findings through a mixed methods approach. We lay out the industrial practices that characterise the industry as part of a larger network of garment production - one that expands beyond the national boundaries of Bangladesh with buyers and suppliers located in the European nations, US and South East Asia. Finally, we look at the local labour processes as a necessity for the very sustenance of the industry and ask - What does this do to those working in such an industry? Divided into three sections, this chapter is primarily based on the field work interviews, documents and documentaries on garment industry and its workers.

The first section lays out the political economic condition that the global garment industry takes roots in - while it relocates the production process to the global south. The ease of access provided to foreign investment to the labour markets by the government, precisely the female labour market, in the context of the global level discourse on women empowerment forms a crucial part in understanding the dynamics of power operating in the RMG industry. As cheap labour has been cited as the reason behind Bangladesh's success in garment exports, we explore how cheap labour is manufactured for garment work and is instrumental in sustaining the global garment supply chains. Contextualising the modifications on the concurrent debates on development that take stage in the global economic relations, we look at the conditions that manufacture such cheap labour. As production relocates decisively to South and Southeast Asia, the production process

undergoes shifts that are suited to the local labour and governance conditions in the specific regions. In such a context, this section argues that cheap labour is not a given, but rather a culmination of the social conditions that the industry emerges in and reproduces in Bangladesh. This section deals with the questions of who works in these factories, how is the production organised; how is garment work as a whole organised and controlled. This inevitably needs us to carefully understand the many layers in garment production - from the workers, to the supervisors, the management, the owners, the suppliers and the international brands. Through the descriptions of the layers and networks of production, this chapter attempts to offer a structural reading of the Bangladeshi garment industry. In the next section we discuss how exactly labour is cheapened, in such a social, political, economic context as is laid out in the previous sections. This section explores how garment work takes over the body, routine and lives of the workers. How the garment industry reproduces workers who embody the practices of labour and peculiarities of work life becomes central to this section. To put it simply, this section looks at women's work beyond the accepted trope of 'nimble fingers' to the embodiment of social production of labour. It attempts to explore the intersections and interactions of the suburban, industrial, gendered, migrant lives of garment workers. From recruitment networks, floor relations, everyday targets, domestic work, protest demonstrations, community practices, every actor plays an active role in structuring the labour force. The attempt is to read the workings of capital through the social relations that cannot be understood without considering the garment workers as central actors; whose social and cultural lives while being continuously restructured through the

consequences of transnational economic processes are remarkable acts of creative resistance to such processes.

Beginnings of the industry

Whether it is muslin or apparels, the colonial powers and developed countries have found their way into the labour markets of South Asia. The industry which recruits all year round - RMG industry - dates back to 1977 when the first shipment went abroad from a private firm called Jewel Garments (Siddiqi, 1996). Since then more than 6000 garment factories have come up in Dhaka and its suburbs employing more than 4 million women and accounting for more than 10% of the Gross Domestic Product (GDP). While the emergence of the RMG industry can be located in the Structural Adjustment Programs (SAPs) imposed by the major financial institutions, like the World Bank and International Monetary Fund, the place that Bangladesh assumed in the Muslin trade during the colonial regime serve as a significant historical context for the prominence the country has gained since the colonial rule in the international market of apparel trade.

Bangladesh has been at the centre of discussion on labour rights since the collapse of Rana Plaza building in 2013. The industry has been characterised as one where forced work, poor building and fire safety, lack of governance dominates the lives of working class women. While a large part of such characterisation holds true, it becomes equally crucial to locate these narratives in the structures of power that dominate/ regulate the

industry. These span from the patriarchal controls that determine the lives of women working in these factories, to the supervisors and management working to secure investments, and to the state that is looking for opportunities to increase their global presence. On the other hand, the structural position of a garment worker in the larger supply chain is coordinated by institutions such as the buyer brands, local and global suppliers, governmental labour departments, and other bureaucratic offices.

Delineating the bureaucratic control structure of the industry and its accompanying practices of material production are integral to uncomplicating how the industry has thrived. Labour Process Theory (LPT) has been concerned with the dynamics of control, coercion, consent and labour agency at the point of production. It posits that the central features of capitalist labour process are deskilling, fragmentation of tasks, hierarchical organisation, division between manual and mental work and a whole array of various means of controlling labour. As a corollary, the production process becomes an integral marker of how politics of production is played out where the worker is increasingly replaced by machines and deeper fragmentation of tasks takes place into unskilled and semi-skilled tasks (Thompson, 1983). Such fragmentation becomes possible through the distinction drawn between ownership and control over the means of production and eventually skills. The material culture at work is made possible through the access to knowledge that reproduces managerial hegemony (Hales, 1999). As part of enforcing control, workers are gradually coerced into consent, what Braverman calls 'manufacturing consent'. Capital production therefore develops through and reinforces the patterns of social domination and subordination. Thompson (1983) argues that in the process of delineating the politics of labour processes, LPT overlooks the nature and role

of labour agency that shape labour processes. In a recent edited volume, Taylor et al. (2015) approach the labour process theory in global value chains through the global production network (GPN) analysis that seeks to bring labour into the equation. While the supply chain analysis/framework assists in understanding the various layers of a supply chain operating concomitantly, the expanse of the Bangladeshi garment industry could only be ascertained through a careful understanding of all layers and actors engaged in production. The emphasis lies on the coexistence of both cooperation and conflict within the actors that form the network - firms, state, labour, consumers and civil society organisations. In such a context, the GPN framework provides an analytical basis to examine the actors in terms of their territorial and network embeddedness that organises the global economic processes. As GPN framework seeks to focus analyses around the questions of labour and labour agency, incorporation of methods of labour geography into the field of work and employment studies allows us to explore labour agency in the multi-level scalarity, spatially embedded power systems.

Approaching the industry from the Global Production Network (GPN) perspective, this section looks at the industry in its functioning that transcends geographical boundaries, and locates garment production as a part of a network that has been a necessary result of globalisation. Constituted and structured essentially by transnational elites, global production networks are geographically differentiated organisational forms that are shaped by their particular social, political and cultural processes (Levy, 2008; Coe et al., 2008). These networks are structured by the ideologies and institutions of the transnational elites while comprising the “*struggles over the construction of economic relationships, governance structures, institutional rules and*

norms, and discursive frames” (Coe et al., 2008, pp. 274). Cumbers et al. (2008) argue that “value chains are networks of embodied labour”. Therefore, labour as a factor of production must assume a central role in understanding the global garment value chains as they hold the conditions under which labour is converted into labour power through the labour process (Henderson et al., 2002). Demarcating between different actors that work in the industry, from production owners, to designers, to production houses, to operators and supervisors, Hoskins (2014) traces the linkages between different companies and brands that operate through a variety of offices. These brands function through a network of managers, designers, suppliers and their respective management (Hoskins, 2014). The global fashion industry that runs on colonial relations of power, legitimising its expansion and sustenance through the ideology of consumption, also relies on the local conditions that allow for its exploitation (Herod, 2012, Hoskins, 2014). Thus, the industry cannot be seen in isolation as a phenomenon; it rather needs to be understood as a social production that uses the labour in industrialising countries, exploiting raced and gendered bodies to make mass-produced clothes at low wages and sell it in the markets with higher profits.

Additionally, Mezzadri (2017) argues for the need to pay “attention to the solid and capillary organisation of the sweatshop as a regime” to be able to grasp its resilience, despite many attempts at intervention and regulations following industrial disasters and scandals in recent years. She argues that even the corporate led CSR initiatives have also reinforced the exploitative and oppressive mechanisms of the sweatshop (Mezzadri, 2017, pp. 2). Although Mezzadri (2016; 2014) has extensively worked on the Indian Garment industry that has consolidated itself in a different fashion, her thesis on

approaching a study on garments industry through the sweatshop regime provides for a comprehensive tool to understand the expanse of the global production networks vis-a-vis the local manufacturing industries. She begins her thesis by tracing the production systems that characterises the Indian garment industry across its different local manufacturing units and links it with the simultaneous production of cheap labour. The informalisation of labour brought forth by neoliberalism coupled with the fragmented and decentralised nature of the Indian garment industry had produced different centres of production which were brought up primarily by certain communities through access to state incentives.

The Bangladeshi garment industry rose in a similar fashion through state incentive and foreign investment contracts accessible to politically and economically powerful sections of the business community. The prospects of an open economy facilitating an entry of foreign private capital were assumed to be favourable since the formation of Pakistan and consequent independence of Bangladesh. The state of the economy in both these years had witnessed setbacks due to impoverishment, famines and floods. Undeniably, the inflow of foreign aid at the cost of privatisation of the economy seemed a feasible solution for the poor economic conditions prevailing in the state. The increasing tariffs on exports in other countries, Taiwan, South Korea turned the attention of brand buyers towards a quota free Bangladesh for the huge labour force and high levels of poverty. Foreign companies extended agreements with the government which led to the establishment of the garment industry with tax benefits and tariff protection to the investors.

The decade of the 1980s witnessed the production of standardised garments for the global market. The term ‘fast fashion’ came into existence in the 1990s marking a shift from product-driven manufacturing to a market-based model that meant a shift to mass produced cheaper quality clothes. This required a ‘Quick Response’ approach with retailers bringing the latest fashion trends to their stores reducing the time gap between manufacturing and consumption. The demand for ‘just in time’, ‘quick response’ and agile supply chains by retailers worked in tandem with the introduction of the ‘mid-season’ in the fashion industry in addition to the existing two. The retail fashion commercial system works on the principle of ‘sense and respond’ to the demands of the consumers (Bhardwaj & Fairhurst, 2010). It is important to point out that in fact the working principle is more like ‘create and respond’ where cultural choices are relentlessly reshaped and manufactured through the process of advertising and marketisation of fashion. The unprecedented scope for profit maximisation and therefore power consolidation under the new economic order meant that in addition to the creation of new, ever shifting markets of demand and supply for ‘street fashion’ characterised by low quality but cheaper clothes, the retailers also competed for cheaper costs at production. Time therefore became the deciding factor for profit and expansion of business for the suppliers.

An important arrangement that needs to be mentioned here is the Multi Fibre Agreement instituted in 1974 which would phase-out by 2005. As the agreement was designed to set in motion the industrialisation and globalisation of developing countries initially, the MFA was supposed to phase out after a completion of 30 years by the time the countries would reach sustainability. However, it also meant fierce competition for

the suppliers to get into the market owing to termination of import quotas by 2005. As a consequence, costs were pushed down rapidly and the competition grew fierce as the struggle to get business became more cut-throat. At this stage, labour was the only entity that could be employed to keep the business running. The buyers became the determinant factor whose demands drove the supply chain, hence the coinage 'buyer-driven supply chains' (Bhardwaj and Fairhurst, 2010). The lowest production costs fetched more orders increasing the pressure at the production chain which meant higher targets and overtime for the labour.

The garment industry producing both knitted and woven garments can be segmented into three tiers. The first tier comprises the formal end of the industry epitomised by those in the EPZ with direct links with the international buyers. They use modern equipment, have better quality assurance, and employ a large relatively educated and skilled workforce. They have generally better conditions at work than the rest of the industry. The second tier factories outside the EPZs also have a direct, often long-term, relationship with their buyers and hence some reliability in their orders and supplies. They vary in size and also observe certain minimum labour standards, largely because of their direct dealings with their buyers. The third tier merges with the informal sector, comprising small low-grade factories with no direct relationship with the buyers. The pressures of containing the costs of production and the new commercial common sense of achieving huge margins of profit in a short time led to the establishment of small garment factories, typically a workshop of 100-300 workers in whatever space available around the city of Dhaka (Kabeer and Mahmud, 2004). The subcontracting business that prepares

orders of piece work for the bigger factories at lower rates lay outside of the boundaries and jurisdiction of the EPZ.

The factories which undertake the end to end process of knitting a fabric to stitching garments, have four more sections - knitting section, washing, dyeing, and printing and cutting section. Except the printing and cutting section, the other three sections are all male sections that are entrusted with the responsibilities of operating the heavy machines. All these machines required for knitting, dyeing and washing are imported mainly from Belgium, Germany, and Sweden while the threads are imported from India, Australia and other countries. These operations are overseen by supervisors recruited for each section of a floor who report to the management with their work or any other production issue. These supervisors, all male, come from middle class families located in and around the industrial areas. The factories which undertake the end to end production process are mainly located in the EPZ areas, while the ones outside of the EPZ specialise mainly in stitching, ironing and packaging.

The system of subcontracting laid its roots in Bangladesh where multinational companies invested through their capital and cheapened labour. Impoverishment helped keep the wage rates low assisted by traditional patriarchal roles and norms. The entry of garments in Bangladesh was thus seen as a cure for the unemployed and poor migrants in villages who entered the workforce in large numbers. The workers began to settle around the factories in Narayanganj, Ashulia, Gazipur, and Savar that are the main centres in the fringes of the district of Dhaka. These areas housed factories that fell under the Dhaka Export Processing Zone (henceforth EPZ) and many outside of it. The EPZ consisted of factories established by foreign investors producing for big brands like Primark,

Walmart, H & M, Levi-Straus, K-mart, Tesco, Asda and others. The origin of these brand buyers were located in the developed countries in the West such as the United States, Germany, Sweden, France, United Kingdom and the likes. The continuous supply of labour was put in process with recruitment from villages similar to the owners or through recommendations from workers who brought their village kin to these factories. This cycle was possible for the extra benefits that a worker received if they brought more (cheap) labour to the factory. Gradually, the “just-in-time” technique that the industry runs on also created a production regime that consistently overburdened the garment workers stretching the working hours from 8 hours (as per the ILO convention 1919, No. 1 ratified by Bangladesh in 1972) to more than 15 hours often adding a few more hours of overtime as well. The pressure to fulfill targets also entail a strict surveillance over the lines where even a short toilet break depends on the fulfillment of the target.

As much as the industry was assisted by the government and its various institutions, the industry began its operations under the Export Processing Zones. But as it expanded its production spilled over outside the strict boundaries of the zones. The beginnings of the Bangladeshi industry was based on the idea of comparative advantage that it had in accessing global markets without any restrictions. This not only attracted the suppliers but also encouraged the manufacturers to restructure the production to be able to establish direct export links with brand buyers. In the initial stages, the industry did not procure backward linkages which could ensure fall in the import of basic means of production such as threads, fabrics and other ancillary instruments. However, with the end of the Multi-Fibre Agreement in 2004, Bangladesh lost its privileges of quota free import. This meant that Bangladesh had to compete with other developing countries to

acquire and sustain contracts with the brands. The years leading up to the phasing out of MFA are significant in terms of the rise in the number of garment factories which grew from 1537 in 1992-1993 to its double in seven years and to 4500 within two decades (Rahman, 2015). There does not exist a proper list of all garment establishments but rough estimates suggest the number stands at more than 6000 factories. Currently EPZ factories are remodeling production to provide start to finish products with only the import of machines. Referred to as ‘buyer driven chains’, the garment industry comprises multiple layers and tiers of suppliers and units, incorporating a vast pool of unorganised and unregistered workshops and stretching all the way to home-based settings (Mezzadri, 2008). While India has clusters of small workshops, Bangladeshi garment industry is concentrated mainly in two EPZs, one in Dhaka and another in Chittagong. Outside of these EPZs, there are industrial clusters where smaller, non EPZ, subcontracting factories are concentrated in and around industrial areas with workers’ quarters springing up all around. The subcontracting factories have proved to be a boon as well as bane for the garment industry in Bangladesh. These factories have facilitated the access to higher and increased orders as bigger factories hand over a share of production to these factories during times of urgent orders. Conversely, it has been difficult for owners to steer clear of controversies regarding compliance. The Rana Plaza collapse has pushed brands to ensure that their sourcing factories were compliant to codes of conduct on building and fire safety. But subcontracting factories which over the course have been able to access direct orders have in turn increased the share of non-compliant factories.

The entire industry is regulated by the Bangladesh Garment Manufacturers and Exporters Association (BGMEA) which was established in 1977. BGMEA is a trade

association of owners who assume the responsibilities of ensuring smooth functioning of the factories, build and sustain networks with the international suppliers and buyers and engage in decision making with regard to the garment factories. Entrusted with the main responsibility of overseeing foreign investment in the main export industry in the country, BGMEA has been seen as an important factor in contributing to the economic and overall development of the country. Coe et al. (2004) look at regional development through the global production network perspective in terms of three processes: value creation, value enhancement and value capture. They use the example of BMW in Bavaria, Germany and its plant in Thailand to map out the interactions that take place between the suppliers, off-shore plants, logistics centres, and assembly-line plants. The narrative of power runs through this map that looks at the nature of the interactions between focal and regional firms and institutions with an emphasis on the reach and investment of the nation state in the global economic processes. BGMEA can be understood as that heralding component that has eased Bangladesh's initiation into globalisation by the government which has actively assisted BGMEA in all its operations - legal reforms, constitutional amendments, tax incentives and autonomy.

As the industry is shaped by the political interests of the government in power, it is also shaped by the social structure that sustains the industry. The role of the state remains the integral subtext that dominates the discussion on the politics of production that takes place in the RMG industry. The international politics at play within the context of a post-colonial and globalising economy sheds light on the interconnections and intersections between the socio-cultural, political and economic spheres of societies. It is indisputable that the product manufactured and the form of state control on economy

differed throughout different time periods that Bangladesh witnessed from being a part of the Bengal province in the pre-colonial era to the post liberation era. The semblance between the nature and relations of production throughout the different phases of the ‘government’, however, can be identified as colonial and imperial strains that influenced the terms of international trade and politics around the export industry. The close alliance between the state apparatus, businessmen/business elite and bureaucracy can be identified therefore as a system organised around maximisation of profits without fundamentally affecting the relations of production or dismantling the traditional hierarchical social structures.

As these factories are privately owned, mostly by bureaucratic officials and political leaders, bypassing labour law regulations becomes easier.¹⁷ The registration of a factory requires permission from 18 governmental institutions in the local areas including regional and district offices, and national bodies like the Ministry of Labour, Directorate of Inspection of Factories and Establishments. The lackadaisical attitude of these institutions in inspecting factories before approval and maintaining the image of a non-partisan public office set the course for rapid growth of this industry, although at a cost of many lives. Concurrently, the private nature of the industry discourages and actively obstructs the right to form unions, paralysing the labour law. The right to form trade unions and to collective bargaining came under serious threats since the beginning of the subcontracting business. This took the form of extreme surveillance that characterised the lives of garment workers. The surveillance over workers in the factories was made

¹⁷ <https://www.nytimes.com/2013/07/25/world/asia/garment-trade-wields-power-in-bangladesh.html#:~:text=Business%20interests%20dominate%20Bangladesh's%20Parliament,financial%20interests%20in%20the%20industry.> ; <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-bangladesh-garments-special-report/special-report-how-textile-kings-weave-a-hold-on-bangladesh-idUSBRE9411CX20130502>)

possible through the recruitment of supervisors on every floor overseeing the manufacturing process. The constant observation of the local leaders and factory appointed spies and goons took control over the workers' lives in their areas of residence. This level of surveillance made it difficult for the few unions to mobilise worker's movements. It was however the deplorable conditions at work that forced workers to mobilise for striking work during times of unrest.

The Bangladesh Labour Act was drafted in 2006 after a massive strike by around 18,00,000 garment workers from 4000 factories. The lack of implementation of the labour law regulations was felt during 2013 when the Rana Plaza building collapsed killing more than a thousand workers and injuring a thousand more according to the government estimates. The frustrations with the passive government led to a series of strikes that took place from the day of the collapse till the end of the year with around 50,000 workers from 400 factories demanding higher minimum wage and effective implementation of labour laws. The threat on unions and collective bargaining as a concern came out strongly during these strikes. The lack of unions and their representation in negotiations gained international attention which caused an amendment to the Bangladesh Labour Act of 2006. The right to unionise and collective bargaining and freedom of association was upheld in this amendment, but the constitution of participatory committees inside each factory replaced unions as a negotiator. In the subsequent years, the RMG industry witnessed an increase in the number of registered independent unions but there was a clandestine silence on their sudden and rapid emergence.

The presence of yellow unions under factory management/owners is a characteristic feature of informal industries to evade criticism for non-implementation of labour laws. These unions function as a buffer zone in the conflict between workers' demands and the interests of the owners to maintain the anger among workers and ensure the continuity of factory work thus defecting the labour movement. The government, on the other hand, aids in the functioning of industry by shifting accountability to the brands and multinational companies. The ideology of nationalism is forwarded to morally compel workers to make amends and continue working in such conditions for the greater good of the country that has emerged successfully from a bloody war of liberation.

Manufacturing cheap labour

The prevailing notions of domesticity and traditional gender relations that regulated the cultural contours of Bangladesh were exploited and benefitted off in the course of development brought in by foreign trade. Although factory work has been considered unsuitable for women as their appropriate role has been understood to be restricted to the household, stitching garments has been deemed as a woman's job. As stitching was seen as a feminine skill, women were recruited in these garment factories for their dexterity and docility that was a requirement for doing repetitive work. The deplorable conditions at home had pushed a lot of women to the city who were quickly absorbed into the factories signaling the availability of jobs in the labour market. As international and private firms expanded their base taking advantage of the deregulation of the business environment, the brands seized the opportunity to capture these labour markets to reduce the manufacturing costs. The 'race to the bottom' ensued and factories

were established everywhere without any regard for humane or safe working conditions and infrastructure (Rock, 2003).

Owing to the traditional gender roles that defined the private sphere/ household as the domain of women and public sphere as men's, the women were only allowed to join the factories operated by kins. Another relative or village kin working in the factory was also allowed. Being placed under the care of the village kin who was the owner ensured the presence of a father figure in the workplace. Over the years, as many young women joined garments through already employed relatives, moving to cities increasingly gained acceptability. Although the migration was predominantly female, the subordination of women based on sexual division of labour was not fundamentally altered. Subordination of gender takes place not only in the ideological sense but in the material sense that restricts women as a gendered people to certain occupations and spaces that are understood as private and individual and excluded from spaces that are public, defined by overtly social activities (Elson and Pearson, 1981, pp. 94). Women's work inevitably remained low/ unskilled and therefore low waged contributing in turn to their unstable economic status, perpetuating their economic and social vulnerability.

The garment labour force was formed by migrant women from the districts near Dhaka who migrated to the city owing to lack of livelihood opportunities in the villages. Initially migrating to Dhaka for work as domestic workers, these women took up garment work as it provided a more respectable employment option. As the industry emerged, women were recruited as helpers at a very low wage rate. In the course of work they learnt operating machines from the operators they assisted and were promoted to sewing operators. Men mainly were recruited in the cutting and printing section which paid better

than the operator jobs. The assumption of stitching as women's work was influenced by the traditional gender roles set in society, which saw 'nimble fingers', precision and patience as essentially a woman's work that led to the recruitment of women in these jobs. Consequently, women's wages were also considered secondary which meant they were/are insufficiently low wages. The invisibilisation of the work women performed in the household and contributed to the reproduction of labour perpetuated the perception that waged work was essentially a male domain.

Elson and Pearson (1981) note the distinction between women and men free wage labourers in contrast to Marx's understanding of a free wage labourer who is a free individual who disposes his labour power as his commodity while holding no other commodity for sale. A woman, on the contrary, is never free as she has obligations to discharge domestic labour, faces difficulties in establishing control over her own body, has to negotiate the inability to be a full member of the society but holds the possibility of obtaining subsistence from men in exchange for personal services, sexual or nurturing, of realising her labour power outside of the capitalist labour process – thus her secondary status in the labour market (pp. 97).

Mezzadri (2017) argues, "If one also accounts for social profile and differences and realms of reproduction, the patterns of 'freedom' or 'unfreedom' at work in the garment sweatshop get further complicated" (Mezzadri, 2017, pp. 29). In the context of the Bangladeshi garment industry, the distinction between freedom and unfreedom is difficult to grasp as the long working hours, physical exhaustion, low wages and threat of harassment at work is pervasive. The system of control that drives the production makes it impossible to perceive workers as free in the sense that Marx understood. Positioned

inequally in an industry that is driven by buyer demands, garment workers experience work in variegated forms depending on how the local labour practices unfold. Additionally, in terms of reproducing labour, social and otherwise, gendered labour embodies all these distinctions simultaneously.

Garment workers, predominantly women, are recruited as helpers and operators according to their skills. The helpers assist operators in moving the assembly line swiftly, while learning operating skills to be able to gain promotion. The operators are divided into senior and junior levels according to their duration of experience and quality of work. Each operator line is supervised by a line chief who ensures the timely movement of the line and work. The line ends with a quality check where the stitch is examined and passed on to the next section for ironing. The ironing section also has a supervisor to do the quality check and pass it on to the packaging section. Each floor is similarly supervised by a floor supervisor who ensures smooth functioning of the whole process. This section is predominantly female with a few men who also are recruited as operators. The supervisors are most of the time, if not always, male. The recruitment of men in a social setting that is already skewed against women only reinforces the control that men exercise over women. It is widely agreed upon that supervisors are hired mainly to threaten and harass workers, and “therefore good supervisors are dismissed soon”. The few women recruited in supervisor posts perhaps only reflect the attempt to fortify the control of men over women.

Made in the aftermath of Rana Plaza collapse, *Made in Bangladesh* uncovers the practices of subcontracting in the Bangladeshi garment industry.¹⁸ Sujeet Sennik, a designer for Walmart, admits that the move towards fast fashion in the last two decades turned Bangladesh into a “mecca” to get clothes “cheaper and cheaper”. Barry Laxer of Radical Designs, one of the factory owners interviewed by the team, also refers to the Bangladeshi garment industry as the ‘wild west of the global garment industry’ after he decided to invest in Bangladeshi industry since his buyers asked to reduce production costs. He claims he also wanted to see “how cheap prices can go”. The documentary interviews nine workers from Hasan Tanvir Fashions in the outskirts of Dhaka that produced for Walmart while being on a list of factories banned by Walmart themselves. While the workers who sew those clothes testified to their production in their factories and the conditions at work that are predominantly of threat and fire hazard, the owners and management denied any association with Walmart.

At this time, demands for transparency emerged from among the international activist campaign networks as subcontracting as a production process was increasingly proving to be fatal. Focusing on the practices of subcontracting within the industry, Anjali Kamat (of Al Jazeera) in *Fault Lines: Made in Bangladesh* traces Wal-Mart’s business through the multiple layers of suppliers and contractors who fulfill their order.¹⁹ Kamat interviews Walmart’s supplier factories in Bangladesh who have previously fulfilled Walmart orders and are currently in the list of 240 companies Walmart has cut

¹⁸ *Made in Bangladesh* (2013) was conceptualised and produced by The Fifth Estate, a newsmagazine program that airs in the CBC network based in Canada.

¹⁹ *Fault Lines: Made in Bangladesh* (2013) is a short documentary based on investigative journalism undertaken by Al Jazeera America after the Rana Plaza Collapse in 2013.

ties with post the fire. Subcontracting practices in the garment industry revealed the continuing practice of child labour, poor condition of factories, and lack of health and safety precautions.²⁰ Understood as essentially a refusal on the part of big brands to take responsibility for their sourcing factories and workers, it laid bare the sustenance of the global supply chain through these factories. A similar refusal is witnessed in *Made in Bangladesh*, the CBC documentary, by the then BGMEA President Atiqul Islam in an interview after a garment tag found in Rana Plaza debris was found to be linked to his factory. Upon further investigation, it was found that there existed no formal agreement between Walmart and his factory. In the documentary, he categorically denies any Walmart production in his factory while defacing the tag of the tee shirt that was shown to him as evidence. It was later found that Walmart sourced from another factory in the Rana Plaza building which was already blacklisted for failing audits. However, Walmart admitted that it was their last and delayed consignment from that factory.

The CBC team also traces the Rana Plaza collapse story through the garments tagged Joe Fresh in the collapse debris. The brand was audited by Loblaw which was supposed to conduct safety checks in the factory producing for Joe Fresh. Instead, Loblaw contracted it out to an India based company, House of Pearl, which was entrusted with the task of checking quality at the workplace. However, on inquiry it was found that they checked only the quality of products and not factory safety. They interviewed one of the biggest garment factory owners in the Rana Plaza building, Bazlus Samad Adnan,

²⁰ The practice of employing child labour in garment factories has been complicated since the campaigns that seek to abolish child labour. It is important to note the circumstances that push children into factory work in their early teens (Brooks, 2007).

regarding his factory operations.²¹ Adnan refers to Joe Fresh as his biggest buyer that earned him 6 million USD per year but also mentions that Joe Fresh never complicated matters and only demanded that they ship it on time. Another garment owner, Arif Jebtik, interviewed in the documentary *The True Cost* admits that the pressures of competing prices in international stores eventually transmit to competition between the suppliers as there is no other option than lowering the prices and offering shorter lead times. Time gradually transforms as capital in the global garment supply chains as delay in shipment signals the loss of business for the exporter. The pressure to deliver on time falls primarily on the garment workers who have to finish around/more than 150 pieces every hour to complete the consignment. In case of larger orders, that often leads to extension of working time till late at night exceeding the working hours and hours of overtime work by a considerable margin. The increasing demands of fast fashion, from two lines per year to introducing new designs every two weeks, is seen to take a toll on the lives of the workers.

The documentary *The True Cost*, directed by Andrew Morgan, traces the system of production conducting interviews with activists with the non-profit War on Want and garment workers in Cambodia and Bangladesh to discover the practices of decision making by the ones occupying the top of the value chain. The biggest share of the brunt of this exploitative system, however, is borne by the women working in the factories who have no voice in the larger supply chain. The Tazreen fire and Rana Plaza collapse became signposts for the need for international intervention in the industry. The

²¹ <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2013/apr/27/bangladesh-factory-owners-engineers-arrested>
<https://www.wsj.com/articles/SB10001424127887324766604578460833869722240>

documentaries as a response to the crises of occupational health and safety in the Bangladeshi garment industry work through the logic of the issues of reputational risk. On the other hand, the extensive documentation of the industrial practices pushed for international agreements like the Bangladesh Accord and Alliance. At the national level, the protests led to the constitution of a minimum wage board for the garments sector.²² This has been possible due to the documentation of the trauma of survivors and rescuers also led to the realisation of the magnanimity of the accident.

The international attention post the Rana Plaza collapse that has concentrated in exposing the production practices and working conditions suggests the modalities through which the cheap labour is manufactured, in an abstract and corporeal sense. The question of accountability of brands towards its sourcing factories and workers also led to the criticism of the Bangladesh Garment Manufacturers and Exporters Association (BGMEA) which was seen as responsible for the unsafe working conditions inside the factories. Additionally, the inefficient management of the industry and the callous response to these industrial disasters by the BGMEA legitimised the entry/intervention of transnational actors in the industry in the multiple forms, one among them being the Accord on Fire and Building Safety, also called the Bangladesh Accord. An institutional mechanism to ensure safe working conditions, the ACCORD is a five-year independent legally binding agreement between apparel brands and retailers and trade unions designed to build a safe Bangladeshi Readymade Garment (RMG) Industry. It was devised as an inspection program supported by the companies in which workers and trade unions are

²² <https://www.industryweek.com/talent/article/21960228/bangladesh-to-raise-garment-workers-minimum-wages>

involved including inspections, remediation, workers' training programmes, safety and health complaints mechanism with a focus on transparency and reporting. It was signed by more than 190 apparel corporations and 1,500 factories covering around 2 million workers in the RMG industry. The witness signatories include Workers Rights Consortium, Clean Clothes Campaign, International Labour Rights Forum, and Maquila Solidarity Network.²³ The ACCORD was renewed for another three years in 2016 much to the dismay of the Bangladesh Garment Manufacturers and Exporters Association. The formation and implementation of Accord has been a widely studied area of research.²⁴ However, currently Accord has been terminated and the work has been taken over by a government body.²⁵

²³ Workers Rights Consortium is an international labour rights monitoring organisation based in the United States which conducts investigations and publishes reports on the factories producing major brands and aids workers in these factories to end labour abuse and defend workers' rights. It is supported by over 175 colleges and universities affiliated with it focusing on labour practices of factories producing university-related apparel.

