

Lmd

Journal **Labour and Management in Development**
Volume 2, Number 7

Problems surrounding wages: the ready made garments sector in Bangladesh

Syeda Sharmin Absar



Asia Pacific Press at the
AUSTRALIAN NATIONAL UNIVERSITY

<http://ncdsnet.anu.edu.au>

© Asia Pacific Press 2001

This work is copyright. Apart from those uses which may be permitted under the Copyright Act 1968 as amended, no part may be reproduced by any process without written permission from the publisher.

ISSN 1443-6698

ISBN 0 7315 3685 1

Syeda Sharmin Absar is an expert on poverty and gender issues. She has worked for UNICEF in Bangladesh. This article is part of her doctoral thesis.

Abbreviations

BGMEA	Bangladesh Garment Manufacturers' and Exporters' Association
BIDS	Bangladesh Institute for Development Studies
BTWL	Bangladesh Textile and Garment Workers' League
MOU	Memorandum of Understanding
RMG	Ready Made Garment
UNESCO	United Nations Educational, Science and Cultural Organization
UNICEF	United Nations Children's Fund
WHO	World Health Organization

I did not know what office is, what garment factory is. I have heard of these things through word of mouth after I came to Dhaka.

Mahmuda, a garment employee

In the last decade of the twentieth century, the ready made garment (RMG) sector of Bangladesh gave the country and its women an image boost, both in South Asia and the rest of the world. Currently, Bangladesh exports 35 types of garment products to about 31 countries around the world (Nuruzzaman 1999:2). The RMG sector is a 100 per cent export-oriented industry. From Table 1, it is clear that RMG export earnings are very significant and continue to increase. Table 1 shows the market position of Bangladesh in the United States, Canada and the European Union between 1991 and 1997. Bangladesh maintained its position as the sixth largest exporter of apparel to the United States between 1994–97 (Quddus and Rashid 2000:53). It was the largest exporter of T-shirts and shirts to the European Union in 1992 and 1993.

That Bangladesh today is considered an economic competitor in terms of international garment manufacturing by other countries of the region and beyond is an important development in the history of the country since gaining independence in 1971.¹ It appears that much of the socio-economic development in the first decade of the twenty-first century for Bangladesh and its approximately 1.5 million women workers depends on the continuing success of the RMG industry.

There has been a rapid increase in the number of women, and the number of working mothers in particular, in the RMG sector. In 1980, it was estimated that there were around 50,000 female garment workers (World Bank 1990:101). According to Bhattacharya and Rahman (2000), the number of people employed in the apparel

Table 1 Market position in the United States, Canada and European Union markets, 1991–97

Year	United States	European Union	Canada
1991	8 th largest	-	-
1992	7 th largest	Largest T-shirt and shirt exporter	9 th largest
1993	7 th largest	Largest T-shirt and shirt exporter	-
1994	6 th largest	5 th largest T-shirt and shirt exporter	-
1995	6 th largest	-	-
1996	6 th largest	-	-
1997	6 th largest	-	-

Source: Quddus, M. and Rashid, S., 2000. *Entrepreneurs and Economic Development: the remarkable story of garment exports from Bangladesh*, The University Press Limited, Dhaka:229.

sector had increased to more than 1.5 million in 1997–98, which constitutes about 70 per cent of the total female employment in the country's manufacturing sector. Table 2 shows that women constitute more than 66 per cent of the total number of persons employed in the garment industry, the highest proportion of any industry in Bangladesh.

Gendered division of labour

In the garment industry in Bangladesh, tasks are allocated largely on the basis of gender. This determines many of the working conditions of women workers. All the workers in the sewing section are women, while almost all those in the cutting, ironing, and finishing sections are men (Paul-Majumder and Begum 1997). Women workers are absorbed in a variety of occupations from cutting, sewing, inserting buttons, making button holes, checking, cleaning the threads, ironing, folding, packing and training to supervising. Duties and responsibilities vary according to the type of work. Women work mainly as helpers, machinists and, less frequently, as

