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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  
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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

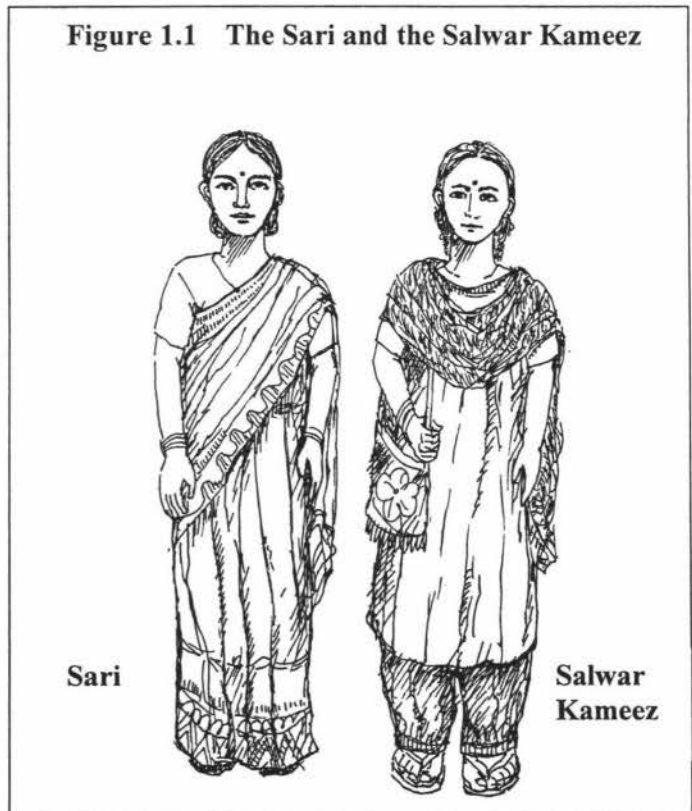
## Chapter 1. Introduction

*I always wore a sari before coming to work in the factory. Now I usually wear a Salwar Kameez to work because it is much more practical. Before I couldn't make these kinds of decisions for myself. Now I can say what I think ( Ayesha: a Bangladesh garment worker. Personal communication, September 2000).*

During the 8 years that I have been working in Bangladesh I have witnessed many changes occurring for women in this country, especially in the largest cities of Dhaka and Chittagong. Women are now seen in large numbers on the streets. They travel in tempos (a three wheeled van) with unrelated men. More and more married women are seen wearing the salwar kameez, a loose dress worn over baggy full-length pants, instead of their traditional attire, the sari. These are major changes in a country that has such strict cultural traditions about what women may do and wear.

I have often heard local people remark that the major catalyst for these changes has been the enormous increase in young women gaining employment outside of the domestic setting in the Ready Made Garment (RMG) industry. These female garment workers were the first large group of women to be seen regularly on the streets of the city or riding in tempos. As a group they have also challenged the cultural norms that once a woman is married or reaches adulthood she should abandon the salwar kameez in favour of a sari. Now many other groups of women do these things.

**Figure 1.1 The Sari and the Salwar Kameez**



Source: Sketch done A.Wahyudianto  
from a photo of garment workers taken by the author

Before going on to explain the objectives of this dissertation, let me provide a brief introduction to this country of Bangladesh.

### **Bangladesh: a general introduction**

Bangladesh is a small deltaic country (147,570 sq. km.) situated in the north-eastern part of South Asia, bounded by India to the west, north and north-east and by Myanmar to the south-east. The southern border of the country opens onto the Bay of Bengal. With an estimated population in 2002 of 137.4 million and consequently a population density of 931 persons per square kilometre, Bangladesh is one of the most densely populated countries in the world (UNICEF 2002:4). Poverty is endemic with about half of the population falling below the poverty line, two thirds of these being extremely poor (GOB/UNICEF 2000:15-26). With an average life expectancy of 58.6 years, an adult literacy rate of 40% and a GDP per capita of US\$348 in 1998, Bangladesh is ranked 146<sup>th</sup> out of 174 countries on the Human Development Index (UNDP 2000:159).

The fact that Bangladesh is a patriarchal, patrilocal and patrimonial society has a lot to do with the second class status women are generally accorded within the household and society. The division of labour is highly gendered. This is due both to traditional perceptions of women's work and also widespread adherence to the Islamic practice of *purdah*, which promotes women's seclusion from unrelated males and therefore basically excludes them from public spaces (Hewitt and Amin 2000:137, Hossain et al. 1990:49). Women's employment in the formal sector in Bangladesh is very limited, apart from in the garment industry. Marked gender segregation operates within the formal labour market in Bangladesh, with women commonly working in different occupations and holding less skilled positions than men. There is obvious gender disparity in salaries with 51.6% of female salaried workers in all occupations earning less than 1000 Taka per month, while the same is true for only 11.9% of the male workers (BBS 1999:53). What is more, it is likely than the male guardians of female workers will decide how the salary is to be spent, as Bangladesh society is not favourable to women's control over their income (Kibria 1995:294) or other important aspects of their lives. In fact a

‘recomposition’ of gender is often seen in the transformation of gender subordination whereby a father’s/husband’s power over his daughter/wife is transferred to the male factory manager’s power over female factory workers (Elson and Pearson 1997:199-200). This ‘recomposition’ of gender, which is very much in evidence in the RMG industry in Bangladesh, the only industry in the formal sector of this country that relies on a predominantly female labour force, will be explored further in Chapter 3 of this thesis.

### **Objectives of the study**

My thesis aims to examine some of the changes that have occurred in the lives of female garment workers in Bangladesh, particularly changes in decision-making power, relationships with significant others and the women’s own sense of self. It discusses whether employment in the RGM industry in Bangladesh brings about empowerment of women or not.

This topic is a development issue because the very notion of development implies change; ‘the gradual growth of something so that it becomes more advanced, stronger’ (Wehmeier 2000:363). There is an inherent sense of progress about development. As the Human Development Report 2000 says ‘The idea of human development focuses directly on the progress of human lives and well-being...[It] is also integrally connected with enhancing certain capacities – the range of things a person can do and be in leading a life’ (UNDP 2000:19).

As explained earlier in this chapter, Bangladesh is one of the poorest countries in the world. Women in this strongly patriarchal country bear the greatest burden of this poverty, on average receiving less nourishment, health care, education and lower wages than men (GOB/UNICEF 2000:17-18). It was this poverty and the subservience of women that made Bangladesh the ideal site for a low-cost, labour intensive RMG industry which has grown at a phenomenal pace these past 20 years. Today this industry has become the economic backbone of the country earning 75% of Bangladesh’s total foreign exchange and employing some 1.6 million workers, over one million of whom

are poor women (CPD 2002:1). In 1999 we know that this sector employed 70% of the women in waged employment in the country (UN 1999:9), therefore representing a very significant percentage of working women in Bangladesh.

The work of the female garment workers is having a substantial impact on the economic development of Bangladesh. It is important to examine the impact of that work on the lives of these women themselves. Hewitt and Amin (2000:135) in their study of women in the RMG industry in Bangladesh remarked that ‘the garment industry in developing countries has received considerable negative press... [and went on to ask the question] Does the fact of working in the garment industry make young women better or worse off than their non-working counterparts in the country?’ In effect, does such employment promote the development of women?

It is essential that the women themselves define what development means to them and what they see as their own real needs. We know that when Welbourn (1992) studied Bangladeshi women, she found that economic security was mentioned by them as being very important. Paid employment is a very significant means of women gaining that economic security. Sen and Grown (1987:83) remind us that the ‘recognition not just of poor women’s work but of its centrality to...[the] development process is essential’. This is because of the link between poverty and gender subordination. Paid employment has been shown to lead to a gradual weakening of the traditional gender subordination of women in many societies (UN 1999:13), as well as improved status and self-reliance of the women workers. This capacity of women to become increasingly self-reliant and stronger within themselves is identified by the ‘empowerment approach’ to development as evidence of women having increased their power (Moser 1989:1815).

Human development must involve empowering people so that they can increasingly take control over their lives (Longwe 1994:291), changing them in ways that they consider best. This is particularly true for women. They have often been neglected in development practice, because any focus on women’s inferior position and oppression is a challenge to patriarchal institutions which still by and large control economics and societies. That is

why although the majority of workers in the garment factories in Bangladesh are women, it is still male management staff who decide what position these women will have, their working conditions and remuneration. In order to redress this gender imbalance of power there is need for women to be empowered. Women's empowerment is the outcome of external experiences, which increase their power to do certain things, and of internal experiences which enhance their sense of self-worth (Mahmud 1994:88-9).

This research provides us with the opportunity to listen to what a small group of female garment workers in Bangladesh perceive as the changes that have occurred in their lives since taking up work in this industry. Female garment workers are doing things that were previously considered unacceptable. Continuing to wear a salwar kameez after marriage is but one outward example. In my thesis clothing worn by the women workers is both an indicator in itself of women's empowerment, as well as being used as a metaphor for their emancipation.

My thesis aims to highlight things that these women are now able to do, or can do to a greater degree than before taking up this employment. At the same time this study hopes to reveal what changes have occurred in this group of Bangladeshi female garment workers' sense of self. Do they feel more confident, more self-reliant? What do they believe other people think of them? How do they feel about themselves as persons? In other words, my thesis aims to see whether employment in the RMG industry has been empowering of this group of female workers.

There has been quite a lot of research done on garment workers in Bangladesh since the late 1980s. Most of it has been undertaken by local researchers who studied garment workers from an economic, sociological or health perspective. Some studies have focused on the economic impact this garment industry has had on the country as a whole (e.g. Quddus and Rashid 2000) while others have looked more specifically at the economic impact on the individual worker and her family (e.g. Zohir 2000). Certain studies link both sociological and economic perspectives. Hewitt and Amin (2000) looked at how earning an income has affected selected quality of life measures of the female garment

workers, while Hossain, Jahan and Sobhan (1990) researched how employment of women in the industrial sector leads to gender transition both at the work place and in households. Much of the research looks at the actual working conditions in the factories in the RMG industry (e.g. Hossain 1999 and Hossain 2001) or the impact of these working conditions on female workers' health (e.g. Begum 1997 and Paul-Majumder 2000). Several of the female researchers such as Afsar (1999, 2000) and Naved et al. (1997), while looking at gender exploitation in the RMG industry in Bangladesh, try to see the dynamics of women's empowerment. However these researchers tend to focus on the effects of female labour migration from the rural areas and adaptation to urban life, rather than on the empowering aspects of employment in the RMG industry itself. Apart from the studies of Kabeer (1991) and Otani (2000), there has been little research focusing primarily on empowerment of Bangladeshi women through employment in the garment industry. Nor could any research be found on how the external changes that have occurred in these female workers' lives have affected how they see themselves as persons.

Hence in this study I wish to explore what Bangladesh female garment workers see as important personal changes that have occurred in their lives, particularly changed perceptions of themselves and their capabilities, and in doing so examine the question of empowerment of these women. This thesis may also contribute more broadly to research concerning industrial work and the empowerment of women in developing countries.

### **Research questions**

The questions to be addressed in this thesis are as follows:

1. What do this particular group of female garment workers in Bangladesh perceive as some of the personal changes that have occurred in their lives since taking up employment in this industry?
2. Are these personal changes indicative of empowerment of these women?
3. Is there any relationship between the type of clothing worn by the garment worker and aspects of her empowerment?

## Chapter outline

This thesis consists of six chapters. This *first chapter* has introduced the research topic and its relationship to development, particularly that of women. Brief comment has been made on current knowledge about women's empowerment and previous research done on garment workers in Bangladesh. The last part of the chapter set out the research questions to be addressed by this dissertation. Now I shall provide an outline of how the thesis is organized.

*Chapter 2* explores gender and development theory and changing approaches to women's development. Emphasis is placed on the empowerment of women, with particular importance given to the role of the women's self-perception in the empowerment process.

*Chapter 3* begins with a brief overview of socio-economic structures that require consideration when reflecting on the RMG industry in Bangladesh, followed by background information on this industry. The remainder of this chapter is a literature review of research done on female workers in the RMG industry in Bangladesh: characteristics of the female garment workers, their work conditions and the impact this work is having on their lives.

*Chapter 4* outlines reasons for choosing to study changes in the lives of female garment workers in Bangladesh and briefly explains my personal involvement with certain organizations for garment workers. After mentioning the ways other researchers of the RMG industry have carried out their research, the methodology and data collection techniques I have used are explained in detail.

*Chapter 5* begins by describing characteristics of the female garment workers who took part in this research. The personal changes that have occurred in their lives since taking up work in the RMG industry are then described in terms of economic, health, social and psychological impacts.

*Chapter 6* attempts to relate the changes that have occurred in the female garment workers' lives to the issue of personal, relational and collective empowerment of these women. Efforts are also made to see whether there is any relationship between the type of clothing worn by the workers and aspects of their empowerment. Finally the findings of this research are then summarized and conclusions drawn.

## Chapter 2 Gender And Development, Empowerment And Self Perception.

*When I first started work in the garment factory it was so hard. Often the male supervisor would yell at me for mistakes, some of which I hadn't made. He'd insult me saying; 'You girls have no brains'. It hurt, but I'd say nothing because I'd been taught since I was a little girl that men knew more than we did. That's why we should obey them. Now I can speak up. I know we women aren't stupid. Without our hard work these factories couldn't keep going and those big people wouldn't get rich. (Parveen: a Bangladeshi garment worker, Personal communication, February 2001)*

Parveen's words reveal a rising awareness that she is not what society taught her she was; an unintelligent creature, inferior to men and destined to be subjugated to them. They also infer that she and the million other poor women working in the Ready Made Garment (RMG) industry in Bangladesh, are being exploited by men, who profit at their expense.

This chapter explores gender and development theory in order to provide insights into women's status in Third World countries such as Bangladesh and prospects for their empowerment. It begins with presentation of key concepts concerning sex and gender, gender roles and relations and also patriarchy. This is followed by an overview of changes that have occurred in theoretical approaches to gender and development since the 1970s. The second half of the chapter looks at the concept of power and theories of empowerment before going on to discuss the meaning and importance of self-perception in the empowerment process.

### **Sex versus gender**

Statistical indicators of status and human development in Bangladesh, as in so many other countries, point to women being invariably less well off than men: less educated, more malnourished, lower paid and expected to serve the men who control their lives (UNDP 1994:1). Although there are definite biological differences between women and men, most of the differences we observe have little to do with that. Rather they are based on *gender*, a term referring to the way a particular society has constituted the differences

between women and men, assigning each sex particular roles and desirable traits (Moser 1989:1800).