Clean Clothes Campaign (CCC) is an international alliance between trade unions, non-governmental organisations and consumers that identify local problems and transform them into global actions. CCC is involved in educating and mobilising consumers, lobbying companies and governments and offering direct solidarity support to workers as they fight for their rights at the workplace.

International Labour Rights Forum is a human rights organisation involved in transnational campaigns with their allies and networks around the world - labour unions, consumer activists, religious and community based organisations, and student groups.

Maquila Solidarity Network is a labour and women's rights organisation that supports the efforts of workers in the global supply chain to achieve improved wages and better working conditions. Though it works primarily in the regions of Central America and Mexico, it collaborates with the Clean Clothes Campaign at the international level.

²⁴ <https://www.epw.in/journal/2013/28/web-exclusives/clothing-garment-workers-safety-case-bangladesh.html#>

²⁵ Accord to finally pack bags in May. <https://www.thedailystar.net/business/accord-finally-leave-bangladesh-in-may-1854739>

Since Rana Plaza, building safety has been considered as a marker of responsible business. There have undoubtedly been certain improvements in terms of safety, other concerns regarding the working environment still continue nonetheless. Ample evidence of such practices are illustrated in the following excerpts from the conversations with garment workers based in the Ashulia industrial area,²⁶

“The medicine box is stocked, the bathrooms are cleaned and soaps are kept only during the time the audit visits are scheduled. On other days bathrooms are kept in such poor conditions that we cannot even use them. The owner and management do not provide the sanitation workers with detergents due to which the workers leave the job.”

“We also get boots and masks during these visits only.”

“The owner calls us the day before a buyer visits. We are taught what to say when asked something.”

“There is a crèche in the factory but we are not allowed to keep our kids there. But on the day the buyers visit, we are all asked to bring our kids along.”

“The management makes different slips to show that they are paying us rightful wages. They do not mark anything on Fridays on our cards but we get only one Friday off and have to work on all holidays.”

The practices of silencing the workers during audit visits are common in the industry to avoid buyers from shifting to other suppliers. The audit visits usually

²⁶ These excerpts are part of the conversation held with garment workers located in Ashulia. Some of these sessions were organised by Bangladesh Institute of Labour Studies-BILS with the help of local union of National Garment Workers Federation (NGWF) as part of a research study on decent wages.

conclude with an interaction with workers. In these interactions workers are asked, as a formality, to say if there is any problem they face. This mostly ends in successful flawless reports as workers are asked to not say anything that would risk the audit for the management. However, it does not work out well for the workers too if they count their problems. Momin *Bhai* recalls an incident he has heard while interviewing workers for research projects, “Once a worker slipped a note to the auditor in the fear of being sacked if the management were to know. A week later, he was asked to leave and not return to work”. In another factory, an audit group called Alpha came to the factory in Savar and gave the workers visiting cards asking the workers to contact them if they faced any problem in the factory premises. One of the workers gathered the courage to call Alpha and consequently that worker was thrown out of the job, recalled Tanaya. Provision for crèche facilities, proper toilets and medical facilities, and rules for estimating wages as enshrined in the Bangladesh Labour Act 2006 and amendment 2013 and mandatory under the code of conduct guidelines are still not being strictly followed. Atiqul Islam, the former BGMEA President who was found to have been subcontracting production in the CBC documentary admits that the Rana Plaza collapse has made owners work with Accord and Alliance to ensure compliance to safety measures.²⁷ Apart from the prevalence of subcontracting, the lessons from the Tazreen fire and Rana Plaza collapse led to an identification of practices that were missing in the industry. The need for an employee list; salary list; issue of ID cards for workers that would allow for quick recognition and claim making on the part of the worker/family; need for a comprehensive compensation structure and simplification of rules of application/claim for the family.

²⁷ Rana Plaza Tragedy is a major learning for us – Atiqul Islam. Labour – A BILS Journal. Jan – June 2018, 21(1), 53-57.

Above all, long rescue operations and lack of equipment directs to the need for a thorough plan for disaster management.

While the instances of industrial accidents allude to the disposable life of workers, the constant surveillance and environment of threat and assault at the factory floors contributes to the devaluation of work lives. The perception that women or for that matter men under capitalism are free labour in the sense that workers still hold the agential role in deciding who they sell their labour to comes into question in this context. The labour inside the factories, as has been documented, is balancing the thin line between free and unfree labour. The women workers who gathered at one of the cafes of Karmojibi Nari in Mirpur complain that they are marked absent for three days if they show up late one day at work. This is a standard practice across the industry as according to the Bangladesh Labour Act, 2006, workers are liable to get a *hajira* bonus if they attend work on time consecutively for a month. Even if a worker misses work for medical emergencies or some other emergencies, this bonus is not paid.

Application for leaves is also a complicated endeavour for the workers. If there's a shipment to be sent, the weekly holidays are cancelled. Momin *Bhai* explains that according to the labour law, if the owner doesn't give a weekly off in 7 days then they have to give one day holiday by the next 3 days. But this is hardly followed. By rule workers are also supposed to get 17 days holiday over the year apart from the weekly offs, but they do not get that too. Mumtaz chips in "Today is the first holiday we got after working continuously for four months".

Sweety works as a subcontract worker now after working in the garments for more than twelve years. She sums up her factory life in precisely these words,

“If there is some emergency, the management would ask for proof to verify. Till they give permission the person would be dead. Even if one head signs after a lot of requests, it would go to the higher rank, they would also not sign and make us wait. If the worker faints by the time we get the signature and the gate pass, by the time I get out to take the person to the hospital, they would also die. Currently, the situation in garments is terrible. You do not get any holiday.... Two takas increase in wages have been supplemented with three takas of extra pressure on work, there is no time to go to the washroom! Women do not drink sufficient amounts of water in a day. A human body needs at least four litres of water in a day, but women drink hardly a litre. Hundred pieces in an hour is not acceptable to the owners. One has to deliver 120, 150 or 200 in an hour, or you may leave work. This is the situation! One cannot have water because of the pressure at work. The time taken to go to the washroom and come back would be lost and the production will suffer. On top of that the management abuses very badly if there is any delay. They abuse taking your mother’s and father’s name.”

The factory floors have CCTV cameras on all floors that cover all the lines apart from the watchful eyes of the line supervisor and line chief. Workers from the Borobari area of Gazipur attest to the surveillance mentioning that they are not allowed to talk to each other or take lunch if they are hungry during work. The pace is maintained by the supervisors who abuse and sometimes physically assault them for not fulfilling 120-150 piece rate per hour. Sharmin has been working for more than 20 years in garments. She joined at the age of twelve years after she was tired of working as a domestic worker. She

admits that she liked working in garments because it gave her a new life with friends and colleagues. Over time, her interest towards work waned with long working hours, forced overtime and pressure of fulfilling targets.²⁸ She has witnessed deaths of her colleagues due to harassment and work pressure as she has witnessed the denial of the dignity of workers' life by supervisors and management. The work day extends if one is not able to finish the set target during the usual working hours. In terms of overtime too, the full payment is seldom made. According to the Bangladesh Labour Act, workers are entitled to an overtime pay that is double of the hourly rates during usual working hours. But according to most of the narratives, the overtime pay as mentioned under the law is not paid in full, either the hours or days accounted for are reduced. In the documentary *Sramik Awaaz*, produced by Chaumtoli Haq of Law @ the margins, Hasina Akhter testifies, "If someone has to go to the toilet twice in the same hour, overtime pay is slashed. They made us do night shifts but would not pay. I used to get only basic wages, no overtime at all". Naseema Begum adds, "These days abuse is increasing. Salary has increased by two takas, but they make us work for six takas more. They have reduced the overtime pay too."

The factory management indulges in censuring workers too in times of crises. For instance, if there is any mistake on the part of the worker in finishing a garment, they are asked to report to the chamber where the production manager abuses them for not working properly and threatens to terminate them and deduct the overtime pay. Khaled recollected an incident when a consignment was being packed and "some were not as per the requirements of the buyer. During such situations, the in-charge asks us to pack them

²⁸ Bangladesh Garments Sramik Sanghati. (2018). *Ki Kore Banche Sromik*. Dhaka.

at the bottom of the carton and place the cartons at the bottom of the column of the cartons. The worker was instructed to do it the same day. Unfortunately, the buyer representative who came to check and approve the consignment started from the boxes at the bottom and found the garments were not according to the specifications they wanted. Instantly the blame was put on the worker who did the packaging, but the in-charge who asked to pack the defective garments was not held accountable.” In such instances, in Khaled’s witness, the in-charge gets a bonus and credit for the work while the workers get nothing.²⁹

The surveillance tactics are employed to create a compliant workforce and deter them from forming unions. Fatema Begum, a member of NGWF interviews in Sramik Awaaz says, “If an employer learns that there are workers trying to form a union, then they find ways to fire them from the job. Owners think wrongly that increased wages and benefits can cause closure of factories. The union office sends factory owners the register with the name and address of workers who have raised some concern regarding work and are members of the union. This is done to put pressure on the owners. But the owners discuss the matter among themselves, then they pay the workers whatever they are due and terminate their employment.”

Simultaneously, sexual harassment and violence covered a considerable part of garment workers’ lives. Women crossing the boundaries of the household to enter public paid labour as much as it is a necessity is seen as violating cultural prescriptions of appropriate gender roles. Women in garments are thus considered low on respectability

²⁹ Interviews conducted at Gazipur industrial area.

and equated with being ‘available’ to men. Attaching sexual morality to the work is illustrated in the collapsing of identities of workers into sex workers that finds representations in the comments by supervisors –“why don’t you go sell your body?” Considered as derogatory, it also reflects the struggle of workers to evade being labelled a sex worker by following purdah and self-regulating their movements.³⁰ Sexual harassment inside the factories by men in the supervisory positions competes with incidents of threat outside on the streets (Siddiqi, 2000). Meghna considers the incidents of sexual harassment in the streets as a price she has to pay for her employment in a garment factory. Siddiqi (2003) in a study finds that workers are conscious of how the public discourse perceived and sexualised them. Being indecently proposed for marriage, called sex workers and ensuing harassment has been ubiquitous in a garment worker’s life. The practice of controlling female sexuality is present inside as well as outside the walls of the factory. The position of garment workers in their conflicts over culturally organised gendered codes of spatial use and respectability has been witness to many forms of sexual harassment and violence that define working women’s lives. Complaints of abuse and harassment by supervisors inside the factory were found to be common (Siddiqi, 2003). Sweety recalled an incident when she protested against the supervisor at the previous factory for abusing her co-worker using expletives insulting her parents and family. Sexually charged environment at factory floors, unsafe commute between home and workplace at night and insecure employment alludes to the subordination of women in the network of power that exists in as well as produced through garment work. Tahera

³⁰ The attempts to avoid being called/labelled sex workers is not to reiterate the problems of attaching sexual morality to the profession of sex work, but to only indicate the social acceptance or rather disapproval of sex workers by the society that abides by the middle class notions of sexual purity and also the resistance by garment workers to be identified with the image of garment workers as morally lax. (Siddiqi, 2000; conversations from the field, 2018)

and other workers make an interesting reference when speaking about supervisors. According to their experience at TRZ Garments good supervisors do not last long, “supervisors are chosen on the basis of who can abuse the workers and ensure more production, there are no supervisors who are good to the workers. We had one once, he lasted for only two months”.³¹ As much as it was considered to be the most degrading aspect of their working lives by the women workers, the male workers also understood it to be the worst part of garment work that affects women workers severely.³² In this context, Momin *Bhai* recalled an excerpt from a conversation between a garment worker and him during one of his research projects. On being asked what kind of a man would one want to marry, a young unmarried garment worker had said, “someone who would not make me work in garments.”

Currently, projects on gender based violence in garment factories are being undertaken by various organisations. Maheen Sultan, senior fellow in-charge of gender and social transformation cluster in BRAC University and a member of Naripokkho works on a project titled ‘Shojag’ meaning alert/aware in *Bangla* that was based on gender based violence in garment factories. She found that the perception regarding violence at work was already present among the garment workers contrary to the popular belief that garment workers did not understand gender-based violence. The perception of

³¹ Siddiqi (2003) documents the experiences of harassment of women workers under supervisors in garment factories where harassment and productivity is perceived to be related. She notes that the nature and form of surveillance and pressure at work differ according to the status of compliance of factories. The factories under EPZ operate with greater surveillance but provide for considerable safety to the workers. In contrast, the factories outside the EPZ referred as *Bangla* factories deploy more informal networks of surveillance. These factories also operate under the impression of workers as lazy and in need of disciplinary techniques like hair pulling, pat on the head to ensure the completion of production targets and maintaining productivity. The supervisors unable to ensure the same are considered as weak or incompetent. (pp. 40)

³² Interviews conducted on field. Also, Siddiqi, 2003.

violence, she argues, ranged from “not being allowed to go to the bathroom, or not getting maternity leave when needed, working under pressure for delivery, but there was a lack of differentiation between the kinds of violence”. Maheen argues that it represented to her the entry into these discussions by drawing an initial demarcation between practices that could be defined as *nirjaton* (torture) and *sohingsrota* (violence). She believes that the violence and harassment that a woman faces in the factory is correlated to the violence she faces inside her home. A deeper discussion of domestic violence will be taken up later in the chapter. However, to extend this argument to look at gender based violence in the workplace, the relations of power that intersect garment workers' lives make them vulnerable to harassment by line chiefs, floor supervisors and officials in the position of or under the management. The question of respectability also holds significance in terms of the understanding of sexual harassment of garment workers. The conflicting notions of female respectability that distinguish garment work from other disrespectful work, i.e. sex work, also disturbs the control of male social power.

Coerced yet consensual

Despite the number of factors that make garment workers disposable, the question one is faced with is, why garments? When asked what made workers work in these factories, Barry Laxer, the Canadian businessman had said, “Working for next to nothing is better than working for nothing”. The main premise of most of the documentation work has also been the same. Sweety *apa*, Johura *apa*, and many other workers admitted that this was the only option after they could not find other employment opportunities back in

their villages. In all the reports that are cited and interviews gathered on the field, the response to this question has been unanimous, that there was no other way to sustain.

Some had small shares of family land back in their villages which did not fetch enough for every member of the household. Some had no other employment opportunity available to them due to low levels of education. Feldman and McCarthy (1982) document the employment opportunities for rural and urban women in Bangladesh as demonstrated through their class positions. They note a number of factors that lead to the classification of women as unskilled and low paying workers. The destitution and landlessness forms the context for the entry of women into employment contradicting the social position of women as subordinate to and unequal than men, marking a shift in the traditional system of purdah with the changes in the economic structure. They note education as an important marker that classifies women of lower, lower middle and upper class women into different jobs that also correlate with the degrees of visibility that one can afford and is bestowed. Education and class as markers of status influence the sectors that women are allowed to or choose to enter. The latter are women from towns with family members in affluent occupations (government jobs, bankers and so on) with domestic help to maintain the household. Unlike the women in different classes in rural Bangladesh, urban women are more qualified as they have access to higher education. Some hold university degrees and therefore enter professions that are more in accord with their status. Comparatively, their circles are also wider than their immediate kin networks, to colleagues and friends from educational institutions. Their degrees allow them to enter good marriages as educated women are sought in urban upper-middle/ upper class families. Concomitantly, the rules of purdah shape up differently for women

of this class. Working jobs therefore becomes more of a choice than a necessity. Feldman and McCarthy (1982) argue that the proletarianisation of labour allows insights into the role of women in social reproduction.

While purdah precedes the social analysis by scholars when understanding Bangladesh, Chen (1986) argues for understanding the society through the concept of patriarchy that allows one to uncover the structural basis of the control and domination of women by men. Chen looks at the rural employment of women, mostly in agriculture, and alludes to the sexual division of labour that sustains a village economy. She draws distinction between different classes of women in terms of their kinship relations/ systems. The increasing rates of landlessness and impoverishment has wrought changes in the patriarchal system that have hitherto been in control of female labour and autonomy. She notes five reasons as the implication: a) nuclear families have become the normal household structure; b) traditional family systems have begun to break down including extended family ties; c) rise in divorce and desertion; d) rise in the number of female headed households; and, e) incidence of dowry transaction in the marriage has witnesses a rise. Those below the subsistence level generally have all men as well as women in wage employment. The ones at the subsistence level consist of women in unpaid family labour and paid village labour. The ones above the subsistence level generally withdraw women from paid labour and often from unpaid family labour. As a consequence of loss of land, a large number of families are dependent on the wage labour with women of the households joining the paid labour in the village or outside. Concurrently, with the rise in female headed households, as a result of widowhood, desertion and divorce, she estimates that a minimum of 1.2 million women over the age

of 10 and eight million women (40 percent of these rural women) are seeking wage employment in a labour market that has till date restricted their access keeping it essentially as a male arena. Thus, the women who generally enter wage employment can therefore be identified as middle-aged, single and married, lower middle class, rural women.

Contrary to the patriarchal assumption of work being temporary or secondary in a woman's life, we have historically witnessed a large scale participation of women in the industries that are characterised as informal and work that is defined as contractual and unskilled or semi-skilled. Popularised by Guy Standing (1999) as 'feminisation of labour', the employment of women in these industries at abysmally low wages has been able to succeed owing to the existing patriarchal relations that still consider the man to be the primary wage-earner. As an outcome, the large scale employment of women in these jobs are based on the gendered assumptions that women are more attentive, docile and suited for the repetitive tasks in an assembly line production. Coupled with the existing poverty in third world countries, the availability of cheap labour markets and prevalent gendered ideas on work act as a catalyst for shaping a predominantly female workforce.

In Bangladesh, poverty, low education levels of women, lack of resources, consecutive floods and low returns in agriculture pushed a large number of women from rural districts to join unskilled repetitive work in the garment factories located in the capital city - Dhaka. As traditional patriarchy recognises women as secondary wage earners while men are seen as heads of households and sole earners, women were employed at cheaper wage rates in the garment factories. The employment of women into unskilled work became possible due to docility and obedience - the essential component

of their gender performance. Kabeer notes four different groups of women who entered garment factory: a) women who came from poor households and worked in domestic service or in small workshops or factory units before joining the industry; b) women who joined garment industry as a consequence of death of the husband or the father or collapse of family business; c) women who sought garment work to improve their standard of living or improve their children's prospects; d) women who entered the industry to earn money for their own needs, including saving money for a dowry (Rahman, 2007).

Kibria (1998) agrees with the classification that Naila Kabeer draws. Her research concurs with the studies on migration among garment workers for socio-economic mobility and taking the responsibility for their own wellbeing. Notwithstanding, she argues for pull factors as opposed to the push factors like poverty and social mobility that organise labour spatially. She finds that in addition to the women who entered garment work to sustain her family, there were women who looked forward to moving to the city to achieve financial and personal independence increasingly without male kin (Kabeer and Mahmud, 2004). Most of these women migrated on the basis of some form of contact with the city. For instance, Sweety joined garment work through an uncle who was also employed in a garment factory. Hiring workers from the same district as owner's was a prevalent practice in the initial years as that helped form a sense of relief for the parents. It was considered to be safe when owners hired workers from their own district as that meant that the owner or the relative took over paternal vigilance. However, the sacrificial overtones pertaining to garment work have also been recorded. Sacrifice or altruism has been witnessed in terms of prospects of a better socio-economic condition (pp. 9).

Prescriptions of purdah in such circumstances transformed to complement with the demands of social mobility endeavours (Wright, 2000). The prospect of continued control of female sexuality through the kin networks in the city also contributed to the approval of parents to send their young daughters to work in garment factories (Ahmed, 2004). These differing locations are instrumental in creation of varied experiences on the factory floor. The experiences of embodying garment work intersecting with their position within the networks of social reproduction allows for a layered understanding of garment work.

Embodying garment work: Struggles from factories to homes

“Kaaj korte bhalo e lage, shoril-er byetha o thik e lage. Ekhon mone hoy jei bhaat amra khai seta hojom hobe na jodi amader paa machine na chalayee” - Meghna.

(Translation: There is a certain amount of happiness in working, the body pain also seems normal. Now it feels like the food we eat will not get digested if our legs don't run the machine.)

Siddiqi (2000) notes the complex and ambivalent relationship between the worker and the machine. The pressure to ensure the functioning of the assembly line requires constant motion and speed on the part of the worker. This pressure is exacerbated by the surveillance by supervisors and the pressure of electricity on the bodies. Working constantly without enough breaks slouched on a machine for 10 to 12 hours a day depletes the strength and renders a supernatural image of the machine. Meghna's understanding of her relationship with the machine also echoes this ambivalence when the machine becomes a part of her bodily process to digest her food – an important biological function. The long presence and use of machines take over the bodily

processes that are outside of the individual worker's control. Dressed in a deep brown cotton salwar kameez and carefully pleated dupatta, Meghna arrived at the regional office of the Garment Workers Unity Forum behind her room in Barabari, Gazipur with her friend and roommate Rekha. Colleagues at Interfab which is at a walking distance from their quarters, Meghna has been working for the past 8 years as sewing operator, while Rekha has begun her work life at Interfab two years back in quality check.

It was a Friday and a few days after Eid-ul-fitr when I visited Momin *Bhai's* house for an interview. I was asked to get down at Barabari masjid from where Momin *Bhai* was supposed to pick me up. Upon meeting, we took a rickshaw to his house which took almost 25 to 30 minutes. After getting down from the rickshaw we walked for another 15 minutes to reach his house. Local elections were due in a few days, so the alleys were filled with posters on the wall and strings connecting lamp posts. Factories were reopening after the only and annual stop in production in a year for a duration of 5-7 days for Eid. The *paras* were abuzz with the energy of the workers who had just returned from their village homes spending the only holidays they got with their friends and extended families. There was a certain disappointment as well with the Eid holidays ending, but that was partly overshadowed by the excitement to reunite with colleagues and friends in the city. Meghna and Rekha lived right next to Momin *Bhai's* house (more of a room) and shared the same alley which was more of a corridor. As it was just a few days after Eid and a Friday, Momin's sisters living in the next industrial area had come to visit. My visit was as unannounced as the rains that day which flooded and muddied the alleys leading to the union office behind the quarters next to the local masjid. As it was right after lunch and the end of Eid vacation, we engaged in conversations over their lives

inside the factories and outside as ‘garment women’. Momin *Bhai*, being an active union member and a former garment worker, helped moderate the session to often restructure questions in terms that were simpler to follow and respond to.

As we began talking about factory work, the main complaint was the lack of holidays, the unlimited work that *malik* with the help from management makes them do. Tanaya said, mocking her daily life ritual, “The time of entry into the factory is on us, which is around 8 a.m., but the time of exit is not according to our will”. An average day in the life of a garment worker begins at 5am standing in queues for bathroom and gas facilities in their one-room quarter buildings. After cooking breakfast and lunch, taking a bath, preparing children, if any, to be dropped at the madrasa or an elder relative’s place, she begins her journey to the factory, often by foot.

Workers interviewed in the documentary *Sramik Awaaz* also follow a similar routine. Naseema Begum, a garment worker and a member of Sammilito Garment Sramik Federation, says, “As women we have to manage everything from family and household work to factory work. I only have to endure everything, who else will do that?” Naseema Akhter, a member of BGIWF, also shares her daily concerns, “At night when I go to sleep I am already tensed that I have to wake up in the morning and report at factories by 8 am. That I have to prepare for the whole day’s meals for the family - cook rice, prepare or heat the curries, boil water, and do all the household work. Then take a bath, eat and get ready to leave for work”.³³

³³ Sramik Awaaz, Chaumtoli Haq from Law @ the margins.

The day at work begins with punching ID cards at the gate, followed by a body frisking. At their seats, they begin work by cleaning up their machines where they sit to finish everyday targets of completing 100-120 pieces an hour. The production target is set per day according to the order received. It is usually set at 5 to 10 lakh pieces a day which often increases when the order has to be completed in a short period of time. The lunch break is for one hour where they finish their food and rest for the remaining period or read “*Asar-er namaaj*” (afternoon prayer) before resuming work. After the working hours (at 5.00-6.00 pm), they take a small break of 30 minutes and start working overtime hours which spans for more than 2 hours or till the daily target is reached. It is almost 9.00-10.00 pm by the time they return, sometimes even later. By the time they break for the day after preparing for dinner, food for next morning and cleaning for the night it is almost (often over) 12.00am. The cycle repeats the next day and over. There is only one holiday per week that elapses in weekly chores of washing clothes, cleaning the house with very little rest. This, however, varies according to the family size. Many single women who stay together take a tour of the market or go for movies during the day off, although that happens very rarely. Although the weekly holiday often comes after 2 to 3 months.

The narrator in the Hidden Face of Globalisation was astonished to discover that “workers do not go for movies, do not have bicycles, do not own fans or Walkman, and do not go for vacation”. In 2005, when the garment industry was beginning to get exposed, brands like Disney, Walmart and other US companies had reasoned that Bangladesh is a poor country where 11-17 cents an hour is enough to afford the basic necessities. However, the team’s visit to homes proved otherwise as they bore witness to

the lives of workers trapped in tiny one room huts with roofs made of thatch, scraps of metal and cardboard. Monsoons meant stagnant water and sewage all over, often flooding homes. Floods also meant rampant malaria which incurred expenses of USD 5 for doctors and medicines. It was equal to 4 and ½ day wages for a worker at that time.

With the passage of years and campaigns over decent wages, the housing conditions in the industrial areas have changed, not to a large extent. As extensions to the central district of Dhaka, the industrial areas differ structurally from the city. The spatial expansion of the industry led to changes in the structure of the suburbs. The cityscape shifts radically to a few and far high-rise buildings and commercial areas than the main city. The broad, paved roads turn narrower and dusty as one crosses Turag river on the north, or Buriganga river in the south. The number of public conveyances decreases with long route buses connecting the other districts to the city and rickshaws for commuting within. Inside the alleys are local markets, grocery shops, a few garment shops, and residential quarters. There are only a few buildings taller than 6th floor, while the major part of the area has single-storeyed houses. Often an individual owner rents the other rooms in his house with shared bathroom, kitchen and water facilities. The single rooms are shared by a minimum of three members with a child or a relative. There are flats as well which are shared by single women and men, and couples. Johura joined garment work as a helper at 11. She has worked in the garment industry for more than 12 years now. She shares a one bedroom flat with her sister and her husband; where she lives in the hall and her sister in the main bedroom. The sister and Johura work in the same factory, while the husband works as a driver in another. They share the kitchen, bathroom and a cooler as summer in Bangladesh is hot and humid. These flats have poor

ventilation and lack safety in terms of its common infrastructures like the staircase which is neither plastered nor covered. Some of the kitchens are equipped with a gas line that runs on a schedule, while many use stoves and *chulhas* as well to avoid queues. The gas supply is also irregular within these areas unlike the city, for instance in Mohammadpur the gas line runs throughout the day. This has compelled a lot of families to add another expenditure to their budget for separate supply gas cylinders to save time. The rent for a room, gas and water ranges between BDT 3000 Tk to 5000 Tk (equals to 2500 INR to 3500 INR, or 35 USD to 59 USD) which is higher than what is accounted for rent in the minimum wage.

Udita records the daily diet of garment workers which consists mainly of rice, pulses and vegetables. Fish and meat are highly priced and therefore not affordable. Beef is a luxury food item that workers can afford only once in 6 months or a year. Eggs and small fish are the only protein that is available. Big fish and meat is prepared when guests come or if it is a holiday, although that is rare. The expenses for food range between BDT 5000 Tk to 10000 Tk depending upon the size of the family. Many single workers, predominantly male, avail mess food in the localities which costs more than BDT 6000 Tk a month.³⁴ Workers with children have another expense of child care and education. Workers who send their children to their relatives back in the village send money home. The expenses for child care including education, medical and other care run around BDT 4000 – 5000 Tk. One of the main expenses consists of school fees and medical care. The lack of government schools and predominance of private schools in the industrial area

³⁴ Focussed Group Discussions conducted by BILS. The expenditure on rent, food, medical expenses and children can be found in many research documents published by BILS as well as other organisations in Bangladesh. These estimates are derived from a study of the reports published by BILS, Bangladesh Mahila Parishad and Bangladesh Garments Sramik Sanghati.

leads to many being sent to villages or dropped off at madrasas that provide day care facilities for an affordable fee.

Momin explains, “We undertook a study on this actually. It is true that a majority of the garment workers put their kids in madrasas and not schools. The wages that the workers earn is absolutely insufficient to pay for school fees for their children. And as you know, the expenses of education in a simple school is also quite high for these workers to manage. In villages there are government schools where there is free education and also snacks for these students in a day. But these women have not migrated to the cities from the villages. Now in these industrial areas, each ward has maybe 20-30 factories, but hardly one school which is not enough. So the majority of these children cannot be admitted into these governmental schools. Another reason is, these schools are often very far and that the parents are very busy with their working hours, their children often get ready on their own for school. If the school is far from home, the parents are not willing to admit their children as safety concerns are there like who would drop and pick their children and look after them while they are working in their factories. So, the workers prefer to put their children in schools that are nearby. For instance, there is a ward with 34 kindergarten and government schools, but these kindergarten schools are very expensive and therefore unaffordable for the workers as the fees is around BDT 3000-4000 Tk where the workers earn hardly BDT 8000 Tk per month. So after a lot of calculations, workers prefer to keep their children in madrasas and *yateem khanas* as they provide for the food and security of the kids.³⁵ This relieves the tension of the parents. Another reason is, the expenses are comparatively very less as these madrasas undertake

³⁵ Majority of the mosques in the industrial area have *yateem khanas* that provide food and shelter.

contribution drives as well. The expenses in madrasas are around BDT 1000-1500 Tk.”³⁶ However, this does not mean that children of the garment workers do not study in kindergarten schools. The kids who go to these schools mainly come from families where either both the parents work, or they are the single child of parents who are in-charge or supervisors. A lot of children are sent to the native villages to their grandparents to reduce their expenses and also ensure safety. In the village schools undertaken by the government, students get free books, a nominal amount as scholarship which is absent in the cities.

The industrial area also lacks proper health and medical facilities. Prolonged work in the same posture, lack of rest and few toilet breaks leads to a range of health problems. Majority of the workers report that they have constant body pain from sitting in the same posture for 4-5 hours at a stretch. In the study conducted by Bangladesh Garments Sromik Sanghati, 39% of the garment workers suffered from major medical issues, like respiratory diseases, typhoid, jaundice, urine infection, and ulcer. Unhealthy working and living conditions and lack of a balanced diet leads to the majority of these ailments. According to the workers, they prefer to visit a local pharmacy for medicines instead of going to a doctor due to distance and expenses (Choudhury, et al., 2016, pp. 60-61). The health centers in factories have also been reported to be lacking in equipment, doctor and medicine for medical check-up. In most of the situations, workers are given painkillers and sent back to their machines.³⁷ Traveling to the city to avail hospital services also becomes difficult as city hospitals do not tend to workers properly. Local pharmacy shops become the most accessible and affordable option in these circumstances.

³⁶ Interview with Mominur Rahman Momin, central committee member of Garments Sromik Oikyo Forum.

³⁷ Bangladesh Garments Sromik Sanghati. 2018. *Ki Kore Banche Sromik*. Dhaka. pp. 40-41.