line supervisors and quality controllers. There are no female cutting masters. In 1998, a cutting master was paid Tk3935 per month (Paul-Majumder and Begum 2000:26).² Men also dominate the administrative and management level jobs (Kabeer 1991:135). In other words, women are discriminated against in terms of access to higher-paid white collar and management positions. When asked why they prefer to employ women for sewing, the owners and managers gave several reasons. Most felt that sewing is traditionally done by women and that women are more patient and more controllable than men (Paul-Majumder and Begum 2000). Some maintained that women are easier to manage and less likely to be engaged in union activities and production disruptions (Jamaly and Wickramanayake 1996; Paul-Majumder and Begum 2000). The duties assigned to the women and the comments made about their appropriateness to the industry are not atypical of women's experiences elsewhere, such as Malaysia (Arifin 1994), Japan (Tsurumi 1990), Philippines (Miralao 1983), and Sri Lanka (Kiribanda 1986).

Table 2 Share of female employment in the total industrial employment (per cent)

Type of industry	No. of surveyed factories	Share of female employment in total employment (per cent)
Garment industry	12	66.2
Other export industries	7	14.7
Non-export industries	31	6.7
All	50	16.3

Source: Paul-Majumder, P. and Begum, A., 2000. *The Gender Impacts of Growth of Export-Oriented Manufacturing in Bangladesh: case study: ready made garment industry Bangladesh*, Background paper prepared by the Bangladesh Institute of Development Studies (BIDS) for the World Bank, Dhaka:9.

Wages

The government of Bangladesh sets minimum wages for various categories of workers. According to Minimum Wage Ordinance 1994, apprentices and helpers are to receive Tk500 and Tk930 per month respectively (Paul-Majumder and Begum 2000:37). Apprentices are helpers who have been working in the garment industry for less than three months. After three months, apprentices are appointed as helpers. Often female helpers are discriminated against in

terms of wage levels, and these wages are also often fixed far below the minimum wage rate. A survey conducted in 1998 showed that 73 per cent of female helpers, as opposed to 15 per cent of their male counterparts, did not receive even the minimum wage (Paul-Majumder and Begum 2000:37). Table 3 shows gender differentials in wages in the garment industry in 1998. All categories of female workers were paid less than their male counterparts.

Table 3 Gender differentials in wages in the garment industry, 1998

Categories of workers	Male wages (Tk/month)	Female wages (Tk/month)
Supervisor	4,234	3,082
Quality controller	4,038	1,724
Cutting master	3,935	-
Operator	2,254	1,536
Ironer	1,894	1,106
Sewing helper	1,200	762
Cutting helper	1,512	837
Finishing helper	1,209	1,023
Folder	1,528	1,157

Source: Paul-Majumder and A. Begum 2000. *The Gender Impacts of Growth of Export-Oriented Manufacturing in Bangladesh: case study: ready made garment industry Bangladesh*, Background paper prepared by the Bangladesh Institute of Development Studies (BIDS) for the World Bank, Dhaka. :26.

Table 4 Unit labour cost, 1994

Countries	Unit labour cost (\$/shirt)	Wages (\$/year)	Productivity (Shirts/worker)
Bangladesh	0.11	290	2536
India	0.26	668	2592
Pakistan	0.43	1343	3100
Sri Lanka	0.79	570	719

Source: Zohir, S.C., 2000. Intra-household Relations and Social Dynamics among Garment Workers in Dhaka City, Paper presented at the National Seminar on Garment Industry in Bangladesh: economic and social dimensions, Dhaka, 21–22 January.

Unit labour cost

Bangladesh has the cheapest unit labour cost in South Asia (Table 4). It costs only 11 cents to produce a shirt in Bangladesh, whereas it costs 79 cents in Sri Lanka and 26 cents in India. Clearly, Bangladesh's comparative advantage lies in having the cheapest unit labour cost.

Working hours

Though the wages are low, the working hours are very long. The RMG factories claim to operate one eight-hour shift six days a week. The 1965 Factory Act allows women to work overtime up until 8 o'clock at night. To meet delivery deadlines, however, women are virtually compelled to work after 8 o'clock. Sometimes they work until 3 o'clock in the morning and report back to start work again five hours later at 8 o'clock (Jamaly and Wickramanayake 1996). They are asked to work whole months at a time without a single day off, in contravention of the Factory Act, which stipulates that no employee should work more than ten days consecutively without a break (Jamaly and Wickramanayake 1996; Ahmad 1996; and Hossain et al. 1990).