There has been a problem translating the term gender into South Asian languages, as most of these languages have only one word 'linga' which is used for both sex and gender. A way around this problem, according to Bhasin (2000:3) has been to find other words to qualify the term 'lingua'. Thus the term sex is defined by the Hindi/Bangla term 'prakratik linga' or biological sex while the term gender is expressed 'samajik linga' or social sex. This distinction between 'sex' and 'gender' was introduced because of the general tendency to attribute women's inferior position and subordination to men to their physical make-up. This tendency is the result of patriarchy, which as Walby (1990) says needs to be understood as a *system* of male domination and superiority, because this helps us reject the notion that the different roles or status of men and women are due to their biology. Women may be the only ones able to bear children and breastfeed them, however that does not mean that only women can and should be responsible for child-rearing and domestic work. The fact that women are almost universally assigned these reproductive responsibilities, while productive/ income generating activities are more often allocated to men, is a social construct, not a biological given and can therefore be challenged and changed (Bhasin 2000:11).

### **Gender roles and relations**

Gender is the way in which female-ness and male-ness are defined. It also refers to the 'web of cultural symbols, normative concepts, institutional structures and internalised self-images which through a process of social construction define feminine and masculine roles and articulate these roles within power relationships'(Taylor 1999:37). These differ from culture to culture, from society to society. They are dynamic and change over time differing from one historical epoch to another, depending partly on the principal mode of production of that epoch (Mies 1988:73). Before the advent of the market economy, which was heralded by the industrial revolution in Europe or by the development of export oriented economies in many Third World countries by colonial

powers, most production took place within the household and was for the family's subsistence needs. Every member was a breadwinner. In this traditional division of labour, women and men typically played complementary roles. In Bangladesh men worked in the fields planting and cropping, while women cultivated homestead gardens and raised poultry and sometimes livestock as well. Women's activities, although largely restricted to the homestead, were crucial for maintaining the food security of the household (Khan et al. 1991:335). Men and women were therefore mutually dependent on one another (Nowak 1979:96). Women may not have been equal to men, but their productive skills were recognised and given importance (Ehrenreich and English 1988:8-9). In many societies they had a degree of autonomy and control over certain economic resources of the household.

As the site and goal of production moved from meeting subsistence needs within the household to making profit in factories or on commercial farms, the relationships between men and women changed dramatically. Boys went to school to be educated so that they could gain the knowledge and skills for carrying out productive activities in the economic, public sphere. Many new opportunities and horizons opened up for them. However, since the main role of a woman was still considered to be that of a wife and mother, it was considered more important for her to stay home. Daughters needed to learn domestic skills and so they, along with their mothers were generally confined to the relative seclusion and isolation of the private, domestic domain. In Bangladesh, the widespread cultural and religious practice of *pardah*, which promotes the seclusion of women from unrelated men, helped enforce their exclusion from public spaces (Hewett and Amin 2000:137). This separation of domestic and public spheres in societies such as Bangladesh caused problems for women who needed or desired to take up jobs outside of the home. While a job in the formal sector, such as employment in a garment factory in Bangladesh, demanded mobility, competitiveness and a certain level of independence, the family demanded subservience and service. This demand was not made on men (Bhasin 2000:40-45). When women did engage in homestead production for sale in the market such activity was defined in Bangladesh by the concepts of *obshor shomoyer kaj* (leisure time activity), supplementary work (Hossain et al. 1990:2). As money became the most

important commodity, productive work which earned money was valued more highly than subsistence work. Because women's reproductive work was seen as natural and non-productive in terms of exchange value, it was accorded little value (Moser 1989:1801, Moser 1992:89).

The equating of women with 'nature' came about because of the dualities created between body and mind, nature and culture. Although this nature-culture dichotomy is a binary now rightly contested by some writers (MacCormack 1980, Nowak 1986) because it is not applicable to all cultural groups, it is a gender metaphor used by some South Asian feminists. Bhasin (2000) says that certain dualities such as body-mind, nature-culture have come to be defined as male or female even if they are not necessarily either of these. What is more, a hierarchy has been created between these dualities. She goes on to say:

Mind is supposed to be superior to body and culture an improvement on and superior to nature... Women are the bodies, almost like nature (they breed like animals); men are the minds, thinking, rational, acting beings who work on nature and transform it into culture. Men are therefore superior...they can do with nature as they please (Bhasin 2000:16).

This distinction between culture and nature in which culture is always seen as superior, can help explain the subjugation of women by men.

### **Patriarchy**

The systematic domination of women by men characterizes gender relations. These are the relationships of power between women and men, which are often marked by opposition and conflict. Such relationships are revealed in a range of practices and ideas, ascribing different abilities, attitudes and traits to women and men (Agarwal 1996:5). These relationships are however skewed because of patriarchy. The term patriarchy literally means rule of the father who has the right to demand whatsoever he will of all the members of his household. It is used nowadays to refer to gender relationships characterized by male domination and female subordination (Bandarage 1984:505). Women are kept in subordination in a number of ways. They include gender

discrimination, exploitation, violence against women in the home, workplace and society. While expressions of patriarchy vary according to the social system and historical period, patriarchal norms which define women as inferior to men and impose controls on women's productive and reproductive power as well as their sexuality, are present everywhere (Bhasin 1993:3-4).

In Bangladesh, patriarchy is applied in a multitude of ways. The father, or if he is absent, the next male kin is officially the head of the household. Decision-making power and economic control is thus vested almost solely in the hands of men (UNDP 1994:3). Gender discrimination is blatantly evident within the arena of the family and begins before birth. The girl child is often born into a family that desired and prayed for a boy. At her birth, the *azan* (call to prayer) is whispered in her ear instead of being publicly proclaimed, as at the birth of a boy child. A female infant receives less food and lower quality food than a boy. If she gets ill she is less likely to be given medical care, resulting in the Bangladesh mortality rate for children under five years of age being eleven percent higher for girls than for boys. A girl in Bangladesh is usually married off at a very young age, despite the severe health risks, 'to a man who is on average eight years older than her' (Majumdar 2002:4-5). The strength of patriarchal ideology in Bangladesh society is revealed by the male bias in Family Law, according to which a woman 'has no meaningful guarantee of security apart from dependence upon the males of both her natal and marital families' (Kramsjø and Wood 1992:17). Only a male can be the legal guardian of a child or a woman. This means that younger brothers become guardians of older sisters simply because they are male (Islam 2002:4).

The above examples show that linked to the patriarchal system is ideology that women are men's property and should be controlled by them. In Bangladesh, as in other parts of South Asia, the word for husband (*sami/malick*) means 'Lord' and 'owner' (Bhasin 1993:5). Women therefore owe deference to men who maintain their dominant position by ensuring that important decision making remains in their power. Because of this women who work outside the home in factories, for example, may take their traditional productive skills such as sewing or food processing with them. Nevertheless they seldom

control the productive process (Ehrenreich and English 1988:11). Even if they do rise to power in the workplace or in society, the *system* is still male dominated (Bhasin 2000:22).

When we focus on patriarchy we are not dealing with women's development as a separate issue, but rather on the effect of gender relations on development. Many feminists call for a transformation of these unequal relations and oppressive structures through a redistribution of power (Akter 1996:3; Benaria and Sen 1986:1815).

### **Changing approaches to gender and development: WID, WAD, GAD**

Only in the last four decades have women been specifically linked with development in development theory. Gender entered the development arena at an even later date. One of the ways of understanding theoretical changes on women's development over this period of time is to use the WID (Women in Development), WAD (Women and Development) and GAD (Gender and Development) framework of Rathgeber (1990:490-495).

WID emerged from Western feminism in the 1970s and was closely linked with capitalism and the modernization paradigm. It focused on the way women had been neglected and marginalized by the development process. It emphasized their need to be recognized and integrated 'into global processes of economic, political and social growth and change' (Rathgeber 1990:489). Social structures were not examined or challenged. The focus was rather on means of integrating women into existing development initiatives.

Various policy approaches have been used to plan and implement development initiatives directed at women. Moser (1989) described five of them: the *welfare*, *equity*, *anti-poverty*, *efficiency* and *empowerment* approaches to women's development. The *welfare* or earliest approach (actually preceding WID) involved measures to improve women's welfare, primarily as wives and mothers. The first specifically WID approach, the *equity* approach, focused on reducing inequality between women and men, especially in the

sexual division of labour. The *anti-poverty* approach aimed at meeting women's practical needs by making them more productive, while the *efficiency* approach was that of utilizing women's roles and skills to bring about greater development of the country. It is therefore apparent that WID was used to mean either development in order to improve the situation of women, or how women could be used to bring about the general development of the area. The overall emphasis was on economic development and modernization (Moser 1989:1807-1817). Women's productive work was targeted to the exclusion of their reproductive work. Therefore most development activities were directed towards income-generating projects (Taylor 1999:12).

By the late 1970s the WAD or neo-Marxist feminist approach based partially on dependency theories began to emerge. It focused on the relationship between women and development processes rather than on the integration of women into development, and challenged the notion that women had been inadvertently excluded from earlier development strategies. Instead its proponents claimed that women have always been part of the development process, playing an important economic role in their societies. They argued that the WID approach of integrating women into development serves essentially to preserve existing international capitalistic and class structures of inequality which maintain the economic dependency of the Third World countries on industrialized nations. The WAD perspective therefore implies that women's situation will improve in the measure that international structures become more just. However, the WAD approach has been criticized for not systematically addressing the question of gender because as it sees it, members of both sexes are disadvantaged by these global structures of capitalism and the class system (Rathgeber 1990:492-3).

By the 1980s, feminists were seriously asking why women were systematically assigned to inferior or secondary roles in all aspects of social, economic and political life. From this questioning emerged the GAD approach, which is 'not concerned with women *per se*, but with the social construction of gender and the assignment of specific roles, responsibilities and expectations to women and men' (Rathgeber 1990:494). Rather than capitalism, as in the WAD approach, patriarchy is seen as the root cause of women's

exclusion from development. The focus is on power relationships, exploitation and construction of gender roles. A redistribution of power in an equitable way is required (Akter 1996:4). This entails not only empowerment of those presently denied power, mainly women, but also changes in inequitable structures that are embedded in socio-economic and legal norms (Rathgeber 1990:495). Therefore, as well as meeting women's immediate practical needs within their engendered position, it is also imperative to simultaneously address their prioritized concerns or strategic gender interests, (Molyneux 1985, cited in Moser 1989:1802). In order to be able to apply Molyneux's ideas to the process of development planning, Moser (1989:1802-1804) translated them into needs or ways of meeting women's main concerns and differentiated clearly between strategic and practical gender needs.

Strategic gender needs are derived deductively from the analysis of women's subordination to men and their concern to create a different, more equal kind of relationship between men and women. Such needs may include abolishing the sexual division of labour, removal of institutionalized forms of discrimination against women or developing measures to protect women from violence perpetrated against them by men. Women living under systems of male dominance may only start to become aware of these strategic gender needs as they join together with other women in a grassroots collective struggle for their own emancipation. Meeting strategic gender needs requires long term concerted efforts of the State, development agencies and women themselves in order to overcome women's subordination, by changing their position in society, addressing inequalities in employment and improving their cultural, legal and political status (Taylor 1999:13).

In contrast, practical gender needs are normally a response to what women within a specific context perceive to be their immediate needs. They stem inductively from women's everyday roles and tasks in that particular society. For example, women in most societies are responsible for child-care. If they are also expected to work 10-12 hours a day in a factory, as are many women in Bangladesh, then a practical gender need of these women could be provision of child-care facilities at the work place. Since

practical gender needs seldom entail achieving a strategic goal such as gender equality, or challenging prevailing forms of subordination, it has been found that in practice most development policies and programs directed at women world-wide are concerned with meeting their practical gender needs as wives and mothers (Moser 1989:1804). However unless practical gender needs are also used as an indirect means of reaching strategic gender needs, women's long-term situation has little chance of improvement. The GAD approach, by recognizing the social construction of gender and the resultant unequal relationships of power, sees the empowerment of women as the solution to their disadvantaged position in development.

### **Power and Empowerment:**

The empowerment approach to development emerged mainly from the lived experience and writings of Third World women. Realizing the links between poverty in their countries and gender subordination, they saw the empowerment of individual women, often working through organizations, as the method for actualizing their visions of what they wanted society to be and the strategies that would help them attain this (Sen and Grown 1987:78).

What is meant by *empowerment*? The word is used to describe both a *process* to develop human behaviour and an *outcome* (Mahmud 1994:84) and is often used in conjunction with the word 'women' or 'self'; namely the empowerment of women or self-empowerment. It is always a reaction to male, colonial or neo-colonial oppression. As a development approach, it is a bottom-up approach whereby development theorists and practitioners listen to the voices of the people at the grassroots level, rather than imposing development from above. Women are empowered through self-reliance and an increase in their own internal strength (Moser 1993:231). UNESCO also interprets empowerment in the context of self-reliance, saying that it is 'in the sense that makes a person feel so confident that he or she can take a decision about his or her own life' (UNESCO 1999:25). This confidence and self-reliance springs from a personal inner power which enables women to identify their own needs and decide the most appropriate strategies

required to meet these needs (Akter 1996:5). This presupposes that women themselves are aware of the options open to them and the potential consequences of their decisions (Mayoux 1995:253).

According to Karl (1995:109) women start on the path to empowerment when they recognize their lack of access to resources. This is the second stage in the Women's Empowerment Framework developed by UNICEF (1993:5), the first being women as mere recipients of welfare services. The third step is when women become conscious that their problems stem from inherent structural and institutional discrimination and that they need to assert their own agency (Jahan 1995:57). They can then work collectively, mobilizing themselves to gain greater representation in decision making and through that gradually gain control of their rightful share of power (Karl 1995:109).

<b>Table 2.1 The Women's Empowerment Framework</b>
LEVELS OF EQUALITY. Empowerment is an essential element at each level
1. WELFARE. This addresses only the basic needs of women, without recognizing or attempting to solve the underlying structural causes which necessitate provision of welfare services.
2. ACCESS. This involves women recognizing their lack of access to resources as a barrier to their growth and well being and their taking action to address this.
3. CONSCIENTIZATION. Women need to recognize that their problems stem from inherent structural and institutional discrimination.
4. PARTICIPATION. By organizing themselves and working collectively, women will be empowered to gain increased representation, leading to increased empowerment and greater control.
5. CONTROL. Here the balance of power between men and women is equal and neither party has dominance over the other.

(Source: UNICEF 1993:5)

Although there is no consensus on the meaning of the word empowerment, it is clearly rooted in the notion of *power*, and connotes that the person is presently somehow lacking in power (Kabeer 1995:224). Both the Collins and Oxford dictionaries define it as 'to enable' or 'to authorize' (Collins 1991:117, Oxford 2000: 431). Both these words also

imply a certain gaining of power. However there is still the question of what is meant by power.