As the women grow older than 35 years, they are replaced with younger girls to keep up with the production time. Monira Begum, a former garment worker, has been working in the garment sector for 20 years before she was fired for weak eyesight and being unable to meet her production quota.³⁸ During a research project on reproductive health of 30-35 years old garment workers, Momin *Bhai* found that he had a very low number of respondents. He explains that by the time women reach their 30s, they are gradually terminated for not keeping up with the set hourly target. After doing the repetitive and exhaustive work for more than 10-15 years, women who began working in their teen years as helpers reach their retirement years. Productivity of workers is prioritised over health concerns. Termination due to pregnancy is another common instance in the industry. If an employer observes any woman is pregnant, she is fired immediately. Majority of the garment workers do not disclose their pregnancy to the management as long as possible. After six months of pregnancy, women are required to submit the ultra-sonogram report to their companies. When a woman is pregnant, she is entitled to four months leave with pay - two months before the birth and two months after the baby is born. The mother can join after 56 days of her child's birth. But most of the time, when she goes back to her job, she is fired. Even when asked for a reason, they are just told that the job is gone.³⁹

These problems get exacerbated as garment workers are often paid late. Delay in disbursement of wages makes it difficult to manage all the expenses mentioned above. In terms of food, the grains are managed from home and workers carry a substantial amount of rice from home during visits. What makes it difficult is managing money for other

³⁸ Hidden Face of Globalisation. National Labour Committee.

³⁹ Mostofa Kamal, in *Sramik Awaaz*.

basic necessities. It is common for neighbourhood grocery shops to give ration in debt to the workers (Ahmed and Akond, 2013). Although it does become difficult to avail that option once the factory holds wages for more than 2-3 months. The bigger or urgent expenses are managed through loans from family or moneylenders. *Samitis* are prevalent neighbourhood loan institutions where a nominal amount is collected every month. The availability of loans from *samitis* are not as regular but workers reported *samitis* as one of the options they avail during the financial crisis.

Responsibilities of social reproduction

The long working shifts and domestic work forms the core of the double day at work argument with respect to garment workers. Additionally, women are compelled to undertake a larger share of child care duties as fulfilling her gender role. The first narrative in Udata documents the life of Nargis Buya, a 25 year old single mother who began working in the garment industry as a child. Her husband left her while she was pregnant just like her mother and aunts. Her son is taken care of by her mother, Shohibita Rani, who yearns to be called ‘*naani*’ by her grandchildren but has to make do with ‘*amma*’ instead. Shohibita Rani’s experience of taking care of her grandchildren builds the narrative of motherless upbringing of the children of the garment workers.

In the same documentary, Fatema is seen cooking a quick meal in the common kitchen outside of her room while her husband Mohammad Akter wakes their daughter and prepares her to drop at his mother’s house before leaving for work. Jannatul, their daughter, dutifully brushes her teeth and gets ready without delay. When asked who had to look after domestic duties, Khaled Hossain who works in Interfab said that he takes

over domestic work from time to time from washing clothes to cooking meals. Most of the women although confirmed that they did major share of the work – some say men do housework whenever the women are sick, some said that they do not feel like pressuring men to work as they come home tired, but they ask “why should we have to ask, we also work equally hard outside?”⁴⁰ Tania, another worker interviewed for an Oxfam Australia study with BILS titled *Made in poverty: the true price of fashion*, resents the twice-a-year meeting with her daughter. Tania’s husband left her when she was two months pregnant. She moved to Dhaka with her child to find a job in the garment industry. She was later joined by her parents to look after her child, but as expenses rose it became difficult for her to afford basic necessities for three more people. She sent her child away with her parents to her village to look after them from afar and meets them twice a year. Sending the children to the parents is a common practice among parents who are engaged in garment work. The lack of affordable education and childcare facilities compels them to send their children to their villages to be taken care of by parents or extended family members.

How do we understand the transformation of these gendered roles in instances like that of Nargis and her mother Shohibita or Fatema Akhter’s husband Mohammad’s involvement in childcare duties preparing their daughter to be dropped off at their relative’s place in Uditā? Or the numerous parents who meet their children only once or twice a year, like Tania? In contrast to those struggling to make ends meet while looking after their children, understanding parenting practices becomes a complicated exercise. Although short of a generalisation, Mohammad’s participation in child care or Belal’s

⁴⁰ FGD conducted in Gazipur industrial area.

equal contribution to housework illustrates how working class households may not and are unable to hold onto the traditional gender roles that demarcate these as women's duties and responsibilities. Like commodities embody the social labour that goes into its production, garment workers and their families embody the social production of labour that goes into rejuvenating their bodies and those around them. While wage remains a contentious issue, the responsibilities of social reproduction for sustenance are fulfilled by the workers and their families.

The conflict between factory work and responsibilities of care continues to remain unresolved. In violation of the codes of conduct, factories do not provide or allow access to day care facilities for the workers. For instance, Hasina Akhter, member of Bangladesh Center for Worker Solidarity interviewed in *Sromik Awaaz*, disclosed that lots of factories have day care centres for the kids, but they are merely for show during audit visits. She further says, "If there was a day care centre I could keep my kids in, I could go or see my children every hour or two. I could be assured by the workers looking after my kids. As a result, my work quality could have increased which would help the production. I could be free from any kind of mental stress". While the inability to tend to 'motherly' duties is seen as incompetence, the lack of time and scope to take care of the kids is also accepted regretfully. Fatema Begum of the National Garment Workers Federation regrets, "I have small kids whom I have to wash, feed and prepare for study which I am not able to do. A father cannot match with the things that I will be able to do. But I can't maintain the family if I stay home too. The kids complain and refuse to stay with their father because he scolds and beats them. I convince them to stay home and promise to take

them out on my day off. Then they stop crying and get convinced. Their father only bathes them, feeds them while I am at work”.

Transforming social relations

Garments households are predominantly female headed households. This is due to a number of factors. As many women entered garments during the time when it opened for women, men were employed in other jobs than that of an operator. There are a few men who are employed as sewing operators, but most of the women workers informed that their husbands are daily wage earners as rickshaw pullers or construction workers. On the other hand, a large number of women are either deserted, divorced or widowed. Hasina’s husband used to torture her physically. He used to demand money from her. At some point he engaged in illegal activities and was jailed. She tried to get him out of jail out of courtesy for looking after her, but did not have enough money to get bail. She found that selling a kidney was the only way to get that amount of money. But her landlord found out and called her father to inform about her plans. He cautioned that this would cause her problems in future because her husband was not a good person. That is when her parents managed the money for her husband’s bail. After coming out of jail, he continued abusing her that has left a scar on her head. Eventually, she left with her son and filed for divorce. Naseema’s husband left her and has married again. He comes sometimes, but again takes off whenever there is a fight and discontinues any form of contact. Shornali has also survived domestic violence. She was tortured by her husband for dowry money. Coming from a poor family, she could not pay him the dowry money but handed over her salary every month. Eventually, he left her after a few years. Johura’s husband also left her after a year of marriage to remarry another colleague. She

tried finding and convincing him to stay with her, but he refused and deserted her. She has no contact with her husband now.⁴¹ The incidence of men deserting their wives are common stories among garment workers.

In our second meeting, Momin *Bhai* referred to his abilities as a researcher in a casual conversation on the research process. He mentions that during one of the projects that he was working on, he spoke to some women workers about their marriages. Being a male, he admitted he understood the hurdles, but made consistent efforts to be able to hold candid conversations with the women and build trust. Eventually, he was able to establish trust that led them to share their experiences of workplace relationships. There was one worker, let us call her Abha, who shared that she was married but in a relationship with a colleague at the factory she works at. She further shared that her husband is also employed in another factory and is in a relationship with another woman. Upon asking if her husband knew, she said that they did not speak about it but both were aware of each other's relationships. Momin *bhai* did not ask her anything further, but she continued, "We work for more than twelve hours, there is no time to give to the husband after household chores. It is natural that workplace relationships would grow stronger than our marriages because we share more time and space with our friends than at home".

During my field visit to the BGWTUC office in Gazipur, Jehana *apa* had asked me if I was married. When I answered in negative, she said "Good that you are not. Isn't it like a vanity bag, cannot throw it also, and cannot carry it also?" I had laughed along with her at the metaphor for marriage. As much as the metaphor was new to me, the response was not. The double shift at factory and at home, the abusive behaviour at work,

⁴¹ Interview conducted in Tongi, Gazipur.

stress over wages and fear of life at work were standard responses that have been recorded in various research reports and during my fieldwork contradicted the idea of marriages based on gender division of labour. These were not an anomaly, but not a widespread phenomenon.

Shornali summed it up in her testimony as precisely as possible. She grieved that “Female workers face a lot of problems. Especially when she returns home at night her husband becomes angry. He knows his wife was at work but still tortures her. He asks where she was all this time. But when she gets paid, he snatches all of it. He never says that you are working so hard so late, why are you giving me the money, you only keep it! One of the girls feeds her in-laws during the lunch break then runs back to the factory. There is so much work that she does not get time to breathe. Isn’t it like double shift work? She may do only one, and another one can be managed by all of us together.”

To look at garment workers’ lives, therefore, requires us to look at the production practices inside the factories as well as the reproduction processes unfolding outside its gates. As we explore the labour practices inside the garment factories, we understand how the assumption of this workforce as cheap labour becomes the sole driving force behind the global garment chains. Hasan Ashraf uses the phrase “garments world” to symbolise the rhythm and time the garment factories work on that remains obscured from the sight of those outside its boundaries. This world extends till the boundaries of the industrial areas where work takes many forms and reshapes bodies, homes and relationships. Labour agency also becomes complicated as the workers’ material and subjective realities are enmeshed in a struggle for a dignified existence and fulfillment of traditionally set roles as responsible citizens, parents and partners.

Chapter 5 - Mapping Movement Networks

“Solidarity is created and expressed by the process of mutual association that attempts to restructure or reorder human relations.” – *Cultures of Solidarity* (Fantasia, 1988, pp. 11)

The documentary evidence in the international activist spaces and anti-sweatshop campaigns are mostly in the form of testimonial narratives from the women garment workers in the Global South. The last chapter was an attempt at retelling those narratives privileging the local conditions and circumstances that often remain unaccounted for and undiscovered in the international campaigns. As it involves the processes that restructure relations of production in the garment industry and looks at the creation of a ‘garments world’ that runs on its own time, rhythm and system, we encounter the ways in which the industry shapes up and is shaped by the garment workers.

This retelling is significant when women workers are predominantly portrayed in these campaigns as victims of local suppliers’ and brand buyers’ demands, thus creating the image of third world women as helpless victims. In this chapter, the discourse on sweatshop labour and rights built by the international activist networks and campaigns are explored further to understand its implications for local labour rights networks. Tracing the relationships between transnational and local level networks and organisations involved in the garment sector, this chapter looks into the existing literature on transnational campaigns in both academic and popular platforms. It also looks at the discussions on labour rights that emerge from the demands framed in terms of

accountability, transparency and safety at workplace to the very recent #PayUp campaign during the current Covid-19 crisis. These campaigns are aimed at not only putting pressure on the brands, but ineluctably shaping the discourse on rights in the international, national and local levels. This chapter attempts to understand and examine the relevance of these campaigns in the multiple networks that are engaged with the garment workers struggle today.

These activist networks have shifted the locus of conflict between the employer and the workers on the factory floor, to the international stage where the consumer becomes an important agent in the resolution of that conflict in a system of transnational governance. Additionally, these networks and campaigns seem to be providing possibilities for democratic functioning of institutions in nations that are deemed ‘thinned states’ or weak states. The transnational networks note the failure of state institutions in implementing labour practices with legal provisions and hence call for opening of more channels that would facilitate transnational governance of the supply chains. In the context of the Bangladeshi garment industry, the Bangladesh Accord on building and fire safety has been seen as one such attempt that offers possibilities of resolving the problems of the global garment industry. The relations of power that exist at the global scale between the capitalist brands, suppliers, unions, labour organisations and workers engender the unequal relations in the international campaigns as well as the layered activist networks working locally and internationally. The 2013 Bangladesh Accord has been seen as a remarkable step in the transnational governance of supply chains. While the Accord has brought forth discussions on safety and accountability of brands and

suppliers in ensuring a safe working environment, the everyday struggles in the industrial areas have only witnessed a rise in the number of unrests.

This chapter traces the local level struggles that have historically been witnessed in the industrial areas, regarding wages, holidays, building safety, pensions, maternity leave and benefits, and other human rights. Re-centring the question of labour organising and struggles to the strike actions that have been a regular feature of garment workers' lives, this chapter looks at the discourse of militant versus responsible workers and the demands regarding wages and other benefits. The chapter returns to the women's question in the context of the battles that women and all workers have been waging against the state, the garment factory owners, the international brands and the cooptation of leaders of the movements. This is not to discard the possibilities of transnational activism, but to emphasise the limitations of these attempts at making major transformations in the advancement of labour rights.

This chapter is divided into the following sections. The first section considers the literature on transnational networks based on the claims of transnational or stateless governance. This section looks mainly at the primacy accorded to the consumers and transnational corporations in resolving conflicts that originate at the factory floors between the owner/ management and the workers. The next section offers a systematic reading of the Bangladesh Accord – as an example of a transnational multi-stakeholder agreement – from its implementation to consequences. The third section is a contextualised and local reading of the garment workers struggle locating labour agency in the industrial areas in Dhaka. In an attempt to relocate the struggle back to the industrial areas, this section looks at the labour unions and NGOs trying to mobilise

garment workers through strike actions, research, advocacy, training and lobbying using their own networks. It further attempts to project the demands that have been a constant feature of anti-sweatshop campaigns from the local context. The demands that emerge from the local struggles also run the risk of being rejected as conspiratorial attempts to dismantle the garment industry. The last section explores the political subjectivities that emerge among the workers in their engagement with union spaces and their factory spaces. The intertwined spaces of factory, union and home in terms of marking the struggles of women is the focus in this section.

Possibilities of transnational governance

The logic of capital, of accumulation, expansion and spatial growth, has been a major part of intensifying the process of globalisation since the age of industrialisation. The emergence of ‘commodity chains’ as conceptualised by Gary Gereffi and Miguel Korzeniewicz (1994) involves linking production processes with layers of global outsourcing assumes an important part in the discourse on transnational activism and networks and the larger struggle for labour rights. As the production process is segmented into fractions, with manufacturing taking place in one country, of assembling in another, and marketing in yet another, the onus of ensuring proper conditions of work and abiding by the rules of contract does not lie with the brand name companies which bring in the capital. The multinational companies, located mostly in the United States and Europe, invest in the low wage labour markets of the South Asian countries through chains of subcontracting, augmenting the physical and geographical expansion of capitalist forces. Tsing (2009) terms this as ‘supply chain capitalism’ as subcontracting emerges as an

exciting practice allowing for procuring manufactured goods from distant regions without much investment or undertaking responsibility.

We witness a dense network of activists, unionists, academicians, consumers and workers interacting at a global level to resist the growing hegemony of capital. The weak state/ government regulations in terms of exports and the urge to accumulate capital by the Third World nations has contributed to the tightening of the control of brand buyers and retailers on these supply chains. The ineffective and insufficient labour laws in weak states acts as a catalyst to the mushrooming of these garment supply chains as the buyer gains the access to cheap labour supply without owning up the responsibilities of abiding by the laws. In this context, the labour activists and human rights organisations that form the transnational activist networks have been seen as crucial in resisting the capitalist expansion and against these hegemonic and exploitative production chains.⁴² Margaret E. Keck and Kathryn Sikkink (1998) argue that the networks of activists, unionists, consumers, workers and academicians, which form the civil society in the buyer and manufacturing countries are crucial to wage a sustained fight against the human rights violations that take place in the Third World countries. ‘Boomerang pattern’ has been deemed as an alternative where the local groups interact and find connections with the groups that pressurise their governments in the industrialised or developed countries that may benefit the local groups in the manufacturing countries. This process of creating pressure is essentially based on invoking global norms that stress on the upholding of human rights worldwide. “Keck and Sikkink, borrowing from Alison Brysk, have

⁴² Evans, Peter. “Fighting Marginalisation with Transnational Networks: Counter-hegemonic Globalisation”. Symposium. 231-241.

developed a typology of tactics that transnational networks employ in “their efforts at persuasion, socialisation, and pressure” that consists of

(1) *information politics* [that] . . . quickly and credibly generate politically usable information and move to where it has the most impact; (2) *symbolic politics* [that] . . . call upon symbols, actions, or stories that make xxvi introduction sense of a situation for an audience that is frequently far away; (3) *leverage politics* [that] . . . call upon powerful actors to affect a situation where weaker members of a network are unlikely to have influence; and (4) *accountability politics* [that] . . . hold powerful actors to their previously stated policies or principles.”” (Brooks, 2007, xxv-xxvi)

Serving as a catalyst that enables local efforts to become more efficacious, these transnational advocacy networks are seen as a crucial element to counter the capital driven globalisation process and turn it in favour of the most dispossessed. These networks were based on three interrelated processes – transmitting information, invoking global norms, and shifting political venues. As isolation is witnessed to be one of the main factors behind exploitation of cheap labour markets, the efficacy of these networks is embedded in the transmission of information, locally and globally. The activist networks emerge as a response to the globalisation process engineered by the market and capitalist forces, using the same logic of forging connections beyond the borders to disrupt the smooth functioning of the process of accumulation. The point of intersection between the actors and market are the products manufactured. With the allocation of manufacturing responsibilities on the suppliers based in the Third World countries, the buyers and retailers focused only on the image making for the marketing of the products. There were not only the products on display but also an identity associated with it which

regenerated the profits. Therefore, wearing Nike shoes made one sexually attractive, socially sophisticated and popular, thus increasing the profit margin for the retailers. The association between the products and the working conditions under which the products were manufactured were the cornerstones for transnational activist networks to mobilise the consumers. Fair conditions of work came to be an important measure fulfilling the ‘utility function’ of purchasing a product for an average customer. The sweatshop as a site of material and symbolic production turned into something where the assumption was of the consumer as a rightful political agent because of their purchasing power (Brooks, 2007). Consumer boycotts therefore became an effective mechanism to demand accountability from the brands in implementation of proper and safe conditions of work in the factories. Striking at the sales through boycott was compounded with the strategy of “naming and shaming” the brands associated with the products (in the market).

Consumer campaigns moving away from the sites of productions also has implications for local organising where multinational corporations are deemed with a certain moral agency (Brooks, 2007; Siddiqi, 2020). Inevitably the economic power of multinational corporations and their moral agency is equated in the global governance mechanisms/supply chain management (Scheper, 2017). The demand for accountability gave rise to the model of monitoring brands and their practices by independent actors, such as the human rights organisations. The abolition of child labour in the Rugmark carpet industry in India is cited as a successful campaigns of independent monitoring. In the case of Rugmark, several civil rights activists in India and child rights organisations in the First World countries campaigned together against the exploitative practices of global brands of employing child labour in India and over the globe. Consequently, the

conditions of work and the use of children in manufacturing of carpets were highlighted to shame the retailers through transmission of information of what constituted right to childhood. Independent monitoring committees were constituted with inspection teams who would pay unannounced visits to the looms to check if children were working, and the factories that qualified carried the organisation's "child labour free" seal. Similarly, the 'maquila' zones in Guatemala City witnessed a shift towards the efficacy of independent monitoring to bring a 'culture of compliance' by the local labour and human rights activists. Coping from a civil war and highly militarised government, the Guatemalan activists followed the "boomerang pattern" to garner support from the international community for the need for democratisation of the state and its institutions, by transnational activist networks. In response to the deplorable condition of social and political rights in the country and severe labour repression, the non-state organisation Commission for the Verification of Codes of Conduct (henceforth COVERCO) was founded in 1997 comprising of labour activists and human rights activists with a long and respected history in the struggles in Guatemala (Seidman, 2007). The organisation stressed on transparency, integrity and balance. They accepted monitoring projects only if they were scheduled to last a minimum of eighteen months and conducted repeated, frequent and unannounced visits by trained monitors, met with workers off-site and published public reports. The independence from the influence of corporate clients was an essential feature of COVERCO. By directing the attention of transnational activists in Geneva and Washington and the international clothing workers union towards the threat to unionism and deplorable working conditions, COVERCO compelled the Ministry of

Trade to threaten the subcontractors with a cancellation of export license, effectively using state's control over access to market, to enforce compliance.

Independent monitoring turned out to be an important mechanism to enforce 'core labour standards' invoking universal global norms. Concurrently it also worked in the 'naming and shaming' strategies directed at the brand images that multinationals propagate through avenues of marketing. One of the modes involved publicising the testimonials from the sweatshops to the audiences in the Global North, as their 'powerful' consumers. Campaigns of Clean Clothes Campaign, Labour Behind the Label and other global rights organisations bear testimony to these modes engaged in by the transnational activists and networks to mobilise support against the inhuman and unsafe working conditions at these sweatshops. Seidman terms this as 'bearing witness to and seeking protection for vulnerable victims' in her documentation of international campaigns as opposed to the general trend of stopping at successful mobilisations (Seidman, 2007). As we saw in the last chapter, the personal narratives of workers hold a place of eminence in these campaigns against the violations of human rights in the Global South.

The recent debates of labour academics from the Global South focus on the local labour collective and nature of the state in a globalised world. Adhering to regulations and arguing for transparency, the consumer is conceptualised as a regulatory pressure in these campaigns. The urgency of 'stateless' regulatory schemes thus employed seeks to manoeuvre through the inefficiencies of states that prioritise accumulation of capital to compete in the global market. Termed as "thinned national states", these states tend to overlook regulations and trade off labour rights between job creation and economic growth (Seidman, 2008). The need for democratising institutions and the nature of

institutional regulating mechanisms assumes a substantial place in these discussions. The instance of Guatemalan labour and human rights activists forming alliances with the Global North activists and organisations to respond to the exploitative working conditions and the repressive military government exemplifies this need for democratisation in states with weak national labour laws and regulations. The networks also demand accountability from the national governments of the supplier countries to intervene legally and on the level of policy to check on labour violations in the supply chain sweatshops. The failure of many such interventions due to ‘soft’ regulations and the inability of countries to control multinationals owing to the threat of capital flight give rise to this ‘global civil society’ advocating for global governance. The Bangladesh Fire and Safety Accord, an independent monitoring scheme, is seen as one such attempt at global governance with non-state actors, the multinational companies, local unions and workers coming together into a formal agreement to ensure safe working conditions through inspections and conducting training programmes for the workers. Though there are limitations to such monitoring schemes, these governance struggles act as a catalyst in the connections between the local unions in the supplier and the buyer countries which play crucial roles in the agreements and the networks.⁴³

The centrality of the local actors in the resistance towards capital by creating their own methods marks a crucial turn towards understanding labour under globalisation (Herod, 2012). Contextualising studies on labour in their socio-political, historical and cultural realities helps unfold the nature of power exerted by labour to negotiate with the

⁴³ Jamie K McCallum refers to governance struggles as ‘the exercise of power in the absence of an overarching political authority, usually by a constellation of institutions of institutions that make decisions and enforce compliance with norms and rules at the supranational level (McCallum, 2013).

functioning of the capital to its detriment. Categorised under two broad sources, ‘old’ or ‘traditional’ and ‘new’, forms that labour power assumes, they can be distinguished as structural, associational and institutional, coalitional and cultural-social, respectively (Zajak et al., 2017; Webster, 2015). In the case of the RMG industry in Bangladesh, the ‘new’ forms of labour power find illustration in the campaigns by rights based organisations on transparency and compliance such as ‘Go Transparent!’, ‘Right to work without fear for life’ and the like that work in coalition with the local activists to broadcast cases of discrepancies and in framing demands based on the socio-cultural context of the country. The coalitions that emerge between the workers, local activists, human rights organisations, and labour activists worldwide leading to institutional arrangements to frame issues and demands comes under the ‘new’ forms of workers’ power. In a recent issue of *Global Labour Journal*, a global forum for scholarly work on comparative sociology of labour movements, a group of scholars discuss Transnational Labour Alliances (TLAs) as different from Transnational Activist Networks (TANs) distinctly marking the shift towards coalitions between labour activists and unions at the global level. Transnational Labour Alliances consist of workers and labour activists, mainly organised in local or national unions, workers’ council, global union federations and other workers’ organisations. As opposed to the TANs, TLAs target mainly the employer and are more concerned with the immediate material concerns and outcomes as it has implications for the collective actions and guiding designs for transnational campaigns. The intersection of three forms of power, structural, institutional and coalitional, that labour embodies defines the coordination behind the networks of labour activism (NOLAs). These networks view labour as an active agent which holds structural

power to interrupt production, institutional power to enforce regulations citing formal and informal rules, and coalitional power to mobilise non-labour actors on whom the employers depend for business activities to enforce their demands (Brookes, 2017).

Moving beyond transnational activist networks, social movement unionism, or new modes of worker organising in global supply chains, the conceptualisation of NOLAs reveal the roles and relationships of different actors across multiple contexts (Zajak et al., 2017). Concerned mainly with cross border strategising and cross organisational networking, NOLA scholars shift attention to the multiple forms of labour agency that are witnessed through the labour's power embedded in the local, national and transnational spheres of production. Particular political contexts of countries facilitate the shaping of the network pattern that depend upon the national institutions and political cultures of the actors. The nature of the relationship between the state or the government, the factory owners and traders, the civil society groups and the workers determines the shaping of the labour networks locally and globally.

The conceptualisation of solidarity depends on the intersection of vulnerabilities of the worker as a citizen of a nation, a worker in the factory, the gendered labour in the household, and in meetings and rallies. The avenue of global governance often lies on this idea of borderless and universal right to livelihood, and life as a citizen on a whole, or in other words, the rights of labour as citizens and agents of capital income in an export dependent economy.

What after the Bangladesh Accord?

As an illustration of global governance, the Bangladesh Accord has been studied extensively by scholars concerned with the garment production networks. Dominated by the scholarship on labour activist networks as well as corporate social responsibility, the Accord has been seen as a landmark agreement that has shown possibilities of ensuring compliance and safety of garment workers. In the course of my fieldwork and the focus of research questions, engagement with Accord and its modalities is primarily through already existing literature on the initiative which has documented the effects and pitfalls of Accord for building and fire safety (henceforth Accord) as well as the similar agreement – Alliance for worker safety in Bangladesh (henceforth Alliance).

Reinecke and Donaghey (2018) argue that the Accord signifies a paradigm shift as a new and important agreement that shows the prospect of changing labour lives through a multi-stakeholder approach.⁴⁴ They argue that it offers a platform where equal representation from retailers and unions and NGOs is made possible. As an industry led social auditing mechanism, Accord is considered to be a consumer and labour-led initiative that constitutes cajoling and pressurising companies leveraging reputational risk for compliance from brands. Similarly, Kumar and Mahoney (2014) also look at the prospects of the agreement as brands are made to comply with basic fire and safety regulations and to come in interaction with the unions instead of the management.

In this context, it is important to recall the signatories of both these agreements. Prior to the constitution of the Accord, international rights bodies were already campaigning on fire and building safety violations that took root after the fires at Garib

⁴⁴ Also see Anner et al., 2013.

and Garib Factory and That's It factory in 2010. Followed by the deadliest fire at Tazreen Fashions in 2012 and the collapse of Rana Plaza in 2013, the need for an international agreement became imperative as it would be more effective than the voluntary codes of conduct. The Accord was the culmination of these campaigns undertaken individually by Clean Clothes Campaign, War on Want, Workers Rights Consortium and International Labour Rights Forum (Huq, 2019; Al Bhadily, 2015).⁴⁵ As a legal agreement applicable for a duration of five years, the Bangladesh Accord was signed on 23rd May 2013 by 40 brands and retailers, two global unions – IndustriALL and UNI Global, and, eight Bangladeshi unions – National Garment Workers Federation (NGWF), Bangladesh Revolutionary Garment Workers Federation (BRGWF), IndustriALL Bangladesh Council (IBC), Bangladesh Garment and Industrial Workers Federation (BGIWF), Bangladesh Garment Textile and Leather Workers Federation (BGTLWF), Bangladesh Independent Garment Workers Union Federation (BIGWUF), United Federation of Garment Workers (UFGW), and, Bangladesh Textile and Garment Workers League (BTGWL). The Clean Clothes Campaign, Maquila Solidarity Network, Workers Rights Consortium, International Labour Rights Forum assumed the role of witness signatories with the International Labour Organisation (ILO) as an independent advisor and neutral chair. By the end of that year, around 190 brands and retailers, located in 20 European, North American and Asian countries and in Australia, had signed the Accord.

According to the agreement, brands sourcing from Bangladeshi suppliers were to comply with unannounced inspections conducted by independent team of inspectors at

⁴⁵ H&M had conducted their inspection at Garib & Garib Factory four months prior to a fire in 2010 which killed 29 workers. They failed to note the lack of fire-fighting equipment, emergency exits and no smoke detectors. Gap, which was sourcing from That's It Sportswear factory also underwent a fire accident in December 2010, which also killed 29 workers (Al Bhadily, 2015).

the factories for fire and building safety measures. In the meanwhile, they were legally bound to continue sourcing from Bangladeshi suppliers, prevent flight and fund remediation if and when required. In addition to inspections, safety training and committees were also to be formed which would train workers on dealing with workplace accidents. The Accord currently is in transition and would end in May 2021. The functions of the Accord would be taken over by the Remediation Coordination Cell, the body constituted under the Government of Bangladesh's National Initiative to look after health and safety conditions of the factories and follow remediation process (ILO, May 2017). The Alliance is a similar five year agreement formulated by anti-union US brands and retailers signed in 2013. Unlike the Accord, it is not legally binding and is mostly focused on problem solving than capacity building. It overlooks 600 factories on fire and safety regulations. In addition to not being legally bound, the reports submitted by the Alliance were not made public disregarding the demand for transparency. Additionally, the brands were not prevented from lowering prices for the suppliers making it difficult for the suppliers to continue operations. In case of any conflict, the Accord suggested that the resolution would require signatories complaining to the administrative dispute resolution process while the Alliance had no dispute resolution process which eventually rendered the agreement unenforceable.

Reinecke and Donaghey (2018) make a case for consumption as well as production oriented initiatives that would materialise projects of global labour governance. In their analysis of the Accord, they note that there is a certain amount of complementarity and conflict between unions and international campaigns that makes it possible to pursue these projects. However, they note that aggressive actions are not

preferred by unions which frustrates the campaigns, and campaigns' shortsightedness which in turn frustrates the unions. Consumer-centred approaches are mostly focused on strategies that miss the substantive issues that the garment workers have been agitating against rendering these actions more symbolic than effective. Nonetheless, the international campaigns, NGOs and unions are seen to share a clear and sense of purpose, which in the case of the Bangladeshi garment industry is occupational health and safety. There is also a clear sense of the roles they are supposed to fulfill.

Huq (2019) argues that the Accord rather reflects the dominant neoliberal approaches similar to CSR efforts of multinationals which have remained ineffective. She proposes that agreements that would build or enhance organisational capacities of workers would be more effective ways to ensure labour rights inside the factories. She further notes that the health committees are short-sighted as the impact on the health noted as by Afshar – “dust and smoke inhalation, noise, lack of ventilation, eyestrain, musculoskeletal pain, stress, and exposure to lights, electric wires, and chemical adhesives” are not considered (Huq, 2019, pp. 71). Gender issues such as, maternity leave, sexual harassment and assault are not considered as important measure of health of garment workers. Momin *bhai*, while recalling a research project, confirms the need to focus on the reproductive and other health concerns of workers due to the exhausting and physical nature of garment work. He was asked to note the health condition of garment workers in the age group of 40-45, stressing especially on reproductive health. Initially, he found the topic interesting and prepared his field plan but when he began his fieldwork he realised that there were not many workers in that age group. He said, “Women usually join garments at a very young age but this exhausting work that they do for more than 20

years decays their body so quickly that they cannot continue after they enter their late 30s. How was I to find this project?”