Occupational mobility

Level of education, age, length of service, job position and gender all affect the occupational mobility of workers in the RMG sector. Men have more years of schooling, are absent less often and their average age is higher than that of women workers. Thus men hold upper level jobs and women are mostly helpers.³

From the above discussion, it can be said that women workers face wage differentials, insecurity and discrimination at various levels and places. They also face a variety of challenges both at work and home in coping with their daily responsibilities. Researchers have suggested a number of potential reasons for women choosing to work in the Bangladesh RMG sector—because of economic hardship (Kabeer 1991; Paul-Majumder 1998); because the family is unable to provide for them (Kibria 1995); and as a means of increasing marriage potential (Hossain et al. 1990). Kibria (1995) asserts that women are still under strong patriarchal control and are caught between traditional values (saving for dowry and marriage) and modernity (earning through factory work). They have little or no control over their income (Paul-Majumder 1998). They are burdened with a double day's work, face discrimination at work in terms of wage differentials and gender difference, work in poor conditions, and can not feel safe on the streets. They are denied reasonable legal support (Hossain et al. 1990) and yet they are reluctant to organise themselves into unions (Jamaly and Wickramanayake 1996).

This paper will show

1. why women work
2. what women do to increase their wages
3. what problems they face to receive their wages
4. what they experience because of the violation of labour laws, ineffectiveness of the trade unions and indifference of the management.

Why women work

According to the existing literature, women work for a number of reasons.

Pull and push effects

Some of the women workers interviewed by Kabeer (1991) were seen to be responding to the 'pull' of new incentives in the female segment of the labour market, while others were 'pushed' towards employment by the failure of the 'patriarchal bargain' and the loss of a male guardian. Whatever the motive for entering the market, 'most women workers behave like rational economic agents in order to improve their situation' (Kabeer 1991).

Improved marriage prospects versus financial incentives to induce men into marriage

Hossain et al. (1990) found that better wage prospects improved women's chances in the marriage market. According to these authors, this factor might encourage more families to allow their daughters to take up paid employment. The authors pointed, however, to the other side of this scenario—the need to use financial incentives to induce men into marriage (either through a dowry or through income potential) shows that women are still forced into situations of extreme dependence in Bangladeshi society. This is also a way of endorsing the traditional roles of women—getting married and bearing children.

Economic wellbeing versus self-fulfilment

Junsay and Heaton (1989) noted that cultural factors, inadequate professional qualifications, and discriminatory company

policies work against female participation in industries, trade, and services. Women workers, however, are consciously making a decision about self-fulfilment by working and keeping the marriage option in mind (Hossain et al. 1990). Female workers are consciously saving for a dowry from their limited income. Therefore, their efforts to gain liberation are directed towards both economic wellbeing and self-fulfilment.

According to the interviews of 34 women workers in the RMG sector conducted by Kibria (1995), despite the traditionally low economic independence of Bangladeshi women, the women's ability to control their income varied. In fact, a substantial number of women workers exercised full control over their wages. This, however, does not necessarily mean that the women are emancipated from traditional roles or religious norms. Kibria (1995) argued that, with the exception of some young unmarried workers, women's employment in the garment industry had not posed a significant challenge to patriarchal family relations. The women stated that they did not associate their entry into wage work with an enhanced ability to assert more power in family decisionmaking processes. Paul-Majumder (1998) contradicts Kibria's (1995) findings. She noted that female workers cannot spend their own hard-earned income according to their own desires, and thus the extent of psychological stress they suffer is considerable. It is because of this psychological stress that female workers sometimes lose interest in work.

Kabeer (1991) perceives that women have acute awareness of the unreliability of marriage because of the existing patriarchal

relations in terms of freedom, work and control over income. Kibria (1995) added that engaging in wage employment does not necessarily help women change their attitudes and behaviours. Rather, living away from family guardians who monitor their activities serves as a more potent catalyst for change. Almost all of the women she interviewed felt that greater respect was accorded to them due to their status as income-earners. To summarise, it can be said that patriarchal relations (traditions) are not changing, but women's status as income-earners is improving. This means economic relations between men and women are changing.