Three different interpretations of power commonly found in social science literature are discussed at length in Lukes' detailed work (Lukes 1974:14-22). The first is 'power to'. This notion of power is concerned with the interpersonal exercise of power, namely, who prevails in decision making when there is manifest conflict about the issues involved. The second is 'power over', which looks at the institutional basis of power, remembering that the institutional arenas include the household, as well as public bodies. It is the type of power that circumscribes which issues within the institution are open for decision-making and which are excluded from the decision-making arena. For example, women may be allowed to decide to go out to work, but the household division of labour is often a non-negotiable issue. Male power is exercised both within the domestic and public arenas by mobilizing biased norms, rules and procedures which habitually benefit certain individuals/groups at the expense of others (Bachrach and Baratz 1962:950). To challenge these norms and rules would entail challenging the very basis of the organization. The costs of confrontation can be very high. It may well be safer to conform (Kabeer 1995:225).

Lukes' third dimension of power, 'power within' is concerned with how the behaviour of groups or institutions is socially structured and culturally patterned so that dominant and subordinate groups both accept their present position in the order of things (Lukes 1974:22). They do this, either because they think it is divinely ordained and thus is good for them, or because they cannot see any other alternative. This is particularly true for women whose life experiences may be severely restricted by structures such as *purdah*, the Muslim term for female seclusion from all unrelated males (Rozario 1992:29). Only when a person comes to recognize in an experiential way and analyze the many dimensions of power can 'power within' be generated. It cannot be given from outside (Kabeer 1995:228-229). Empowerment strategies for women need to build on this kind of power which arises from within.

Is this sense of 'power within' what is meant by the concept of empowerment? It does describe part of what empowerment is. However the concept of women's empowerment has to be broad enough to encompass more than identifiable individual decision-making processes. Decision-making power has an institutional as well as an individual basis, both of which are shaped by societal norms. Decision-making agendas need to be distinguished from women's relative decision-making power (Mahmud 1994:89).

Women's empowerment is the outcome of empowering experiences, both internal and external. Internal experiences which increase women's 'power from within' consist of things such as greater awareness, knowledge and skills, an enhanced sense of self-worth and questioning of commonly accepted social injustices. External empowering experiences increase a woman's 'power to ' in the sense of being able to do certain things. They may include things such as increased participation in the public domain, more control over her own labour and other resources or increased access to support networks. Both types of experiences can affect decision-making agendas and woman's relative decision-making power (Mahmud 1994: 84-9).

Kabeer, a South Asian feminist writer, when talking about women's empowerment also describes the multidimensional nature of power from three vantage points: 'power within', 'power with' and 'power to'. Two of these terms are the same as those used by Lukes. Kabeer's 'power within' also looks at social structures influencing power relationships. However, it involves women actively reflecting, analyzing and assessing their present situation, so as to become conscious that many of their problems are socially constituted and shared by women as a group. As women become aware of gender subordination, they will reinterpret their needs in terms of their 'rights' as human beings, as workers and as citizens of society (Kabeer 1995:245-253).

Recognizing their subordination as a shared experience, women will realize that as a collective group they can also change the situation. They therefore come together in solidarity to form alliances with other women. This Kabeer calls 'power with'. It is this collective identity that forms the basis for the women to mobilize for change around what

they themselves now see as their priorities and major concerns. This mobilization for change is described by Kabeer as 'power to', an expression used earlier by Lukes to refer to the interpersonal exercise of power. Kabeer states that the ultimate goal of empowerment is the ability of those who are disempowered to act collectively in their own practical and strategic interests (Kabeer 1995:253-256).

This notion of empowerment is beautifully expressed by a poor woman in Mazumder's report on the Bankura experiment, which was an association between a research group and groups of poor female peasants in West Bengal who were trying to reclaim waste land. Provided with professional management training and formation in legal rights by the research group, these peasant women became aware of their earlier 'gender blindness' and increasingly confident in their own ability to collectively influence positive change in their lives. As one of these women said:

We were like frogs in a dark well. No-one thought of extending our minds. Our idea of 'we' meant the family, or at most the village or caste in the village. When we became members of a multivillage, multicast organization 'we' suddenly expanded. Now it has become so much bigger. We are part of a network of organizations. This, plus the knowledge that we have equal rights, has been like a shot of vitamin in our lives. We are stronger and more determined today than ever before (Mazumder 1989:33).

Rowlands (1997) develops Kabeer's logic, also presenting three dimensions of empowerment: personal, relational and collective empowerment. 'Personal empowerment' involves developing a sense of self. This includes personal confidence and increased awareness of what one is capable of. Such empowerment involves undoing the effects of internalized oppression and developing self-esteem. 'Relational empowerment' entails developing the ability to negotiate and influence the type of relationship and the decisions that are made within this relationship. The third dimension, 'collective empowerment' is where people work together so as to produce a greater impact than would have been possible through individual efforts. This includes not only involvement in political structures, but also collective action based on cooperation rather than competition. The collective action may be focused at the local level or be

institutionalized, as in the activities of national networks or formal procedures of international organizations (Rowlands 1997:15).

<b>Table 2.2 Summary of Lukes (1974), Kabeer (1995) and Rowlands' (1997) ideas on power and empowerment.</b>		
Lukes	Kabeer	Rowlands
<p><i>Power within:</i> Social structures and cultural patterns which maintain present power relationships</p>	<p><i>Power within:</i> Women analyze present power relations and become aware of how they are socially constituted</p>	<p><i>Personal empowerment:</i> Women undo effects of internalized oppression as they develop their individual sense of self.</p>
<p><i>Power over:</i> Institutional exercise of power circumscribing which issues are open for decision making.</p>	<p><i>Power with:</i> Recognizing shared aspects of subordination, women in solidarity form alliances with other women.</p>	<p><i>Relational empowerment:</i> Women develop ability to negotiate type of relationship and decisions made.</p>
<p><i>Power to:</i> Interpersonal exercise of power, determining who prevails in decision making.</p>	<p><i>Power to:</i> Women as collective, disempowered group mobilize for change according to own practical and strategic interests.</p>	<p><i>Collective empowerment:</i> Women as a collective group cooperate to make greater impact than individuals could on women's empowerment.</p>

This table shows that while Lukes looks at different forms of power as separate entities, Kabeer's and Rowland's models of empowerment indicate a linear progression towards greater levels of empowerment. The key arguments of Kabeer's and Rowlands' models are basically quite similar. Kabeer's 'power with', 'power within' and 'power to' are applicable to Rowlands' 'personal, relational and collective' empowerment. Both provide us with an important approach to analyzing the complicated nature of empowerment. I shall therefore use these approaches to examine empowerment in this

research. Special emphasis will be put on personal empowerment or the ‘power within’, because my research focuses on the female garment workers’ changed perceptions of themselves since taking up work in the garment industry in Bangladesh.

### **The importance of self-perception**

Since an essential component of personal empowerment is developing a person’s sense of self, research on such empowerment needs to include how that person perceives herself/himself. Due to the difficulty in finding writings on self-perception in the development literature, the discussion of this concept relies almost solely on ideas taken from the psychology and anthropological literature.

What makes up a person’s *self-perception* and why is it so important? Self-perception or self-concept is multidimensional and can be defined as how the individual person knows herself/himself. It is made up of the attributes the person perceives s/he possesses, plus the perception of how others view her/him. This includes what the person perceives as being her/his personality traits, moral characteristics, physical appearance and general outlook on life. Although a person’s self-perception changes over time and varies according to life situations, each person does have certain core attitudes towards self. These limit and direct that person’s perceptions, thoughts, actions and interactions (Witte et al. 1991:108-9).

Self-perception can therefore be viewed as a result of multiple contributions that vary with time and context. It develops first of all within the social context of the family and then within the school environment (if the child goes to school), and peer groups. If the child and adolescent receives positive feedback from the family, teachers, peers and society for what s/he is and what s/he does, then it is likely that his/her self-perception will be positive. However if s/he cannot satisfy the expectations and demands of ‘significant others’ in his/her life, then s/he is more likely to experience failure and negative self-perception (Altman 1995:579-92). A person with a negative perception of

self will have low self-esteem. The person's cultural environment also plays an important role in self-perception and self-esteem.

Roland (1988) explored the concept of self as held by Asian Indians, while Mpofu (1994) did the same in Zimbabwe society. Both of these writers differentiated between an 'individualized self' and a 'collective self' (which Roland named the 'familial self'). Roland said that the individualized self emphasizes individualistic 'I-ness' orienting the person towards creation of one's own self-concept through independent functioning and inner separateness. The 'familial self' is where the person experiences self as a 'we-self' which is highly relational, enabling the person to function well within the hierarchical intimate relationships of the extended family, community and other groups. Self-esteem is derived from a strong identification with family honour and reputation. Roland's study showed that amongst the Indians the 'familial self' was dominant and there was very little of the more individualized self (Roland 1988:8-9). This would seem to be true also of Bangladeshis.

Mpofu endorsed these ideas. She said that members of cultural groups with an individualistic self-concept regard the self as grounded in what is private and unique to that person, giving them a sense of being distinct from others. A high value is placed on achieving personal goals and preferences. However in collectivist cultures, a person's sense of self is rooted in her/his sense of perceived connectedness with significant others, who both form and validate an individual's sense of self. Asian, Pacific, South American and certain African cultures can be described as nurturing collectivist conceptions of self, rather than the individualistic self-perceptions which are strongly associated with Western cultures (Mpofu 1994:341-54).

Regardless of cultures, there is a particular 'self' that speaks to women across the myriad of social and cultural identities, namely a 'gendered self' (Bat-Ami Bar On 1993:161). It explains how women's own perceptions are transformed and modified by gender role conceptions, which act as filters to their self-perception (Kirtley and Weaver 1999:170).

Therefore it is not surprising when studies on self-perception show that women rate their competence in a number of domains lower than men do (Poole and Evans 1989:147-173).

Positive self-perception, which includes self-esteem and a sense of personal dignity, is a desired outcome of any development process. Scheyvens (1995:3-7) showed that it is also a prerequisite if women themselves are to influence the direction change should take or fully participate in the development process. Without faith in themselves and sufficient self-esteem, they will not be able to say 'No' to people, whose ideas of development are not compatible with their own.

It has been shown that positive self-perception is linked to long term mental health, emotional well-being and social life adjustment (Roland 1988:13, Hayes et al 1999:41). People who have a positive view of their own worth and capabilities are more likely to be able to relate well to others and handle stressful situations as they arise (Klein et al 1996:5). They are more creative, employable and contented with their lives (Hopkins and Klein 1993:466). Sen (1999:190-5) argues that women's perceptions of their own wellbeing and worth (or the lack of these), along with the fact that they are often resigned to accept the legitimacy of the status quo, can be important factors in the continuation of gender imbalances of power. A woman's empowerment therefore begins with her realization of gender subordination and what it has done in her life. Gradually she will become consciousness of who she herself is, as well as her rights, her capacities and her potential. Only when she arrives at the stage of believing deeply in herself, seeing herself in a positive light, will she have the wherewithal to act individually, or in solidarity with others, in a way that is truly empowering (UNDP 1994:1).

## **Conclusion**

This chapter began with a discussion of the concept of gender, explaining how gender roles are socially constructed and articulated within power relationships. It was seen that such relationships, skewed because of patriarchy, are characterized by male dominance and female subordination. This focus on gender and patriarchy has brought about a real change in the approach to women's development. When women did first make it into the

development discourse it was in the form of the WID approach, integrating women into existing development initiatives. By the late 1970s the WAD approach with its focus on the relationship between women and development emerged. However, as feminists began to suggest that the root cause of women's exclusion from development was the patriarchal inequalities of power, a gender and development approach developed. Empowerment of those presently denied power was seen not only as the desired outcome of this approach, but also as the process by which such power could be achieved. This is demonstrated by the models of empowerment of Kabeer and Rowlands with their three vantage points indicating linear progression towards greater empowerment. Women must first achieve 'power within' or 'personal empowerment'. They can then develop 'power with' or 'relational empowerment' and thenceforth as a collective group mobilize for change in line with their own practical and strategical gender interests. Since empowerment strategies need to be built upon power within, it is essential that women develop a positive sense of self. This self-perception includes the attributes a woman recognizes she has, plus her perception of how others view her. In collectivist cultures, such as those of Asia, a woman's sense of self is influenced more by what significant others think of her than is the case in Western cultures emphasizing an individualistic self-concept. Nevertheless, women of all cultures and societies experience a 'gendered' self which filters their self-perceptions and can lead them to accept their subordination as inevitable.

The next chapter will examine gender and factory work from the perspective of literature concerning women in the ready made garment industry in Bangladesh, so as to gain some idea as to whether such employment is empowering or dis-empowering to these women.

### **Chapter 3: Development with a hidden face: the Ready Made Garment Industry in Bangladesh**

I will begin this chapter by outlining the economic and social background of the RMG industry in Bangladesh, three socio-economic structures impinging on this industry and four particular characteristics of the female workers. I shall then review literature concerning the actual working conditions in the industry and the impact work in this garment industry has had on the lives of the female workers. From time to time, comparison will be made with the situation in other countries of Asia.

As already mentioned in Chapter 1 most of the studies done on garment workers in Bangladesh have been done by Bangladeshi academics from economic, medical, sociological or feminist backgrounds. Male researchers tend to have favoured an economic or medical approach, while female researchers have carried out most of the research done from a sociological or feminist approach. Although written by Bangladeshis, the vast majority of studies have been written in English and many are unpublished works presented at seminars in Bangladesh (Otani 2000:5-6). Those studies that have been published are mainly to be found in various publications of the Bangladesh Institute of Development Studies. Much of the information I have gained is from that Institute. However I have also obtained studies from other organizations in Dhaka, particularly UN agencies and labour organizations.

#### **Background of the ready-made garment industry in Bangladesh**

The Bangladesh ready-made garment industry is comparatively new. Until 1947 Bangladesh as East Bengal was a major rice and jute producing area for India. Following the end of British colonization, Bangladesh had 24 years as East Pakistan and a terrible nine-month war of liberation, before finally emerging as an independent nation in 1971. This new nation was a country totally shattered by war (3 million dead and two million destitute), and devastated by a tidal wave and cyclone of the previous year. The jute

crops had been destroyed and most of the jute processing factories abandoned (Newton et al. 1996:19).

The early 1970s were marked by shortage of resources, severe economic constraints and political uncertainty. The emphasis was on import substitution industries. However, by the late 1970s a real shift was noted towards non-traditional export industries (Al-Hussamy et al.1991:1). Some local businessmen, inspired by the success stories of East Asian nations such as Hong Kong, South Korea and Singapore, realized that the garment industry could be a very promising industry for Bangladesh (Quddus and Rashid 2000:59). Since labour costs in those countries were gradually increasing, it was not surprising that owners of factories, such as those in Korea, were interested in seeking new production places. A joint Bangladesh-Korean enterprise, 'Desh Garments', was set up in 1978. This really marks the beginning of the RMG industry as such in Bangladesh. One hundred and thirty Bangladeshi employees of Desh garments were sent to South Korea to be trained in garment production. Many of these later set up their own factories, thus spearheading the rapid growth of the industry (Population Council 1998:1).