The Accord has been seen as ineffective in terms of completing inspections and training workers on occupational health and safety. The main criticism of such a multi-stakeholder agreement has been its constitution that holds the brands and unions at par as equal representatives when the brands hold more power and influence in configuring the supply chain management. Transnational labour advocates and NGOs working in this sector take up claims of labour and transform them into contractual agreements. But this not only limits the ethical demands to regulative rules of corporate responsibility, it also remains uncritical of the constitutive rules that make network based outsourcing practices possible (Scheper, 2017). Apart from this stark difference in the position of unions and labour representatives with regard to the brands, the Accord and Alliance include only a small fraction of garment factories.⁴⁶ Anner (2018) documents the fall in sourcing prices from the buyers and shortening of lead times, while the industry has increased its export earnings by almost 5%, from USD 24.49 billion in 2013-14 to USD 29.2 billion in 2017-18 as an impact (Rahman and Rahman, 2020) . He notes,

“In the case of Bangladesh, prevailing wages only cover an estimated 14% of living expenses, which is the lowest level among major apparel exporting countries (WRC 2013). In sum, the pricing squeeze has resulted in persistently low wages that do not cover living needs.” (Anner, 2018, pp. 7)

⁴⁶ The Accord and Alliance together include around 1900 factories, while the number of garment factories presently functioning is around 7000. (Huq, 2018; Clean Clothes Campaign, 2013)

In a recent series of articles on the effects of Accord, Ahlquist and Mosley (2021) find that public firms have higher rates of participation in the Alliance and Accord. More firms in Europe agree to sign agreements, they note, due to their histories of labour movements. This is not to suggest that they are aware and concerned about labour rights, but that they are aware of what labour unrest could lead to, in terms of production delays. On the part of the US brands, the impetus to not sign these agreements simultaneously point to the fact that firms do not want to be traced by the US custom authorities. The garment workers in the supplier firms confirm undergoing safety training more than one time. However, they also mention that it has translated into less time to complete consignments increasing the production target and pressure from the management. The workers also spoke about the changes they observed – regular inspection, closing down of unsafe factories, renovation of some, installation of fire extinguishers, widening of exit staircases, regular fire drills, first aid boxes, importance of keeping aisles free from obstructions (Kabeer et al., 2020). Rahman and Rahman (2020) document the conception of Accord by the management in supplier firms and find that the Accord has been understood as a mechanism of coercive compliance by the management. It may have been educational in terms of understanding industrial safety but has also made ensuring compliance difficult. In interviews with the management officials reflect the inconsistent demands of the inspection teams regarding renovation requirements that keep changing with their multiple visits. This also complicates ensuring compliance when a substantial number of owners do not own the buildings that are inspected for renovation. In cases where renovation is required, the suppliers claim that they do not receive any funding from the brands or the government which forces them to either shut down or become

subcontractors. In cases of relocation, workers are compensated partially by the Alliance while the Accord does not offer any monetary compensation in such cases.

Al Bhadily (2015) recalling the class action suits under Alien Torte Statute in 2005 and the ineffectiveness of Accord agreement, recommends legislations akin to the Australian Commercial Code of Conduct Bill, 2000.⁴⁷ Under the bill, corporations are accountable for work conditions in the overseas sourcing factories with more than a hundred workers. From sections on environmental standards (section 7), health and safety standards (section 8), employment standards (section 9), this bill could prove to be more effective than the Accord as there is no expiration date attached. These are rather legal provisions that are to be integrated into the standard practices of industrial production which can prove to be a more sustainable solution than the Accord.

Accord as an agreement and an auditing system holds promise of an interaction space between unions and the international brands – legally binding responsibility to workers and unions. It remains ineffective as factories under the Accord have restricted union activities, many without a union presence (Kumar & Mahoney, 2014). Moreover, unions across the spectrum in Bangladesh face serious threat, violence and surveillance whenever they have tried to organise labour movements. While Accord is considered to be a means for achieving institutional power for the trade unions and an important source of societal power, the above issues call for rethinking the modalities under which these private multi-stakeholder agreements emerge and assume the form of governing bodies.

⁴⁷ Al Bhadily (2015) here refers to the ineffective mode of class action that has invoked the US Alien Torte Statute in 2005 where a case was filed by garment workers in Bangladesh, Cambodia, Nepal and China against Walmart for not adhering to their code of conduct and fundamental protection of labour laws in the workers' home countries. After two years of the case, in 2007, Walmart was held not responsible for the conditions at work at their supplying firms.

The Accord is considered an exceptional and important agreement that can be replicated in other countries and across sectors in terms of institutionally binding arrangements. However, it needs to be noted that the Accord or the Alliance are focused primarily on fire and safety while overlooking the structural inequities of supply chains that are linked to the fires and accidents in the industry - low wages, long working hours, inhuman pressure of completing targets, patriarchy, child labour, and, other human rights abuses.

Understanding local strategies

Herod (2001) appeals for a local understanding of labour struggles that are as equally effective as global efforts at resolving labour conflicts. The contradictions and paradoxes that workers face under multinational corporations are the main focus in his comparison between the United Steelworkers of America (USWA) Local 5668 in West Virginia and the workers in a metal stamping plant in Flint, Michigan affiliated to the United Auto Workers Local 659. As a response to the death and injury due to accidents, workers at the Ravenswood Aluminium Plant demanded for health and safety measures as part of the new contract in 1989. However, after the contract ended, workers affiliated to the USWA were thrown out. Soon the workers found that Ravenswood came under a much larger conglomerate headed by Marc Rich who was expanding into other countries as well. The USWA Local 5668 chapter made contacts with other USWA chapters to fulfill the demands of reinstatement, health and safety measures and built an international campaign to prevent the expansion of Rich's business. The USWA members associated with unions based in 28 countries had organised anti-Rich demonstrations by 1992. Eventually, the largest shareholder of RAC took over the company, reinstated the terminated workers and worked out a contract that included strong union successorship

clauses with wage and pension increases (Herod, 2001, pp. 414). In the other case, workers walked out of the metal stamping plant in Flint protesting the new work rules that limited workers' ability to bank time. As it had a snowball effect, this led to closing down of more than a hundred plants that were directly or indirectly dependent on the production at Flint. Herod argues that it is difficult to privilege one form of labour action over the other as both forms have proven favourable in the labour struggles in the USA, nonetheless, he draws attention to the local economic and political constraints and conditions that determine the success or failure of international actions. In situating and understanding these incidents of unrest, mapping the local context and the encompassing social relations become indispensable. Local organisations become the representatives for the workers building strikes and other actions that centre around garment work in the industrial areas of Dhaka. As has been noted above, the Accord fails to build organisational or other forms of capacity of unions contrary to its claims. Inevitably, this section looks at the local strategies used by the unions and NGOs that are involved with the garment sector and build the local labour movement in direct and indirect ways.

The discussion on the international agreements like the Accord become central to any analysis of larger anti-sweatshop labour movement, especially since 2013, for two reasons. One, the connection drawn between such agreements and the present garment workers' movement in Bangladesh. Two, the realities of the local labour networks that are removed from the international campaigns where factory unrests characterise everyday life in the garment world. The Accord has been celebrated as a landmark agreement for bringing unions and brands on the table for negotiations. Although it has undoubtedly changed the perception regarding workplace safety in an industry that has

mushroomed in a short span of time and limited consideration for workplace safety, it remains short of facilitating any discussion on the structural inequalities that keeps the industry from achieving just labour practices. This widens the already existing disparity of means and power between brands and the workers and the control that brands and suppliers exercise over the lives of the workers in various forms.

Lock outs and protest demonstrations outside the factory gates take place almost on a regular basis over the demands of back wages, bonus and overtime pay, holidays and wage theft. This regularity is unlike the mass strikes in Bangalore in 2015 against the PF issue that forced the government to roll back the PF regulations, or even the largest strikes that took place in Dhaka in 2006 or 2010. This is not to suggest that the contradiction between labour and capital (should) disappears after/at a certain moment. The point of enquiry, rather, is precisely these contradictions that make unrest or '*genjam*' the everyday affair in the industrial areas.⁴⁸

The labour movement in Bangladesh has been dominated by practices of trade union bureaucracy and politicisation of unions engineered by the national political parties (Rahman, 2011; Khanna 2011; Umar, 2006). Chronologically documenting the role of unions, they find that unions became part of the anti-colonial movement with left and nationalist political parties. As a part of colonial Bengal, the union movement was active during the Indian independence struggle but withered after Bangladesh attained nationhood. The military rule of Ayub Khan introduced factory level union which would counter the left democratic unions and maintain military hegemony over the working class (Umar, 2006; Rahman & Langford, 2012). Unions affiliated with major political

⁴⁸ *Genjam* translates to chaos in Bengali and is used colloquially to mean factory unrest.

parties followed successively flourishing through corruption, nepotism and rise of the self-interested labour aristocracy (Ahmed, 1995 as cited in Rahman and Langford, 2012). The first unions that formed after the formation of Pakistan with East Pakistan as its colony were documented as arising from splits and cults of leadership permeated by politicisation, corruption and nepotism (Rahman and Langford, 2012, pp. 93). Between 1966 and 1969, under the military dictatorship of Ayub Khan, gherao as a political strategy was used by the industrial workers under the leadership of Maulana Bhashani. The strategy of gherao became common henceforth that also contributed to the liberation struggle of Bangladesh during the same years. Post liberation, the features that defined the labour union continued despite the initiation of a Workers' Management Council in all nationalised industries due to the regulated attempt of political leaders to politicise unions for their ends. After General Zia took over the reign, trade union politics was banned under martial law in 1975. Two years later he lifted the ban and introduced a mandatory registration system under which 30 percent of the employees in a workplace were required to form a union. Registration could be attained only by the labour front of a political party. As General Zia introduced a privatisation policy under which he sold nationalised enterprises to supporters of the ruling party, labour movement suffered a setback. Zia's successor, General Ershad also sold state owned enterprises to his supporters at cheap prices. He contributed monetarily to the formation of labour, student and youth fronts (Rahman and Langford, 2012, pp. 96). This period was also marked by inter-union rivalries, corruption and nepotism, with increasing competition over trade union positions and offices which also led to murders of opponent leaders.

However, it also holds true that it has survived despite consequent bans and threats during the time Bangladesh was the eastern wing of Pakistan and since the years of military rule post liberation (Rahman and Langford, 2012; 2014) (as discussed in Chapter 3). Union presence has decreased with the decline of the jute industry which has witnessed strong union actions in the 1970s through 1990s. The establishment of labour unions under political parties in General Zia's period has only strengthened the hold of the parties over how the labour movement shapes up. Post the Rana Plaza collapse, the gag on unions took center-stage in the discourse of the anti-sweatshop movement as international campaigns published reports and research on the threats on unionisation. This not only translated to the rapid increase in the number of unions after the collapse, but the formation of participatory committees within factories. Most of the unions that emerged were affiliated to the IndustriALL Bangladesh Council which acted as one of the signatories of the Accord. Although the percentage of workers unionised is hardly between 5% - 10%, there is a large number of organisations working in this sector. Rahman (2011) notes that in 2007 there were around 42 registered federations. Due to the numerous factions, it is difficult to determine the exact number of union federations operating in the garment industry. However, according to a 2015 report on the Dhaka Tribune there were 464 trade unions in the garment sector. Interestingly, in 2013 alone 326 trade unions were registered with the Directorate of Labour according to the Ministry of Labour (Ovi, 2015).

Scholars working on the garment labour movement have also been concerned with the impact of political unions affiliated with major national parties. Similarly, labour leaders from smaller labour federations, mostly left-leaning unions, have witnessed

workers' struggles being risked by the yellow unions that operate under the directions of the owners, or ally with similar interests. The dynamics between the politicised unions, independent unions and the left unions allows an interesting reading of the garment workers' struggle. The ideological leanings of politicised unions are easier to locate with the national parties that influence their actions. However, the functioning of local unions and organisations that emerged from private market initiatives also require systematic exploration. For instance, the 2006 strike was a result of spontaneous strikes over long standing issues of wages, threat and arrest of labour leaders and workers. Those who were a part of those protest strikes record their struggle differently. Reflections of the difference lies in the formulation of demands, mode of strikes and so on. The repercussions of these actions on all stakeholders could be an important point of entry into the analysis of these networks.

We look at the composition of these three main forms of local unions and non-governmental organisations (NGOs) involved in the garment sector to understand what role they assume in the collective forms of resistances that defines the garment workers' struggle today.

There are multi-layered networks that function locally in the garment workers' struggle in Bangladesh. Understanding the state of the struggle is to try to understand the numerous layers of networks as the actors in the field share distinct associations with groups and other actors within the larger activist network that is involved in mobilising the garment workers. Most of these associations are overlapping and therefore have a consequent effect on the roles that these actors play in these particular associations. The effect of such interactions also finds reflection in the shaping up of this network and the

narrative of the larger garment workers movement. For instance, a member of an independent registered union, affiliated to the IndustriALL global union, also has an NGO aligned to them. The members from unions, both registered and non-registered, associate with other unions within this network. Simultaneously, they come in interaction with the groups working with the IndustriALL that are apart from the unions, like research organisations, advocacy groups and NGO training groups. Overlapping memberships of union women in women's political forums and organisations are therefore a complex but common phenomenon.

Mapping the network

I look at five unions and six NGOs that are currently involved in the garment sector in differing capacities.⁴⁹ Although the functions and structure of both these forms of organisations differ, the overlapping memberships and close association between them has prompted me to look at the strategies that they employ to mobilise garment workers or lobby with institutional forces. Out of five unions, three unions are left leaning affiliated to different political organisations, while the other two are independent and registered with the IndustriALL Bangladesh Council. Out of the three left leaning unions, only one has been able to obtain registration after 12 years, after a legal battle that spanned for almost 7 years. The other two registered unions have been affiliated with the

⁴⁹ Brief descriptions of the organisations available in the chapter on methodology. Listing the names here, for convenience. The unions approached were: Garments Sromik Oikyo Forum, Garments Sromik Sanghati, Bangladesh Garments Sromik Trade Union Kendra, United Federation of Garment Workers, Bangladesh Garment and Industrial Workers Federation. The non-governmental organisations (NGOs) approached were: Naripokkho, Bangladesh Mohila Parishad, Karmojibi Nari, Awaj Foundation, Bangladesh Institute of Labour Studies - BILS, Bangladesh Legal Aid Services Trust (BLAST)

IBC since 2013, while one of them registered with the Directorate of Labour in 1997. The following paragraphs briefly describe the history and functions of these organisations.

Two left leaning unions - Garment Sromik Oikyo Forum and Bangladesh Garment Sromik Trade Union Center - have played decisive roles in the strikes from 2006 as crucial organising forces. All the representatives from the unions have also been under surveillance from law enforcement authorities for their organising work. These left leaning unions are aligned with different political organisations that also had separate youth women and labour wings.⁵⁰ These unions organise study circles and meetings on the labour law and labour struggles in history. These unions survive on monthly membership fees from workers which range between BDT 2 Tk to 10 Tk. These funds are collected to maintain the regional offices in the industrial areas. There are a few reasons why these union federations have not been registered with the Directorate of Labour. As documented in chapter on legality, Bangladesh Garments Sromik Trade Union Center filed for registration in 2006 but were rejected thrice on flimsy accounts such as missing employment record which was not even required under the law. After a wait of five years, BGWTUC filed a case at the labour court in 2011 regarding registration. The case also dragged on without court hearings. When finally a hearing was announced the judges reasoned that the proofs which were not required under the labour law needed to be submitted because the labour inspector wished to see those. Gradually the judge failed to show during consequent hearings and the case was sent to a tribunal

⁵⁰ Garment Sromik Oikyo Forum is affiliated to Gonotantrik Biplobi Party, Garments Sromik Sanghati to Gonosanghati Andolon, and Bangladesh Garment Sromik Trade Union Center to Communist Party of Bangladesh. These unions are also part of a coalition of 12 garment unions names Garments Sromik Adhikar Andolon, which comprises of Bangladesh Textile Sramik Federation, Bangladesh OSK Garments and Textile Sramik, Garments Sramik Mukti Andolon, Garments Sramik Federation, Biplobi Garments Sramik Sanghati, Bangladesh Sweater Garments Sramik Federation and Garments Sramik Andolon among others.

bunch under the High Court citing that judges were not able to reach a decision due to pressure from the government. Finally the union was granted registration in 2018, after a legal battle of seven years without a valid reason for the delay. The union has been active since the 1990s and has entered into negotiations with garment owners and BGMEA in cases of delayed wages, misbehaviour, unlawful factory closure and so on. They also follow the old strategy of gherao in case the negotiations fail. These are undertaken by regional offices that are run by local members. The central committee members regularly visit the local offices. The local offices open everyday where workers meet casually after work or workers gather during any conflict that requires resolution.

Garments Sromik Oikyo Forum has also not been given registration on similar grounds. The members mention that their leader, Moshrefa Mishu, is seen as an instigator by the government and has faced successive incarceration since 2010 for organising garment workers. The Forum began working with a member strength of 8,000-10,000 which has now increased to more than 50,000. The members pay a monthly fee of ten Tk which is spent in managing the regional offices and organising union programs. In terms of activities in the industrial area, the union organises weekly study circles that hold discussions on labour law, history of the working class movement, framing demands and constitutional rights, explains Amina. The union also takes up legal cases and currently has 3000 cases pending at the labour court. These cases are handled by pro bono lawyers who are sympathetic to their politics (Appendix 3.11).

Garment Sromik Sanghati is aligned with Gonosanghati andolan, a left leaning political movement organisation. It is not yet registered under the Directorate of Labour. Although some leaders have been active in the 2006 strike as students, the organisation

began working in 2008. The initial days were spent in meeting with workers in their residences and discussing factory life, labour law, problems and issues at the workplace. Presently, the union holds weekly discussions with member workers on everyday life, possibilities of the labour movement, national politics and so on. The meetings are also one of the ways the union recruits members which requires filling out a form and a nominal membership fee. The regional offices are set up by the local workers and members who meet at the office every day after work. Julhasnayeem Babu, general secretary, mentions, “We only considered registration a mere formality as we believed that our involvement is based on our solidarity to the workers in their struggle to gain their rights. We focused on leadership building and channelising the movement according to the workers’ interests and ambitions. We conduct workshops regularly on labour law and how to build unions. Now we are focusing on registering basic unions”.⁵¹ Apart from training, the union involves itself in negotiations during unrest where they approach the owner, BGMEA, DIFE, and relevant government offices to resolve the problem. Most of the conflicts are resolved by the regional offices. The central office members intervene when they are summoned to the BGMEA office. When these negotiations fail, workers gherao the President who then is compelled to resolve the conflict. Garments Sromik Sanghati hires lawyers whenever the need arises but with a prior understanding that workers would, if they wish to, pay any amount as fee to the lawyer after the case has concluded successfully. However, he explains that workers do not prefer legal cases as it takes more than five years to conclude and attending hearings often becomes difficult as it would mean traveling to the city and losing one day's salary at work. In addition to organising, the union has also taken up research work with the help of academicians from

⁵¹ Interview with Julhasnayeem Babu, General Secretary, Garments Sromik Sanghati. 2019.

the University of Dhaka. They published a dossier in 2014 with testimonies of workers and rescuers, commentaries by labour leaders and academicians, data on workers affected in the Rana Plaza collapse, titled *Chobbish-e April Hajar Praner Chitkar – Rana Plaza Sromik Hotyakando Bishoyok Sankalan*. In 2016, they published a research report titled *Ki Kore Banche Sromik* on the decent minimum wage for garment workers (Appendix 4.2 - 4.3).

Unlike the left leaning unions, the two independent unions are not affiliated to any political party. BGIWF was founded in 2005 by three former garment workers. The federation is affiliated to the IndustriALL Bangladesh Council and is supported by Solidarity Center, ILO (International Labour Organisation), DIFE (Directorate of Inspection of Factories and Establishments), Canadian Union, European Union, and labour rights organisations like the Clean Clothes Campaign and Workers Rights Consortium. Located near the Tejgaon industrial area, their central office setup is spacious with glass interiors, computer systems, copier machines and employees. BGIWF undertakes training programmes where workers are educated on the process of formation and significance of unions, how to write demands, how to submit these deputations and take further actions. The workers are trained on what they should know from the labour law regarding their responsibilities and duties, bonus and sanctioned holidays. They mainly undertake the task of simplifying the labour law as it exists, educating workers on what is the appropriate behaviour and how to conduct themselves on the factory floor. The Solidarity Center provides support through salary, office rent and related expenses, ILO funds training programmes, DIFE assists through resource persons for training. ILO provides technical and financial support in training the board members and employees

who in turn train the workers and members of the unions formed in factories to help in their collective bargaining efforts. IndustriALL provides expert training, floor to floor and seconds the demands put forward by the workers and unions. BGIWF is currently working in 52 factories, with a total of 29000 workers as union and solidarity members.⁵² The federation has one permanent and three part time lawyers who look after federation's labour court cases which stood at 1200 at the time of the interview.

UFGW, another affiliate of IndustriALL, began functioning in 1986 among Ramna Bhaban Tailors. At that time, the union had procured an online registration with the International Textile, Leather, and Garment Workers' Federation which later merged to become IndustriALL. UFGW functions out of a small office space in a building near Topkhana Road. The office is mainly a two room flat that is only adorned by a table and stacks of files. The federation has a membership of more than 50,000 workers, including solidarity members. A sum of ten Tk is collected from the local UFGW offices as a membership fee. Out of the ten Tk, two Tk is collected in the central office fund on which the union subsists. It undertakes safety training and collective bargaining training programmes that are organised and supported by organisations like FNV, 3F and BILS where both share financial responsibilities. As a policy, the federation claims to ensure 50% participation of women in all its training programmes.

The non-governmental organisations that are closely associated with the garment industry also function in somewhat similar manner. The six NGOs that are the focus of this study can be divided into two groups - one especially focused on women's issues,

⁵² Union members are workers who are a part of any factory union. Solidarity members are workers who are not in any factory union but are part of the federation. Both pay an amount of BDT 5 Tk as membership fee per month.

and one that are engaged in training, advocacy and legal services. The former can further be divided into groups, one that began with a focus on women workers, and one that dealt largely with women's issues.

The two organisations that were formed especially for women workers were Karmojibi Nari and Awaj Foundation. Karmojibi Nari, which translates to 'working women' was founded by Shirin Akhter, MP from Jatiyo Samajtantrik Dal in 1991. It focused primarily on policy level work for women working in different industries, domestic work, agriculture and garment work. Their main office was located in Rajabazar near the central Farmgate bus stop. It has three to four rooms, two for the director and project head, and one as a documentation space which was bigger and another that acted as an office floor with more than 4 cubicles. It had a separate reception where one had to wait before being called inside in case of an appointment. Karmojibi Nari works with international donor agencies like Friedrich Ebert Stiftung, GIZ, Action Aid, and Oxfam among many others. They are active in 250 garment factories and have 6 offices located in Mirpur and Ashulia. These offices are referred to as cafes where workers come for training sessions. The women who come to the cafes are divided into groups of 6-8 workers, among them the ones who are generally more proactive and vocal of the group are then given leadership training. These trainings enable them to provide help to the workers who come with problems, factory level or personal. When they are unable to deal with them, they assist them to approach the organisation who then provide resolution. They also provide solutions to community level or household problems, through negotiation or legal services. If they need further assistance, they are forwarded to Ain o Salish Kendra or BLAST who offer legal services for free. If the problems are

factory level, then the management is approached to negotiate. If that doesn't work, they prefer filing cases with the BGMEA which then resolves these disputes. Rabeya, a trainer with the organisation, explains, "We strive to activate the PC committees as it is important to ensure recognition of workers' rights in the workplace. There are supposed to be four committees in a factory, namely, PC committee, OHS committee, Anti sexual harassment committee and another committee which I don't remember, but most of the times these committees do not work". She also points to the need for training workers on their responsibilities as often workers do not notify the factory before resigning but demand compensation, in such cases workers are made aware of the rules and negotiations take place with the owner to pay the dues. The cafe that operates in the Mirpur industrial area also doubles up as a day care centre for children of the garment workers. These cafes are run by volunteers, mainly young undergraduate students from middle class homes in the neighbourhood. They also undergo training to become trainers, like Rabeya who began as a volunteer in 2007 and now is a trainer for negotiations and collective bargaining.

Founded in 2004, Awaj Foundation began with 12 women, all former garment workers, registering with the Department of Women Affairs, Government of Bangladesh and NGO registration to access donor funds that were available. It is a non-profit organisation focusing on worker's rights in Bangladesh and striving to form a better relationship between the workers and owners in the RMG industry. They have around 17 offices all over Bangladesh, in Dhaka and Chittagong with around 85 working members dividing work according to their respective area and to be able to respond to critical situations erupting in the industrial areas. Awaj Foundation takes up projects on donor-

fund basis and recruits accordingly. Most of the time they recruit field/local level organisers for the projects through recommendations and references. Some posts are also advertised online when there are specific qualifications required for certain projects. In the initial years, they would make contact with the workers during their entry and exit hours from the factory, lunch times and visit their residential areas and call them for meetings at the office. They organise training on labour law, family law, safety at workplace, concerns of gender, and business human rights. They also take up complaints from workers and negotiate with the owners. In case nothing fruitful comes out of it, they follow the proper procedure of filing grievance complaints with the concerned authorities and pursue the case, i.e., legal cases at the labour courts. They also offer legal assistance to workers in labour courts at very low prices to fight cases if the workers wish to pursue. As the conditions of work and the labour rights movement have taken a different turn over the years, they focus on consciousness raising training programmes for the workers and also look out for the industry as they believe the garments industry should survive. Thus, AF looks forward to building a sustainable workforce with labour rights and proper workplace conditions. At the time of the interview, they were taking up projects which would help in realisation of Vision 2021 proposed by the Government of Bangladesh.

The organisation is funded by eight donors, including brands, international rights organisations located mostly in the US and European countries. Kik Textiles, a brand based in Germany, focuses mostly on education with two programmes: ***School of learning*** where around 20 children of garment workers study till the primary level who are later on assisted to join government schools for higher education; ***Day Care Centre*** where 20 children of garment workers stay during their mothers' working hours. Kik also

has provisions for these children to study outside the country, in Germany, if they wish. They also provide training on awareness on health and help with medicines to the garment workers. C & A Foundation, a buyer from Switzerland, funds the training programme called ***Improving Livelihood and Quality of Life for RMG Workers*** that deals with financial skill development like savings, health awareness, occupational safety and health, decision making for women. GIZ, based in Germany, focuses on health rights of leather and RMG workers. Action Aid runs three projects – ***Sromik Project, Good Governance and Rights*** focusing on democratic rights and awareness, ***UNDP guideline principle*** focusing on plant level trade union leaders, works with workers, management and has programmes with both together, and PC committee activation. Fairway Foundation, another buyer company located in the Netherlands, has 17 brands and around 200 factories in Bangladesh. They focus mostly on harassment and gender based violence activating Nirjaton Birodhi Protirodhi Committee – or anti-sexual harassment committee. Friedrich Ebert Stiftung, a German rights organisation, funds projects on training of trade union representatives on collective bargaining and union formation. Manusher Jonno Foundation, originally based in the US with a branch office in Bangladesh, which looks after the issues of gender-based violence in 10 factories in Chittagong. Lastly, Solidarity Center focuses on building community workers in the areas of Ashulia, Ahmedpur and Mirpur. The training involves the neighbourhood (brick kiln, home-based and construction workers) on civic education, women leadership, gender, labour law, family health and financial skill development. They also have networks with Asia Floor Wage Alliance and FNV Mondiaal with whom they have collaborated on projects.

Naripokkho and Bangladesh Mahila Parishad, on the other hand, formed with a focus on policy related work that underscore the need to include women as an important stakeholder and constituency of policy formulation. Both the organisations began with a focus on women's rights to contribute to the autonomous women's movement. The participation and membership is therefore on a volunteer basis.

Naripokkho came into being in 1983 after four women graduates came together to create a space where women's lives took centrestage. Weekly discussions were organised on daily life experiences of women and the problems that they face in their homes and outside. In 1995, a public meeting was organised with representatives from all the organisations where the decision to maintain continuity in working towards the goal of women empowerment led to the formation of the Durbar Network with 240 organisations. It has now risen to 550 organisations. The Network undertook capacity building of small organisations focusing on two issues - violence against women and political empowerment. Two more were issues added, reproductive health and rights and economic empowerment. Their membership philosophy is based on three factors – regularity in attending weekly meetings for 6 consecutive months; no affiliation with political parties; members of other women organisations do not need to be Naripokkho members. Members of political parties are not allowed membership as there arises the question of conflict of interest where they might not be speaking for/ from their political party affiliation and not from the point of view or interest of the women's group. The information regarding the meetings are spread through informal networks to the university students through university teachers, and other acquaintances.

Naripokkho focuses mostly on fixing the unequal laws through research, advocacy, lobbying and amendments. One of their first actions has been to hold protests against the declaration of Islam as the state religion while recognising the separation between religion and politics. They also organised a campaign on body rights with the slogan “*shorir amar siddhanto amar*” (My body, my decision). This campaign focused on mainly reproductive rights and clothing preferences. Rowshan Ara, project director, exclaims that “It was misread by regressive groups as a demand for normalising free sex or asking for sex work, but gradually many organisations understood that the demand was for autonomy over bodies and supported the campaign”. She also claims that it was the intervention of Naripokkho that has made way for women-friendly corners and women constables in police stations to make it more accessible to women. This began as a complaint they made to the police regarding rising cases of violence against women. As the police rejected the claim saying there is no valid or sufficient research, Naripokkho began gathering news clippings from the newspapers and submitting them at the police stations. As a result, the police began documenting these incidents and archived the news in the police stations. It was realised that all the state institutions were not friendly towards women. Police denied entry to women, courts and the justice system blamed the women and hospitals were also not cooperative.

In the early years, the funds for organisational activities centred on expert consultancy and research were arranged by the members of Naripokkho. It was only from 1995 that they started working with donor funds. Naripokkho began working with other smaller women’s organisations to build organisational capacity with the help of donor funds. They are assisted by two kinds of donors - international and regional - and the

government. They are currently working on a project titled Shojag was constituted in September 2017 in collaboration with Bangladesh Legal Aid and Services Trust, BRAC Bangladesh, SNV, and Christian Aid. The reason for collaboration is the specific areas all these organisations work in, for instance, NP deals with gender and sexual harassment, while BRAC and BLAST extends legal aid and support. They also work with the Manusher Jonno Foundation - Bangladesh. Rowshan Ara also admitted, “We wanted to retain our autonomy and decision making right over the work we do and the way we do them, hence didn’t look forward to many donors as this often creates obstacles in the way of doing your work when donors set the criteria of work”.