Research method

Informant selection

Following the example of small-sample based narrative studies set by organisations such as the World Bank and the World Health Organisation (WHO), I interviewed 35 women workers in the RMG industry. The small number is also significant considering the fact that the interviews are in-depth narratives of the 35 women. Cannon et al. (1988) state that qualitative research frequently involves (1) face-to-face contact between researcher and subject, (2) open-ended rather than closed-ended questions, (3) unstructured rather than structured interview schedules and (4) small samples. They have also argued that it is much more useful if the small samples under study are relatively homogeneous, since extreme diversity makes the task of identifying common patterns almost impossible.

There are other studies (Kabeer 1991; Kibria 1995; World Bank 2000; and Markovic and Manderson 2000) based on narratives of women only and these studies consist of 34–52 interviewees. One of the most recent works is that of Markovic and Manderson (2000), which focuses on an ethnic minority of 52 immigrants to Australia from the former Yugoslavia and explores employment-related issues. The women arrived after the commencement of the war in the former Yugoslavia in 1991. The interviews were conducted in 1996–97 and the research has applied a predominantly qualitative methodology to explore the social context in which individual women make their decisions, namely the micro-world of immigrants (see also Pahjola 1991; Grasmuck and Grasmuck 1997). The researchers justify their methodology stating that

in-depth interviews were conducted to explore their settlement experiences, as we believed this to be the method which would best capture the integrity and complexity of their lives, and hence illuminate broader issues (Markovic and Manderson 2000:127).

Another narrative-based study that involved only 50 women is Tarr's (1996) research, on the sexual culture(s) of young Cambodians. Certain problems can be understood from a different angle if in-depth interviews of a few women are conducted in a way which is both manageable and cost-effective. Tarr (1996) helps summarise the reasons for adopting such a research methodology for exploring issues related to

women garment workers in Bangladesh, arguing that the

research project rejected survey methods right from the outset, not simply because I considered they would not yield very much ethnographic data but the funding agency was opposed to large-scale population surveys...arguing that such research instruments could offer few insights into the personal and social contexts.

Voices of the Poor (World Bank 2000) is one of the outstanding departures from the traditional quantitative research method adopted by the World Bank. Professor Amartya Sen, in his review of the *Voices of the Poor*, suggested it was a marvelous introduction to development seen from inside (World Bank 2000). Indeed the fresh perspective that such studies can provide is becoming increasingly widely accepted in the international academic community.

My interviews were dependent on the availability of the workers. Most of the women work overtime until quite late at night (on a daily basis, and often beyond 2 a.m.) and also on weekends. It was difficult to interview workers at night for this reason and also because of the insecurity of the city as a whole. I went to the factory premises during lunchtime, and asked the workers if they were interested in talking about their work and after-work life with me. I left my address with them and invited them to drop by my house whenever they were free, if they were interested. The first batch of women came in a group one night after overtime work. I briefed them about my research. They became very interested. The

following Friday, they came along with friends and colleagues who worked at the same or other factories and lived in the same neighbourhood. Every time they came, they brought somebody new—sometimes (former) women workers, sometimes husbands, children or old guardians besides currently employed women workers. I started interviewing 40 workers, but before my series of interviews was completed, five workers left for their village district and, for this reason, I was forced to drop them and analyse the narratives of only 35 women. Most of them were helpers, young, unmarried and illiterate. Of the 35 workers, 28 were helpers, four were operators, two were sweepers, and only one was a supervisor.

Interviews included individual and focus group discussions. I often went to their neighbourhood as they could not come everyday after work, but they liked coming to my house to be interviewed because it gave them an opportunity to do something other than household work.

Interview location

I interviewed 35 women workers from two factories. One factory was selected in Gulshan and one in Badda. These regions were chosen because of the high concentration of garment factories there. Most workers live in Badda to take advantage of the lower rental costs of housing there. Only three workers were found to be both living and working in Gulshan. The number of workers interviewed at each location is shown in Table 6.

Table 5 Women workers by occupation

Occupation	Number	Wages/Month (TK.)
Sweeper	2	650
Helper	28	650–900
Operator	4	1100–1400
Supervisor	1	1800
Total	35	-

Source: Fieldwork 1999

The RMG sector is based on assembly line production. The entire production line depends on the time management of each worker on the line. To avoid disrupting the production line, the interviews were conducted in either the researcher's or the worker's homes. This provided a feeling of relative safety to the respondents. Open-ended interviews were carried out.