Another factor that also played an important role in the rapid growth of the industry during those early years was the escalating civil unrest in Sri-Lanka. Factories there could not assure buyers that ordered garments would be produced and reach their destination on time. Attention thus turned to Bangladesh as an appropriate alternative site for this industry (Schulze 1998:2). The government set up Export Processing Zones (EPZ) and gave high levels of financial assistance. The garment industry developed at a phenomenal pace, while the market for jute, which was still an important export, was collapsing in the face of competition from versatile, quality synthetic products with better longevity (Al-Hussamy et al. 1991: 3). By 1986 ready-made garments overtook jute products as the country's principal export earner. By 1996 the export earnings from the RMG industry were more than 10 times those from jute manufacturing. At the same time the share of jute products to the country's export figures had fallen to 7.1% (BBS 1999:272). The number of factories also rose at a colossal pace from about 700 in 1985 to an estimated

2,400 factories a decade later (Population Council 1998:1) and about 3500 factories today employing some 1.6 million workers (CPD 2002:1).

The cheap labour costs in Bangladesh were a major factor in the rapid expansion of the market for ready-made garments. Companies that used to buy from the USA, Hong Kong, Taiwan and Singapore began ordering supplies from Bangladesh (BGTD 2000:10). They could therefore still make a good profit while keeping the garments at a competitive price for customers. In 1981 the RMG industry fetched US\$ 6.4 million in foreign exchange earnings. By 1991 this was US\$900 million and it was expected that the figure would cross the US\$5 billion mark by the end of the 2000-2001 fiscal year. The economic importance of this to Bangladesh can be seen in the fact that the country's total export earnings for this period was only expected to be about US\$6 billion (Hassan 2001:3). The RMG industry is easily identifiable as the most substantial economic group in Bangladesh today.

The growth of this industry has not merely been an attempt by a poor, newly independent nation to build its economy. With the resurgence of modernization theories of economic development in the 1980s, Western governments and major international economic agencies played an ever-increasing part in determining economic policy in the Third World. Financial Aid became dependent on orienting economic strategies towards global trade rather than national self-sufficiency (Brohman 1995:134-136). Export orientated industry therefore replaced the earlier import substitution industries. With this, industrial growth to achieve improved income distribution of the local people was no longer justified as the objective. Export oriented industry, as a strategy of globalization, does just the reverse. A country's social structure needs to be tailored to serve the economic interests of the world market, especially the multinational companies that control that market (Charoenloet 2001:8).

The RMG industry in Bangladesh is not only characterized by being export oriented. It is also a labour intensive industry that relies heavily on a cheap, female workforce. Females have provided the labour power for the growth of the garment industry not only

in Bangladesh (Population Council 1998:1), but also in Korea (Kyung 2001:11-12), the Philippines (Honculada 2001:15), Indonesia, Thailand and Nepal (GDS 1997:11). In contrast to 'heavy', capital intensive industries such as steel, iron and mining, which continue to employ more men than women, the garment industry is a 'light' industry, where labour forms the major cost component (Enloe 1989:166-7). There is therefore maximum advantage to minimize labour costs as far as possible by employing cheap labour. This is usually equated with a predominantly female work force, because women generally accept lower wages than those demanded by men (Joekes 1982:186-8).

There are no doubt many reasons for this. Women's reproductive work is almost universally undervalued. It is often not even counted as work. This is vividly exemplified by a poster commonly seen in Bangladesh. The poster depicts a woman doing the multitude of things that make up her daily routine. At the bottom of the picture there is one man explaining to another 'My wife doesn't work' (Bachte Sickha poster).

Garment factory owners have used the assumption that sewing is something women naturally do, not a skill that needs to be rewarded, for keeping wages and benefits for female employees low. The 'skilled' tasks are reserved for men, who therefore should be paid more. The assumption is that women workers are secondary wage earners, working on a temporary basis to supplement the income of the family's main wage earner, their husband or father (Enloe 1989:162-3). Moreover many women, especially those in Third World countries, have very limited options for paid employment. They are therefore willing to work for very low wages, rather than be unemployed (Afrin 2002:3, Paul-Majumder and Zohir 1994:181).

Other reasons why women have been given preferential employment in the RMG industry in Bangladesh are that they are considered patient and docile, unlikely to roam outside the factory or to have much knowledge about the country's labour laws and trade unions (Begum 1997:7). These things are generally true of poor, uneducated women in this predominantly Islamic country, where 'silence, immobility and obedience are key criteria of female beauty' (Rozario 1992:80). Traditional Bengali culture also cultivates

this dependency and docility. From infancy girls are taught to serve and obey the men in charge of them (UNDP 1994:4). Female employees therefore readily obey what management or supervisory staff (most of whom are men) tell them to do.

The mobility of women in Bangladesh society is severely curtailed by the concept of *purdah*, whereby women, in order to protect family honour, must restrict their interaction to that small group of male relatives with whom contact is permitted (Jahan 1975:28, Rozario 1992:88). The purity of any woman who starts mingling with unrelated males, or roaming around on her own, would be suspect and the family's reputation tainted (Afrin 2002:3).

Bangladesh still has a very high illiteracy rate, especially for females. The UN's data revealed a female literacy rate in 2000 of 28.6%, which was only 56% of the male rate (UNDP 2000:159). It is therefore not surprising that most women in this country know little about existing labour laws. Besides, women generally shy away from association with trade unions, as many are wings of political parties, more concerned about political power than with workers rights (Khan et al.1979:2).

The above factors help explain the high percentage of female workers in the ready-made garment industry in Bangladesh. Most of the literature reviewed puts the percentage somewhere between 85% and 90% (Amin et al 1997:3, Hewett and Amin 2000:5, Kabeer 1991:28). However in the study done by Paul-Majumder in 1997 only 60% of the workers were found to be women. She puts this down to an increasing diversion to knitwear in Bangladesh, where more and more males are employed (Paul-Majumder 1998:1). Nevertheless the Bangladesh Garment Manufacturers and Exporters Association (BGMEA) statistics for the year 2000 still maintain that female workers account form about 90% of the workforce in the RMG industry (BGMEA 2000).

Certain socio-economic structures have had an important role to play in the extraordinary growth of this industry here in Bangladesh and the sexual composition of its workforce. Let us now look at these.

## **Socio-economic structures impinging on the RMG Industry in Bangladesh**

There are three such socio-economic structures that need to be taken into consideration when reflecting on the RMG industry in Bangladesh.

### *The international economic system under capitalism*

The existence of the Multi Fibre Arrangement (MFA) which gives Bangladesh higher quotas in US and Canadian markets than countries such as Korea, Taiwan and Hong Kong, plus a Generalized System of Preference (GSP) treatment by countries under the European Union, help explain why garment production was shifted to Bangladesh, resulting in a major economic advantage for this country (Bhattacharya & Rahman, 2000:1). However, industrialized countries have also profited greatly from buying products at a very cheap rate because of the low labour costs. Under this economic arrangement, Bangladeshi women are employed in the garment industry as poorly paid labour, producing Western clothes they rarely wear, products which are then exported to the industrialized countries at cheap prices (Otani, 2000:39). The Bangladesh garment industry maintains its international success through exploitation of its own workers.

### *Social class structure*

Bangladesh is a highly class structured society with an enormous gap between rich and poor. The RMG industry is made up of well-educated, high-middle class males in management positions while the workers are predominantly poorly educated, low class females. Such differences in class serve to maintain the successful development of the ready-made garment industry. The socio-economic background of female garment workers reflects that of servants who work for high middle-class families, the most likely option such workers would otherwise have had for employment outside of the factories. The existing class structure between the middle class family and their poor servant is simply transferred to the structure between factory management and workers. It also helps to explain why educated, middle class women in Bangladesh do not seek

employment in garment factories. It is considered poor women's work and for this reason low wages are justified (Paul-Majumder and Mahmud, 1994:21, Paul-Majumder and Begum 1997:20-21).

### *Patriarchy*

The fact that the garment industry in Bangladesh relies on a largely female labour force reflects structures of patriarchy which strongly permeate Bangladesh society.

As explained in Chapter 2, from childhood onwards girls have been made to believe that they are inferior to boys and should be submissive in all things to the men to whom they belong (UNDP, 1994:3). The conventional notions of *pardah*, by restricting their behaviour and mobility, significantly limit their opportunities to work in the formal sector. In fact, working women have been regarded as poor women; sheer economic necessity being the only reason for women to risk diminishing the family honour by moving outside the confines of the home (Salahuddin and Shamin 1992:26-27).

Women's mass participation in the formal sector, namely the garment industry, is a new tendency in Bangladesh. However, it exemplifies employment in a highly gender biased labour market. Factory owners give preferential employment to women, not to empower them, but because of their subservience, their willingness to accept lower wages and endure worse working conditions than men (Afsar 1999:5, Begum 1997:6).

These three socio-economic structures serve to maintain the trend of employing a mainly female workforce in the garment industry and have contributed to four characteristic features of female garment workers in Bangladesh.

### **Characteristics of female garment workers in Bangladesh**

The female workers in the RMG industry in Bangladesh are characterized in general by their young age, their status as migrant members of landless families, the high percentage of unmarried workers and their low level of formal education (Otani 2000: 29-32).

### *Their young age*

Most studies show the average age of the female garment workers to be in their early to mid 20s (Paul-Majumder 1998:5, Zohir 2000:59). Female workers were found to be about 5 years younger than their male counterparts (Paul-Majumder and Zohir 1994:193). However it is difficult to determine the actual ages of the workers, as registration of births is not compulsory and seldom done. Many uneducated Bangladeshi have only a vague idea of their age (Hossain 1999:6).

Child labour was a crucial issue in the Bangladesh garment industry in the early 1990s. However the problem was superficially solved with the signing of the 1995 ILO/UNICEF/BGMEA Memorandum of Understanding to get children under 14 years of age out of the factories and into schools (Schulze 1998:1). Nevertheless recruitment of children is still very common (GOB/UNICEF 2000:25). When buyers or other visitors come to the factory these child workers are kept hidden in the toilets or even inside packing boxes (Hossain 1999:39). Some garment factory employers are keen to employ young workers, as they can pay them substantially less than older ones (Paul-Majumder and Zohir 1994:193).

### *Their status as rural migrants from landless families*

According to a survey of 1050 garment workers carried out in 1997, 87% of the female workers were recent migrants from rural areas and 62% of these had migrated by the time they turned 16 years of age (Hewett and Amin 2000:139). A later study (Afsar 2000) put the number of at 90%. Why are there so many rural migrants amongst the garment workers?

Bangladesh is a predominantly rural country. By 1990 50% of the rural population were already landless and the figure has now risen to 80% (Anam 1999:5). Widespread flooding has swallowed up vast tracts of land, leaving millions destitute and caused mass migration of both men and women from the countryside in search of work. In Sri Lanka many garment workers migrate to the Middle East in search of work (WITZ 2001:5-8).

While some women in Bangladesh migrate overseas to find employment, most female migration is to major cities within the country itself. I did not find evidence of such a high percentage of female rural migrant workers in the garment industry in other parts of Asia. Afsar (2000:8) found that in Bangladesh three quarters of the female migrants working in the garment industry belonged to functionally landless households. Half of the male migrants also came from landless families, but families with a slightly better economic background than the female migrants.

Job opportunities for female migrants have increased faster in the 1990s than in the 1980s, and also faster than for their male counterparts. This can be explained by the phenomenal increase in numbers of factories during that period, plus the preferential employment of migrant female labourers over urban residents, the former being considered more loyal and docile (Afsar 2000:5). The loyalty can partially be explained by the fact that many of the female workers were directly recruited from the factory owner's home village (Afsar 2000:17). Traditionally it was the men who left the village to seek work in the city and send money home. Now the cycle has been reversed. Preferential employment of women in the garment industry has prompted fathers to send their daughters and husbands their wives, to go and seek jobs in the city (Jung 1994:9).

Pressure from impoverished families to meet their survival needs was the prime factor that prompted 65.7% of these women to take up work in the RMG industry, while a further 29.2% wanted extra income to spend on their children. However 96% of the respondents in Kandala's study stated that gaining independence was also an important reason for seeking employment (Kandala et al. 1997:16-8).

#### *High rate of unmarried workers*

A large percentage of female garment workers are unmarried. Afsar's survey revealed that 43% of the women workers were not yet married (Afsar 2000:17) while Zohir's study put the number of unmarried workers at more than half (Zohir 2000:61). Managers use the marriage factor to depress wages. They say that unmarried women's earnings are

not essential to family survival, but merely supplement those of the male breadwinner (Enloe 1989:163). Employers also prefer unmarried female workers because they have fewer domestic responsibilities and can therefore devote more time and energy to the factory work (Paul-Majumder and Zohir 1994:194). The management also do not need to worry about these workers needing maternity leave or child-care facilities, both provided for under ILO conventions ratified by the Bangladesh Government (ILO 2000:20-21). Preferential employment of unmarried women is also a feature of the garment industry in the Philippines, Sri-Lanka and Nepal (GDS 1997:18) and other parts of Asia (Lim 1983:70-91).

### *Low level of education*

We have seen so far that female garment workers in Bangladesh are predominantly young, unmarried migrants from landless rural families. They are also usually poorly educated. A study conducted by Hossain in 1998 on working conditions in the EPZ showed that 11% of the workers were illiterate, while a further 68.6% had only completed the five years of primary education (Hossain 1999:7). The situation is worse in the garment industry in general. In a 1994 study, Paul-Majumder and Zohir found that 29% of the workers were illiterate, and few had completed more than four years of schooling (Paul-Majumder and Zohir 1994:193), while recent statistics put the number of illiterate female workers at nearly 40% (Afsar 2000:98). Although the illiteracy rate among female garment workers is lower than the illiteracy of women in Bangladesh as a whole, it compares with an illiteracy rate of less than 10% amongst the male workers, many of whom have completed Secondary School Certificate and above (Otani 2000:36). Not only is the female workers' level of education much lower than the male workers, it is in stark contrast to that of the factory owners most of whom have a university degree (Quddus and Rashid, 2000:85-86). Almost all factory owners are middle class men. Most are married and their average age is about 40. The marked difference between the entrepreneurs and the workers is evidence that Bangladesh's RMG industry, like factory work around much of the Western and Third World, is elitist.

Having looked at these characteristics of female garment workers in Bangladesh, we shall now examine what has been written about the conditions under which they work. It is important to identify these conditions as they are closely related to empowerment and dis-empowerment of female garment workers.

### **Work conditions in the garment industry in Bangladesh**

In this section I shall provide insights into the conditions of employment, especially that of female garment workers in Bangladesh.

#### *Employment process*

Recruitment of new staff in the garment industry is done by word of mouth (Amin et al. 1997:7). Either an agent is sent to the owner/director's village to find the needed workers amongst poor kin and acquaintances or else relatives and friends already associated with the industry introduce them to management staff. More female than male workers count on kinship ties to get them a job in the industry (Paul-Majumder 1996:65-6). In Paul-Majumder and Begum's study (1997:34) 85% of the female garment workers were recruited by kin or neighbours.