Bangladesh Mahila Parishad, on the other hand, draws their history from the Indian independence, language movement and the liberation war. Founded in 1970, it is the oldest organisation that this thesis looks at. Mahila Parishad, as it is alternatively called, identifies as a multi-class, multi-religion, and multicultural organisation. Ayesha Khanum, a longtime member, explains, “Post Liberation, all the laws that were formed affected women, for instance the family code or the personal law. BMP played a role in raising concerns, drafting and disseminating and pressuring the government to implement it. One of the prominent identities of the organisation is that it is an advocacy group. During 1980s we started working on addressing the issue of violence against women and girl child, which was undertaken in more organised forms from ‘84/ ’85 within the organisation. Now we have 14 sections with 14 secretaries. We were the first women’s organisation to provide free legal aid in the country and South Asia, alternative dispute resolution, which has over the years become more formalised”. They have worked mainly on the Uniform Civil Code, and violence against women. The legal section of the

organisation handles all cases that involve violence inside household and outside. They also run a shelter in their office building that is located in a central part of the city of Dhaka. The women who are rescued are also trained to sew or basic education skills to be able to find employment to sustain themselves. Due to their work, Mahila Parishad had faced the criticism of taking internal matters of families to the court during the 1980s. They have therefore focused on patriarchy that uses religion to control women. They work with like-minded organisations which work with the same ideology - non-communal and progressive ideology. Unlike many NGOs that began working for donor-funded projects, Mahila Parishad depended on donations for their work. It was only after the 1990s that they began working in collaboration with development NGOs without compromising on the goals of the organisations.

The membership of the organisation is voluntary, that means everyone gives time to the organisation after their respective office hours. There are no criteria for membership. Women who are members of other national parties and organisations can also be a part of BMP unless their party membership meddles with the work and functions of BMP. They have members from Awami League as well and many without any party membership, but by constitution no one from Jamaat or any other religious extremist groups is accepted as a member. The constitution is prepared/ updated by the highest policy making body which evaluates feedback through a socio-political analysis every year in a council meeting keeping intact the main ideological stands. Mahila Parishad has 8 divisions now, with 83 executive committee members.

The two NGOs engaged in the garment sector through advocacy, policy and lobbying are - BLAST and BILS. Bangladesh Legal Aid and Services Trust takes up pro

bono cases for people from marginalised communities. To trace its history, it was founded by Advocate Kamal Hossain after a resolution was passed in the Bar Council to form a body that would provide free services to the poor and marginalised in the country in 1993. The main groups that BLAST seeks to approach are the workers, tribals and handicapped people. In the administrative front, there is a board of trustees, followed by an advisory board and an executive committee, followed by cells and units in all local areas. When BLAST first formed there were 19 districts in the country which now has become 64. They have opened offices in all these districts gradually since the formation. Every unit has its management committee with a general secretary who is also a bar member. Every committee has around 11 to 30 members and all the activities and procedures of the committee require the approval of the president.

BLAST works mainly on three fronts – advocacy, research and capacity building. In terms of advocacy, they organise community level meetings to discuss issues which require a reform in the law. For instance, during 2006 and 2013 when the labour law was formed and amended, BLAST has been a crucial part of that process. The organisation works on needs based projects with other local NGOs, like Sromik Nirapatta Forum, CIDV which works Domestic Violence, Domestic Workers Rights Network to mention a few. They have also undertaken collaborative work with the Labour Ministry, Labour Commission, and Health Commission whenever needed. Internationally, they have worked with the Clean Clothes Campaign as well.

There are 26 panel lawyers who work pro bono with the organisation. They make recommendations to the government and participate in public hearings. There are around 172 MoU based NGOs in the country with whom they take up partner work where they

link cases with other organisations when they are unable to follow up on a case due to lack of resources. There are government legal aid committees which function through district legal aid committees under the Supreme Court that BLAST works with. They refer a certain percentage, for instance 25 percent, to these committees so that these committees keep running and the funds that are allocated are utilised through these bodies.

In terms of legal cases, mainly two kinds of cases come from workers. One, pending arrears when the factory does not pay them for more than 2-3 months, and two, cases of no payment of compensation when a worker leaves the job due to some problem. There is another type of case as well, of sexual harassment, but which are not that widely reported as women fear disclosing these incidents due to stigma attached to it. There are four phases through which BLAST functions: Advice, Referral, Mediation and Litigation. Advice can take place over any mode, phone or email or in person. They provide advice services for everyone, be it an owner or a worker, rich or poor. The next is referral, which is mainly referring the case to some other organisation if they are not able to help as has been noted. Then comes mediation which involves solving the dispute under the provisions of the laws governing the country. These three services can be availed by anyone, rich or poor, owner or worker. The last one is litigation which is filing cases when the first three steps are completed. The cases are filed on behalf of the people concerned, mainly those who cannot afford expenses of a legal case. The cases of failure of payment of arrears or compensation are taken up legally only when mediation has failed. Apart from resolving disputes, BLAST also organises paralegal workshops for workers in collaboration with other NGOs and unions. The idea behind these workshops

is to build leadership among workers. The paralegal refresher course charts out the basic laws that workers should know. These are organised two to three times a month where panel lawyers and paralegal experts conduct camps followed by question and answers sessions among workers.

Bangladesh Institute of Labour Studies (BILS) is involved in training, advocacy and lobbying for labour rights. BILS was founded in 1995 with 13 national federations coming together to facilitate capacity building for trade unions through training, research and advocacy work. The executive body consists of representation from each national federation while the administrative office is run through staff. Located in the older posh neighbourhood of Dhanmondi, the office rents out a floor that has separate sections for research, library, accounting, project development, media, a conference room and a kitchen. It has a total of 31 employees, with 5 women and 26 men. It is not mandatory for employees to be well-versed with labour law, but they all undergo training through their work.⁵³ BILS functions with the help of donor funds from a number of organisations, like Danish Trade Union Development Agency, FNV Mondiaal, FES, SNV, DIHR, ILO, IndustriALL, Oxfam, and GLU that covers the project expenses as well as staff salaries. The projects undertaken cover a wide range of workers across the country - garment workers, rickshaw pullers, domestic workers, fisheries, aquaculture and agriculture workers. The workers affiliated with these unions are given training on leadership, union building and capacity building for unions. These training workshops are often organised with other local NGOs like BLAST, for instance. Although the main goal of the organisation is to strengthen the trade union movement through leadership training and

⁵³ Interview with Syed Sultan Uddin Ahmed, Executive Director, 2018

capacity building of unions, BILS also undertakes research projects on decent wages, gender based violence, issues of migration, corporate social responsibility, sustainable growth, overseas workers and so on. Apart from the research reports, BILS also archives and classifies newspaper clippings on industrial and informal workers under different heads, like decent work, labour market, accidents at work, assault and unrest.⁵⁴ They also run a bi-annual journal, *Sromik* (Labour) which is published in both English and Bengali that publishes articles relevant to labour studies.

The garment workers across the industrial areas, unions and NGO affiliations have been actively participating in regular strikes which are explored in the following section.

Garment strikes: 1999 - 2019

Labour unrests in the garment industry have taken place on issues of union representation and wages since the early 1990s and have also developed into full-fledged strikes. Rahman (2011) cites the struggle of Lovely Yesmin and her supervisor Jaheda Begum from Sparrow Apparel to form and register a union at their factory in the late 1980s. As soon as they registered a basic union with 35 of the employees, someone from the Directorate of Labour informed the owner who immediately sacked all the employees and hired local thugs to bar their entry at the factory gates. As the workers continued to agitate, both the women leaders were arrested by the police who released them only after the workers blocked the van. The next day 350 employees were assaulted by owners' thugs and eventually sacked. Lovely Yesmin filed 250 cases against the owner in the

⁵⁴ Most of the research reports, journal, press clippings are available on the website of Bangladesh Institute of Labour Studies - BILS.

labour court. In a surprising development the labour leader who was helping these two women handed over the case files to the owner in return for money and asked them to withdraw the agitation. The workers, out of job, were also not able to sustain the movement anymore. Lovely Yesmin and Jaheda Begum found a job after struggling for almost a year at a factory after submitting an undertaking that they would not be involved in union action (Rahman, 2011, pp. 184).

The first noted strike action, however, was witnessed after a fire at Saraka Garments in December 1990 which killed 27 people, including workers and the owner. A coalition of garment unions affiliated with major national political parties - Bangladesh Garment Workers Unity Council – negotiated with the BGMEA on strict implementation of labour laws for the next few years. In 1994, the minimum wage was set at BDT 930 Tk in response to a threat to call for a strike by the Bangladesh Garment Workers Unity Council. The committee was supposed to meet every two years to review wages against inflation. However, it failed to meet in 1996 or later in 1998 (Rahman, 2011, pp. 204). The threats of strikes and agreements between the BGMEA and BGWUC continued for more than ten years without any resolution or result until the coalition eventually disintegrated and remaining members allied with the BGMEA between 2005 and 2006. Simultaneously, the campaigns on child labour by National Labour Committee, unrests in the EPZ factories due to wage cuts, and fires and accidents culminated into demands for reform by the US trade secretariat with the threat of withdrawing GSP benefits. Due to the demands from abroad, workers' welfare committees were constituted in the EPZs which would transform into workers' associations in mainly EPZ factories, through the EPZ Act of 2004 established mainly to restore GSP benefits (Khanna, 2011). Similar to

the management strategies in the colonial periods, these workers' welfare committees functioned like the company unions that would prevent establishment of worker led unions. Misreading and misinterpretation of labour rules and laws to introduce and manipulate workers' representation in company unions were used and spy networks were created to maintain surveillance over the workers (Uddin, 2021).⁵⁵ In the present context, these spy-surveillance networks have been replaced by the local thugs hired by the owners or the local governmental officials who share common interests with the business associations and often report on workers' union organising attempts.

Despite these threats, the garment sector saw one of the biggest strikes in the month of May, in 2006. The strike erupted at F S Sweater Factory and Universal Knitting Ltd, located in Gazipur and Savar, respectively, over the issue of non-payment of wages. Two left leaning unions – Garment Sromik Oikyo Forum and Bangladesh Garment Workers Trade Union Center – were organising workers in these factories during the same time. At F S Sweaters, management filed cases on two workers who were arrested and fired other striking workers. As workers continued agitating for the release of their colleagues, management locked them in and cut off water and electric supplies and found a way out. They blocked the adjacent highway and were joined by workers from nearby garment factories. Police tried to dissipate the crowd by firing which led to the death of a worker – Shohag. This news spread far and wide as more workers joined in. Similarly, in Universal Knitting workers were owed three months' back wages. As workers went to demand their wages from the management, they were beaten up inside the factory. As the

⁵⁵ Layli Uddin (2021) refers to the spy networks in the context of Adamjee and Karnaphuli riots when the vulnerabilities of Bihari workers as refugees and favorable position were manipulated to be employed as spies for non-Bengali management/owners.

news spread wide, workers from around 4000 factories struck work bringing the city to a standstill. Around USD 2 million worth of clothing materials, two factories and five buses were torched by unidentified people (Siddiqi, 2017). The government brought in the dreaded Rapid Action Battalion to control the unrest which was met with workers' resistance. The clashes between workers and security forces led to destruction of 16 more factories and 200 vehicles. As a result, Border Guards Bangladesh was brought in to dissipate the strikers (Senan, 2006). Mominur Rahman Momin, a central committee member of the Garment Sramik Oikyo Forum, had joined the union only two years prior to the 2006 strike.⁵⁶ Recalling the strike, he said,

“In FS Sweaters, the piece rate was 50 Tk which was reduced to 32 Tk which is when the workers started to organise. The protest meeting was called in Gazipur. The police filed cases against a worker in protest of which many workers struck work and occupied the factory. To break the strike the electricity and water supply was disconnected, a rally on the streets was organised which was fired on by the police. Shohag, one of our comrades, was killed in that firing and his body was hidden by the police inside the godown. Workers retrieved the body from the godown and walked in a rally with the body in their arms. The body was then taken to the police station and other procedures were undertaken. Two days' time was taken to mobilise for a widespread strike in the industrial areas of Dhaka. I was working in Zaheen Tex then and I made sure that it had to be closed the next day to make the strike successful. As there was a shipment to be dispatched, the PM agreed to give us a holiday the next day if we worked all night and completed the shipment. I instantly agreed with a condition that we are

⁵⁶ Interview with Mominur Rahman Momin. Central Committee Member, GSOF.

allowed to go home, take rest for some time and have dinner, as I realised this is a golden chance to mobilise everyone in the factory and start off to join the rally from there only. As planned, after a night's work, we started our rally from the factory raising slogans from our floors! Everyone was on the streets that day, all the workers with sticks. The reporters and journalists were asked to come to a hotel nearby for a press briefing. As soon as Mishu apa entered the hotel she was arrested by the police with 8 other leaders. She was put on remand and later on we moved for bail after which she was released, but the workers were not. A tripartite agreement was reached with workers, owners and the government. Wage board was also constituted, but the owners did not implement anything. On 10th October, we called for a strike where 200 more were arrested and tortured. The only positive result of this strike was an increase in our minimum wage from BDT 930 Tk to 1632 Tk, after 12 years.” Moshrefa Mishu, leader of the Garment Sromik Oikyo Forum, was arrested and 19 cases were filed against her. The demands in the strike were not only for the back wages but higher minimum wages, end to repression, release of arrested workers, weekly time off and overtime pay for extra work. As the standoff continued, the government convinced BGMEA to negotiate with the workers. BGMEA demanded the involvement of SKOP as workers' representative during the negotiation. In a tripartite agreement signed in June, BGMEA agreed to all the demands: issuing of appointment letters, increase in minimum wage, weekly holidays, maternity leave, withdrawal of all cases against the workers and right to form trade unions. However, the role of SKOP in these negotiations turned suspicious during the negotiations on minimum wage as the workers demanded a subsistence wage of BDT

5,000 Tk while it was set at BDT 3,000 Tk. The 2006 strike also culminated into the constitution of a minimum wage board for the RMG industry.

The next big strike took place in 2010 after minimum wage protests simmered from 2008. In June, workers from Nassa factory demanded a hike in the minimum wage to BDT 5,000 Tk. The protest demonstration turned violent as workers lit fire on tires and scraps of wood to create blockades while police fired tear gas shells, rubber bullets and water cannons (Khanna, 2011). Quoting the difficulty of surviving in such low wages, the workers demanded a raise from BDT 1,662 Tk to 5,000 Tk per month. As the demonstration grew, owners from 250 factories shut down their enterprises and requested the government to bring in paramilitary forces. The government assented to the proposition and brought in the paramilitary forces and the protest was cleared out. The Bangladesh Garment Manufacturing and Exporters Association (BGMEA) and Bangladesh Knitwear Manufacturing and Exporter Association (BKMEA) lobbied with the government and agreed to increase the minimum wage to BDT 3000 Tk. This was referred to as a betrayal by the labour organisers, garment workers and the larger international community who tried to pressurise the owners associations and the retailers to raise wages without increasing the price of the product. Around 700 factories underwent strike for two days. Moshrefa Mishu from Garment Sromik Oikyo Forum, Aminul Islam from Bangladesh Garment and Industrial Workers Federation and Montu Ghosh a prominent labour activist and Supreme Court lawyer were arrested under charges of vandalism, instigating violence and association with the banned Islamist party and tortured for more than two months (Senan, 2010). The police also filed cases against 3000 workers for the violence. After a month, the government announced an 80 percent

hike in the minimum wage which led to another round of demonstrations as the amount still fell short of subsistence wage (Burke and Hammadi, 2010). It is important to note that Bangladeshi garment workers were (are) already the most poorly paid. This time more than 50,000 workers joined the strike from more than 700 garment factories across the city. Towards the end of the year, the Industrial Police was established to resolve issues of labour unrest. The establishment of the Industrial Police, or *shilpo police*, came as a response to this strike in 2010. Entrusted with the responsibilities to maintain order in the industrial areas, industrial police are seen as a body working in support of the owners to break strikes. In case of any labour unrest in the industrial areas, the owners and administration is asked to sit with the industrial police to sort the problem.⁵⁷

In March 2012, workers from Shanta Denim factory asked for an afternoon off to watch the Bangladesh national cricket team play in the Asia Cup Tournament. As their request was denied, the confrontation quickly subsumed issues of low wages, sexual harassment of women workers and other issues. Aminul Islam, labour leader from Bangladesh Garment and Industrial Workers Federation and employee of Bangladesh Center for Workers Solidarity, entered into negotiation with the management and owner as a representative of the workers. However, after he brokered a deal with them (on April 12), he was reported missing. His mutilated body was found two days after away from the city. It was later revealed by his employer, Kalpona Akhter, that he was being constantly hounded by the National Security Intelligence officials and hinted at their involvement in his murder (ILRF, 2012; Mahmud and Al Numan, 2018).⁵⁸ His murder

⁵⁷ Interviews with Ruhul Amin, Mominur Rahman Momin, and other labour leaders.

⁵⁸ Aminul Islam was last seen two days before (his body was found) leaving their local union office with a man and a veiled woman. The man, Mostafijur Rahman, was convicted for the murder by a Tangail court.

was understood as a threat for organising workers in the garment industry by the larger network of labour leader and activists working on the ground. His murder received global attention when international rights organisations demanded an investigation into his murder. Two months after Hillary Clinton, on her visit as the U.S. Secretary of State, called for an investigation into the death of Aminul Islam.

International solidarities were beginning to be forged as a witness to the exploitative working conditions in the Bangladeshi garment industry. The watershed moment arrived when Tazreen Fashions, a nine storey factory building in Savar caught fire. The fire started in the basement which was used to store consignments when around 600 workers were working on the overtime night shift. The fire quickly spread to the other floors killing more than 110 workers as there were no proper fire exits in the building. The workers working on the floors above jumped from the windows to escape the fire (Manik and Yardley, 2012). Eventually, the Walmart group which sourced garments from this factory completely denied any connections with the factory. The managing director of the Tuba Group, the parent company of Tazreen also denied commenting on the factory fire. This incident raised concern by the international rights bodies over the safety measures undertaken by the factory owners regarding the safety of the workplace.

The garment industry has witnessed regular protests over the issue of minimum wages. The triggers for these protests have ranged from back wages, misbehaviour to

However, the mystery behind his death, motive to murder remains inconclusive. However, the other leaders I interviewed from the same union believe it is the law enforcement agency that was behind Aminul's murder for his involvement with garment workers struggle. Following are some news reports that have covered the suspicion around the death of Aminul Islam.

industrial accidents, but the demand for a hike in the minimum wages has remained central. Protests on minimum wages emerged again after the Rana Plaza collapse in 2013 which saw active participation of more than 50,000 workers. The collapse also triggered protests demanding death penalty for the building owner, Sohel Rana (Manik et al., 2013).⁵⁹ This turned into a watershed moment as occupational safety in Bangladeshi garment factories became a global concern. As discussed in the last section, multi stakeholder agreements were instituted with a focus on health and safety at the workplace. At the same time, international campaigns like Clean Clothes Campaign, USAS were mobilising buyer countries to pressurise the Bangladeshi government to allow garment workers to exercise the freedom to form trade unions. Interestingly, the same year more than 300 unions were registered by the Directorate of Labour, as will be discussed later. Towards the end of the year, around 2,00,000 workers held protest demonstrations demanding a hike in the minimum wage to BDT 8,000 Tk which was ultimately raised to BDT 5,000 Tk.

The demands for hike in minimum wage rose again in 2016 when workers in Windy Apparels located in Ashulia struck work demanding higher wages citing rising prices of food, rent and basic commodities. As the shadow of Rana Plaza remained, the demands also included occupational safety and delay in disbursement of wages. Like all the strikes in the past (as mentioned above), this too spread all over the industrial area leading to garment owners closing down 85 factories locking out 2,00,000 workers. The government deployed 900 policemen and 15 platoons of paramilitary troops (Marriot,

⁵⁹ An audiovisual published by the BBC News on 29th April where young men are seen taking out rallies asking for death penalty for Sohel Rana, the owner of the building. <https://www.bbc.com/news/av/world-asia-22347899>

2016; Savar and Ovi, 2016).⁶⁰ Considered to be the most militant industrial area, around 1,50,000 workers participated in the strike demanding three-fold increase in the minimum wage from BDT 5,300 Tk to 15,000 Tk. At the end of the 10 days long strike, more than 12,500 workers had left for their native homes, 1500 were arrested on 10 cases including vandalism, looting and instigating other workers. The owners also fired thousands of workers and displayed their photographs at the gates to prohibit their entry. This is a strategy used to keep workers who have been part of demonstrations outside. In addition, their photos are also sent to other factory owners through the BGMEA to hinder their chances of finding jobs at other factories.⁶¹

Over the course of the next two years, workers from various garment factories kept raising the demands for BDT 16,000 Tk. In 2017, it became one of the highlights as owners began suspending workers and the government began arresting labour leaders and workers under the Special Powers Act (1974). As a result, the Dhaka Apparel Summit, which was scheduled to take place in February saw withdrawal of brands like Inditex/Zara, C&A, and Next Tchibo.⁶² Under pressure, the workers and labour leaders were released and the brands agreed to attend the summit. Simultaneously, the movement kept pressuring the minimum wage board to meetings to accept their demand for BDT 16,000 Tk as the minimum wage (Appendix 4.1). After negotiations within the minimum wage board, the government announced a minimum wage of BDT 8,000 Tk in 2018. This received widespread rejection as workers and unions both found it unrealistic and unfair. As the national elections were to be held in December the same year, the workers called

⁶⁰ <http://www.asianews.it/news-en/As-garment-workers-strike-in-Dhaka,-59-companies-shut-down-production-39468.html>

⁶¹ Interview with Mominur Rahman Momin, Garment Sromik Oikyo Forum, 2019.

⁶² Zara is a subsidiary of the retailer brand, Inditex.

for a strike in January (2019) after the elections. Various news outlets covered that while labour leaders found BDT 16,000 Tk to be less, but a reasonable demand, owners were not ready to agree above BDT 8,000 Tk.⁶³ Much to the dismay of workers and unions, the workers' representative proposed BDT 12,020 Tk as minimum wage.⁶⁴ The resolution to the demand was reached in 2019 after the national elections were held. As a first act of the government, PM Sheikh Hasina declared that the minimum wage was to be set at BDT 8,000 Tk. Under the new wage structure, a grade 1 worker would receive a gross salary of Tk 18,257, grade 2 worker Tk 15,416, grade 3 worker Tk 9,845, grade 4 worker Tk 9,347, grade 5 worker Tk 8,875, grade 6 worker Tk 8,420 and grade 7 worker Tk 8000 (De Silva, 2019; GroundXero, 2019; Daily Star, 2019). The workers underwent another strike in rejection of the new wage structure as the new wage did not make much difference in their wages. The wage for workers in grade 3 to 5, who form a major share of the sewing operators, increased only by Tk 70-120. It was also found that many workers were not aware of their grades when joining the factories. As a consequence, owners changed the grades of the workers to not pay higher amounts.⁶⁵ The owners also fired more than 15000 workers, although the official estimates note dismissal of 7,500 workers. Human Rights Watch notes a total of 29 criminal cases filed against around 3,000 workers. It was also reported that unions controlled by owners put pressure on the workers to sign documents admitting to false charges of vandalism in return of payment of one month's wage (Human Rights Watch, 2019).

⁶³ <https://www.newagebd.net/article/50506/minimum-wage-for-rmg-workers-tk-8000>

⁶⁴ It is pertinent to note that the union representative in the minimum wage board is a Women's Affairs Secretary in Jatiyo Sromik League, the labour wing of the party in the government.

⁶⁵ Field interviews.

Alongside these nationwide strikes for hike in minimum wages, garment workers have held factory level protests on back wages, sexual harassment and violent behaviour within the factories. One such protest was held in 2014 by Tuba workers just before Eid when they demanded their wages that were due from 3 months. As the owners denied the payment, the workers struck work and occupied the factory. The owners in response cut electric and water supplies inside the factory. The police were called who threw tear gas shells inside to evacuate the factory premises. However, the workers continued to stay inside fearing arrest if they went out. As the strike continued to its third day, Haroon Rasheed from Salimullah Medical College and Hospital and doctors from Gana Sasthyo Kendra set up a medical camp inside the factory. Various programmes were organised all over Dhaka by members of civil society organisations, intellectuals and activists in solidarity with the workers. Finally, on the ninth day, the authorities agreed to talk. The then Minister of Shipping, Shajahan Khan announced that owners would pay two months' back wages. However, the workers demanded that the owner pay them in the factory. As a result, the negotiations were stalled. The next day tear gas shells and rubber bullets were fired again and labour leaders inside were arrested by the police. However, the workers agreed to receive two months' salary as it became difficult to sustain the movement.⁶⁶

There have been numerous such instances when workers have demonstrated demanding wrongful termination, harassment, misbehaviour and so on. Workers in SL Sweater factory walked out of work after the owner and management avoided negotiations over work conditions comprising bonus, leave and piece rates in 2011. The

⁶⁶ Interview with Mominur Rahman Momin, Garments Sromik Oikyo Forum, 2018.

authorities fired 60 workers and filed cases under the Bangladesh Penal Code 1860, including mischief, intent to cause damage and unlawful assembly. Upon retaliation by the workers, the management fired 70 more workers and hung names of all 132 workers at the factory gates. Soon the unrest spread to nearby factories and the RAB and industrial police were deployed. Eventually, 269 workers were coerced into signing resignation letters (Ashraf and Prentice, 2019). In 2018, workers at CA Knitwear Ltd. located in Gazipur blocked the Dhaka Mymensingh highway when one employee was terminated for not signing on a blank paper. In the same factory there were allegations of workers being fired for taking prayer breaks, applying for leave or joining late even in case of emergencies (Akand, 2018). At the same time, workers at Paplin Knit Composite Ltd. located in Narayanganj industrial area and Anika Garments located in Mirpur called for a strike and blocked the adjacent roads demanding back wages.⁶⁷

In all these strikes the response of the government has been to dismiss the strikes as a conspiracy to dismantle the government or the economy. While in 2006 the protests were shut down through brute force of the rapid action battalions, in 2010 the institution of the Industrial Police brought down the number of workers entering strikes. Established to resolve labour unrest in the industrial areas, the Industrial Police (henceforth IP) has been seen colluding with the owners and managements to violently break down protests. The IP also acts as an instrument of surveillance for the owners which deters workers from entering into strikes. In any case of unrest, the management has not only terminated the agitating workers, they have also published their names and photographs through the BGMEA to other owners so that they are never hired by any other employers. Their

⁶⁷ BILS Press Clippings. May 2018.

names and photographs are put outside the gate to deny entry. The Bangladesh Labour Act amendment was rushed through in 2013 immediately after the collapse of Rana Plaza removing barriers to freedom of association as a measure to ensure foreign investment. The freedom of trade unionism was ensured through the participatory committees as an essential body in the factories. These committees (locally referred to as PC committees) were to be established through the equal representation of both management and workers to resolve any conflict arising in the workplace. Workers' representatives were to be selected through an election held among the workers. Many workers have reported that the representatives from the management often include the family members of the owners and representatives from the workers are chosen by the management instead of holding an election as prescribed by the amendment. The workers' representatives are also not allowed to speak in committee meetings as reported by garment workers. They are asked to inform the decisions made by the committee to the other workers and any worker not following the same is terminated without any valid reason.

The right to strike and collective bargaining has also had an interesting and dynamic history in Bangladesh. After 1971, the right to strike and collective bargaining in the nationalised industries was prohibited for six months by Presidential order no. 55 in May 1972. Although it was withdrawn in 1973, the Emergency Power Ordinance of 1974 was promulgated and the rules formulated under the Ordinance completely suspended the democratic rights of workers by prohibiting trade union activities such as strikes, lock-outs, collective bargaining (Al Faruque, 2009). In all the consequent reforms, the right to strike has remained prohibited in 1983 during Ershad's regime, and 2007 after Khaleda Zia's resignation. Although the international pressure has compelled

the government and the manufacturers to allow freedom of association and collective bargaining, it remains void as a legal principle when not accompanied with local practices. Even today, protest demonstrations are not allowed without permission from local administrative and police authorities. Any form of demonstrations result in termination of employment of union members with continuing constant surveillance over workers in the factory and outside.

At the institutional level, recognition of the labour law regulations and their implementation is a widely discussed issue. Studies on labour rights and work conditions in garment factories have documented the lack of proper lighting and ventilation, long working hours, lack of bonus and social security benefits and leaves (Khan, 2001; Rock, 2003; Kabeer and Mahmud, 2004). Prior to the formalisation of labour rules, Rock (2003) notes the Factories Act of 1965 prescribed the working hours, overtime work, safety and the provision for holidays. She further notes that these were eventually bypassed by the owners through a minor bribe to the inspectors who would not file complaints. The lack of trained inspectors under the Directorate of Inspection of Factories and Establishments also added to the possibilities of circumventing legal provisions. As the garment industry is vital to the economy, the departments under the Ministry of Labour and Employment are equally influenced by the demands of the owners who are politically and economically powerful. “The owners of the factories are ministers, ex-ministers, parliament members, ex-parliament members, army generals, civil bureaucrats, even university vice chancellors - this is the elite of the society who have great influence over state mechanisms” (Amirul Haque Amir, President of NGWF, in interview with Hoskins, 2014 pp. 68) The history of unions being denied registration despite fulfilling all

conditions required to qualify to register according to the Directorate of Labour (DoL) regulations has been an oft-cited problem in the industry. Anner (2017) reports that during mid-2013 till end of 2014, 228 new unions were given registration. But by late 2014 and 2015, the rejection rate of the government escalated. To quote an instance, the Garment Workers Trade Union Center (GWTUC), a left-leaning union, which was established in 1994 received their registration after 12 years of application. The response from the current president of the union, Md. Ruhul Amin, on their registration, sums up the distinctions that Edelman and Stryker refer to in terms of understanding how law functions beyond the tangible definitions that are formulated as rules.

“We first filed our application in 2006 for the registration which was rejected thrice. In 2011, we filed a case at the labour court. They rejected us on grounds which are not even enlisted in the Bangladesh Labour Act. They raised objections on 15 points which was expected as we knew BGMEA and BKMEA would intervene in this. We resubmitted some documents which were required under the labour act but did not re-do the papers which had no objection as per the act. One of the objections was regarding the branch committees we mentioned in the application, another was a missing signature on the resolution of the general body meeting we organised. According to the labour law registration of a basic union requires a signed copy of the resolution, not for a federation. They also said there should be a proof of employment for the members in a federation attached which again is nowhere mentioned in the labour law as 25% of the membership consists of people other than factory workers. So there is no need for such proofs while filing an application for the registration. During the case, we were forced to make rounds of the court without a hearing for long. Finally we got one hearing where

we asked for clarification about the section which mentions that proof of employment for federation members is necessary. They said that it is not in the law but the labour inspector insisted that it is attached to the form. We also argued regarding the proof of subcommittees in a federation while submitting but we were asked not to. We got the same response that the labour inspector thought it should not be there, that is why it should not be there. Therefore, none of this is enshrined in the law but they thought these points should be there and so we were not eligible for registration. When they realised that they had no legal basis for these arguments, they began delaying the case without a judgement. On most of the days our hearing was scheduled, the judge would take a holiday. We realised we had to do something about it, so we approached the head of judiciary. Once they realised that we were not going to stay silent, they sent the case to the appeal tribunal with the excuse that the court is not able to form a judgment due to the intervention from officials higher up the government. This tribunal is a part of a High Court bench. The justice asked us what he was supposed to do in such a situation and sent the case to another court. That court also took a lot of time delaying the case, but finally we persisted and got the registration in 2018. We had to fight for almost 12 years, although the case began in 2011 after we had to wait for 5 years from 2006 to register it.”⁶⁸

This resonates equally with the threats that are posed on the workers entering into any conflict with the management. The strikes that have taken place till date have resulted in termination of workers for being a part of the protests. The Bangladesh Labour Act 2006 and amendments of 2013 lay out the provisions for rights and

⁶⁸ Interview held with Md. Ruhul Amin in March 2018.

responsibilities of workers that are often in discord with the actual functioning of the factory management. The maternity leave, for instance, is sanctioned for four weeks in the 2006 Act which was increased to six weeks in the amendment. Nevertheless, workers who have asked for the leave have been fired or are not allowed to rejoin after the leave. This has often led to women not disclosing pregnancy to the management whose surveillance mechanisms keep a note of possible pregnancies too.⁶⁹ The silence of the workers on bodily ailments is a common practice as factories often lack the provision of proper medical centres within the factory premises. Due to the lack of government hospitals in the industrial areas and lack of money to see a private doctor, women often take painkillers from the medical shops without undergoing diagnosis for the pain. Irregularities of wages is another regular occurrence in the industrial areas that episodically lead to strikes and stoppage of work over back payment of wages (Burke and Hammadi, 2010; Mukul, 2014).⁷⁰ As per the labour law, the owner is required to pay a gratuity amount to a worker who has completed five years of service in case of termination or resignation. However, there are regular cases of workers being fired before they complete five years to avoid paying that amount as explained by labour union members in the Gazipur and Savar industrial areas. There have been consistent efforts by various unions and non-governmental organisations working in the garment industry to implement the labour law as per the Act and the consequent amendments. The autonomy that the BGMEA and the owners possess in terms of circumventing these provisions without accountability owing to the support by government explicates the networks of power that operate at the local level while operating as an actor in the global garment

⁶⁹ Interviews held with garment workers in Gazipur industrial area in April 2018.