Fieldwork findings of why women work: narratives of women workers

All the women I interviewed bore responsibility (in terms of cost) for at least two other members of their family. Workers often sacrifice their own needs and give priority to the needs of the family members. This was reflected in some of the statements made by the women.

I am working because I have responsibilities to look after my grandmother and parents. I also have to save for my dowry. Because I work, I can save. Therefore, I have to keep on working.

Lovely,⁴ an unmarried operator

I work so that I can eat. The biggest problems are food and clothing. There is no peace in this world if you cannot eat properly.

Piyara, a factory helper

We need the money for our extended family so I have to work. Working is difficult but there are no gains without pains.

Hurmuti, a factory helper

I work because my husband is not good. In-laws do not have *jomidaree*.⁵ I work and afford the expenses of my four kids. Money is a big problem.

Raj Banu, a factory sweeper

Money is the problem. My family cannot afford to feed the children regularly. It would look like a luxury if the mother tries to be on a regular diet and particularly protein based.

Fatema, a factory helper

Sometimes we eat potatoes for days. Boiled potatoes and water. Most of the time I go to work without having breakfast. My kids eat once a day often. Just dinner. After I come back from work I cook. They complain. I pretend it is not abnormal. I scold them for complaining. Sometimes I give them a good spanking and they stop complaining. Life is very difficult in Dhaka. Life was difficult in the village too. That is why we left the village.

Shopna

Shopna's children could only eat once a day even though both parents were

Table 6 Interview location by workers

Interview location	Number of women workers interviewed
Factory A in Gulshan	17
Factory B in Badda	18
Total	35

Source: Fieldwork 1999

working. Her children had only boiled potatoes to eat, even though Bangladesh is a tropical country where a variety of fruit and vegetables is available in abundance throughout the year.

I expect to get my wages by the end of the first week of the following month but I am often disappointed. I am usually paid around the end of the second week or beginning of third week. I get my overtime payment on the third week and sometimes after three to four months.

Fatema, a factory helper

I left my job because I was not getting my overtime payment. I joined another factory. Then I had no time to go to the previous factory and claim my overtime. Still I went three to four times. Every time I was asked to go and see the supervisor the following week. He would not be available in the week I would go to see him. He would always be busy. Often I wouldn't be able to go and see the supervisor the following week because of my current factory job. If I absent myself from this job then my wages are deducted. I can't afford to do that. So if I would get a holiday on a Friday then I would go on a Friday to the previous factory because that usually is open on Fridays. I would go and wait for hours at the gate and the gate-keeper would not

open the gate. After many hours of waiting I would be told to leave as the supervisor would be busy and I would be asked to come again later. They were trying my patience. I felt very bad. I felt deep anger inside me. I thought 'why do these people employ us, make us work like animals and don't pay on time. We are not asking for alms (*bhikkha*) or charity'. I resented working in that factory. I resented working for this type of people.

Lovely, a factory employee

Women suggest solutions

From this research it is clear that, in spite of employment in the RMG sector, all the interviewed women workers fall under the poverty line with wages lower than US\$1–2 per day.⁶ All 35 workers' concerns circulate around wages. The discussion of factory work among the women workers begins and ends with one major topic: wages. They think that wages for all workers should be increased to cover the basic cost of living in Dhaka. They expect regular and timely payment, and they are aware how low their wages are. Thus, they are concerned about the cost of living in Dhaka. In order to cope with the circumstances, they try to increase their income by working overtime, but this increases the risk to their security every

night on their way home. This is why they become concerned and upset if they feel that they are not going to be paid at all.

Workers are aware of their problems and solutions. All 35 interviewees identified their problems and highlighted their needs. They asked me to convey their suggestions to the proper authority so that they can work hard and also live a better life in Dhaka. They identified six major needs through two group discussions. These were

1. job security (through job contracts and enforcement of factory laws)
2. physical security (through provision of factory transportation)
3. higher wages (in accordance with consumption price increases)
4. regular and timely payment of wages
5. subsidised accommodation arrangements
6. better working conditions.

This can be broken down into two major types of problem—institutional failure and the gap between wages and the minimum urban living cost.