Before being given the job, applicants have to undergo a test of literacy and practical skills. While all workers must be able to sign their name (and that is the only thing the illiterate ones can write), others will be required to recognize English numbers and letters, or demonstrate their ability to differentiate between shades of colours. Those seeking jobs as operators are likely to be asked for practical demonstration of the speed, accuracy and neatness of their work (Paul-Majumder 1996:65). Practical skills in garment manufacture are more important than academic achievements.

Very few garment workers are issued with a written letter of appointment. Paul-Majumder and Begum's survey (1997:34) revealed that not a single female garment worker had received an appointment letter where the terms and conditions of employment

were specified. Many workers believe their job to be permanent, when in fact it is only casual (Hossain 1999:11). The lack of a written contract leads to a great sense of job insecurity for many of the workers (Paul-Majumder and Zohir 1994:188).

### *Positions*

The production process in the garment factory is conducted in assembly line set-ups, in which garments are first cut, then sewn and finally checked, ironed, folded and packed for export. The factory is therefore divided into a cutting section, a sewing section and a finishing section (Naved et al. 1997:4). In a survey of workers' positions, carried out on 3,017 garment workers it was shown that 62.2% of the work force were machine operators, 29.5% helpers, 4.9% line-persons, 1.9% supervisors and 1.5% were quality control inspectors and technical assistants (Hossain 1999:11).

The highest-ranking positions are those of cutting master, supervisor and production manager, which along with those of clerical staff within the factory, are regarded as 'intelligent' jobs. Part of the strong patriarchal system permeating Bangladeshi society is the ingrained belief that men are more intelligent than women. It is therefore not surprising that few females are employed in senior positions (Kabeer 1991:4). Another reason given by employers for preferential employment of men in the top ranking, better paid jobs, was that these tasks require dealing with outsiders and existing socio-cultural norms in Bangladesh made it difficult for local women to perform these roles (Paul-Majumder and Begum 1997:20).

It is obvious that gender segregation, especially vertical discrimination, is very much in evidence in the garment industry in Bangladesh. Factory management say that they do not get enough skilled and educated women applying for higher positions and that is true. Paul-Majumder and Mahmud's study (1994), revealed that not a single woman with HSC or above even showed any interest in applying for a factory job, mainly due to the earlier mentioned social stigma associated with working in the garment industry (Amin et al. 1997:13). Nevertheless the shortage of female workers in top positions is originally based

on a gender biased recruitment system where workers generally apply for an opening of an unspecified nature and then management assigns the particular job on the basis of sex and skills. Almost always women have to start as helpers and gradually work their way up the system, while men can be recruited directly to higher positions (Paul-Majumder and Begum 1997:21).

### *Promotion*

The usual indicators for promotion, such as length of service, skills and educational qualifications are not being taken into consideration in the garment industry in Bangladesh (Hossain 1999:12). In fact kinship ties are more important, as bargaining for promotion through kinship ties is easier than anything else (Paul-Majumder and Begum 1997:34). Although in the EPZ there is a written time schedule for promotions, it is largely ignored. Besides, the authorities in some factories actively search for faults in long-term employees, so they can be retrenched from their job before their entitlement for promotion and other service benefits causes extra expense for management (Hossain 1999:12-13).

There is actually very limited opportunity for promotion of female workers in garment factories after they have moved from 'helper' to 'operator' position. The lower the worker's educational level, the longer it will take them to move between these two positions (Paul-Majumder and Zohir 1994:194-195). Female workers are also hampered in their efforts to gain promotion because they are accorded markedly fewer opportunities for work related training than their male counterparts (Hossain et al. 1990:62).

### *Working hours and paid leave*

Work in the garment industry is usually based on a six day 48 hour working week, Friday being the weekly holiday. However in reality the working hours are considerably longer. A BIDS survey done on 808 workers from 39 garment factories in 1997 showed that the employees worked on average 12 hours a day (Paul-Majumder 1996:80). This represents a 72-84 hour working week, depending on whether the worker gets a day off or not.

Although Section 51 of the Factory Act 1965 says workers must be given one full day off per week (Collingsworth 1995:21), this is often not being accorded, especially during the peak season. Both the 1990 and 1997 surveys carried out by BIDS revealed that 35-40% of the workers did not have a single day off during the month preceding the survey (Paul-Majumder 1996:80, Paul-Majumder 1998:175). Even the workers' definition of 'day off' was a revelation to me. I presumed that when workers said they had a day off it meant that they did not go to the factory that day. Then I discovered that many workers said they had holiday on Friday if they finished work at 5pm instead of 8-10pm.

The Factory Act 1965 also mandates a one hour lunch and rest break within six hours of starting the day, a 10½ hour maximum work day (including the 1 hour break), no work for female workers after 8 pm, annual festival, maternity and sick leave (Collingsworth 1995: 21-24). Very few factories obey these laws. Of the 32 factories in the 1991 BIDS survey, 19 gave only a half-hour lunch break (Paul-Majumder 1996:80). A survey done of 1,650 garment workers in 1995 showed that only about 10% of female workers were aware of their rights to annual, casual and maternity leave. None of the workers were aware of their right to 14 days sick leave per annum and 10 days annual festival leave (Paul-Majumder and Zohir 1996: 130-131). Very few factories accord this leave. Workers who are aware of these provisions are afraid to press for their demands out of fear of dismissal (Hossain et al. 1990:66).

When workers are granted leave, it is generally unpaid. In the 1997 BIDS survey, only 35% of the total leave days taken in the previous month by female workers had been paid leave (Paul-Majumder 1998:61). Of the 32 firms surveyed in 1991, only three had given paid maternity leave and one had given leave on half pay. Male workers managed to get more paid leave accorded than their female counterparts (Paul-Majumder 1996:82).

### *Wages*

Wage rates in the garment industry are fixed by law. The prescribed minimum monthly wages range from 930 Taka (about NZ\$38) for a helper, 1,725 Taka for an operator and

up to 4,700 Taka for a pattern master (Chowdhury 1996:671). Many workers, both male and female, are paid less than their legal entitlement. In his survey report on 1,588 garment workers randomly chosen, Hossain found that only 28.3% of the 'Helpers' received the legally set lower limit of 930 Taka per month. The vast majority of those who received the bare legal limit or less were female workers (Hossain 2001:7-8)

There is considerable gender discrimination in wages in the garment industries, female workers receiving only about 66% of the wages of a male worker belonging to the same category and length of service (Paul-Majumder and Zohir:1994:190-191, Paul-Majumder 1996:70). This is true of all categories of workers except that of supervisor, where the difference is much less ( Paul-Majumder and Begum 1997:36). This gender discrimination in wage rate is similar to that found in the factories in Thailand (Siengthai and Leelakulthanit 1993:90).

A major concern for the garment workers is the lack of proper payment for overtime and the delay in the payment of wages. Many of the 87 case studies included in Hossain's survey report witness to the rampant disregard by factory owners of laws concerning appropriate payment of wages and according of leave (Hossain 1999:45-67).

### *Facilities*

The absence of canteen and child-care facilities as well as the inadequate provision of toilets and safe drinking water were often reported in the literature reviewed (Hossain et al 1990:63, Paul-Majumder and Zohir 1996:32, Paul-Majumder 1998:7). Although legally there should be one toilet for every 25 workers with separate ones for men and women, there is often only one for 60-70 workers. Besides, workers require permission from supervisors to go to the toilet and this is only accorded once or twice in a 12 hour shift (Paul-Majumder 1996:87-8). Of the 39 factories surveyed by BIDS in 1997, not a single factory outside of the EPZ had a canteen. Workers had to race home for their midday meal or else eat on the stairs or the roof of the factory (Paul-Majumder1998:7). By mid 1999, there were still only nine garment factories in Bangladesh providing creche

facilities for workers (Naripokkho 1999:2). Apart from in some of the factories in the EPZ, workers rarely have access to health facilities (Paul-Majumder 1998:11). I have not heard of any garment factory that provides housing for its workers. However, an NGO, Nari Unnayan Kendro (NUK) has now set up several hostels providing accommodation specifically for female garment workers (Zakiuddin 2000:5).

Transport facilities are only provided in the Export Processing Zones. Sixty percent of workers in other factories commute to and from work on foot, as they cannot afford to spend money on public transport (Paul-Majumder 1998:8). Various surveys put the average distance walked at three to five kilometres per day (Paul-Majumder and Zohir 1994:208, Paul-Majumder 1996:82, Paul-Majumder and Begum 1997:36). In addition to physical discomfort, especially during the monsoon season, long distance commuting by garment workers greatly increased their risk of physical and sexual harassment on the streets. Having to walk home after dark is a constant source of concern for garment workers, especially young females (Paul-Majumder 2000:178).

### *Safety within the factory*

The movement to develop the garment industry in Bangladesh took place very hastily and without taking the necessary safety precautions. About 90% of the garment factories started production in rented buildings that were not designed to house factories. As a result there is insufficient floor space per worker, poor ventilation and insufficient lighting. Diseases spread rapidly in such an environment. Staircases are narrow and passageways often obstructed by packaging materials and loaded cartons. While the risk of fire in a garment factory is very high, fire safety equipment is insufficient or poorly maintained and factory staff not taught how to use the available equipment (Paul-Majumder 1996:86). What is more, the exit doors of the factory are usually kept locked during working hours to prevent pilferage of goods (Grumiau 2001:10).

This leads to tragedies such as the massive fire at Chowdhury Knitwear on 25<sup>th</sup> November 2000, the third fire in a garment factory since August of that year. 'In this

incident no less than 48 young workers, mostly girls, were trapped and killed because the factory authorities had cold-bloodedly padlocked the only exit door from outside' (Anam 2000:5). On 8<sup>th</sup> August 2001 18 garment workers died in another garment factory, 14 of them women, in a stampede trying to get out of the factory when the fire alarm rang. Once again both exits to this building, containing 5,000 garment workers were locked. The security personnel holding the keys could not be found until 15 minutes after the fire safety authorities arrived. 120 workers have died in factory fires since 1990 (Daily Star 9/08/2001). Such incidents have also occurred in Thailand (Charoenloet 2001:4).

There are daily work hazards such as the noise pollution from hundreds of poorly maintained sewing machines or inhaling the toxic chemicals used in fabrics (Paul-Majumder 1996:79). Needle and bruise injuries are common amongst operators. A significant number of workers receive electric shocks from poorly wired or maintained plugs and machinery (Paul-Majumder 2000:170). In a survey done by the Bangladesh Institute of Labour Studies (BILS 2001:5) it was stated that 73 garment workers lost their lives at work during the year 2000, while a further 240 workers were seriously injured.

Arrangements for emergency care are not available in many factories. Neither is there medical leave or any form of compensation for injuries sustained during working hours (Hossain 1999:27). This is abuse of workers' rights.

#### *Abuse and harassment*

Hossain (1999) in his section on the harassment of female workers mentions various forms of abuse and harassment. He says that of the 2,443 female workers surveyed, many reported:

that the factory authority harass and torment them such as by verbally abusing them with obscene words, pulling their hair or even beating them severely and by assaulting them sexually. Those who protest strongly are often slapped and then issued letters warning of the possibility of their dismissal, so that they are scared to disclose their harassment. Sometimes girls are made to stay late at night in the name of shift duty and are then compelled to satisfy the sexual appetites of the officers. Most girls dare not protest in fear of losing their jobs (Hossain 1999:35-36).

Apparently male management staff believe they have the right to do whatever they like to the female workers, just as men sometimes do to female servants within the domestic sphere.

The work conditions in many of the garment factories in Bangladesh appear to be draconian. Most workers are over-worked and underpaid, subject to harassment and abuse, denied paid leave, basic facilities, and security of employment. What impact is all of that having on their lives?

### **The impact of work in the garment industry in Bangladesh on the female workers' lives**

Much has been said and written about the enormous contribution the RMG industry has made and continues to make to the economy of Bangladesh. The thousands of young women seen walking briskly along the streets early morning and late evening on their way to and from the garment factories has made people aware that this industry is flourishing on the shoulders of these young women. It is therefore not surprising that studies on garment workers done by local female researchers, sometimes assisted by foreigners, have tried to gain some insight into the impact work in this industry has on the lives of female workers. The literature reviewed has focused mainly on the economic and health impacts. However writers have also looked at changes in intra-household relations, mobility and the female workers' sense of self. These impacts help provide us with some idea of how gender is being reconstructed through garment factory work.

#### *Economic impacts*

Boserup (1970) indicated that migration from rural areas to the city had generally a negative impact on the economic status of women. However Afsar's studies carried out on many Bangladesh garment workers from 1996-8, show how work in the RMG industry has substantially improved the economic situation of the female migrant workers and their families (Afsar 1999, Afsar 2000). Had these women not migrated, they could

at best have got work as a daily labourer for about 25 Taka per day. Most of these women would have been unemployed (Afsar 2000:01). If a woman had migrated and worked as a domestic servant she would earn about 690 Taka per month), which is only half of the present average take home salary of a garment worker of 1389 Taka (Afsar 1999:9). It is evident therefore that work in the garment industry provides a significant source of income relative to that which is available for poor women outside of the industry (Hewett and Amin 2000:146). The estimated poverty line in Bangladesh is 950 Taka per capita per month. Afsar (1999:7) found that fifteen percent of the garment workers earn below that level. However this is much lower than the existing poverty level for the country as a whole and 'probably overestimates poverty amongst garment workers, many of whom are still children without dependents' (Paul-Majumder and Zohir 1994:181).

The garment workers' income is not only used for personal survival. Although workers now have money to spend on themselves, often for the first time in their lives, (Afsar 2000:126) most of them make an important financial contribution to their household (taken here to mean the group of people with whom the worker resides). One survey revealed that more than 90% of garment workers contribute at least part of their income to the household, 39% of them surrendering their entire income for household use (Hewett and Amin 2000:147). This improved income raises the nutritional food intake of garment workers and their families and allows them to spend more money on health-care and education than other poor people (Paul-Majumder and Zohir 1994:181, Begum 1997:48). It also permits them to improve their living conditions.

A comparative study carried out by Hewett and Amin (2000) found that garment workers are significantly more likely to have higher quality housing conditions and access to electricity, piped water and sanitary latrines than if they had not taken up work in this industry (Hewett and Amin 2000:9-10). However this does not mean that the living conditions of garment workers are always good. The bulk of workers live in low-rental accommodation, where they share latrines, bathrooms and cooking gas burners with 10-15 families (Afsar 2000:107). Other garment workers still live in slums. However a BIDS

survey carried out in 2001 found that their living conditions are better than other slum dwellers (Afrin 2002:3).