⁷⁰ RMG Bangladesh, a news magazine website on RMG industry, reports on the Swan garment protests. <https://rmgbd.net/2015/07/1300-workers-of-two-rmg-factories-demand-back-pay/>

production. The social embeddedness of economic activity therefore becomes an important marker of how an economy restructures itself and its institutions to the needs of capital under neoliberalism.

In spite of the strikes that have stalled the capital city, the garment unions have remained unsuccessful in forming basic unions or recruiting more members. Rahman and Langford (2012) delineate the reasons for the failures of unions in organising garment workers and maintaining the movement. They note the problems of unionisation attempts in the garment sector lies with: a) Directorate of Labour and DIFE as both are financially corrupt and under the influence of factory owners; b) DIFE lacks resource to enforce and implement BLA 2006 in terms of establishment safety; and, c) that EPZ factories were prohibited from forming unions while the ones outside were in principle allowed to form unions but were strongly opposed and repressed. Further the problems that unions face in terms of functioning without enormous institutional support and resources to build organisational capacities remains absent. The multiplicity of organisations that are based on interests of the leaders rather than political ideological differences have been noted as the main impediment towards realising labour rights. The variety of non-governmental organisations operating in the sector sponsor their own labour unions that function in similar ways. Additionally, the lack of finance often compels unions to form alliances that can offer material help. Hence, NGO sponsored unions become normalised and simultaneously offer an alternative to the old trade unionism. In addition to the multiple unions, the diverse backgrounds of labour leaders also facilitate the division. The presence of leaders from middle class backgrounds with no experience of garment work and the ones who have prior experience of garment work and have gradually emerged

from the garment workers movements also strikes a class conflict. The awareness of everyday life experiences of garment workers among the latter reflects in their interactions and engagement with the workers and the larger movement. On the other hand, the conflict between the left-leaning unions and IndustriALL affiliated independent unions finds expression in the differing modes of engagement with the workers. The problems that arise due to such differences often are irreconcilable as can be understood from the following debates that necessitate an intersectional approach to the garment workers' lives and movement.

Unpacking accountability

The international unions and NGOs build a separate discourse that often aligns with how the international campaigns understand accountability. The NLC led campaign on the ban on child labour in garment factories in Bangladesh derived their legitimacy from the child garment workers like Sheikh Nazma who toured the buyer countries (Rahman, 2011). As part of consumer boycott campaigns, these labour organisations based in the US have made travel arrangements for garment workers to share their experiences with the consumers in the global north. As Brooks (2007) writes, "Women in garment factories around the world, whether or not they have been involved in organising protests on the shop floors, are the ones who "quickly and credibly generate" the information that is then used by the Northern activists to target Northern corporations. Although the information generated is intended to be used to improve working conditions in the factories that are the focus of protest, its generation by one group and narrativisation by another tends to privilege the agency of the activists who are in control of the information's use and dissemination" (Brooks, 2007, pp. xxvi).

Accountability as a demand entered the language of rights largely post the Rana plaza collapse. It initially emerged after the exposure of subcontracting as a widespread practice in the garment industry of Bangladesh. However, the context of the demand lies largely in the industrial accidents that have characterised the industry. Earlier accidents were mainly seen as negligence of suppliers in terms of failure to abide by the regulations set for building construction that led to collapses or fires. With the increasing industrial accidents leading to huge loss of lives, the international consumer campaigns began putting pressure on the brands to ensure safety at the workplace. Whenever fast fashion is mentioned or discussed, the question of accountability inevitably comes up as the ultimate demand. Accountability from the brands initially meant declaring sourcing practices, ensuring workplace safety and reforming production practices that degrade labour. Further, to be accountable was to take responsibility for the labour exploitation and industrial accidents. Documentaries that focus on these campaigns make consumers to be the policing agents for brands through boycotts. Simultaneously, we also witness pleas from local activists in the international campaigns to not boycott or stop buying, but rather pressurise their governments to hold the brands accountable. The pressure aimed at the multinational brands to act as corporate good citizens takes away from the basic contradiction that exists in the position of workers vis-a-vis the owners as well as the brands and retailers.

In light of the constant usage of terms like accountability and responsibility in the global labour rights discourse, the demand takes different forms when looked at from the local struggles for garment workers' rights. Therefore, the questions that become central are who asks for accountability and from whom? And, what does this accountability look

like? To understand the demand for accountability would be to look at how that demand translates in terms of the conditions and needs of the workers.

In terms of the local networks that work in the industry, this demand for accountability can be understood through the different forms it assumes. The independent NGOs that conduct donor oriented projects frame demands that are consistent with the ends of these projects. The demand for health and safety committees after the Rana plaza collapse urges brands to take responsibility for their sourcing practices that abets the practice of subcontracting. Brand names, like Abercrombie and Fitch adorned the posters and placards held by members of BCWS, for instance, during the fifth Rana Plaza anniversary for not signing on the 2018 Accord (Appendix 3.3).

The demand for decent wage forms the central issue that emerged from the strikes documented above. The consistent demand for hike in the minimum wage emerges owing to the rise in prices of basic necessities that are higher in proportion than the increase in the increment. The strikes are often a result of the debt ridden lives of garment workers where delay in wages activates circles of debt from grocery stores and local samitis nearby. The problems of the low wages extends beyond the debt cycle to intake of less nutritious food, difficulty in affording proper education and self-imposed negligence towards medical needs. In discussions with workers in the industrial areas, one often hears them remark that “garment work is no work”. It is not the lack of work, or labour that this statement points to, but rather the denigration it entails as a form of employment. The insufficient wages, abusive behaviour, lack of benefits and threat of termination defines a garment worker’s life. While the international organisations with the help of independent unions and NGOs build the campaigns for disclosing sourcing factories and

ensuring safety, the demands that emerge from the strikes and local movements point us to another question- accountability from the owners and from the government.

In addition to demanding higher minimum wages, the garment workers strikes have also focused on harassment and assault by supervisors and management, increasing pressure to finish targets and forced overtime. Tahira admits, “We do want to contribute to the industry and the country, but they treat us like they own us. If we were rich, we wouldn’t have been working here like this!” This statement from Tahira resonates with those of Nasima’s from the documentary *Sromik Awaaz*.⁷¹ It is a common response among workers who invoke citizenship rights when it comes to demanding basic benefits like maternity leave and benefits, pensions and payment of overtime at par with government employees. In a similar vein, Ruhul Amin had compared the industrialists from the Pakistan era to drive home the point that the current factory owners have only thought of expanding disregarding the lives of those people that make that expansion possible.⁷² It emanates from the lived realities of contributing to the fortunes of the owners who establish more than one factory with the profits incurred from the first. It is rooted in the knowledge that the garment industry contributes the largest share to the nation’s economy. The demands for accountability in these strikes are found to be located within the larger demand for dignity of labour. The unions carried the demand for freedom to form unions and collective bargaining as the main demand. This demand calls for a non-interference of owners in union registration while also registering protest against punitive action taken by the state representatives in consultation with the owners in terminating jobs. The demand for accountability translates into the condemnation of

⁷¹ FGD conducted in Gazipur, 2019.

⁷² Interview with Ruhul Amin, President, Garment Workers Trade Union Centre, 2019.

deployment of paramilitary troops during strikes and police arrests that have become a regular practice of the industrial police and the local authorities.

As much as international campaigns build the image of the garment workers struggle in the international media, the local realities find separate expressions of the demands that occupy the language of anti-sweatshop rights discourse. As the local struggles unfold with the organising efforts by unions and spontaneity of workers demanding rightful wages, we witness the binaries created in the form of a responsible worker and an instigator.⁷³

Umrinkhal union, Dalal union

Gherao as a strategy has been used since the Pakistan era, popularised mainly by Maulana Bhashani. In the current context, the most common form of protest has been to stop work and demonstrate inside or at the gates of the factory. Left unions working in the industrial areas proceed towards protest demonstrations after ensuring initial negotiations by workers with the management. In March 2019, management at Bokul Garments in Gazipur stuck a notice at the gates and shut the factory down without paying the wages to the workers. The factory was shut down under section 13 which permits the factory to close down operations in any event of workers' protest. The workers had not

⁷³ Siddiqi (2019) uses the terms 'good worker' and 'bad instigator' to look at the logic of how any movement has been disregarded as a conspiracy by the government. She refers to the case of Tuba group in 2014 where Moshrefa Mishu, president of GSOF, was arrested under numerous false charges without any proof. I use the term responsible workers that emerges from the interviews as one of the aims of training. The use of instigator shares the same context as labour leaders aligning with the Left unions have been referred to as instigators by the government, the BGMEA as well as the leaders from the independent unions.

held any protest. One of the workers explained, “There was not much work in the factory. Only the sewing section had some work. Finishing section workers were given holidays for the next two days, except a few. As all worked together, a few workers went to ask if they should also come and know more about what is happening which angered the manager. Next when we went to ask for our wages, we saw there were police troops encircling the whole factory.” There existed no union in the factory but some workers were members at the BGWTUC. The remaining workers reached the local office of BGWTUC to find ways to negotiate with the management and keep their jobs. Although a single case, the disagreement between worker and manager or shortage of order being used as an excuse of factory closure is a telling example of how owners keep drawing legitimacy. A decade earlier, a similar incident took place in Nippon Garments when owners closed the factory due to shortage in order without following the steps enshrined in the labour law. The labour law requires the owner to inform workers of factory closure prior and ensure payment of wages. In the unrest that ensued, a clash between law enforcers and workers led to the death of two workers and injury to more than 100 workers (Mirdha, 2009).

Dina Siddiqi (2019) recalls the images of the revolutionaries against the colonial state in British India, the wartime collaborators in independent Bangladesh into the discussion on the militant worker. As an anti-national conspirator, in the post 9/11 context, the workers and unions that challenge the state represent a danger to the state, nation or economy assume the role of revolutionaries and wartime collaborators for the state. Moshrefa Mishu has been seen as an instigator since the first big strike of 2006 by the government and the BGMEA. Owing to her long term experience in organising

workers, she has also challenged the police during many strikes with massive participation of workers. She is also one of the few labour leaders who have been arrested secretly, on various false charges and tortured in custody.⁷⁴ The collapsing of bodies of the garment worker with that of the nation that needs securing the nation and its sovereignty from the ‘bad instigator’ runs as a dominant state narrative to quell any protests.

Conversations with labour leaders and organisers with independent unions, one finds reference to the term *usrinkhal* for unions that organise strike actions.⁷⁵ Strikes are identified as lawless and undisciplined and therefore unnecessary. It is to be noted here that these strikes are mainly called by left leaning unions, most of the time after negotiations with respective owners fail. International organisations aiding various individual factory leaders began towards the end of 1980s with the establishment of Bangladesh Independent Garment Workers Union. Solidarity Center funds BIGU and indirectly funds BGIWF. NGOs also sponsor unions like Karmojibi Nari and Awaj Foundation. Many NGOs undercut unions undertaking union-like roles for union activity with paying workers to participate in seminars and training programs. Khanna (2011) draws similar conclusions regarding the labour movement, although merits the NGO model as a favourable and possible actor of progress. However, soft and non-confrontational approaches by NGO-led unions remain ineffective as the government and owners have historically only responded to strikes by workers rather than readily agreeing to negotiate on the basic and reasonable demands.

⁷⁴ According to Momin, she has been arrested on 27 cases so far on charges that range from looting to conspiracy. Interview with Mominur Rahman Momin, 2018.

⁷⁵ *Ushrinkhal* translates to disorderly, lawless.
Interview, Awaj Foundation/ Sammilito Garments Sromik Federation, 2018.

The leaders on the Left have also made overt references to the leaders of independent unions as allied with the BGMEA, or *dalals*. *Dalal* is a prominent image in contemporary political movements that refers to someone with access to power or material resources but who has also originated from deplorable conditions and background (Chowdhury, 2019;). In the discursive practices surrounding the question of *dalali* in the labour movement, we hear references to the leaders who have been funded by various international organisations to attend foreign trips to address consumers in the buyer countries. Some leaders have also been able to arrange for citizenship or permanent residencies in these countries (Rahman, 2011; Rahman and Langford, 2014). The image of the *dalal* emerges regularly when workers face any issue within the factory that has the presence of the independent unions. For instance, the Tuba Group protest in 2014 began with workers' dissatisfaction with the actions of the unions in handling the problem of delayed wages. Sammilito Garment Sromik Federation, under the leadership of Nazma Akhter, had three unions inside the factory. But during the protests the workers had discarded their leadership as their negotiations with the BGMEA led to no resolution of their demands. Gradually, Moshrefa Mishu from GSOF, Joly Talukdar from BGWTUC entered into discussions with the workers which finally led to the 11 day long occupy movement until the police tear gassed, fired rubber bullets and broke the strike. Jehana has been witness to many such instances when workers approach the BGWTUC after being failed by other leaders in cases of dispute. She believes it is the constant work of the union leaders which allows the workers to rely on them in times of crisis.

Interestingly, one of the leaders from an independent union remarks that the garment industry needs a *jadrel neta*, one who would be strict in their ideology and

strong to face the state.⁷⁶ This is rooted in the fear of murder and disappearance that looms over any opposition leader organising workers as the murder of Aminul Islam still serves as a threat. Leaders also note the failures of the government to reform the labour relations where independent unions would be able to work and owners would engage in meaningful collective bargaining. Rahman and Langford (2014) argue that as long as the State allies with the elite, the owners function by their feudal mindset and international organisations work for hidden protectionist agendas, militant movements are essential for a successful labour struggle. It is undeniably the militant movements by workers that have witnessed an increase in the minimum wages than any other form of protest.

Training, advocacy, lobbying

The role of the independent unions in Bangladesh has been explored on the inroads that AFL-CIO has made in the trade union sector. Rahman and Langford (2014) find AFC-CIO's involvement in the garment sector as an arm of trade union imperialism by the US that operates by creating independent unions instead of strengthening the already existing unions. This is complemented with training-based activities that are organised through donor funds working within the capitalist logic of enhancing productivity (Roychowdhury, 2005). AFL- CIO which has merged four international regional labour institutes into American Center for International Labour Solidarity, or Solidarity Center. The Solidarity Center has been seen to be influenced by the US federal government in its activity (Scipes, 2010; Marriot, 2014). The close connection between

⁷⁶ *Jadrel* roughly translates to one who is imperious or arrogant in Bengali.

Solidarity Center and the US government has been witnessed in the form of funds that are invested in Bangladesh as well as the intervention of US Trade organisations for the release of union leaders backed by the Solidarity Center. For instance, during crises or persecution of BCWS activists, US organisations as well as administrative officials have intervened through their trade roles in the form of threat of GSP suspension, while arrest of labor in Bangladesh has historically been a regular phenomenon (Rahman and Langford, 2014; Siddiqi, 2017). At the local industrial level, unions backed by Solidarity Center have been interested in negotiation with the owner and filing legal cases. There is a professional problem solving method that this entails. It would also be interesting to note that the Accord, which has been a much celebrated milestone, has been signed mostly by Australian and European brands while many US brands have refused to sign and have rather initiated another ineffective agreement - Alliance.

Siddiqi (2017) captures the functioning of the independent unions as facilitating individual development over collective empowerment. She identifies it as neoliberal sentiment that drives the functioning of the NGOs modelled on the need for neoliberal governance. As has been discussed in the beginning, these independent unions build the narrative for a non-state governance that seeks to perform the functions of the state. Training, therefore, becomes one of the main engagements of the independent unions with the garment workers as have been mentioned above. One of the first unions that Solidarity Center established was the Bangladesh Independent Garment-Workers' Union (BIGU). Established in 1994 with four former garment workers as founders which helped gain credibility as an inclusive organisation. BIGU began its functions with training programmes with basic literacy and filing cases in labour courts (Rock, 2001). After

BIGU, several other unions that emerged as part of independent organising have followed similar footsteps in mobilising workers through training programmes and lobbying. The following descriptions of a few sessions draw on the implications of these training sessions.

In a 6 day paralegal workshop organised by UFGW and funded by 3F (United Federation of Danish Workers), a group of 20 workers (15 men and 5 women) were chosen from a factory in Dhaka to train on labour law. The workshop was moderated by their woman leader and the group met once a week on Friday, the only holiday in a week for garment workers. The training began in the morning at 10 and extended till lunch hours. These workers have been part of UFGW for more than 3-4 years now. These sessions mainly consisted of reading out from a booklet published by IndustriALL titled *Srom Ain: Toiri Poshak Shilpe Niyojito Sromikder Jonyo Sahayak Pustika* which roughly translates to Guide to Labour Law for RMG workers.⁷⁷ Explaining the Article 202(23), Salam *bhai* said that the workers can ask the federation to negotiate for them which would depend upon the power that they have in the factory. He also mentions that this provision should be mentioned in the constitution during the formation of the union. Articles were read out by the workers and most of them were generally attentive except for a few who got diverted in between but were signaled to pay attention. They were also educated about the union contribution and the ways it could be collected. One being the owners deducting it from the salary and showing receipts/proof of the contribution being put in the union's fund after the union is registered.

⁷⁷ I accompanied Salaam Khandoker, senior trainer and consultant from BILS, to the last day of the workshop. He was a resource person for the last day where he read the last sections from the handbook. The duration of the last session was around 3 hours.

The next session was on the PC committees, referred to as ‘allergy’ by everyone. Even if there are 50 workers the PCs are compulsory, which are constituted in the absence of unions. These committees are formed to resolve factory issues which stall productivity. The workers were also told to ensure participation in the PCs even if unions were formed. Interestingly, the workers discarded the idea of PCs saying that all the office bearing posts are kept by the management and only representation from workers is there which ultimately is ineffective. However, they were trained to hold these positions as a strategic move to keep in touch with the activities of the management and report to the labour ministry in case of any discrepancy. Many workers had questions with PCs being so unrepresentative in terms of how they do not negotiate for the workers. Salambhai also urged them to organise outside the factories, to reach out to the rickshaw pullers, auto drivers, hawkers and small vendors so that the workers inside have a support outside in case of any need to wrestle, not literally, with the management or owners. The workshop concluded with an evaluation of what they learnt through an exam on labour law. There was no requirement to write names or numbers, but most of them insisted that they would want to write their names to check how they fare. The questionnaire for the exam was 20 questions long with multiple choice answers. The questions were mainly on time of disbursement of wage, sanctioned holidays, and rules for accessing maternity leave, rules of resignation and termination (Appendix 3.10).

Naripokkho’s Shojag Coalition began with eight compliant factories that were already selected by the buyers funding the project. The project was to begin with women workers being trained on the behaviour that constituted sexual harassment inside the workplace and how to report on the committees inside the factories. Prior to the training,

the coordinators found that women workers understood gender based violence in terms of forced labour, abuse and misbehaviour. When explained about the harassment or assault that was not solely linked with work but sexual advances of all kinds. This harassment was not confined to the factory alone. Women shared their experiences of insecurity while commuting to work and back, inside the houses and neighbourhoods, and while using public transport. Many women even affirmed that they feel safer but also disclosed that the committees inside the factories were non-existent (Tithi, 2018).⁷⁸ The training therefore began in seven factories where the management selected the workers. The eighth factory dropped out without citing a valid reason. Although the coordinators wished to interact with the workers prior to selecting them, the management did not entertain such possibilities. Eventually, as the project began the workers asked the coordinators to include their male colleagues in these sessions as they felt it was more important that they heard what behaviour would be considered unwelcome and as sexual harassment. At the end of the training, these women were named '*shojag sathi*' who would take up responsibilities of educating other women about the committees, how do they work, how to report any case of sexual harassment and eventually functionalise the committees inside the factories.⁷⁹ Eventually the coordinators realised that the project must include not just the workers but those at the supervisor and management level as well. At the time of the interview, they were looking at possibilities of enlarging the project to include employees of all these levels in a garment unit.

In another training session organised by Karmojibi Nari in association with Action Aid, women workers from the Mirpur area were trained on collective bargaining

⁷⁸ Interview with Maheen Sultan, Team Leader, Shojag Coalition. 2019.

⁷⁹ Shojag Sathi roughly translates to alert or vigilant companion in Bengali.

approaches. This session had only two male workers among a group of eight women workers. There were two trainers, a man in his forties and a woman in her thirties who mostly assisted in the tasks. The training was planned as a series of games and some facts about the labour law. As communication among workers on the factory floors is under surveillance, they have always found ways to communicate any plan of action through whispers or during lunch times. During this training, one of the games involved standing in a U-shaped semicircle and whispering something into the ears of the next person that would be relayed till the end of the semicircle. Women giggled as they tried to whisper the sentence into the ears of the next person, the men looked uninterested. A young man who stood in the middle of the semicircle altered the statement completely.⁸⁰ Hence, two messages were conveyed in this game, uninterested men and possibilities of incomplete messages.

To attempt an analysis of these training sessions in terms of their implications requires understanding what these training programmes entailed. As these trainings are part of CSR projects, their scope is also limited. The Shojag project, for instance, is limited to only a few factories under the donor. The selection of participant workers by the management is another limitation that impedes free and fair participation. One of striking features of these trainings, as remarked by a former project coordinator with an NGO, was that the same group of people took training under different projects.⁸¹ The union federations which were part of BILS selected the same crop of union members for different training programmes that ranged from leadership training to collective

⁸⁰ I accompanied Rabeya Dilruba to the training session in Mirpur for an interview. I was allowed to sit as an observer with the Naripokkho staff for a brief moment before we shifted to another for the interview with Rabeya Dilruba. 2018.

⁸¹ Interview. 2018.

bargaining. This was seen as a way to access more donor funds through documentation of these training sessions. Similarly, the participants at the paralegal workshop were also members of the federation for more than three to four years and were given training on basic labour laws that concur with Siddiqi's findings of individual development.

Individual development that entails through work of NGOs as well as unions differ according to the actors in these networks. For women workers, involvement with unions have made them fearless. This has been possible as workers have been able to understand their bargaining power as producers of garments. Women workers attending NGO training have also reported similar changes in their attitude towards factories. While women organisers have been able to enroll in university programs and attend international conferences, women workers have gained a sense of strength. One of the questions that I asked these women was what would their first step be in case of any incident of conflict or unrest in the factory? Women whom I met in those cafes proclaimed they would bring them to the cafe and make them speak to the *apas* here. The few women union members I met claimed that they try to argue on the basis of whatever knowledge they have of the labour law. The difference in engagement in terms of project based training and formal union membership becomes clearer as we discuss what union spaces mean for these workers in the next section.

Women's voices in unions

Labour leaders argue that despite suffering from deplorable working conditions, workers are unable to voice their protests because there is constant surveillance and threat involved from the owners and their *mastans* (goons). This becomes possible, the claim, as

workers are also not completely informed about their rights as workers. They are not aware of the peculiarities of labour law that could alter their conditions as workers.

Nasima Akter, member of BGIWF concurs with that perception when she says, “I have rights as a worker, as a woman and as a citizen. But we are being deprived of all these rights. If I had money, they would respect me. If I was more educated, they would listen to me. But I have none, which is why they can deprive me of my rights.” The low levels of education and the constant struggle to survive in the city conforming to the demands of factory work that stands as an obstacle towards unionisation. The leaders regret that hardly 10% of the workers are unionised till date.⁸² That regret increases manifold when the gender question is raised. Julhasnayeem Babu, leader of Bangladesh Garments Sromik Sanghati admits that their union federation has not been able to organise and recruit as many women as they should have considering the garment sector is predominantly female. Similarly, many other labour leaders and organisers chart out the number of reasons women avoid union work, the first being the fear of termination. It also becomes difficult to manage time for union after factory work and domestic work for a woman worker.

The culturally coded roles of gender also see involvement of women in union work as not desirable. Women union members and leaders all have at some point faced resistance from family as well as the co-workers for joining a union. This relates to the general perception of disapproval of trade unions as corrupt and politically motivated organisations (Kabeer and Mahmud, 2004). Secondly, the image of a disruptive worker as masculine also imprints on what a union member usually is. Women, in such a

⁸² Interview with labour leaders.

situation, are socially expected to conform to the rules of purdah as union work means interaction with many people, especially men.

In the documentary *Udita*, Ratna Miah is seen opening the NGWF office for daily gathering.⁸³ She is one of the few women who have joined unions. She narrates personal experience of wage theft without any legal reason that led her to join the union. She spends her time in the union office after work regularly. Living alone in a one-room house in the industrial neighbourhood, her time in the union is very dear to her. There are numerous narratives of workers joining unions after suffering personally at the hands of factory management. Nasima Akter formed a union affiliated to NGWF after witnessing the practice of wage theft. She narrates, “A hundred hours overtime would give us seventy hours pay, the rest would not be paid. If my salary is 3000 taka, then they would take 300-500 taka citing some or the other leave. How long can we stay silent? When our backs hit the wall, we mobilised all workers and demanded for a trade union that would help us in such situations. This is why we formed our union. Previously we did not get maternity leave, service benefits, or clean water. There was no regular cleaning of factories, or any annual leave. We were never allowed any emergency leave due to sudden illness. Joining the trade union at least gave us some of these benefits.”

Similarly Shornali recollects, “When I joined Jeans Care, I saw that the line operators always bullied the operators, swearing at them. Assaulting the workers, slapping, kicking out without pay are a normal day scenario. They force workers to sign blank papers, torture and kick them out without any mistake by the workers. I did not like

⁸³ As documented in *Udita*, 2015.

to be a witness to it. It was hard to witness the abuse because I was abused by my ex-husband. Gradually, I began to protest against this abuse.”

Resistance from husband or family for involvement in unions are common as Fatema describes her day, “I wake up so early that I cannot even give my baby a bath. The father only does that, feeds him. I work till 8 or 9 at night and return home and cook and feed them. In between I have to take time out to go to the union office. If my husband gets angry I tell him I’m still going. There’s no point getting angry”. This resistance runs across different socio-economic classes as regulation of purdah becomes less binding. Rehana, a café coordinator working with Karmojibi Nari, faced a lot of problems when she joined the organisation and later when she was promoted as café coordinator. Women from her organisation had to convince her husband to let her work that eventually alleviated pressures at home.⁸⁴

Repercussions for being a union member also exist as it contradicts the culturally sanctioned gender roles. Workers who are active in unions face constant threats from the management in the form of threat of termination. Jehana, a member of Gazipur unit of Bangladesh Garment Workers Trade Union Center, has been working in the garment factory for more than 10 years. She has been harassed at her workplace for her union involvement. When asked if that deters her, she says, “I am working as I have to, and not doing anything out of the rules, so they know that they cannot throw me out so easily. They keep trying to find problems or rather create one, to fire me.” Only recently, she had to leave her job after she asked for a holiday to tend to her son’s illness. She narrates, “I submitted a letter on Thursday. I took him to the factory and submitted the letter, but

⁸⁴ Interview conducted with Rehana, who is in charge of cafes in Mirpur established by Karmojibi Nari.

they wouldn't accept it. They said you can leave without submitting any letter, we will manage it later. I believed them and went home. After 12 days I went back, punched my card and sat at my machine. I punched my card on the 8th day, and I knew that under labour law if I stay absent for 10 consecutive days I will lose my job. But then I couldn't fight longer as I had believed them. But then I made sure that I got my money. As I had punched my card on the 8th day when I went to the factory with my son, they couldn't throw me out that simply. They asked me to write a resignation letter to which I said I do not have a job. Why should I resign? Then they asked me to come back after some months and join again. I said I have worked for 3.5 years and if I work a year more I would get a little more money added to my monthly salary. Why should I leave when I want to work? But nothing worked and I left after settling my dues. My sister was in security, she was also thrown out because of my involvement with the union. They made strategies to throw her out too."

Hasina from BCWS also points to the consequences of actively working as union workers. She narrates an incident from 2014 where the union visited a Korean garments factory in Gulshan, called Chuin Jin International Ltd. As they attempted to organise a union they were harassed and assaulted by the owners' mastans. It turned serious and they were admitted to the hospital. She admits she still has nightmares about that incident when she sleeps. She believes that "Only a garment worker would only understand the distress and sorrow of another worker. As 80% of the workers are female workers, surrounded mostly by male union leaders, we face problems at home if a male leader

visits our house as our families do not think it is proper. That is why I think there should be 10 female union leaders for every 5 male leaders”.⁸⁵

Ranging from threat to intimidation, Shornali narrates her struggles with the misogynic management for her union involvement. She was offered compensation if she left the union by the management. She recalls her struggles to join the union and claims that she feels safe because of the trade unions. She believes, “Unions are our strength, creating courage for us. Other than the trade union, no one else can understand our problems as workers. When my husband left me, I thought of committing suicide. But then I thought this would be unjustified, it is a sin. Why should I commit suicide, I am a good person. Even if I can do nothing for me, I would struggle for peoples’ rights. Then I gained confidence in joining a trade union. Before I could not understand, but now I encourage everyone to be strong and firm. I want a trade union in every factory. We won’t live forever but we want to ensure a good working environment for our future generations”. Nasima Akter, a member of BGIWF and a garment worker, also had a similar story to tell. She was told that she is a woman and joining a union would bring harm to her family and if she left the union she would be compensated with a good amount of money. These veiled threats often turn into real ones, as she further says, “they said just leave with the money, do not organise a union or you will face problems. We face these threats constantly”. Captured in a discussion with other garment workers, both men and women, Nasima is seen saying, “We are assaulted whether we are in a union or not. It is a taboo - our men do not want us to lead in the union or face dangerous situations. There are times when we do fight or argue, but that is all part of union work.”

⁸⁵ Sramik Awaaz, 2014.

Naseema believes “those who don't join trade unions are making a big mistake. Why? They don't understand. She doesn't understand her legal rights. She only understands what the company tells her. But this will not work with me because however little I know, I know my legal rights as a worker.”⁸⁶

The low percentage of union membership among garment workers seems an anomaly when an industry is marred by a series of industrial accidents and disputes. The industrial areas suffer from industrial disputes almost on a regular basis. The common experiences of delay in wages, wage theft, disputes over bonus are regular occurrences in Bangladesh. Hossain and Akhter (2015) demonstrate that 259 industrial disputes took place on an average over the years from 2008-2014. The main demands that lead to the disputes are mostly due to pay hike, due wages, lay-offs, bonus and overtime, victimisation of a union leader, closure of factory without notice. Among others are safe working conditions, dismissal of officials, extending holidays, extension of maternity leave, medical allowance and relocation of factories (Sharmin et al., 2019). Even the last strikes regarding hike in minimum wage saw widespread participation of garment workers, men and women alike.