Institutional failure. Because the law-enforcing agencies are not strict in enforcing factory laws, it appears that many of the problems are due to institutional failure. If working conditions were improved, many of the problems could be solved. For the RMG sector women then it is not as much as an economic problem as it is a legal problem. If factory laws are properly implemented, women will receive regular and timely payment and also enjoy a better and more secure working environment, plus timely training and promotion.

The gap between wages and minimum urban living cost. The current minimum wage is not in keeping with the minimum living cost in Dhaka.

The management's response

Since the RMG industry is faring so well in terms of its export performance, it is interesting to analyse its contribution to the overall development of the economy and the social conditions of its workers, particularly its female labour force. The major representative body for the employers, the Bangladesh Garment Manufacturers' and Exporters' Association (BGMEA), has responded to workers' concerns. According to a recent BGMEA Newsletter (BGMEA 1998a:9), BGMEA leaders and representatives from workers' unions in the garment sector meet on the 30th of each month. Discussions at the meetings focus on creating improved industrial relations, and therefore smoother growth in the RMG sector, by finding amicable solutions to industrial disputes in the sector.

The BGMEA is also trying to assist with housing and other facilities for workers. In February 1998, assisted by donor agencies including the International Labour Organisation, UNICEF and the United Nations Development Programme, three housing projects for Dhaka garment workers were being considered by BGMEA (BGMEA 1998b:9). Another high-rise housing project to provide safer and better housing for female workers (BGMEA 1998b:2) was also under consideration.

BGMEA President Mostafa Golam Quddus said, '[t]he garment industry is growing on an average 15–20% per annum. But government has not yet taken any step to make the garment workers efficient and educated. We shall make the garment workers efficient...' (BGMEA 1998c:17).

At a function, Tofail Ahmed, Minister of Commerce and Industries, formally launched the new education program 'Earn and Learn' for students aged 14 or more who were previously child labourers (BGMEA 1998c:4). At the same function, BGMEA President Mostafa Golam Quddus mentioned that steps would be taken to introduce regular medical check-ups for 1.5 million garment workers.

The agreements and promises are not delivering as much as they should, and that is why workers like Piyara, Hurmuti, Lovely and Fatema continue to struggle for food, wages, overtime payment and daily expenses.

The Trade Union's response

How effective is the trade union in helping the workers? One of the workers, Lovely, provided an insight into this, saying,

Union Offices are open on Fridays. So I went with some workers (who also had overtime or work related problems) to a local union office. The woman officer told us to come in a group of 20. If we come in a group then she would file our complaints. She also asked us to pay Tk20 each if we wanted to file our complaints. Twenty taka is a lot of money. So I did not want to pay. Some girls also started thinking when they came to know of

payment. Some women paid and filed their complaints by going in a group of twenty. It was difficult for them to find 20 women at a time to go in a group. Most workers don't have time to meet in one place to form a group. I don't know why that union office has this stupid system. I don't have time to go around and organise 20 women to file my complaint. Anyway the fee was also ridiculous. Twenty taka! It's a lot of money. I did not want to pay just like that without having any guarantee that I would get my overtime payment after filing a complaint. So I left the place and never bothered to go back. I don't have time for all that union grouping and paying money for nothing! Later I came to know some of the women who paid Tk20 for filing their complaint are still running back and forth to win their cases. I don't know how they manage. I never went back to the union.

The trade union movement in Bangladesh, which is weak, has been male-oriented. There are five trade unions, but individual workers have no recourse to any of them in the case of a dispute (Afsar 1998:5). During my interactions⁷ with Z.M. Khamrul Anam, trade union leader of Bangladesh Textile and Garment Workers' League (BTWL), I was told that workers are benefiting from being trade union members and that the unions have been able to raise the level of awareness by targeting female workers who are smart and have a strong capacity for organisation. Some trade unions, including BTWL, are circulating print materials in Bangla to organise workers. Najma Akhter, a female trade union leader, claims to listen to around 200

workers everyday.⁸ She asserts that trade unions help workers and successfully fight cases on their behalf to ensure proper wage payment and so forth.

The Bangladeshi state apparatus, increasingly driven by export oriented economic policies, has limited its role to watching from the sideline (Khan 2001:25). Industrial owners' networks have been more influential. Owing to their power, minimum wages, work hour restrictions, workers pension schemes and fringe benefits have not been implemented. During a conference on the garments industry in January 2000 in Dhaka, BGMEA Director Abu Taher assured the participants (researchers, workers and union leaders) that BGMEA would seek to solve problems arising mostly from irregular payments, insecurity on and off the job due to lack of factory transportation, and violations of labour laws, especially in issues related to maternity and leave benefits.