Many workers contribute not only to the household in which they reside in the city, but also send remittances to their families of origin in the rural areas. As studies in Bangladesh, India, Indonesia and Africa have shown, 80-90% of these remittances is spent on family maintenance. A significant part is also spent on the education of younger siblings. This strengthens the long-term resources of the workers' families (Afsar 1999:9-11).

Besides sending remittances to their families, garment workers also have a high propensity to save. Paul-Majumder and Zohir's survey (1994:182) found that 85% of female workers had a bank account and 26% had managed to save something in the month preceding the survey. This is a significant change, considering most of the workers come from rural areas where banking is rare (Paul-Majumder and Zohir 1996:124). Unmarried workers often save money for their own dowry. Having a higher dowry to offer not only makes it easier for them to attract a husband; it also means that families include them in the decision-making process about marriage (Naved et al. 1997:9).

#### *Intrahousehold relations*

Jobs in the garment industry have not only had a very favourable impact on the economic well-being of female workers. They have also led to significant changes in intrahousehold relations. Traditionally, women in this strongly patriarchal society have had no control over money and little say in decision making within the family (Kibria 1995:294). By gaining an income that has markedly improved the living conditions of the family, female garment workers have in many ways started to redress their lack of power. While many unmarried female workers still hand over their total earnings to an older guardian, who in turn gives them pocket money (Absar 2000:128), 35% of the female garment workers in Paul-Majumder and Zohir's study had total control over how their earnings were spent. A further 23% of the female workers shared joint control with

other members of the household. Forty three percent of these women workers said they had acquired the right to make decisions, not only about expenditure of money, but about all aspects of family life (Paul-Majumder and Zohir 1994:199). This is definite evidence of some reconstruction of gender in a country such as this.

Work in the garment industry has also led to changes within marriage relationships. Even if female garment workers still usually let their parents choose a prospective husband for them, many are given some say in when and whom to marry (Paul-Majumder and Zohir 1996:120). They are also developing a more equal relationship with their spouses (Zohir 2000:19). Traditionally in Bangladesh men are considered the breadwinners and therefore have no responsibility to help with domestic chores. However Paul-Majumder and Zohir (1994:200) found that about 52% of the female workers reported that their husband assisted with housework and child care while Zohir's research (2000:18) put the figure at 73%. The more the wife earns, the more the husband is willing to become involved in domestic chores. This certainly helps to relieve something of the double burden most working women bear.

While work in the garment industry has increased the chances of female workers finding a husband and improved the marriage relationship of certain workers, it has also led to the breakup of many marriages. The female worker's arrival home late at night from work breeds suspicion and distrust amongst some of the husbands and becomes fuel for separation or divorce (Paul-Majumder and Zohir 1996:95). The fact that these women are breadwinners and asserting their independence also leads at times to gender conflict. However the incidence of divorce is still lower amongst garment workers than in the lower strata of Bangladesh society in general (Paul-Majumder and Zohir 1994:199).

The income earned from work in the garment industry enables divorced women to survive on their own if need be. It also permits female workers to make the decision to move out of intolerable marriages, enter another on more favourable terms, or live alone with their children. All of these are unprecedented freedoms for women in a society with such a strong gender hierarchy. As workers said during a focus group discussion in

Naved et al's study, 'How many times do you think a garment worker would tolerate violence against her? Once, twice, maybe thrice and then a worker would initiate divorce' (Naved et al.1997:18). It is the garment worker's economic independence that gives her the possibility of choosing to do this (Paul-Majumder and Zohir1994:199, Zakiuddin 2000:4).

The garment industry's preferential employment of women has led to changes in household structure. Traditionally unmarried girls lived with their parents until given in marriage. They then moved to live with their husband's parents and siblings. Now thousands of young unmarried girls migrate to the city to work in the garment industry. There they often live with older siblings or relatives other than their parents in new types of families such as branch families. These essentially consist of two or more adult members related by blood, but exclusive of a married couple (Afsar 2000:105). Paul-Majumder and Zohir's survey also found that 35% of the married female garment workers had left their husbands behind in the village when they migrated to the cities in search of work (1994:199). The percentage of female-headed households amongst garment workers was found to be 37% while the national figure for urban households is only 16% (Paul-Majumder and Zohir 1996:115). An important social change is taking place.

Another new tendency has occurred. Single, migrant girls plus some whose marriages have broken down, have begun renting rooms in the city with other female garment workers. This system is called 'messing' and has traditionally been practiced by men. However, with the emergence of the garment industry, this form of residential arrangement has broken the traditional norm of females residing with a male guardian (Paul-Majumder and Zohir 1994:199). This trend towards messing also says something about the increased mobility and independence of the female garment workers in Bangladesh (Otani 2000:77).

### *Reconstruction of purdah*

As explained earlier in this chapter, the mobility of women in Bangladesh is severely curtailed by the concept of *purdah* or female seclusion from unrelated men. *Purdah* values are popularly considered an obstacle for women's employment outside the confines of the home (Hossain et al. 1990:46). However, garment workers forced into employment by economic necessity, have re-organized *purdah* to suit their present situation. They travel to and from work together, dress modestly (usually covering their heads with their shawl or scarf), behave in a dignified way and avoid freely mixing with men ( Begum 1997:46). This has led to a shift in society's conception of *purdah* and is surely contributing to women's increased participation in other sectors of the work force. As Absar (2000:130) says:

With the growth of the RMG sector in the city, the landscape became painted with a moving crowd of women in saris and salwar kameez every morning and evening during rush hours. Now this is not only a very common scene, but also a very acceptable scene ... We did not have to wait 100 years to see the change though Bangladesh is considered a very conservative country, especially in terms of women's emancipation issues.

With their increased spatial mobility, women have become more socially self-reliant. They can move about, even going out alone, in most cases to buy daily necessities (Paul-Majumder and Zohir 1994:199). This increased mobility also signifies freedom for some of the workers. As Shapna, a former garment worker said:

Factory is like a prison. Home is like a prison. The distance between the factory and home is the place where I am free (Absar 2000:125).

However, this space between factory and home is also an area of great concern for most female garment workers. Evil elements in society sometimes take advantage of this increased mobility and independent living; harassing and even raping garment workers on their way home from work late at night (Mahbub 2001:4). The incidence of sexual harassment and theft of belongings, or abduction largely occurs when a female worker is found alone on the road (Afsar 2000:108). Of the 58 reported cases of working women being raped in the year 2000, 33 of them were female garment workers (BILS 2001:5).

About 15% of the female workers reported that, while commuting home late at night, either they or their colleagues had been attacked by local touts (Paul-Majumder and Zohir 1994:208).

Commuting in groups is one way that female garment workers have tried to protect themselves from harassment on the streets. Another is by wearing a salwar kameez instead of a sari. The salwar kameez, historically the traditional dress of the Punjab State of India, slowly gained acceptance as suitable clothing in Bangladesh for adolescent girls up to the time of their marriage. Garment workers were the first large group of married women in Bangladesh to continue wearing a salwar kameez. A compelling reason for this is the practicality and the comfort of the salwar kameez, allowing as it does for more freedom of movement than the sari which is basically 6 metres of cloth folded around the body (Pokhrel 2001:33, Manchanda 2001:27). However the salwar kameez also affords greater protection against sexual harassment (Roushan 2000:6). It covers the whole body in loose fitting clothing, revealing little of the feminine contour. At the same time it is much more difficult for an assailant to pull a salwar kameez off a woman than to forcibly remove a sari and a woman can run faster in a salwar kameez than in a sari.

#### *The impact on factory workers' health*

This insecurity and sense of fear concerning returning home late at night also takes its toll on the female workers' health. When asked which difficulty related to working in a factory bothered them most, 55% of the female workers mentioned overtime work late at night. They fear the untoward incidents that might happen while commuting home or the hostility of husband and family towards them for returning so late (Paul-Majumder and Zohir 1994:208). The mental health of workers is also negatively affected by the bad treatment received from management and the bad behaviour of co-workers, both female and male. Of the women surveyed in Hossain's study mentioned earlier in this chapter (1999:35), 89.4% reported that they were harassed and tormented by factory authority who verbally abused them, pulled their hair, slapped them or assaulted them sexually. Their mental health is also affected by constant fear of dismissal (as workers have no

appointment letter), irregular wage payments and withholding of rightful increments in salary (Paul-Majumder 1998:12). The physical health of the workers is also at risk because of work related accidents. A survey carried out by the Bangladesh Institute of Labour Studies reported that 49 garment workers lost their lives at work during the year 2000 while a further 240 were severely injured. Most of these workers were women (BILS 2001:4)).

Despite the fact that the female garment workers can now afford better food and accommodation, things that should have a positive impact on their health, most studies done on these women in Bangladesh speak of negative effects of work in this industry on their health (Khatun 1998:12). Of the 589 females interviewed for Paul-Majumder's latest study on garment workers, 90% had experienced at least one episode of illness during the preceding month. The most prevalent complaints were headache, weakness, anaemia, fever, coughs and colds, diarrhoea, or pain in the chest, stomach or eyes (Paul-Majumder 2000:190). This confirms the findings of other studies on the health status of garment workers in Bangladesh (Afsar 2000, Paul-Majumder 1998). Sleep and leisure deprivation also pay a heavy toll on both the workers' physical and mental health. Many workers regularly get only 6 hours sleep a night (Zohir 2000:72). After coming home late at night and then doing domestic chores, many of the women wake up between 3 and 5am to take advantage of the dark for bathing in the absence of built-in arrangements for privacy. Married workers face the additional burden of needing to queue up early morning to share 2-3 gas burners with 10-15 families (Afsar 2000:12). No wonder 45% of the female workers complained of chronic fatigue (Paul-Majumder 1998:2).

The literature reviewed indicates that garment workers suffer from many occupation related problems. However, Hewett and Amin's report on the impact of garment work on quality of life measures, provided evidence that garment workers do not suffer more general health problems than their rural counterparts (Hewett and Amin 2000:150).

One of the positive impacts on garment worker's health has been the notable delay in marriage and childbearing, as well as the reduction in number of children they bear.

Bangladesh has one of the highest rates of maternal mortality and morbidity in the world. Every hour three women die of pregnancy related causes in this country, and for every death there are 150 women who are left with life long complications such as uterine prolapse or chronic incontinence due to birth injuries to the urethra or anus (GOB/UNICEF 1999:3). The women most at risk are those giving birth before 18 years of age. In Bangladesh more than 60% of all girls are married by this age (GOB/UNICEF 2000:175, Morris 2001:4). However the valuable contribution young female garment workers make to the family budget and the fact that they can help save for their own dowry, means parents have an interest in delaying their daughters marriage (Naved et al 1997:6-8). Foo and Lim (1989: 223) in their study of female garment workers in East Asia also found parents did not want to forgo their daughter's financial contribution to the family, and the girls themselves were reluctant to give up their personal income and the freedom that goes with it. In Bangladesh it has been shown that female garment workers marry on average 5 years later than their non-working counterparts in rural areas and wait until about 22 years of age to have their first child (Hewett and Amin 2000:140). In the Population Council project summary (1998) it was shown that while 58% of girls in rural areas were married by 15 years of age, only 19% of the female garment workers were. By 18 years of age, the legal age for marriage in Bangladesh, the figures were 85% and 40% respectively (Population Council 1998:5).

The combination of delayed marriage, greater freedom and the ability to afford small luxuries brought about as a consequence of work in the garment industry, creates a reasonably positive period of transition from childhood to adulthood. As Amin says:

The experience of garment work in the social context of Bangladesh, provides young girls with a period of adolescence, something that is usually denied rural girls from poor households, who at puberty move directly from girlhood to a role as wife and mother (Amin et al 1997:7).

Nearly three fifths of the currently married female garment workers of reproductive age do not have any children, compared to only one-tenth of Bangladeshi women in general. Women workers are therefore obviously controlling their fertility. They are also having smaller families than the national average (Afsar 2000:15). Garment workers are highly

motivated towards family planning, because of the cost of living implications and high aspirations they have for their children's education (Amin et al. 1997:19).

Child-care is a real concern for the female garment workers. With their long work hours, they need to rely on familial support. Ninety percent of those with children under 5 years of age did receive this, as compared to about 60% of women working in other manufacturing units (Afsar 2000:107). Slightly more than 80% of the garment workers' young children were cared for by family members in the city, while the others were sent to the village to be cared for, most often by maternal grandmothers (Kandala et al. 1997:21).

### *Sense of self*

As mentioned in Chapter 1, local women are responsible for writing most of the literature concerning Bangladeshi garment workers. This may help explain why, although studies have primarily focussed on garment workers' working and living conditions and the impact of these on their economic status, mobility and health, they also often give us a glimpse of female garment workers' changing sense of self. This final section of Chapter 3 explains ways in which work in the garment industry is changing the ways the female workers view themselves, and why these changes are occurring.

A woman's empowerment, according to Chapter 2, begins with her consciousness, her perceptions about herself, her capacities and her potential. In that same chapter we learnt that a girl or woman in Bangladesh is from birth a victim of a culture of discrimination, the product of a lethal combination of patriarchy and misinterpreted religious structures that constantly erode and fragment her sense of self (Choudhury 2001:6). It is no wonder that girls/women in this country generally have a low sense of self-worth.

Nevertheless it was shown earlier in this chapter that garment workers are now seen as important contributors to the family income. This has often not only provided them with bargaining chips to assert power in household decision making (Naved et al. 1997:6-18),

but has also raised their value in the eyes of their family (Amin et al. 1997:15). Both these things seem to be giving garment workers a deeper sense of self-worth.

Whilst most Bangladeshi women cannot even think of living independently from their father, husband or other male guardian, both unmarried girls and married women have set off without these people to seek work in the garment industry in the city (Paul-Majumder and Zohir 1994:198). Although most of these girls and women found it very daunting at first coping with life in the city and the factory, they have been able to overcome their fear and confusion. They have been helped by supportive peer groups in the factory, people who understand what they are going through (Amin et al.1997:22). In this process of adapting to new situations in the city and the factory many of the female garment workers have grown in self-confidence. They have become more assertive, not only in standing up for their own rights, but also those of others; developing ways of working together with others to attain these (Meisner 1999:1).

Paid employment also appears to have led to an increased sense of self-reliance amongst these women workers. Even if family support is not forthcoming, they can still survive. The financial security, along with the practical and social skills acquired through work in the industry, appear to be conducive, not only to increased self-confidence and self-reliance, but also to a heightened sense of self-esteem (World Bank 2001:186-7). Over 90% of the female workers in Paul-Majumder and Zohir's study stated that they had a higher opinion of themselves now than when they entered the industry (Paul-Majumder and Zohir 1994:198).

Nevertheless, the literature shows that although society has in some ways become more accepting of this enormous new group of female workers, who as consumers can pump their hard earned wages back into the system (Absar 2000:130), a strong social stigma against women working in the garment industry still exists (Hewett and Amin 2000:153, Amin et al. 1997:10). Female garment workers are very much aware that large sections of society still believe that their virtue as women has been tarnished by work in this industry. It is a constant challenge to their otherwise enhanced sense of self. That is why

many of these female garment workers say 'that it is only possible to work in a factory in Dhaka and particularly with men, because they are away from home, beyond the gossip, comments and traditional values of neighbours and relatives' (Absar 2000:129).

