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# **From Sari to Salwar Kameez:**

**Changes in the Lives of Female Garment Workers  
in Bangladesh**

**A thesis presented in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of  
Master Of Philosophy**

**in**

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**Abstract:**

This thesis aims to give voice to what female garment workers attending the Working Women's Education Centre in Dhaka, Bangladesh perceive as personal changes that have occurred in their lives since taking up employment in the Ready Made Garment Industry. It examines these changes to see whether they are indicative of personal, relational or collective empowerment of these women and attempts to ascertain if there is any relationship between the type of clothing worn by the garment worker and aspects of her empowerment.

Changes most often mentioned by these women were earning personal money, increased decision making power, self-confidence, self-reliance and freedom: in sum a greater sense of control over their own lives and hope for the future.

Personal empowerment of most of the women studied was evident in a heightened sense of self, built on greater awareness of one's own capacities and value as a person. The ability of many of these women to negotiate and get support within the marriage relationship and family was indicative of some degree of relational empowerment. These garment workers, by reconstructing *pardah* to suit their work situation, were shown to be gradually gaining the support of Bangladesh society for women working outside of the home. There was little evidence of collective empowerment apart from attendance at the WVEC Centre which could be seen as a first step in this direction.

This thesis also explored whether the trend for married garment workers to wear salwar kameez rather than a sari as work attire was a reflection of these women's increasing sense of confidence and control over their own lives. It concluded that the wearing of a salwar kameez was indicative of women's ability to challenge cultural traditions imposed on them by men and negotiate with their husbands the right to make this personal decision. Such a choice could therefore be seen as being related to aspects of the worker's personal and relational empowerment.

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## List of Abbreviations

ACILS	American Center for International Labor Solidarity
BBS	Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics
BIDS	Bangladesh Institute of Development Studies
BIGU	Bangladesh Independent Garment Workers Union
BIGUF	Bangladesh Independent Garment Workers Union Federation
BGMEA	Bangladesh Garment Manufacturers and Exporters Association
CPD	Centre for Policy Dialogue
DBPWC	Dhaka Business and Professional Women's Club
EPZ	Export Processing Zone
FGD	Focus Group Discussion
GDS	Centre for Governance and Development Studies
GOB	Government of Bangladesh
GSP	Generalized system of Preference
HSC	Higher School Certificate
ILO	International Labour Organization
MFA	Multi-fibre Arrangement
NUK	Nari Unnayan Kendro
RMG	Ready Made Garment
UN	United Nations
UNDP	United Nations Development Programme
UNESCO	United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation
UNICEF	United Nations Children's Fund
WWEC	Working Women's Education Centre