According to Khan (2001:26), the Industrial Relations Ordinance of 1969 provides various avenues for workers' participation in management. At the enterprise level, works councils, joint consultation committees, and other systems of worker participation in decisions provide the basis for more active involvement of workers in the running of the enterprise with a view to developing their potential and improving the efficiency of the enterprise. Khan (2001:26) adds that such participation schemes have largely failed to produce the desired outcome in the Bangladeshi private sector because, rightly or wrongly, most garment manufacturers fear that it will inevitably lead to an unhealthy collusion between political parties and trade unions,

which, in turn, would hamper improvements in productivity and the creation of a congenial working environment.

It seems that the cost of production, the comparative advantage of cheap labour in the international market and international competition are the major reasons for the failure or reluctance to implement labour laws in Bangladesh.

Conclusion

Most Bangladeshi garment manufacturers have failed to see any causal connection between labour standards and productivity outcomes. As a consequence of their economic priorities, many of them have become virulently anti-trade union, believing that trade unions would upset Bangladesh's low-wage employment structure, which is vital for maintaining Bangladesh's attractiveness to foreign investors (Khan 2001:26).

Women workers' limited purchasing power and poor command over commodities define and shape their access to housing, health and sanitation and transportation facilities. Lack of job security is compounded by low wages, which in turn cause insecurity of life for women in urban areas. Still, women continue to work, and the reasons for this are explicit in the narratives.

Notes

- ¹ Bangladesh emerged as an independent country in 1971 after a nine-month war with Pakistan. The major reason for the conflict between the Urdu speakers and Bengali

speakers in Pakistan emerged with the declaration by Muhammad Ali Jinnah, the founder of Pakistan, that 'Urdu, and only Urdu, shall be the state language of Pakistan'. This implied that Bengali speakers (the majority in East Pakistan, now Bangladesh) would lose jobs and business and academic positions because of a lack of Urdu language skills. It should be noted that the difference between the birth of Pakistan and Bangladesh is that Pakistan emerged in 1947 on the basis of religion (Islam) and Bangladesh (though a Muslim majority state) emerged on 16 December 1971 on the basis of language.

- ² US\$1= Tk.50 in February 2001.
- ³ Helpers cut and clean thread from finished products, assist the operators, open and store boxes and push carts.
- ⁴ Names of workers have been changed at the workers' request.
- ⁵ Jomidaree is the Bangla word for landownership.
- ⁶ The World Bank (2000) defines poverty as the inability of people to attain a minimum standard of living. The United Nations and the World Bank use US\$1–2 (PPP) per day as the international poverty line, indicating a lack of access to basic sustenance. In 1998, 1.2 billion people in the world had consumption levels less than US\$1 per day and 2.8 billion less than US\$2 per day.
- ⁷ For collecting trade union print materials from the BTWL office.
- ⁸ She claimed this in an Oxfam-sponsored Bangladesh Institute of Development Studies conference in January 2000 at the Bangladesh Institute of Development Studies, Dhaka.

References

- Afsar, R., 1998. *Poverty, Work, Health and Sexual Behaviour of Women and Men in Garment Factories in Dhaka, Bangladesh*, ACTIONAID, Bangladesh.
- Ahmad, I., 1996. *Basic Labour Laws of Bangladesh*, 2nd edition, Ferdous Iqbal, Dhaka.
- Arifin, J. (ed.), 1994. *Readings on Women and Development in Malaysia*, Population Studies Unit, Kuala Lumpur.
- BGMEA, 1998a. 'BGMEA meets garment sector trade union leaders regularly', *BGMEA Newsletter*, 9(1):9.
- , 1998. 'BGMEA to undertake housing projects for garment workers', *BGMEA Newsletter*, 9(2):9.
- , 1998. 'BGMEA's aid for more UCEP Training Centres', *BGMEA Newsletter*, Special Issue, 4 July:17.
- , 1998. 'Third anniversary of MOU observed', *BGMEA Newsletter*, 9(6):4.
- , 1998. 'BGMEA committed to uphold workers rights', *BGMEA Newsletter*, 9(6):2.
- Bhattacharya, D. and Rahman, M., 2000. *Bangladesh Apparel Sector: growth trends and the post-MFA challenges*, Paper presented at the National Seminar on Garment Industry in Bangladesh: Economic and Social Dimensions, Dhaka, 21–22 January.
- Cannon, L.W., Higginbotham, E. and Leung, M.L.A., 1988. 'Race and class bias in qualitative research on women', *Gender and Society*, 2(4):449–62.