Are there possibilities for female workers to be able to improve their lot?

### *Trade Union Activity*

Typical of high volume, low wage industries, Bangladesh's garment manufacturers maintain strong opposition to representative unions. Trade Union activities are still legally forbidden within the EPZ. Nevertheless within the total RMG industry there are more than 16 union federations which claim to represent garment workers. Most of these serve as labour fronts for various political parties and tend to push their party agenda, even if this is opposed to the will of the workers. This means that in reality workers still have very little voice on the factory floor.

It has been said that less than 1% of the workforce belongs to a union in the RMG industry in Bangladesh. Public authorities work hand in hand with employers in doing all they can to hamper the proper functioning of unions. Those who do become union members face intimidation and dismissal (Grumiau 2001:11). This is similar to what has happened in Sri-Lanka (WITZ 2001:12-14). In Paul-Majumder and Begum's study not a single female garment worker reported being currently a trade union member, although some workers said they had been a member in an earlier job (Paul-Majumder and Begum 1997:38). This may be because they know their employers do not encourage unionism. They may fear getting involved in political activities or are simply ignorant about the existence of garment workers' unions (Meisner 1999:1). Even in unionized factories, female workers seldom come forward with 'women-oriented demands', since it is perceived that they need the support of their male counterparts for any action to take place (UNDP 1994:14).

The founding of the Bangladesh Independent Garment Workers Union (BIGU) by four female employees on 16<sup>th</sup> December 1994 heralded the beginning of a feminist style, grassroots, non-political labour organization, run by workers in the interests of workers. This marked a significant step forward for women and the garment industry in Bangladesh (BIGU 1994:1). In 1997 BIGU received government registration as part of a federation of garment unions (BIGUF). This union, through its work related and welfare activities, has great potential to improve the lot of female workers.

### **Conclusion**

This chapter provides a review of the literature written about women's work in the garment industry in Bangladesh. It shows how the garment industry here has developed into the extremely important economic force it is today, contributing the bulk of the country's export earnings. This has been achieved principally through the cheap, female, predominantly young migrant workers. The work conditions in this industry were then looked at. They were found to be disturbing. There is also evidence of blatant gender discrimination in all aspects of employment in this industry, for example in wages, paid leave, opportunity for work related training and promotion.

Finally an attempt has been made to identify the impact work in the garment industry is having on the lives of its female garment workers, particularly on reconstruction of gender. While the industry is taking advantage of, and even reinforcing certain gender and class inequalities in Bangladesh, it also seems to be opening up whole new possibilities and resources to women. The lives of the female garment workers have changed. In my own research I hope to delve into these changes from the workers' own perspectives, focusing especially on any changes in sense of self.

## **Chapter 4. Getting to Know these Women who Make our Clothes**

### **Introduction**

For six of the eight years that I have been in Bangladesh I have been working with organizations for garment workers. Over these years I have been privileged to meet thousands of garment workers, many of them on an individual basis. In this chapter I shall explain why I chose to look at changes that have occurred in the lives of some of the female garment workers in Bangladesh and discuss my personal involvement with three specific organizations for garment workers. Then I shall provide a brief overview of how other research on garment workers in Bangladesh was carried out before going on to describe the methodology and data collection techniques used in this particular piece of research.

What struck me first about the garment workers in this country was the predominance of young, female workers whom I observed moving along the city streets at great speed early morning and late at night. I felt tired just watching them and thinking of the long hours they worked for such meagre salaries. Through my work with them I discovered that many suffered from chronic fatigue and were underweight. However, as these young women started telling me about their lives I noticed that in certain ways they seemed different from the non-garment worker girls and women with whom I also worked. Despite their low social status and educational level, these female garment workers appeared more self-assured and able to speak their mind than Bangladeshi females of a similar socio-economic and educational background, who were not employed in the formal sector.

This aroused my interest in learning about changes that had occurred in the lives of these women workers since taking up employment in the garment industry. I wanted to do this as far as possible from the female garment workers' own perspective. Most of the research already done on female garment workers had focussed on working conditions and the impact of this employment on their economic condition, health and fertility. I

decided to look not only at the economic, health and relational impacts of employment in this industry, but also at changes in the workers' sense of self and their personal capabilities. Aware that the garment industry is the largest employer of women in the formal sector in Bangladesh, I realized that these changes might not be any reflection of employment in the garment industry *per se*, but rather of employment in the formal sector. However there was one thing I noticed about the female garment workers that was not true of women workers in general in this country, particularly married ones, namely the type of clothing worn. The majority of female garment workers wore salwar kameez instead of the traditional sari, the two forms of clothing pictured at the beginning of Chapter 1. This fascinated me and made me want to know whether this change in dress code was in any way indicative of movement towards greater empowerment of these women.

### **BIGU, BIGUF and WWEC**

As stated earlier, my involvement with garment workers dates back six years. At first I was working for the Bangladesh Independent Garment workers' Union (BIGU) mentioned already in Chapter 3. BIGU's concern that female workers' voices be heard was reflected in their Constitution which states that at least nine of the fifteen positions on the Executive Committee must be held by women. This was a 'policy decision by BIGU to offer affirmative action to women workers since they make up the majority of workers in the garment industry' (BIGU 1994:6). One of the earliest requests made to BIGU by the female garment workers was for basic primary health care services for themselves and their dependents. These were provided in the form of evening health care clinics. Early in 1996 I took over as the person in charge of these health services.

In July 1997, BIGU joined with a group of other similar non-politically aligned RMG workers' unions to obtain Government registration as the Bangladesh Independent Garment workers' Union Federation (BIGUF). I continued to run health services for this new organization until severe financial restrictions forced the closure of the health clinics on 1<sup>st</sup> March 2001. However I continued treating patients who were on long-term

medications at the headquarters of BIGUFs funding partner, the American Center for International Labor Solidarity (ACILS).

On 13<sup>th</sup> May 2001 a new organization for garment workers was inaugurated by ACILS, the Working Women's Education Center (commonly known as the WWEC Centre). This organization which is open to all garment workers offers educational and awareness raising programs, along with legal support and primary health care services. Evening seminars covering family laws and sexual harassment, workers rights and labour laws, trafficking of women, worker's migration, health and gender issues are run six evenings a week. Forty workers may attend each of these six seminars once only. During the WWEC Centre's first year of operation more than 2000 garment workers, mostly female workers, from 198 different factories registered for the educational programs, most of them attending the six seminars available. I am Health Program Coordinator for this organization. This involves running a weekly health education seminar for garment workers and two evening clinics each week. Twenty to forty-five patients are seen at each clinic.

My work has therefore provided me with extensive face-to-face contact with many garment workers, especially female workers and their immediate families. As I have dealt with their health problems and listened to their life experiences my respect for them has grown, as has the desire to know and understand them better as individuals and as a group of women. I believe these female garment workers are somehow paving the way for major changes in the lives of Bangladeshi women in general. That conviction was a powerful stimulus to my carrying out this research.

Before proceeding to describe how I carried out my own research I would like to briefly mention how other research done on garment workers in Bangladesh was conducted.

### **Methods used by other researchers**

Most of the research on female garment workers in this country appears to have been carried out by either the Bangladesh Institute of Development Studies (Paul-Majumder, Afsar and co-researchers) or the Population Council (Amin, Naved and co-researchers), or has been based on large scale surveys done by the above organizations. All of this research involved quantitative data collected from 500-1050 garment workers in the form of structured survey questionnaires. This data was then complemented by qualitative data collected by means of focus group discussions, key informant interviews and case studies of individual workers. Multivariate statistical analysis was carried out on the quantitative data, while qualitative data was included in the narrative of the research document. In some of the studies non-garment workers or young women from the garment workers' area of origin were also surveyed, in order that a comparative study could be carried out. Other individual researchers such as Mokaddem Hossain (1999) and Otani (2000) also used both quantitative and qualitative research methods, while Sakhawat Hossain (2001) relied solely on quantitative data and Absar (2000) solely on qualitative data collected through in-depth interviews.

Although all of the researchers tried random sampling methods for selecting factories and garment workers to be included in their research, most admitted the difficulties involved in actually doing so. Not all factories would grant access to the researchers (Paul-Majumder 2000). In some instances, researchers or their assistants were denied access to any factory (Hossain 1999 and Hossain 2001). It was probably the factories with better working conditions that allowed research to be carried out on their workers. Because of the difficulty of contacting garment workers at their place of work, some researchers increased their sample through a 'snow-ball' sampling method, using the original respondents from randomly selected factories to find other garment workers living in their neighbourhood (Hewitt and Amin 2000).

Though not always specifically stated, it appears that most of the data collected on garment workers was collected outside of the factory setting, on the way to and from

work or in areas where the workers live. Otani (2000:71) remarked that when she visited some garment factories in Dhaka simply to observe workers, these women were not allowed to take their eyes off their work for an instant to look at her. There are enormous time constraints in the garment industry. Since garments are produced on the assembly-line system and high daily production targets are set, if a worker even stops work for ten minutes the work of the whole line is compromised. Absar (2000:125) noted that even outside of the factory setting it took time for garment workers to trust her sufficiently to share openly with her. They had no experience of people who were actually interested in their situation, concerns and needs. What is more, they feared factory management had sent her and they therefore risked losing their jobs. The ten garment workers who themselves collected data for Hossain's research thought that the most conducive environment for gaining accurate information from garment workers was away from the pressure of managers or supervisors (Hossain 1999:4).

Having reflected on the research done by others on female garment workers I recognized the difficulties involved in obtaining a truly random sample of workers and the importance of choosing a suitable time and place for data collection, if my research was to yield accurate information. While acknowledging the value of using a combination of qualitative and quantitative techniques, I realized that in order to answer my particular research questions, I would need to give greater importance to the qualitative aspects than most of the other researchers I studied had done.

### **Methodology and techniques of this study**

As a feminist I am actively committed to challenging gender inequalities and working for the empowerment of women. I wanted this research to be feminist research in the sense of being 'contextual, inclusive, experiential, involved, socially relevant...inclusive of emotions and events as experienced' (Nielson 1990:6). To do that I needed to first acknowledge that my own experiences and values colour my vision and influence my interpretations, before I could begin to discuss the garment workers' reality (Wolf 1996:4-14). Feminist research should, according to Mies (1983:124-126), serve the

interest of those groups of people who are presently disadvantaged, leading to some positive change in their status quo. My years of working with female garment workers in Bangladesh have not only made me aware of how these women suffer from gender subordination in all spheres, but have also led me to believe that some important personal changes have occurred in their lives. I therefore desired to undertake a form of research that could contribute towards promoting positive change for the female garment workers. My conviction was that the research process could be empowering of women. Specifically with raised awareness of how they had changed as persons since taking up work in the garment industry, they might come to the realization that they have within themselves power to actively influence the direction of change in their lives.

In order to allow the female garment workers to express what *they* see as their reality, reflect on it and evaluate it in some way, I chose primarily a qualitative methodology with emphasis given to interviews and focus group discussion (FGD) as specific techniques for data collection. These seemed to be the most appropriate techniques for gathering data that expresses the lived experience and self-perceptions of these female garment workers. Besides it has been found that 'giving voice' to women through interviews and group discussions can itself be empowering because it recognizes these women's knowledge and affirms their self-worth (Gluck 1996 and Opie 1992 cited in Scheyvens and Leslie 2000:24).

A quantitative component in the form of a structured survey questionnaire was also included in my research. This survey was carried out at the beginning of the field research to provide pertinent base-line information, so that I had a better understanding of what issues needed to be discussed or clarified in the focus group discussions and interviews. It also helped in gaining an idea of how representative the qualitative information gained is of the total group being studied.

In order to incorporate the interests of those being studied in the methods used for obtaining information in this study, I held several group discussions with female garment workers prior to collecting data, inviting them to indicate how they thought the research

should be carried out. Their advice was invaluable. I then developed a draft survey questionnaire and tried it out on ten garment workers. This revealed inconsistencies and lack of clarity in some of the questions and enabled necessary changes to be made before the actual survey was carried out.

Given the restraints discussed earlier in the chapter of carrying out research concerning garment workers within the factory setting, this study was limited to female garment workers attending the WWEC Centre. This means that the findings of this research cannot be considered representative of all female garment workers in Bangladesh. However given that the WWEC Centre's sole objective is to promote the interests of garment workers and this organization is completely independent of factory management or trade unions, the Centre is a place where workers feel free to express themselves. The research should therefore be able to yield valuable information about this particular group of garment workers. Further study would be needed in order to determine whether the findings were in any way representative of Bangladesh's female garment workers in general.

The survey was carried out one evening a week over an eight-week period in November-December 2001. A systematic sampling method was used for the survey. Every third female garment worker who walked through the entrance of the WWEC Centre on that particular evening and who had not already participated in the survey was selected. Before administering the survey questionnaire verbal permission was sought. The survey, which consisted of a set questionnaire in Bangla, the language of the Bangladesh (Appendix 1), was administered to a total of 75 female garment workers. The English translation is to be found in Appendix 2. Bernard (1988) in his work on research methods cited in Hossain (2001:3) suggests that a sample of 384 is adequate to predict a population size of over one 1,000,000. That signifies a ratio of 1:2604. The 75 workers surveyed in this research represent about one in every 25 female garment workers who had attended the WWEC Centre educational programmes up to the time of the survey. The questionnaire first asked background information about the worker and then focussed on her clothing, decision making rights and changes that have occurred in her life since

taking up employment in the garment industry. Since many of the workers are illiterate or have difficulty reading, the questions were read to the worker and the woman's response noted according to the set categories for each question. Any 'other' responses or comments were written on or attached to the survey form. Many workers wanted to explain their response in detail, so the survey in fact often took on the form of a structured interview. The survey proved to be a valuable source of information and did help determine the focus of the group discussions and personal interviews, as well as matters that required further clarification.

Four focus group discussions were held with six female garment workers taking part in each discussion. Women were selected from amongst workers attending the WWEC Centre, in such a way that the FGD participants would be representative of different marital status, educational level, number of years in the garment industry and position held in the factory. Workers already treated by me at the WWEC Health Clinics were not included in the FGDs, in case they felt obliged out of gratitude to me to agree to participate. The aims of the FGDs were to give voice to the experience and opinions of a wide range of female garment workers, members of each group being invited to speak about the ways they thought their lives had changed since taking up work in the garment industry. If changes that had occurred in the way individual participants saw themselves as persons did not surface spontaneously in the group discussion, gentle prompting was made in this direction. A Bangladeshi assistant facilitated the group discussion, making sure that each participant got the opportunity to express herself while I took notes of what was said. I did however also contribute from time to time to the discussion. Efforts were made to tape these discussions so that my written notes could be verified. However the quality of recording was greatly diminished by unavoidable, excessive background noise. At the end of each group discussion the participants were asked how they felt about the discussion (to check that they did not feel exploited by the experience) and were helped to see the steps that they had already made on the path to empowerment. Most of these female garment workers said that talking about the changes that had occurred in their own lives and listening to those of others had been a positive experience for them. Some mentioned how the discussions helped them realize their solidarity as women in a

common struggle. Several stated that the fact that someone was interested in knowing about their lives made them feel more important as persons.

