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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 
Development Studies 
at Massey University, Palmerston North

Julienne Hayes-Smith 
2003
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 purdah 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 WWEC 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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Table of Contents

ABSTRACT: .................................................................................... ....... ................................. I

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS ........................................................................ II

LIST OF FIGURES AND TABLES ........................................................................ V

LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS ........................................................................ VI

CHAPTER 1. INTRODUCTION ................................................................ 1

BANGLADESH: A GENERAL INTRODUCTION.......................................................... 2
OBJECTIONS OF THE STUDY ................................................................................. 3
RESEARCH QUESTIONS .......................................................................................... 6
CHAPTER OUTLINE ............................................................................................... 7

CHAPTER 2. GENDER AND DEVELOPMENT, EMPOWERMENT AND SELF PERCEPTION... 9
SEX VERSUS GENDER .......................................................................................... 9
GENDER ROLES AND RELATIONS ....................................................................... 10
PATRIARCHY ........................................................................................................ 12
CHANGING APPROACHES TO GENDER AND DEVELOPMENT: WID, WAD, GAD ... 14
POWER AND EMPOWERMENT: ........................................................................... 17
THE IMPORTANCE OF SELF-PERCEPTION ......................................................... 23
CONCLUSION ......................................................................................................... 25

CHAPTER 3: DEVELOPMENT WITH A HIDDEN FACE: THE READY MADE GARMENT INDUSTRY IN BANGLADESH.. 27
BACKGROUND OF THE READY-MADE GARMENT INDUSTRY IN BANGLADESH ........................................ 27
SOCIO-ECONOMIC STRUCTURES IMPINGING ON THE RMG INDUSTRY IN BANGLADESH .................................. 32
The international economic system under capitalism ............................................. 32
Social class structure ........................................................................................... 32
Patriarchy ............................................................................................................. 33
CHARACTERISTICS OF FEMALE GARMENT WORKERS IN BANGLADESH ................................................... 35
Their young age ...................................................................................................... 34
Their status as rural migrants from landless families ............................................. 34
High rate of unmarried workers .......................................................................... 35
Low level of education .......................................................................................... 36
WORK CONDITIONS IN THE GARMENT INDUSTRY IN BANGLADESH ....................................................... 37
Employment process ............................................................................................... 37
Positions .................................................................................................................. 38
Promotion ............................................................................................................... 39
Working hours and paid leave .............................................................................. 39
Wages ..................................................................................................................... 40
Facilities .................................................................................................................. 41
Safety within the factory ........................................................................................ 42
Abuse and harassment ........................................................................................... 43
THE IMPACT OF WORK IN THE GARMENT INDUSTRY IN BANGLADESH ON THE FEMALE WORKERS' LIVES ... 44
Economic impacts ................................................................................................. 44
Intra-household relations ...................................................................................... 46
Reconstruction of purdah ...................................................................................... 49
The impact on factory workers' health ................................................................... 50
Sense of self ............................................................................................................. 53
Trade Union Activity ............................................................................................. 55
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>CHAPTER</th>
<th>TITLE</th>
<th>PAGE</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>GETTING TO KNOW THESE WOMEN WHO MAKE OUR CLOTHES</td>
<td>57</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>CHANGES IN THE LIVES OF FEMALE GARMENT WORKERS IN BANGLADESH</td>
<td>68</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>EMPOWERMENT OF WOMEN WORKING IN THE GARMENT INDUSTRY IN BANGLADESH</td>
<td>97</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>APPENDIX 1</td>
<td>SURVEY FORM</td>
<td>119</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>APPENDIX 2</td>
<td>ENGLISH TRANSLATION OF SURVEY FORM</td>
<td>124</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BIBLIOGRAPHY</td>
<td></td>
<td>127</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
List of Figures and Tables

List of Figures

Figure 1.1 The Sari and the Salwar Kameez ................................................................. 1
Figure 5.1 Age of the Respondent .......................................................... 69
Figure 5.2 Marital Status of the Respondents .................................................. 70
Figure 5.3 Level of Education .......................................................... 71
Figure 5.4 Number of Years in the RMG Industry .................................................. 72
Figure 5.5 Clothing at the time of survey .......................................................... 73
Figure 5.6 Age and Type of Clothing Worn .................................................. 74
Figure 5.7 Clothing worn at work and on day off .......................................................... 75
Figure 5.8 Health Impact by Marital Status .......................................................... 80
Figure 5.9 Decision making about spending of wages .................................................. 82
Figure 5.10 Garment workers on the way to the factory .................................................. 89
Figure 6.1 Clothing worn to work by married women related to the decision maker .......................................................... 111

List of Tables

Table 2.1 The Women’s Empowerment Framework .......................................................... 18
Table 2.2 Summary of Lukes (1974), Kabeer (1995) and Rowlands’(1997) ideas on power and empowerment .......................................................... 22
Table 5.1 Decision making pattern on workers earnings .................................................. 83
Table 5.2 Participation in Decision making about Spending of Earnings and Choosing Marriage Partner .......................................................... 85
Table 6.1 Comparison between work and day off clothing .................................................. 112
Table 6.2 Clothing during survey and Feeling of Self Worth since Working .................................................. 113
Table 6.3 Clothing during survey and decision maker for spending of earnings .................................................. 114
Table 6.4 Clothing during Survey related to Respect from In-laws .................................................. 115
### List of Abbreviations

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