- Grasmuck, S. and Grosfoguel, R., 1997. 'Geopolitics, economic niches, and gendered social capital among recent Caribbean immigrants in New York City', *Sociological Perspectives*, 40(3):339–63.
- Hossain, H., Jahan, R. and Sobhan, S., 1990. *No Better Option? Industrial Women Workers in Bangladesh*, University Press Limited, Dhaka.
- Jamaly, R. and Wickramanayake, 1996. 'Women workers in the garment industry in Dhaka, Bangladesh', *Development in Practice*, 6(2):150–160.
- Junsay, A.T. and Heaton, T.B., 1989. *Women Working: comparative perspectives in developing areas*, Greenwood Press, London.
- Kabeer, N., 1991. 'Cultural dopes or rational fools? Women and labour supply in the Bangladesh garment industry', *European Journal of Development Research*, 3(1):133–60.
- Khan, S.I., 2001. *Trade Unions, Gender Issues and the Ready Made Industry of Bangladesh*, Report of the United Nations Research Institute for Social Development, UN Research Institute for Social Development, Geneva.
- Kibria, N., 1995. 'Culture, social class and income control in the lives of women garment workers in Bangladesh', *Gender and Society*, 9(3):289–309.
- Kiribanda, B.M., 1986. *Education, Female Labour Force Status and Fertility Interrelationships: a study of dynamics and differentials in Sri Lanka 1971*, University Microfilms, Ann Arbor, United States.
- Markovic, M and Manderson, L., 2000. 'European immigrants and the Australian labour market: a case study of women from the former Yugoslavia', *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, 26(1):127–36.
- Miralao, V.A., 1983. *Female Employment and Fertility in the Philippines*, University Microfilms, Ann Arbor, United States.
- Nuruzzaman, A.K.A.M., 1999. *Human Rights and Garments Industry*, Programme for Research on Poverty Alleviation, Grameen Trust, Dhaka.
- Pahjola, A., 1991. 'Social networks: help or hindrance to the migrant', *International Migration*, 29(3):435–43.
- Paul-Majumder, P., 1998. *Health Status of the Garment Workers in Bangladesh: findings from a survey of employers and employees*, Bangladesh Institute of Development Studies, Dhaka.
- and Begum, S., 1997. *Upward Occupational Mobility Among Female Workers in the Garment Industry of Bangladesh*, Working Paper 153, Bangladesh Institute of Development Studies, Dhaka.
- , 2000. *The Gender Impacts of Growth of Export-Oriented Manufacturing in Bangladesh: case study: ready made garment industry Bangladesh*, Background paper prepared by the Bangladesh Institute of Development Studies for the World Bank, Dhaka, Bangladesh.
- Quddus, M. and Rashid, S., 2000. *Entrepreneurs and Economic Development: the remarkable story of garment exports from Bangladesh*, The University Press Limited, Dhaka.
- Tarr, Chou Meng. 1996. Contextualising The Sexual Culture(s) of Young Cambodians, Paper presented at the conference New Ethnography in Cambodia, 48th Annual Meeting of the Association for Asian Studies, Honolulu, 11–14 April.
- Tsurumi, E.P., 1990. *Factory Girls: women in the thread mills of Meiji Japan*, Princeton University Press, New Jersey.

- World Bank, 1990. *Bangladesh: strategies for enhancing the role of women in economic development*, World Bank, Washington DC.
- , 2000. *Voices of the Poor*, World Bank, Washington DC. Available online at <http://www.worldbank.org/wbp/voices/study.htm>.
- Zohir, S.C., 2000. Intra-household Relations and Social Dynamics among Garment Workers in Dhaka City, Paper presented at the National Seminar on Garment Industry in Bangladesh: economic and social dimensions, Dhaka, 21–22 January.