Tahira, an employee of TRZ garments in Gazipur narrates an incident from a few weeks back. They were informed that the old employees would get Eid bonus, but the new ones wouldn't. So they all decided to stop work to demand Eid bonus. They informed everyone on all the floors to swipe their cards and enter the factory in the morning, open and clean their machines if they want, and then gather downstairs. In the meantime, the supervisors asked them to start work. They left their machines to gather

⁸⁶ Sramik Awaaz, 2015.

downstairs. Tahira remembers, “One of the supervisors asked where we were heading, we asked him to join too if they wanted.” Runa said that on her floor, she was the first person to stand and leave while others were still unsure and looking around for reactions. Later on she saw them also join the gathering. She giggled and claimed that she saw that the owner was almost about to cry.⁸⁷

It is not uncommon for women to be walking out of a factory in protest. Mayday celebrations or women’s day rallies in the city and industrial districts are attended by many women. Due to the large number of garment workers, these rallies are rather overwhelmingly attended by women workers under various garment union banners and flags (Appendix 3.3 to 3.9). While attending a training session near Gazipur, organised by Awaj Foundation, I had asked if there had been any unrest recently in nearby factories. Mahfuza, who had come to attend the training exclaimed that there was one only last week. When asked if she joined the workers, she nodded in affirmation and said “I go whenever there is a protest, why shouldn’t I? I am a garment worker too.”

Outside of these events that take place in the main city, protest rallies or union meetings in the industrial areas are predominantly male. In the last wage strike of 2018-19, 12,000 garment workers were terminated from their jobs and charged with cases ranging from loot to conspiracy to murder along with the labour leaders (Agence France-Presse, 2019; Clean Clothes Campaign, 2020).⁸⁸ The protest rally was organised in

⁸⁷ FGD with Gazipur Industrial Area workers.

⁸⁸ Links pertaining to the last strike over raise in the minimum wage covered by news websites to campaign updates by international labour rights coalitions. The Business and Human Rights Centre provides a timeline of articles that were published by local and international print media outlets in the wake of the wage protests. <https://www.business-humanrights.org/en/latest-news/bangladesh-unions-call-to-release-detainees-reinstate-over-12000-garment-workers-dismissed-after-wage-protests/>

Gazipura by Garments Sramik Adhikar Andolan, a coalition of 11 garment and sweater workers union federation. The programme began with workers and union members gathering at a market complex near the Gazipura main road. The rally was only 2 minutes' walk to the crossing and a brief gathering. The meeting began with only one female union leader and 10 male union leaders holding a banner with the demands of release and reinstatement of the arrested workers, punishment for the death of three workers by police, ban on industrial police, 8 hours working time and hike in minimum wage printed. The female leader was not visible after a while. There were only a few women who were present since the initial gathering, attending as union members. That meeting was however disrupted by the entry of police and the crowd dispersed instantly. The widespread presence of women in rallies and strikes could be understood from the conditions that continue to persist and worry garment workers. As Nasima exclaims, "The Rana Plaza collapse shook the world. But we are still working in factories because that is the way we have to live as sitting idle at home would not get us food. The struggle must continue if we are to live by working".⁸⁹

Elson and Pearson (1981) argue that the relations between factory work and subordination of women shifts as women enter industrial employment. There are tendencies to intensify, decompose and recompose into new forms of gender subordination. The ensuing feminisation of labour is understood to be an effect of availability of cheap labour and gendered division of labour (Standing, 1999; Caraway, 2005). An exploration of these questions must complicate the understanding of how cheap labour is manufactured and organised in the garment industry. As much as

⁸⁹ Sramik Awaaz, 2014.

international discourses raise campaigns, the local political networks also respond to those campaigns in similar ways. Women workers are recruited due to the need for creation of a compliant workforce (Kabeer, 2000; Ahmed, 2004). While work remains an important marker for understanding gender subordination, a critical scrutiny of the local networks helps us gain insight into its bearing in transforming the relations of power. As different classes of labour have different experience; sweatshop experience also varies according to the social location that one occupies in the matrix of power. Along with the pressure of social reproduction beginning from the homes to the factories, gendered labour embodies all these distinctions simultaneously. A closer look at the everyday lives of garment workers obscures the clear distinction drawn between free labour and unfree labour (Mezzadri, 2017, pp. 29). To respond to the question of where one is free, and where does that freedom end is to attempt to critically understand the systems of power that are structurally pervasive. The system that organises and controls the social relations between the owners and workers, management and supervisor, husband and wife, mother and daughter, a woman and a worker.

Chapter 6 - Conclusion

Siddiqi (2009), in the issue on *South Asian Feminisms*, confronts the stereotypical images of the third world sweatshop worker that indicates the universal subordination of women, appropriated by global feminists. Critics of imperialism and capitalism and human rights activists see workers as the embodiment of exploitation by western predatory capital stressing on the dignity of labour. These stereotypes have reduced women to an emblem rather than as a subject of multinational exploitation. Siddiqi argues that women could achieve a degree of autonomy in some areas and still be subjected to surveillance in other domains. Sexuality, respectability, modesty and self-discipline are invoked in different forms subjecting women to conform to notions of tradition and morality.

The introductory chapter of this thesis lays out the theoretical frameworks through which this research looks at the garment workers movement in Bangladesh. As labour organises social relations in a society, we focus on the labour processes and relations that structures working lives. In the context of South Asia, labour is seen integrally linked with the historical material realities based on class, caste, gender, national, region and religious identities. However, as the Marxist understanding of labour often precludes analysis of women's labour both in the private as well as public spaces, this thesis adheres to the Marxist feminist framework that looks at women's labour as a necessary site of neoliberal capitalist expansion, accumulation and exploitation. The structures of capitalist expansion are visible in the colonial relations in the region, in question, where imperial forces have dominated the resources and markets of the colonised. On the other

hand, in the endeavour of preserving difference as well as claiming freedom, the colonised have demarcated women as the bearers of the nation's history and making. With this historical context, this thesis has attempted to understand the garment industry through its labour practices and processes that have undergone significant transitions since colonial rule. The investment of the state on the question of gender becomes important to understand as we witness women not only as a marker of a nation's development but also its sovereignty when the international discourse on development emerges.

Women's lives are therefore central to understanding women's labour. In this effort, the second chapter chalks out the methodological approach of the research where we understand garment women through their own interpretations. The field, in this sense, possesses its peculiarities that are essential in exploring how lives around it are organised. As a feminist researcher, I note the experiences and dilemmas in the field interacting with union and NGO representatives and garment workers as we share certain cultural relations while being in a distinctly unequal relationship as a researcher and researched. The chapter further describes the various registers I look at in the form of documents collected from the field and the documentary films made on the industry to understand garment work and movement through a mixed methods approach.

Delineating the colonial histories that Bangladesh has witnessed, in the third chapter, the role of the state in the reconfiguring of the economy becomes an entry point to understand the position of the business elite in the centre of policymaking. As the postcolonial state navigates through liberation war, cyclones and state-making, it becomes interesting to look at how that state-making relies heavily on the economy. As

Bangladesh witnesses successive military rules and progresses towards parliamentary democracy, the political leaders and government in power draw the limits to the democratic functioning of state institutions as can be understood from the organisation of the RMG industry. The overlapping of power in terms of the business elite in the parliament attests to the state's role in facilitating the smooth functioning of the industry. The state, therefore, participates in the development discourse through the women's equality programmes and schemes that have been undertaken by the donor-funded NGOs since the 1980s. This chapter thus explores the trajectory of the women's movement to look at the response of the state on questions of justice and autonomy as essential to gender struggles.

The fourth chapter takes on labour into focus as we look at the global production networks and garment work. A young garment worker responded, *"I would marry the one who would not make me work in garments"* when asked who she would prefer to marry, during one of the surveys Momin undertook as part of a research study with a national university illustrating the resentment among garment workers regarding their work. Although placed at a disadvantage in the networks of global economic relations, garment workers hold the central role in the functioning of the global supply chains and the national economies. However, this role does not hold as much significance in the discursive practices of the brands and the owners who are placed at a powerful position within these networks. This chapter, therefore, focuses primarily on the cheap labour discourse that forms the basis on which the industry is organised spatially. Consequently, the labour regime that unfolds is argued to manufacture the cheap labour in the labour practices that run on the logic of patriarchy and economy of time. In addition,

surveillance and threat form the main managerial practice that extends beyond the factory shop floors into the private lives of the workers. This finds illustration in the embodiment of garment work where the machines are perceived to replace digestive functions of the body or when daily chores become the source of anxiety. Beyond the bodies, garment work also transforms social interactions and traditional gender roles as workers like Meghna consider harassment as paying the price for working in garments, or Mohammad, who prepares his daughter to be dropped off in his mother's care while getting ready for work. Garment work, therefore, does not remain restricted within the factory spaces as it shapes the lives and realities of workers as well as their families. The intersections between work and home are quite intricately intertwined.

In the fifth chapter, the discourse on garment workers' rights emerging from the mobilisation by NGOs and union federations brings to light the two crucial features on which the movement is built. The conviction that the women workers contribute majorly to the country's economic growth and that the entire industry's growth is dependent upon them. This helps build claims for proper wages and other benefits drawing comparisons with the government officials, thus claiming citizenship rights. This chapter maps the networks of activists, both local and international, involved in the garment sector. As the transnational labour activist networks engage with the discourse on non-state governance institutions, this chapter teases out the salience of the multilateral agreements, Bangladesh Accord and Alliance, through their impacts and consequences. However, extending Herod's proposition to locate local actors in labour conflicts, this chapter relocates labour struggle back to the industrial areas from the international activist spaces of campaigns and agreements. The successive labour strikes over the demand of higher

minimum wage allow for a coherent understanding of the local labour networks and struggles that are based on the politics of labour and surround garment workers' right to a dignified life and workplace. In that effort, this section looks at the three important aspects of the struggles; one, that explicates the multiple meanings of the demand for accountability; two, the binaries of unruly versus broker unions; and three, the project oriented training, advocacy and lobbying practices of NGO based unions. The chapter concludes with the restrictions faced by women in accessing union spaces owing to the male dominance as well as the gendered codes of behavior based on seclusion.

Women as workers: at the crossroads of solidarities

Drawing connections between the women's movement in Bangladesh with the garment workers' demands seem far-fetched at first glance. The relation between the two however remains central to the context of the status of women's rights in the country. Women as workers become relevant as the women's movements account for the conditions of women through their work. Since liberation, progressive women's organisations and human rights defenders have pursued law and policy reform as their priority to establish the rights of women as equal citizens. The laws regarding domestic violence, fatwas and acid violence were taken up for reform to ensure enforcement of constitutional guarantees of equality and non-discrimination (Hossain, 2016, 179). Another significant milestone for the women's movement has been to ensure equal status to birangonas as that of liberation warriors. In all these attempts, the organisations approached the subject of rights through civic discourse rather than interpretation within religious principles. The two organisations that emerged from political movements during the liberation war and another as an attempt to engage deeply with women's lives -

Bangladesh Mahila Parishad and Naripokkho - pursued the women's question through the discourse of violence, oppression and rights. These organisations incorporated women mainly from the middle class into their organisational structures. Both these organisations acknowledged the need for empowerment that would be collective and simultaneously bring structural changes to the condition of life.

Nevertheless, both eventually turned into NGOs as functioning without financial assistance and registration became troublesome which is one of the reasons why professionalisation of women's rights is inevitable in such circumstances. This is the precise moment when empowerment as an agenda entered the development discourse with international donor-driven projects (Nazneen et al., 2011). As the state capitalised on the development aid available post the liberation war, women became an important constituency for NGOs. Availability of donor funds meant rights discourse being dominated by projects that were time bound and donor funded. The foreign aid and developmental projects therefore took over the language of rights.

The simultaneous increase in women-centered NGOs and unions became overbearing on the language of labour rights as well. This was also possible due to the misogynist character of unions that have consistently been blind to the needs of gender in the framing of demands. Dannecker (2000) studied women garment workers who attest to their disinterest in unions due to their institutionalised nature and masculine spaces. The overbearing political nature of the unions in terms of unions affiliated to major national political parties also proved to be an obstacle in women joining meetings and eventually unions. Women workers found these unions uninterested in their everyday life and focused only on the labour law. She focused on BIGUF formed by four former garment

workers who were exasperated being in unions that did not look into the interests of female garment workers. One of the claims of the women's NGOs and their international donors is that their activities are means to build feminist solidarity. The cafes that provide crèche facilities provide a meeting place for women workers to share their lives through these interactions. This coincided with and strengthened the rhetoric of empowerment that saw NGOs as its harbingers.

Feminist scholars like Naila Kabeer (1998) have vouched for garment work as an avenue for empowerment where women workers could enjoy financial autonomy. The focus on empowerment through economic, political, and social avenues has indeed brought certain favourable changes in the economic, social and political aspects of women's lives with the discussion around agency and participation finally coming to the fore. However, the restructuring of gender relations within and without the garment industry stands as a necessary precondition for any progressive change in the lives of the garment workers. The promise of achieving equality that is defined on the basis of equal opportunities for women hinders the mobilisation of political agency. The compulsion to join garments due to lack of education and better opportunity being in turn celebrated as 'empowerment' obscures the unequal gender relations existing in the society. Modulating and organising training programmes and meetings while conforming to gender roles only provides an impetus to the logic of capitalist patriarchy.

The conditions of work and everyday life that have been documented so far have illustrated only a contradictory image of women in a constant battle for higher wages and dignity as workers. In the documentary *Hidden Cost of Globalization*, NGWF's Aminul Islam compares garment work to slave labour. The similarity between the two is drawn

owing to the industrial practices that continue to extract surplus value through forced overtime, abysmally low wages, and constant threat and harassment. These concerns were aggravated once a spate of accidents took garment workers' lives in fires and collapses (Khanna, 2011). This comparison, however, between factory labour and slave labour remains relevant even today as the workers continue to demand decent wages, maternity benefits, end to forced overtime and implementation of weekly holidays among other rights.

As has been explained in the last chapter, women find it difficult to join and work in unions owing to the lack of recognition from male union members of the difficulties women have to deal with. From family to floor supervisors, being union members for women is riddled with threats imposed by moral prescriptions compounded with threats of termination from employment. Dannecker (2000) argues that women have waged resistance against the prevailing gender order through everyday acts of sharing experiences. Whether in the form of gossiping about supervisors or male co-workers or through silent acts of non-compliance with the production time, women workers, as Dannecker notes, have formed informal networks. These informal networks provided for an avenue for women to associate outside of the union spaces which are considered to be unyielding and male. It is pertinent to mention that the massive strikes from 2006 to 2018 were yet to unfold when Dannecker conducted her study. These acts as individual forms of resistance among the garment workers are understood as a form of consciousness among women of being aware of the unequal gender order. However, the inabilities of unions in organising the predominantly female workforce can be attested to the

politicisation of unions that follow the instructions of the national political party often irrelevant for workers' lives (Dannecker, 2000).

In the current context, we witness formation of this consciousness in ways that struggle through the duality of collective as well as individualistic actions. Exploring the process of network formation among women workers in the last chapter, I argue that these could be understood as forms of resilience among women who perform these everyday acts of resistance as organically as their lives correspond to the demands of factory work and as women struggling in a patriarchal society.

Visibility and access thus become two important markers to determine the reality of the claims of empowerment. These also assist in exploring the meaning of solidarity that acts out in the labour rights discourse at both the local and global levels. As one enters the Press Club area on the 1st of May or 8th of March, one can see scores of people with bandanas or small flags walking by. These two rallies are held near the Press Club to be able to access media in the national capital. Mayday celebrations begin early in the morning as each union and NGO tries to capture the space closest to the Press Club entrance. The entire road is cordoned off as hundreds of groups walk to and fro shouting the ever-relevant call "*Duniyar mojdur ek hou*"⁹⁰. This is the only day when garment women attend rallies on holiday. Some unions also organise coordinated sarees for women to wear for the rallies. Demands for higher minimum wage, maternity leave, holidays, and other social benefits adorn the placards. Women from various sectors attend the rally and demonstration - domestic workers, migrant workers and garment workers.

⁹⁰ "Workers of the World, Unite!"

As NGOs can mobilise women with a small amount of money and refreshments, women also feel encouraged to attend these rallies. Men form the major share of the rally as they can pursue opportunities in diverse industrial fields as compared to women. It is essentially a masculine space. Male union workers often form human chains around the women to ensure no stranger enters their space. The Left unions mentioned in the study often miss this demonstration and hold rallies in the industrial areas instead. The Press Club area is mainly populated by NGOs and independent unions.

This scene changes slightly on the international working women's day as garment workers form a major share of the crowd, followed by women from various political organisations. The IndustriALL women's council coordinates all the union members to demonstrate together. The women leaders wear sarees of the same shade - often violet as a signifier of women's rights. The demonstrations begin comfortably after ten in the morning. There is no rush to capture space unlike Mayday. NGO leaders are seen speaking to media channels. Women workers form the second line holding placards with the demands written in colourful fonts. The demand for a workplace free of sexual harassment was the most common demand in 2019. Women leaders from women's wings of various political organisations come with their demands that range from proper rape laws to demilitarising the Chittagong Hill Tract region.

Regarding training opportunities, garment workers from compliant factories witness greater access than those in non-compliant ones as donor funds mainly cover the compliant factories. The access to skilled work is however scarce and a multilayered terrain. This reminds of Wright's research in a coupon processing unit in Mexico. Wright (1997) explores the journey of Gloria from being a worker to a supervisor. Wright

documents Gloria's refusal to submit to the image of a "tradition-bound" docile worker to cross over to the skilled labour force. As a Mexican female supervisor in a factory with a few Mexican-American female and male supervisors and American male supervisors, Gloria accomplishes herself as a worker backed supervisor and a skilled Mexican woman. Her success as a supervisor refusing to learn English to maintain production falsifies two notions— that Mexican women cannot be skilled and that acquiring managerial skills was based on her experience as a worker that facilitates a social network tracing a patronage system to her (Wright, 1997, pp. 289). In the context of Bangladeshi women, the low wages and disposability obstruct all the possibilities for women to access rights to education or skilled work. Unlike women trainers who have been able to access higher education and employment opportunities at various development NGOs, women workers have only been able to access training.

Strict understanding of the labour laws is one of the focal points for the union federations who allege that the abundance of donor funds for activism around labour rights figures as one of the reasons for the dilution of working class politics and strengthening of the business class in securing their interests. Interestingly, not all the organisers working in these local level NGOs have been in garment work, but have initially worked as volunteers and graduated to the level of a trainer. They are mostly lower-middle class/middle class women who have been initiated into NGO work through kin or due to their wishes to do social good. Except, Awaj Foundation, which has former garment workers in their executive boards, trainers in these organisations are either students working as volunteers or beginners seeking permanent positions in the NGOs. However, there are women trainers who have resumed their higher education after

working in these organisations. Their involvement in NGOs has provided them with access to spaces that have been earmarked for only men. These individual stories of gaining voices make for a case for women empowerment that has been widely celebrated in the discourse on participatory development.

The question, however, remains whether these training programmes change the prevalent patron-client relationship between the women workers and the organisers, a defining characteristic of the NGO-isation of movements influenced by narratives usually the West (Rahman, 2011; Siddiqi, 2009). The uncomplicated and often ineffective exchange of training and token participation dilutes the scope of building movements as these trainings are often limited to only building further networks between NGOs and their clients and ‘educating’ workers on issues that are on the peripheries of the real challenges of working in the garment industry.

The presence of international actors is often unquestioned in this process as the image of the ‘savior’ resurfaces in these training sessions. For instance, the women I met in the cafes run by the women’s organisations and at the workshop by an IndustriALL affiliated union were quite eager to speak to me, know about me and my life in India, and reveal the problems they faced inside the workplace and outside. The easy welcome at these cafes for me was reflective of the trust they placed on the ‘foreigners’ to rally for their cause. The untold and implicit trust on a researcher like me seems symptomatic of the reliance on international and external donors for the ‘liberation’ of the garment workers as advanced by the donor funded projects.

The visibility that garments have acquired over the time is an important marker of the significance it holds in the lives of millions of workers and their families. The dearth of employment opportunities in other sectors has often compelled graduated students to join garments as auditors or in the management. For the workers, garment work becomes an integral part of their lives constituting their experiences as women and as workers. Most of the women I spoke to, took a lot of time to respond to what they liked about their work. They were, in contrast, prompt in responding how there is nothing fulfilling about working in garments. While garment work has helped a lot of women and families survive, the general sentiment of the workers is one of resentment about the lack of recognition of the issues that concern the workers.

The NGO-isation of labour and women's rights has guaranteed the entrenchment of the confidence to be vocal. It has allowed exposure to various educational training programmes and provided visibility to women's issues to a larger, international audience. Left-leaning unions have been of assistance in crises but have been largely blind to women's concerns in the union movement. There is, however, an acknowledgement of the need for leadership among women workers to formulate a programmatic approach to ensure labour rights. It is in the crossroads that women as workers have been caught and negotiating their space as ideal workers and militant strikers. It seems that women have to fight their battles alone.

Scope, limitations and directions for further research

The struggles around the gender question and its implications for the labour movement forms the basis of the study. This roots primarily from the discourse around

women's work in globalising economies under the new international division of labour that is increasingly blurring the distinctions between private and the public performances of gender. The feminisation of labour that creates predominantly female, flexible labour in the global economic processes are based on two interrelated theses, one, cheap labour and two, gendered codes of behaviour. As I argue through this study, the cheap labour is manufactured in these layered networks of production where the state and brands and owners play an equally significant role through state policies and labour practices, respectively. On the other hand, international rights discourse seeks to appropriate struggles over labour rights into global campaigns and narrativisation of the lives of third world women. In the neoliberal feminist discourse, the third world Muslim woman remains a victim to be saved by their liberated sisters that finds illustration in the numerous projects focused on women empowerment. In addition, the material realities of workers in the industrial areas, at the fringes of the city, become invisible in the rhetoric of empowerment and development. This study, through its focus on the implications of garment work and labour strikes, shows that the possibilities of obtaining rights of labour are intrinsically linked with gender struggles. Located in the sociology of work and labour, this study thus argues for a local understanding of labour struggles that provide more scope for understanding the labour movement worldwide and the forging of solidarities across geographies.

One of the limitations of the study is its field entry as obtaining a visa, various permissions and conducting a study in a different country did prove challenging. As a result, I could not interact with all the unions working in the sector across the political spectrum. Secondly, as the NGOs and unions interacted with international researchers

working on the garment industry quite regularly, some responses were practised and required more time to engage in conversations that were not solely based on the organisations but their functioning and the larger question of labour rights.

The limitations also reveal the possibilities for further research in the area. As the focus of this study was on the unions and NGOs engaged in the sector, I could not include a larger body of associations like *samitis* which provide loans to the workers in need. Although the study looks at the incidence of loans, a separate focus on loan cycles and local institutions would provide a fuller understanding of how garment workers ensure sustenance. This separate system of debt through local bodies would provide an interesting arena to further complicate the meanings of women's work. Secondly, approaching the garment sector through the social reproduction theory framework would be insightful. As social reproduction theory approaches creation of value through the practices of 'people making' (Fraser et al, 2019), the industrial areas would be an excellent space to understand how extended families, madrassas, day care centres sustain the community through care work. The feminisation of care work and its close links to the garment industry would be an interesting area for research.

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Appendix 1 - Maps



Appendix 1.1 -Industrial areas covered in fieldwork near Dhaka City.

Source: Prepared on Google maps.



Appendix 1.2 - Administrative map of Dhaka.

Source:

[https://www.researchgate.net/publication/320292356 Transforming Urban Dichotomies and Challenges of South Asian Megacities Rethinking Sustainable Growth of Dhaka Bangladesh](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/320292356_Transforming_Urban_Dichotomies_and_Challenges_of_South_Asian_Megacities_Rethinking_Sustainable_Growth_of_Dhaka_Bangladesh)

Appendix 2 - Profiles

Appendix 2.1: List of unions contacted, along with their political party/organisation affiliation and the status of registration under the Bangladesh Labour Act.

No.	Unions	Affiliation	Year of Registration
1	Garments Sromik Oikyo Forum	Gonotantrik Biplobi Party	Unregistered
2	Garment Workers Trade Union Center	Communist Party of Bangladesh	2019
3	Garments Sromik Sanghati	Janasanghati Andolan	Unregistered
4	United Federation of Garment Workers	IndustriALL	1997
5	Bangladesh Garment and Industrial Workers Federation	IndustriALL	2003

Appendix 2.1.1: List of union members contacted, along with their details on sex, age, organisational affiliation, designation and previous occupation.

N o	Name	Sex	Age	Organisation	Occupation	Previous occupatio n
1	Mominur Rahman Momin	M	34	Garments Sromik Oikyo Forum	Full time	Sweater & garment
2	Amina Akhter	F	38	Garments Sromik Oikyo Forum	Full time	Garment
3	Ruhul Amin	M	46	Garments Workers Trade Union Center	Full time	NA
4	Joly Talukdar	F	43	Garments Workers Trade Union Center	Full time	NA
5	Aparajita Chanda	F	34	Nari Sanghati	Banker	NA
6	Julhasnayeem Babu	M	41	Garments Sromik Sanghati	Full time	NA
7	Laboni	F	36	Bangladesh Garments and Industrial Workers Federation	Full time	Garment

8	Babul Akhter	M	45	Bangladesh Garments and Industrial Workers Federation	Full time	Garment
9	Sheheli Afroz Lovely	F	38	United Federation of Garment Workers	Full Time	NA

Appendix 2.2: List of NGOs contacted along with their registration status under the NGO Bureau Act.

No	Non-governmental Organisations	Year of Registration
1	Naripokkho	1983
2	Karmojibi Nari	1991
3	Bangladesh Mahila Parishad	1970
4	Awaj Foundation	2003
5	Bangladesh Legal Aid and Services Trust	1993
6	Bangladesh Institute of Labour Studies - BILS	1995

Appendix 2.2.1: List of NGO officials contacted along with their sex, age, organisational affiliation, designation and previous occupation.

No	Name	Sex	Age	Organisation	Designation	Previous Occupation
1	Khadija Akhter	F	35	Awaj Foundation	Treasurer	Garment
2	Rabeya Dilruba	F	33	Karmojibi Nari	Area head	NA
3	Rowshan Ara	F	37	Naripokkho	Project Manager	Development NGO
4	Ayekha Khanum	F	60	Bangladesh Mahila Parishad	President	Student activist
5	Syed Sultan Uddin Ahmed	M	60	Bangladesh Institute of Labour Studies - BILS	Executive head	Banker/ Bank Employee's Union
6	Borkot Ali	M	50	Bangladesh Legal Aid and Services Trust	Advocate	NA
7	Maheen Sultan	F	48	BGID - BRAC University/ Naripokkho	Program Coordinator/ Project Manager	NA
8	Firdous Azim	F	50	BRAC University/ Naripokkho	Professor/ member	NA

9	Jesmin Juy	F	35	Bangladesh Institute of Labour Studies - BILS/ Chhatro Oikyo Forum	Program Coordinator/ Central committee member	Student

Appendix 2.3: List of garment workers along with their sex, age, marital status, duration in the garment industry, factory they are currently employed in and designation.⁹¹

No	Name	Sex	Age	Marital Status	Duration in garments (in years)	Current factory	Designation
1	Tanaya	F	27	M	6	Interfab	Operator
2	Tahira	F	25	M	5	Interfab	Operator
3	Moushumi	F	28	UM	4	Interfab	Operator
4	Mumtaz	F	30	UM	10	Interfab	Operator
5	Jahida	F	24	UM	2	TRZ garments	Operator
6	Runa	F	29	M	7	TRZ garments	Operator
7	Fatema	F	25	UM	2	TRZ garments	Operator
8	Jannat	F	28	M	8	TRZ garments	Operator
9	Rafiqul	M	30	M	5	TRZ garments	Operator

⁹¹ Names have been changed to maintain anonymity.

10	Khaled	M	32	M	5	Interfab	Operator
11	Sharif	M	28	UM	12	Interfab	Dyeing Section
12	Runa	F	26	M	6	TRZ garments	Operator
13	Meghna	F	22	UM	8	Interfab	Operator
14	Rekha	F	21	UM	2	Interfab	Quality
15	Shaheena	F	28	M	10	Inditex	Operator
16	Majida	F	30	M	5	Inditex	Operator
17	Rahima	F	37	M	9	Inditex	Operator
18	Farzana	F	16	UM	6months	TRZ garments	Helper
19	Sweety	F	33	UM	15	Subcontract worker	Operator
20	Jehana	F	32	M	12	Inditex	Operator
21	Johura	F	31	UM	>15	Subcontract worker	Operator

Appendix 2.4: Reports Collected from the websites of International NGOs and Unions involved in Bangladesh RMG sector

No	Year	Title	Publisher	Author(s)
1	2005	Made by Woman: Gender, The Global Garment Industry and the Movement for Women Workers' Rights	Clean Clothes Campaign (CCC)	Nina Ascoley and Chantal Finney (ed.)
2	2006	Fashion Victims: The True Cost of Cheap Clothes at Primark, Tesco and Asda	War on Want	Khorshed Alam and Martin Hearson
3	2006	The Bangladesh Labour Act, 2006	-	-
4	2008	Fashion Victims II: How UK clothing retailers are keeping workers in poverty	War on Want	Khorshed Alam, Seb Klier and Simon McRae
5	2008	Bargaining for a Living Wage: a trade union guide	International Textile Garment & Leather Workers' Federation	-
6	2009	Stitching a Decent Wage Across Borders (Proposal)	CCC & Asia Floor Wage Alliance	Jeroen Merk

7	2009	A Handbook on Bangladesh Labour Act, 2006	Bangladesh Employers' Federation	-
8	2011	Stitched Up	War on Want	Khorshed Alam, Laia Blanch and Anna Smith
9	2012	Race to the Bottom: Olympic Sportswear Companies' Exploitation of Bangladeshi Workers	War on Want	Khorshed Alam
10	2012	Deadly Secrets: What companies know about dangerous workplaces and why exposing the truth can save workers' lives in Bangladesh and beyond	International Labour Rights Forum	Björn Claeson
11	2012	Bangladesh: Escalation in Campaign to Silence Garment Workers	Solidarity Center	-
12	2013	Fatal Fashion in Bangladesh: The Accord on Fire and Safety in Bangladesh	CCC	-
13	2013	The Living Wage: Winning the fight for social justice	War on Want	Samantha Maher
14	2013	Reframing Trade: Union Mobilisation against the General Agreement on Trade in Services (GATS)	Rainer Hampp Verlag	Donna McGuire

15	2014	Discussion Paper: The Global Textile and Clothing Industry post the Agreements on Textiles and Clothing	WTO	Hildegunn Kyvik Nordås
16	2015	Global Garment Industry Factsheet	CCC	Lina Stotz and Gillian Kane
17	2015	“Whoever Raises their Head Suffers the Most”: Workers’ Rights in Bangladesh’s Garment Factories	Human Rights Watch	Meenakshi Ganguly (ed.)
18	2016	Foreign Donation (Voluntary Activities) Regulation Act 2016	-	-
19	2016	Women Working Worldwide: Researching International Subcontracting Chains	CCC	-
20	2017	Women, Gender and Work Volume 2: Social Choices and Inequalities	ILO	Mark Lansky, Jayati Ghosh, Dominique Méda and Uma Rani (eds.)
21	2019	Made in Poverty: The True Price of Fashion	Oxfam Australia	S. Nayeem Emran, Joy Kyriacou and Sarah Rogan

22	2017	Violence and Harassment against Women and Men in the World of Work: Trade Union Perspectives and Action	ILO	Dr. Jane Pillinger
23	2018	Impact of H&M's Fair Living Wage Initiatives on the Economic Lives of Garment Workers in Bangladesh	H&M	-

Appendix 2.4.1: List of documents collected during field work from various unions and NGOs in Bengali and English languages.

No	Year	Title	Publisher	Author(s)
1	Feb- Jun 2017 (Year 1; Issue 1)	Nari Sromik Barta	Karmojibi Nari	-
2	Jul – Nov 2017 (Year 1; Issue 2)	Nari Sromik Barta	Karmojibi Nari	-
3	2013	In Quest of Minimum Wage Amount of the RMG Workers in Bangladesh	Bangladesh Institute of Labour Studies – BILS	Mostafiz Ahmed and Md. Aurangajeb Akond

4	Jan-Jun 2018 (Year 21; Issue 1)	Labour (A BILS Journal)	BILS	Syed Sultan Uddin Ahmed (ed.)
5	Jul-Dec 2017 (Year 20; Issue 2)	Labour (A BILS Journal)	BILS	Syed Sultan Uddin Ahmed (ed.)
6	2015	National Minimum Wage for Bangladesh's Workers: Rational Standard and Rationality of National Minimum	BILS	-
7	2016	State of Bangladesh Garment Sector Tripartism and the Scope of Harmonious Industrial and Labour Relations	Friedrich Ebert Stiftung and BILS	Jakir Hossain and Afroza Akhter
8	2016	Vulnerable Employment: Capabilities and Vulnerabilities of Female Garment Workers in Bangladesh	Bangladesh Mahila Parishad	Zahid ul Arefin Choudhury, Samina Luthfa & Kaberi Gayen
9	2018	A Situation Analysis Study: Workers Rights and Gender Based Violence in RMG and TU Capacity to Deal with These	BILS	Md. Monirul Islam
10	2013	Jatiyo o Antarjatik Mandonder Aloke Sromik Odhikar o Prapyo	BILS & FES	-

11	-	Nari Sromiker Odhikar: Sromo Ain 2006 o Anyanyo	BILS	-
12	2018	Sromik Odhikar	Samajtantrik Sromik Front	-
13	-	Sromo Ain – Toiri Poshak Shilpe Niyojito Sromikder Jonyo – Sahayak Pustika	IndustriALL Global Union, Bangladesh	-
14	2014	Bangladesher Sromik Andolan: Oitijyer Aloke Bhubishyoter Path Chala		Manjurul Ahsan Khan
15	April – June 2004	A-Bola – Untold	Karmojibi Nari	Qaut El Islam (ed.)
16	Oct – Dec 2006	A-Bola – Untold	Karmojibi Nari	Quat El Islam (ed.)
17	Jan – Mar 2006	A-Bola – Untold	Karmojibi Nari	Quat El Islam (ed.)
18	-	Kormokkhetre Sromiker Peshagoto Swasthyo, Nirapatta o Jhunki Ebong Uttoroner Koroniyo	BILS	-
19	Magh-Ashad 1416 (Jan-Jun 2010)	Muktoshwar – Nari Dibasher 100 Bochhor Puri	Nari Sanghati	Central Committee (Nari Sanghati)

20	2014	24-e April Hajar Praner Chitkar – Rana Plaza Sromik Hotyakando Bishoyok Sankalan	Bangladesh Garment Sromik Sanghati	Taslima Akhter, Julhasnayee n Babu, Dipak Ray, Mehboob Iran (eds.)
21	2018	Ki Kore Banche Sromik	Bangladesh Garment Sromik Sanghati	-
22	2004	Bicharpati-r Abichar O Anyanyo Proshongo	Soummo Prokhashoni	Moshrefa Mishu

Appendix 2.5: List of documentaries consulted, with the details of the year of release, producer and director.

No.	Year	Title	Producer	Director
1	1995	Zoned for Slavery - The Child Behind the Label	Crowning Rooster Arts/ National Labour Committee, US	-
2	2003	Hidden Face of Globalisation	Crowning Rooster Arts/ National Labour Committee	Monowar Shahadat Darpon
3	2013	Fault Lines - Made in Bangladesh	Al-Jazeera English/ Laila Al-Arian	Al-Jazeera English
4	2013	Made in Bangladesh – the fifth estate	CBC News	Lysanne Louter
5	2015	Udita (Arise)	Rainbow Collective Documentary Production & Openvizor	Hannan Majid and Richard York
6	2015	The True Cost	Life is My Movie and Bullfrog Films	Andrew Morgan
7	2015	Sramik Awaaz	Chaumtoli Huq, Law @the margins (community funded)	Mohammed Romel

Appendix 3 - Photographs



Appendix 3.1 - Photograph by Taslima Akhter.
Sourced from https://www.taslimaakhter.com/rana_plaza_collapse/



Appendix 3.2 - Parkscene Apparel Ltd., one of the garment factories on the Dhaka - Gazipur Highway. March 2019.

Appendix 3.3 - Rana Plaza memorial on 24th April, 2018.



Appendix 3.4 - Journalists interviewing Nazma Akhter, President of Sammilito Garments Sromik Federation and founder of Awaj Foundation in Mayday rally at National Press Club, Dhaka. May, 2018.



Appendix 3.5 - Members of Garments Sromik Trade Union Center, affiliated to Communist Party of Bangladesh (CPB) ending their procession on Mayday, 2018.

Appendix 3.6 - Demonstrations in front of National Press Club, Dhaka on International Working Women's day, March 2019.

The placards read:

- Immediate rehabilitation for disabled workers of Rana Plaza.
- Ensure Pension fund for workers.
- Eliminate gender based discrimination at work and society.
- Ensure protection for women of all classes.



Appendix 3.7 - Nari Sanghati, affiliated to Gana Sanghati Andolan, celebrated their 14th anniversary and joined International Working Women's Day demonstrations at the National Press Club, Dhaka. March, 2019.

The banner reads:

Resist Rape- Sexual Harassment- Fear.

Let us unite to ensure women's self dignity, rights and security.



Appendix 3.8 - Loud speakers tied to rickshaws, a standard practice among all political organisations during demonstrations. March, 2019.



Appendix 3.9 - Demonstrators listening to speeches by leaders of Progressive Women's Forum, comprising left women's organisations - Communist Party of Bangladesh Women's Cell, Samajtantrik Mohila Forum, Bangladesh Nari mukti Kendra, Sromojibi Nari Maitri, Biplobi Nari Forum and Nari Sanghati. At the International Working Women's Day demonstration near the National Press Club, Dhaka on March, 2019.



Appendix 3.10 - Salam Khandokar (sitting, centre) from BILS and Sheheli Afroz Lovely (sitting, second from right), Joint Secy., UFGW with participants of the paralegal workshop organised in May, 2018. Questionnaire from the training (below).

সঠিক উত্তরের পাশে টিক দিন। (প্রশ্নপত্রে নাম লিখতে হবে না)

১. একজন শ্রমিককে কাজে নিয়োজিত করতে হলে মালিককে কি নিয়োগপত্র নিতে হবে ?

- হ্যা
- না

২. প্রতি মাসের মঞ্জুরী পরবর্তী মাসের কত দিনের মধ্যে পাওয়ার নিয়ম ?

- ৭ দিন
- ৭ কার্যদিবস
- ১০ কার্যদিবস

৩. ওভারটাইম ছাড়া একজন শ্রমিকের সৈনিক সর্বোচ্চ কর্মঘণ্টা কত ?

- ৮ ঘণ্টা
- ১০ ঘণ্টা
- ১২ ঘণ্টা

৪. একজন শ্রমিক সাধারণত প্রতিদিন কত ঘণ্টা ওভারটাইম করতে পারবেন ?

- ২ ঘণ্টা
- ৩ ঘণ্টা
- ৪ ঘণ্টা

৫. ওভারটাইম ভাতার হার মূল মজুরীর কতগুন ?

- দ্বিগুন
- তিনগুন
- একগুন

৬. অসুস্থতার ছুটি কতদিন ?

- ১৪ দিন
- ১০ দিন
- ১১ দিন

৭. মাতৃত্বকালীন ছুটি কতদিন ?

- ১৬ সপ্তাহ
- ৪ মাস
- ৩ মাস ১৩ দিন

৮. একজন শ্রমিক বছরে কয়দিন নৈমিত্তিক ছুটি পেতে পারেন ?

- ১০ দিন
- ২০ দিন
- ৩০ দিন

৯. প্রসূতি কল্যাণ সুবিধা পাওয়ার জন্য শ্রমিককে মালিকের অধীনে সন্তান প্রসবের অব্যবহিত পূর্বে কতদিন কাজ করতে হবে ?

- ৬ মাস
- ৮ মাস
- ১২ মাস

১০. নিম্নের কে ইউনিয়নের সদস্য হতে পারবে না ?

- মেশিন অপারেটর
- সিকিউরিটি গার্ড
- ক্রিমার

১১. প্রতি বছরের কত তারিখের মধ্যে ইউনিয়নের বার্ষিক রিটার্ন সাবমিট করতে হবে ?

- ৩০শে এপ্রিল
- ৩০শে মে
- ৩০শে জুন

১২. একজন স্থায়ী শ্রমিককে চাকরী হতে অব্যবহিত প্রদান বা টারমিনেট করতে হলে মালিক কতদিন আগে শ্রমিককে নোটিশ বা নোটিশের পরিবর্তে মঞ্জুরী দিবেন ?

- ৩০ দিন
- ৩ মাস ১৩ দিন
- ১২০ দিন

১৩. চাকরী থেকে পদত্যাগ করতে হলে একজন স্থায়ী শ্রমিককে কতদিন আগে মালিকের কাছে নোটিশ দিতে হয় ?

- ৩০ দিন
- ৬০ দিন
- ৯০ দিন

১৪. একজন শ্রমিক কত বছর পূর্ণ হলে চাকরী হতে অবসর গ্রহণ করবে ?

- ৬০ বছর
- ৫৭ বছর
- ৫০ বছর

১৫. আমার জমজ সন্তান আছে। আমি আমার সন্তান সম্বা। আমি কি মঞ্জুরীসহ প্রসূতি কল্যাণ ছুটি পাব ?

- হ্যা
- না

১৬. একটি প্রতিষ্ঠানে কতভাগ শ্রমিক বা ইউনিয়ন সদস্য থাকলে ইউনিয়নের নির্বাহী কমিটিতে ১০% মহিলা থাকতে হবে।

- ২০ ভাগ
- ৩০ ভাগ



Appendix 3.11 - Inside the Central office of Ganatantrik Biplobi Party in Dhaka. Photo taken in May, 2019.

Framed pictures of Rosa Luxemburg, Clara Zetkin, Alexandra Kollontai, Begum Rokeya Shakhawat Hossain and Pritilata Waddedar.

The pictures are followed by three banners from affiliated organisations, Garments Sromik Oikyo Forum, Chhatro Oikyo Forum and Biplobi Nari Forum.

- Ensure unrestricted trade union rights
- Strengthen the fight for democratic education system
- Strengthen the fight for equal rights for men and women

Appendix 4 - Pamphlets

গার্মেন্টস শিল্প সেক্টরে সকল শ্রেণির শ্রমিকগণের নিম্নতম মজুরি হারের খসড়া সুপারিশ। ৮ অক্টোবর, ২০১৮

হেল্পার (গ্রেড-৭)

১। সহকারী অপারেটর (সকল ধরনের মেশিনের জন্য) ২। সহকারী কাটারম্যান/সহকারী নিডলম্যান/সহকারী সিজারম্যান ৩। সহকারী কোয়ালিটি ইন্সপেক্টর/সহকারী কোয়ালিটি অডিটর ৪। সহকারী মার্কার/সহকারী ড্রইংম্যান ৫। সহকারী ইস্যুমান/সহকারী ইনপুটম্যান ৬। সহকারী বাড়লিং ম্যান/সহকারী নাথারিং ম্যান ৭। সহকারী অটো স্প্রেডার/সহকারী লে-ম্যান ৮। সহকারী পলিম্যান/সহকারী প্যাকিং ম্যান/সহকারী ফোল্ডিং ম্যান ৯। সহকারী ট্যাগম্যান/সহকারী স্পটম্যান/সহকারী রিসিভম্যান ১০। সহকারী প্রিটার/সহকারী পেইন্টার/সহকারী ড্রয়ারম্যান ১১। সহকারী ক্রিন এক্সপোজার ১২। সহকারী ওয়েভার/সহকারী ফিটার/সহকারী প্রাঘার ১৩। সহকারী স্যাম্পলম্যান ১৪। সহকারী ডিস্ট্রিবিউটর ১৫। ফিনিশিং সহকারী ১৬। সুতা বাড়া সহকারী				
বেসিক মজুরি ৪১০০/=	বাড়ি ভাড়া (মূল মজুরির ৫০%) ২০৫০/=	চিকিৎসা ভাতা ৬০০/=	যাতায়াত ভাতা ৩৫০/=	খাদ্য ভাতা ৯০০/=
সর্বমোট মজুরি ৮০০০/=				

সাধারণ অপারেটর (গ্রেড-৬)

১। সাধারণ অপারেটর (সকল ধরনের মেশিনের জন্য) ২। সাধারণ কাটারম্যান/সাধারণ নিডলম্যান/সাধারণ সিজারম্যান ৩। সাধারণ কোয়ালিটি ইন্সপেক্টর/সাধারণ কোয়ালিটি অডিটর ৪। সাধারণ মার্কার/সাধারণ ড্রইংম্যান ৫। সাধারণ ইস্যুমান/সাধারণ ইনপুটম্যান ৬। সাধারণ বাড়লিং ম্যান/সাধারণ নাথারিং ম্যান ৭। সাধারণ অটো স্প্রেডার/সাধারণ লে-ম্যান ৮। সাধারণ পলিম্যান/সাধারণ প্যাকিং ম্যান/সাধারণ ফোল্ডিং ম্যান ৯। সাধারণ ট্যাগম্যান/সাধারণ স্পটম্যান/সাধারণ রিসিভম্যান ১০। সাধারণ প্রিটার/সাধারণ পেইন্টার/সাধারণ ড্রয়ারম্যান ১১। সাধারণ ক্রিন এক্সপোজার ১২। সাধারণ আয়রণম্যান/সাধারণ প্রেসিংম্যান ১৩। সাধারণ ওয়েভার/সাধারণ ফিটার/সাধারণ প্রাঘার ১৪। সাধারণ স্যাম্পলম্যান ১৫। সাধারণ ডিস্ট্রিবিউটর				
বেসিক মজুরি ৪৩৬৬/=	বাড়ি ভাড়া (মূল মজুরির ৫০%) ২১৮৩/=	চিকিৎসা ভাতা ৬০০/=	যাতায়াত ভাতা ৩৫০/=	খাদ্য ভাতা ৯০০/=
সর্বমোট মজুরি ৮৩৯৯/=				

জুনিয়র অপারেটর (গ্রেড-৫)

১। জুনিয়র অপারেটর (সকল ধরনের মেশিনের জন্য) ২। জুনিয়র কাটারম্যান/জুনিয়র নিডলম্যান/জুনিয়র সিজারম্যান ৩। জুনিয়র কোয়ালিটি ইন্সপেক্টর/জুনিয়র কোয়ালিটি অডিটর ৪। জুনিয়র মার্কার/জুনিয়র ড্রইংম্যান ৫। জুনিয়র ইস্যুমান/জুনিয়র ইনপুটম্যান ৬। জুনিয়র বাড়লিং ম্যান/জুনিয়র নাথারিং ম্যান ৭। জুনিয়র অটো স্প্রেডার/জুনিয়র লে-ম্যান ৮। জুনিয়র পলিম্যান/জুনিয়র প্যাকিং ম্যান/জুনিয়র ফোল্ডিং ম্যান ৯। জুনিয়র ট্যাগম্যান/জুনিয়র স্পটম্যান/জুনিয়র রিসিভম্যান ১০। জুনিয়র প্রিটার/জুনিয়র পেইন্টার/জুনিয়র ড্রয়ারম্যান ১১। জুনিয়র ক্রিন এক্সপোজার ১২। জুনিয়র আয়রণম্যান/জুনিয়র প্রেসিংম্যান ১৩। জুনিয়র ওয়েভার/জুনিয়র ফিটার/জুনিয়র প্রাঘার ১৪। জুনিয়র স্যাম্পলম্যান ১৫। জুনিয়র ডিস্ট্রিবিউটর ১৬। সহকারী মেকানিক ১৭। সহকারী ইলেকট্রিশিয়ান				
বেসিক মজুরি ৪৬৭০/=	বাড়ি ভাড়া (মূল মজুরির ৫০%) ২৩৩৫/=	চিকিৎসা ভাতা ৬০০/=	যাতায়াত ভাতা ৩৫০/=	খাদ্য ভাতা ৯০০/=
সর্বমোট মজুরি ৮৮৫৫/=				

অপারেটর (গ্রেড-৪)

১। অপারেটর (সকল ধরনের মেশিনের জন্য) ২। কাটারম্যান/নিডলম্যান/সিজারম্যান ৩। কোয়ালিটি ইন্সপেক্টর/কোয়ালিটি অডিটর ৪। মার্কার/ড্রইংম্যান ৫। ইস্যুমান/ইনপুটম্যান ৬। বাড়লিং ম্যান/নাথারিং ম্যান ৭। অটো স্প্রেডার/লে-ম্যান ৮। পলিম্যান/প্যাকিং ম্যান/ফোল্ডিং ম্যান ৯। ট্যাগম্যান/স্পটম্যান/রিসিভম্যান ১০। প্রিটার/পেইন্টার/ড্রয়ারম্যান ১১। ক্রিন এক্সপোজার ১২। আয়রণম্যান/প্রেসিংম্যান ১৩। ওয়েভার/ফিটার/প্রাঘার ১৪। স্যাম্পলম্যান ১৫। ডিস্ট্রিবিউটর ১৬। সাধারণ মেকানিক ১৭। সাধারণ ইলেকট্রিশিয়ান ১৮। লাইন লিভার				
বেসিক মজুরি ৪৯৩০/=	বাড়ি ভাড়া (মূল মজুরির ৫০%) ২৪৬৫/=	চিকিৎসা ভাতা ৬০০/=	যাতায়াত ভাতা ৩৫০/=	খাদ্য ভাতা ৯০০/=
সর্বমোট মজুরি ৯২৪৫/=				

সিনিয়র অপারেটর (গ্রেড-৩)

১। সিনিয়র অপারেটর (সকল ধরনের মেশিনের জন্য) ২। সিনিয়র কাটার ৩। সিনিয়র কোয়ালিটি ইন্সপেক্টর/সিনিয়র কোয়ালিটি অডিটর ৪। সিনিয়র মার্কার/সিনিয়র ড্রইং ম্যান ৫। সিনিয়র ক্রিন এক্সপোজার ৬। সিনিয়র আয়রণম্যান ৭। সিনিয়র স্যাম্পলম্যান/স্যাম্পল মেশিনিস্ট ৮। সিনিয়র মেকানিক ৯। জুনিয়র ইলেকট্রিশিয়ান ১০। সিনিয়র লাইন				
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সর্বমোট মজুরি ৯৫৭৮/=				

মেকানিক ও কাটিং মাস্টার (গ্রেড-২)

১। মেকানিক/ইলেকট্রিশিয়ান ২। কাটিং মাস্টার				
বেসিক মজুরি ৮৫১৪/=	বাড়ি ভাড়া (মূল মজুরির ৫০%) ৪২৫৭/=	চিকিৎসা ভাতা ৬০০/=	যাতায়াত ভাতা ৩৫০/=	খাদ্য ভাতা ৯০০/=
সর্বমোট মজুরি ১৪৬২১/=				

প্যাটার্ন মাস্টার ও চীফ কাটিং মাস্টার (গ্রেড-১)

১। প্যাটার্ন মাস্টার ২। চীফ কোয়ালিটি কন্ট্রোলার ৩। চীফ কাটিং মাস্টার/কাটিং চীফ ৪। চীফ মেকানিক				
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সর্বমোট মজুরি ১১৫০৪/=				

*শিক্ষানবিশ (চাকুরিতে নতুন দুকলে ৩ মাস, মালিক চাইলে আরো ৩ মাস) শ্রমিকের ভাতা মোট ৫৯৭৫ টাকা

গার্মেন্ট শ্রমিকদের মজুরি কমানোর চক্রান্তের বিরুদ্ধে এবং মজুরি বৃদ্ধির দাবিতে শক্তিশালী শ্রমিক আন্দোলন গড়ে তুলুন

Appendix 4.1 - Pamphlet on the breakdown of the wage structure according to grades published by the Bangladesh Garments Trade Union Centre in 2018.

Appendix 4.3 - Pamphlet published by Bangladesh Garments Sromik Sanghati marking a year of the Rana Plaza collapse.



**Fragmentations
AND Solidarities**

24-26 APRIL 2019

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Mitaja
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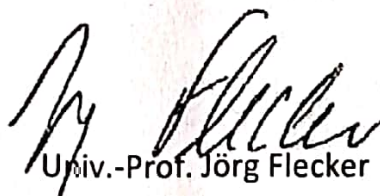
attended the

37th International Labour Process Conference

held in Vienna, Austria

April 24 - 26, 2019

Mitaja Chakraborty presented her paper "Solidarity networks and modes of organising: discoursing gendered labour in RMG industry of Bangladesh" within Special Stream 2: "Representation and resistance: trade unions, their comfort zones and the new hybrid forms of representation" on Friday, 26 April 2019 from 9 - 9:30AM and took part in the symposium "Solidarity in the fissured workplace" with her presentation "Feminist solidarity networks and modes of organising in the garment industry in Bangladesh" on Thursday, 25 April 2019 from 17:45 - 19:15PM.


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5th Annual International Conference

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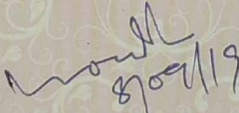
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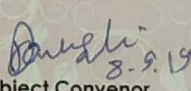
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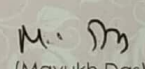
attended the Fifth International Conference 2019 organised by the **Paschimbanga Anchalik Itihas O Loksanskriti Charcha Kendra**; Madhyakalyanpur, Baruipur, Kolkata- 700 144; in Collaboration with **Department of Library & Information Science, Jadavpur University** (Main Campus), on 07.09.2019 & 08.09.2019 (Saturday & Sunday) at Kolkata 700032, West Bengal, India and presented a paper entitled "MAPPING THE ANTI-SWEAT SHOP

MOVEMENT NETWORK IN THE RMG INDUSTRY OF BANGLADESH"


(Prof. Subarna Kumar Das)
President, ISSHC 2019 &
HOD, Department of Library & Information Science
Jadavpur University


(Prof. Samar Kumar Mondal)
Coordinator, ISSHC 2019
Professor of Philosophy
Jadavpur University


Subject Convenor
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Humanities Congress


(Mayukh Das)
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November 10, 2020

To Whom It May Concern

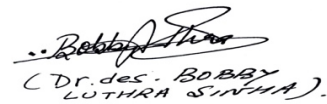
This is to certify that Ms Mitaja Chakraborty, India has participated in the First Annual Conference of the Indian Association for South Asian Studies (IASAS) Rethinking South Asia: Alternative Paradigms, Practices and Discourses, organized by Centre for Alternative Studies in Social Sciences, New Delhi, India during 7-9 November 2020 and presented a paper titled "Encounters with the global capital: discoursing democracy and labour rights in RMG industry in Bangladesh".

Please visit our website for more details: www.iasas.in ; www.casss.org.in

Sincerely,



Dr. Ashutosh Kumar
President
Indian Association for South
Asian Studies (IASAS)
New Delhi



(Dr. des. BOBBY
LUTHRA SINHA).

Dr. Bobby Luthra Sinha
General Secretary
Centre for Alternative
Studies in Social Sciences
New Delhi

Research Scholars' Epistemological Predicament

A CHANDRASEKHAR REDDY, GITANJALI JOSHUA, IPSITA PRADHAN, JANGKHOSEI TOUTHANG, LALATENDU KESHARI DAS, MITAJA CHAKRABORTY, PRIYAM SHARMA, SATHEESH PERUMALLA, SHILPA KRISHNA

What is the position of research scholars in the knowledge food chain? Are they merely consumers of knowledge or can they also produce it? The University Grants Commission Regulations, 2009 and 2016 enforced two important rules: mandatory coursework on research methods and theory for MPhil and PhD programmes, and publication of at least one research paper in a peer-reviewed journal to be eligible to submit a doctoral thesis. An analysis of these regulations through the lens of research scholars offers an insight into the complexity of relationships between academic institutions, journals, and research scholars in the process of knowledge production.

In the introduction to her book, *Southern Theory: The Global Dynamics of Knowledge in Social Science*, Australian sociologist Raewyn Connell (2008) notes that “social science is, at best, ambiguously democratic. Its dominant genres picture the world as it is seen by men, by capitalists, by the educated and affluent.” Notwithstanding the provocative stance of the work, Connell fails to mention that this dominant knowledge is produced by institutional academicians, with a little help from international governmental and non-governmental organisations (Zapp 2018).

The purpose of this article is not to critique Connell, either for presuming a homogeneous “south” (Muller 2009; Collins 1997) or for being ignorant of the segment of research scholars. As we will discuss a little later, research scholars, throughout the world, have predominantly been relegated to the position of consumers of knowledge that is produced by agents who decry their own helplessness in getting recognition as producers of knowledge. Our aim is to analyse the reasons, particularly in the case of India, that have caused research scholars to stay away from the production of knowledge debate and remain mere consumers of knowledge.

We take as the backdrop the University Grants Commission (UGC) (Minimum Standards and Procedure for Award of MPhil/PhD Degrees) Regulations of 2009 and 2016, which made courses on research methods and theories mandatory in MPhil and PhD, and required PhD scholars to publish at least one research paper in a peer-reviewed journal to be eligible to submit their thesis. Thus, we¹ attempt to discuss, through empirical data, the problematic aspects of the relationships between academic institutions, journals, and research scholars in knowledge production. The article is divided into four sections. In the first, we discuss the debate around the politics of knowledge production in India and, while doing so, we try to demonstrate how it has bypassed the domain of research scholars. The next section discusses, in brief, the methods we used to collect empirical data to justify our claim. In the third section, we present data on five academic journals in India and show how research scholars view their relationship with these journals. Finally, we offer suggestions for the way forward.

The Debate So Far

By focusing on the training of research scholars in the theory and methods of social enquiry, on the one hand, and the dissemination of their work to the academic peer group in the form of published research papers, on the other, the UGC 2009 and 2016 regulations necessitated a greater engagement on the part of academic institutions and journals to create “competent”

The authors would like to thank Sundar Sarukkai and N Purendra Prasad for their comments on an earlier draft, which helped the authors refine their ideas, and for their continuous encouragement. The authors also thank the anonymous reviewer for their insightful suggestions, which helped them streamline the arguments.

The position of the authors' names is in alphabetical order and does not represent any difference in their contribution to the study.

A Chandrasekhar Reddy (socio.hcu@gmail.com), Gitanjali Joshua, Ipsita Pradhan, Jangkhosei Touthang, Lalatendu Keshari Das, Mitaja Chakraborty, Priyam Sharma, Satheesh Perumalla, and Shilpa Krishna are research scholars at the Department of Sociology, University of Hyderabad.

Understanding
Social Issues
Some Reflections
Vol. II

Edited by
Dibyendu Ganguli



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Mapping the Anti-sweatshop Movement Network in the RMG Industry of Bangladesh

MITAJA CHAKRABORTY

Research Scholar, Department of Sociology,
University of Hyderabad, Telengana

Brief overview

The struggle between global capital and labour rights has evolved as has the effects of increased exchange and interaction between the nations and nation-states. With the identification of third world countries as pools of cheap labour, the inflow of raw materials, innovation and ideas from the developed countries also increased manifold. The rise of the Readymade Manufacturing Garment (RMG) industry in the globalising economy of Bangladesh is one such sector that has undergone massive growth in the past few decades. Compounding this is the characterisation of states with weaker laws and a colonial history as 'thinned nation states'. As the cheap labour pool has alerted the multinational companies of more profits, it has also attracted the attention of international unions, non-government organisations and labour rights campaigns towards conditions at the workplace. This paper looks at the structure of the garment industry in the context of the activists' network formed between organisations and unions lobbying for labour rights from within the country and outside in a country that has been infamous for violating internationally accepted labour standards. This paper looks at all the actors in anti-sweatshop movement network in terms of their locations and the discourses it engages in with regard to labour.

Keywords: Activist network; Thinned nation states; NGO; Globalisation; Empowerment.

INTRODUCTION

The Rana Plaza collapse marks a watershed moment in the history of anti-sweatshop movement across the globe. In the year 2013, we witnessed widespread protests all over the world where activists, students, and consumers came out on the streets, in front of brand stores to demand

About The Editor



Dr. Dibyendu Ganguli is a dynamic Social Analyst and Social Value Activist. Presently, he is professionally attached with Bijoy Krishna Girls' College, Howrah (erstwhile Girls' College, Howrah) as an Assistant Professor and Departmental Head of Sociology. He was a student and research scholar of Jadavpur University, Kolkata. He was associated with Jadavpur University, University of Calcutta, Jogamaya Devi College and Muralidhar Girls' College as a teaching faculty. His areas of interest are Sociology of Sexuality and Gender, Research Methodology and Sociological Theory. He has published a number of papers in various journals and books and attended a number of conferences and seminars in India and abroad. He is a life member of Indian Sociological Society and a member of Indian Science Congress Association.



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To Whomever It Might Concern

This is to confirm that Ms. Mitaja Chakraborty's essay "**Unravelling the ideal woman: militancy among garment workers in Dhaka**" has been selected to be included in the anthology *New Gendered Radicalisms at the Margins of the State and Empire*, under contract with Routledge. The volume is scheduled to be out in June, 2022. The volume is being co-edited by me (Nandini Dhar, Associate Professor, OP Jindal Global University) and my colleague, Peerzada Raouf Ahmad (Lecturer and Senior Research Associate).

If you have any further questions, please do not hesitate to get in touch with me at nandinidhar2112@gmail.com and (91) 8930105444.

Thanking you,

Nandini Dhar

Nandini Dhar

(Associate Professor,

Jindal School of Liberal Humanities,

OP Jindal Global University)

Unravelling the ideal woman: militancy among garment workers in Dhaka

Abstract

Militancy among garment workers as an aftermath of the Rana Plaza Collapse in 2013 culminated into the Bangladesh Accord with the pressure from international rights bodies. With the persisting threat to unionisation and progressive hollowing out of ideology and practice, non-traditional modes of organising took roots in Bangladesh Ready Made Garments industry with the entry of transnational rights bodies in the local labour movement. It is interesting to note the criticisms laid out by local activists of the irresponsible behaviour of the state towards its predominantly female labour force, the mistreatment of women and the threat to association. Simultaneously, many international labour and women's activists and networks have also campaigned for consumer awareness, 'clean labour' and the need for accountability of brands and governments. However, the patronage politics that Bangladesh survives by, clearly seen through the dependence of governments on foreign aid, makes it difficult for the local actors to realise their demands. This article seeks to outline the efforts of the local labour activists attempting to create a space for mobilising women in the context of garment work, generally labelled as 'women's work'. It seeks to locate the identity of the worker, as a woman and as an activist in a country which upholds the notion of an 'ideal woman' often legitimised through religion and culture. How does the multiclass character of the women labour force challenge the network of global capital that depends on sexual division of labour for its expansion and survival? What roles do the international allies of the labour movement play in the sexual politics that unfolds in Bangladesh? How does the transnationalisation of labour issues reflect and evolve through the local labour networks or vice versa?

What makes garment(s) work? Gendered Labour and Networks of Struggle in the Garment Industry of Dhaka, Bangladesh

by Mitaja Chakraborty

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