In order to give female garment workers the freedom to talk of matters which they might have felt reluctant to bring up in a group setting or to clarify sensitive issues, semi-structured personal interviews were held with nine female garment workers. These interviews did give valuable information, especially about the worker's personal sense of self, and clarified issues such as the reasons for garment workers living apart from their husband. Certain responses to the survey questionnaire also required verification and further clarification. For example I checked the percentage of garment workers entering the garment industry from a major city and unmarried workers still residing with their parents at three of my weekly health education seminars. I then selected every third participant at that seminar who fulfilled the above criteria and having gained their oral permission arranged an interview time with them. Workers seemed to want to share their life stories and willingly provided any information asked for.

Personal observation of garment workers also played a part in my research. On five occasions I stood near the entrance to different garment factories and observed the workers entering. I would note down the number of female workers wearing a sari and the number wearing a salwar kameez. It was not however possible to check how many of those wearing salwar kameez were married, nor to know the total number of female workers in these garment factories. My observations only enabled me to gain some idea of the percentage of female workers wearing a salwar kameez and those wearing a sari. I also have mingled with groups of garment workers, observing their demeanor and listening to their chatter as they walked along the streets. My frequent personal contact with the garment workers at the WVEC Centre has provided me with invaluable opportunities to observe these female workers and in doing so learn a great deal about them.

The data collected by this research has been analyzed in various ways. The data obtained from the survey questionnaire has been coded and processed using the Statistical Package

for Social Science (SPSS). The concern was not to perform a rigorous statistical analysis, but to carry out cross tabulations in order to see any relationships between various factors related to these garment workers. The information is then presented as tables, bar graphs and pie charts. Data obtained from the focus group discussions and personal interviews has been placed in categories and analyzed using the empowerment models of Rowlands (1997) and Kabeer (1995). The results of this analysis are included in the chapters that follow.

### **Reflections on the research process**

The methods chosen to carry out this study provided many valuable insights into some of the ways female garment workers in Bangladesh perceive they have personally changed since taking up employment in the ready-made garment industry. These women readily shared their perceptions and stated that they felt safe in doing so, knowing that we had no links with factory management. That I believe is because the WWEC Centre has already developed a reputation as a *pro* garment worker organization. Although most of the workers studied had never previously met me, it is likely that many had heard about the services I provide for garment workers. This may have helped them feel safe in my presence. Nevertheless I am aware that as an educated middle class Western woman there are marked power differentials between the garment workers and myself. This may have had some affect on what the women shared with me. For this reason I chose to use a Bangladeshi woman to facilitate the focus group discussions. While acknowledging that this woman was also more educated and of a higher social position than the group participants, she has worked with garment workers for a number of years and developed genuine collegial rapport with them. Her assistance was also indispensable when group participants used colloquial terms that I could not understand. I had a local assistant present at some of the personal interviews, to see whether this would influence the type of information offered. The women interviewed appeared more willing to share personal information of a sensitive nature when alone with me, rather than when my local assistant was also present. That may have been because they felt that I was unlikely to know any of their kin and thus be able to divulge information to them. Walsh (1996:94) says that

sometimes it is easier for research respondents to pass on personal information to a total outsider than to someone having more in common with them.

My long involvement with organizations working for garment workers' rights and the relationships formed with many individual workers does mean that I have a certain bias in favour of the workers. Their empowerment is something I constantly hope will be achieved and was an important reason for my accepting to work for the above mentioned organizations. Nevertheless this does not mean that this research began with the foregone conclusion that employment in the garment industry in Bangladesh is empowering of women. The organizations for which I work would probably say that the opposite is true. The principal aim of BIGU, BIGUF and WWEC is that of raising workers' awareness as a group about their legal and social rights. The focus is on existing violations of these rights and means to overcome them. It is not on the personal achievements of workers, although affirmation is readily given when they occur.

### **Conclusion**

A growing inner conviction, over the years I have been working for BIGU, BIGUF and WWEC, that work in Bangladesh's ready-made garment industry has both positive and negative impacts on the lives of female workers, motivated me to study the changes these workers believe have occurred in their lives since taking up work in this industry. Most of the other research done on female garment workers in Bangladesh relies heavily on quantitative data collected by means of structured survey questionnaires, accompanied by a much smaller qualitative component. This particular study, which gives primary importance to qualitative methodology with a quantitative component used in a supporting role, yielded much in-depth information about these women's changes in sense of self and personal capabilities. The following chapters now look at some of the findings of this research.

## **Chapter 5 Changes in the lives of female garment workers in Bangladesh**

This chapter attempts to answer the first question to be addressed in this thesis, namely: What do this particular group of female garment workers in Bangladesh perceive as some of the personal changes that have occurred in their lives since taking up employment in the ready made garment industry?

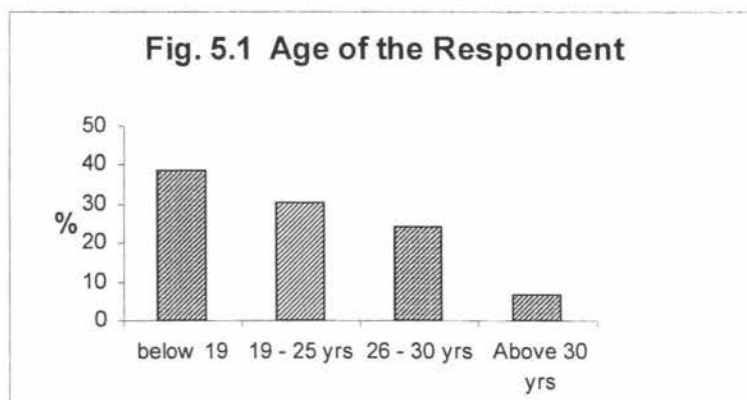
It will begin by describing certain characteristics of the female garment workers who took part in this particular piece of research. Information will be given about the age of the respondents, their educational level, marital status and place of origin, as well as their position and number of years working within the garment industry, the wages earned and the type of clothing they wear to work and on days off. At times I will indicate how this data compares with data collected in other surveys of female garment workers, as discussed in Chapter 3. This is done to provide a clear picture of the women whom this research is all about. The second part of the chapter reveals personal changes that have occurred in the lives of these women since they took up work in the garment industry. Firstly the economic impacts on the woman's own life, her ability to influence the living standards of the household to which she belongs and the long term development of her family will be looked at. Then after presentation of health impacts of working in the garment industry, some important social impacts will be considered. The latter will include changes in decision-making and relationships, as well as reconstruction of the convention of *pardah*. This chapter will then conclude with presentation of findings concerning the psychological impact of employment in the garment industry on the lives of female workers, especially changes in self-perception.

Unless otherwise stated, all quotes in this chapter derive from the FGDs or individual interviews with garment workers. As their confidentiality is protected as part of this research, I will not be naming individuals.

## Characteristics of the workers

### *Age*

My survey covered a good cross-section of workers of different ages, as seen in Figure 5.1. Although many of the workers were unsure of their exact age, the average age of the workers



in this survey was probably somewhere between 19 and 21. This is similar to most of the other studies done on female garment workers in Bangladesh. The participants in the focus group discussions and personal interviews were not asked about their age. However they appeared to be a real mixture of ages, ranging from about fifteen through to the late thirties.

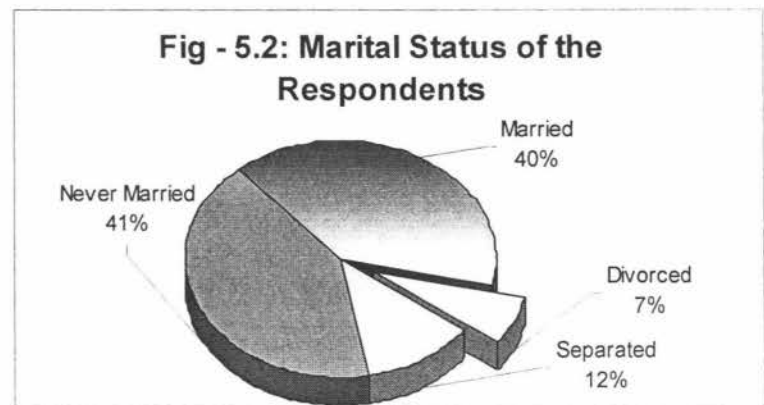
### *Place of origin*

While other surveys found that 87-90% of the garment workers in Bangladesh came from rural areas (Hewett and Amin 2000, Afsar 2000), only 69.3% of the women in my survey came from villages, with almost 9% coming from rural towns. These differences may reflect the way the question was asked in each survey. When garment workers are asked at the beginning of each health seminar at the WWEC Center 'Where do you come from?' they almost invariably state the name of a rural area, their ancestral home, even if they left it many years ago. In this survey the question was more precise. 'Before beginning work in the garment industry, where were you living?' Responses indicated that more than 21% of the workers were living in a major city, usually Dhaka. This finding was checked out at three health seminars. On each occasion the percentage of female workers who had joined the garment industry from Dhaka ranged somewhere between 15-30%. Nine such workers were later individually interviewed. It was found

that most of these workers had migrated to the city as small children along with their parents because their families no longer had any means of livelihood in the village. The children would either help their mothers collect rubbish from the streets for resale or would be sent to work as domestic servants for middle or upper class families. Getting a job in the garment industry was the dream of these girls and their families. It was definitely envisaged as a step up the social ladder.

### *Marital status*

There were similar numbers of 'never married' and 'presently married' women in the survey, as shown in Figure 5.2. The percentage of unmarried women was slightly lower than that found in the surveys

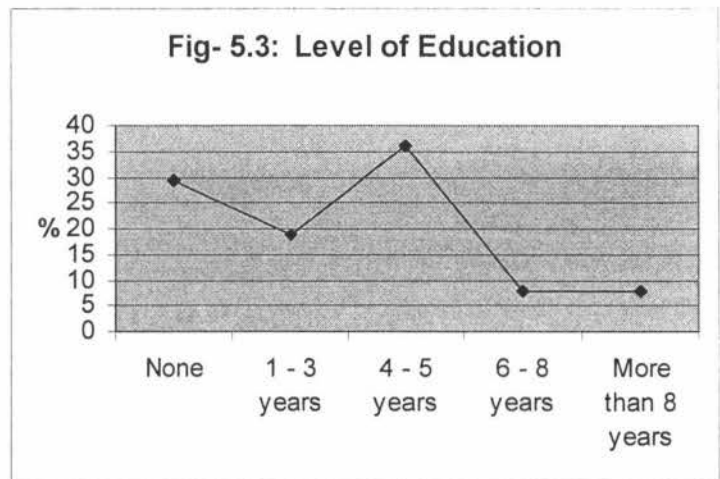


reported in chapter 3. There were no widows in my survey. However 7% of the respondents were divorced, which is similar to Afsar's study (2000:97) and an additional 12% said that they were separated from their spouse. Analysis of these survey results revealed that some of these 'separated' women maintained that since taking up factory work, their relationship with their husband had improved. This finding led to a re-examination of the actual words used in the survey, namely 'husband-wife are living separately'. Six women attending the WVEC Center, who said they were living apart from their husband, were then individually interviewed. Three of these garment workers were separated from their husband because the latter had gone overseas in search of employment. Having a husband working overseas is a normal, acceptable situation for many Bangladeshi women. Another women moved away from her husband when he took an additional wife whom she did not like living with. The husband of another woman simply disappeared some months ago. She believed he had run away, because his life was in danger from bad people with whom he had got involved. She insisted their

marital relationship was good. The sixth worker herself ran away from her husband in the village because of his violence towards her. Fearing for her life, she had brought her little daughter with her to Dhaka and was hoping her husband would not find her here.

### *Educational level*

It can be seen from Figure 5.3 that 29% of the workers in my survey were illiterate, while the percentage was only 11% in the survey carried out by Hossain (1999) on more than 3000 garment workers. However, his survey also included male garment workers and male literacy in Bangladesh is much



higher than female literacy. On the other hand, the percentage of my survey respondents having more than eight years formal education (8%) was almost double that of Hossain's study (1999). This discrepancy may simply reflect a difference in sample size. Nevertheless it was interesting to see how reluctant women in the FGDs and interviews of the present study were to admit that they had a good education. Reference will be made to this later in the chapter.

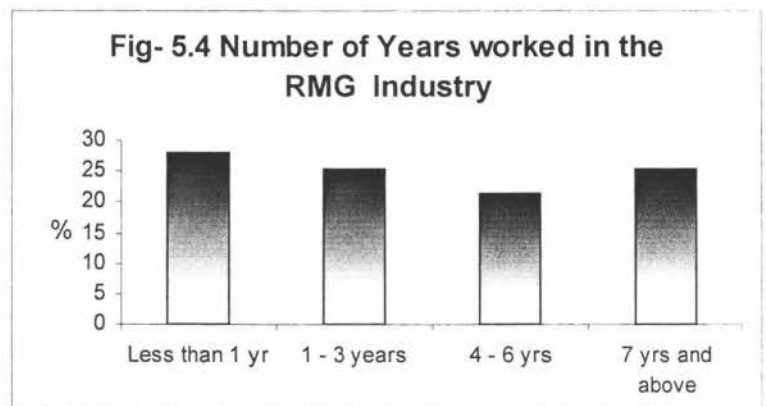
### *Position within the factory*

In my survey it was found that almost 60% of the respondents were machine operators, while 32% were helpers, percentages similar to those of other studies (Naved et al.1997:11). Most helpers were unmarried workers under 19 years of age, who have been working for less than a year, while operators were more likely to be married and have worked several years in the industry. During the FGDs and interviews the women explained that almost all female workers are initially given employment as helpers before

being promoted to the operator category or another position. This is affirmed by the findings of Paul-Majumder and Begum's research (1997:21). Those with higher levels of education usually move up the promotion ladder more quickly (Otani 2000:63). Both of the quality control inspectors in the survey and the one in the FGD had more than eight years schooling.

#### *Years working within the industry*

Figure 5.4 shows a good cross-section of workers in terms of length of employment, with fairly similar numbers of survey respondents in each category. The FGD participants and workers



individually interviewed were also representative of different lengths of employment in garment factories. Most of the women who had been working for less than one year were unmarried while married women dominated the other categories. The fact that 25% of the survey respondents and many of the women interviewed had been working seven years or more, contradicts the commonly held notion that employment in the garment industry is so deleterious to workers' health that they do not survive in the industry for more than a few years ( Paul-Majumder 1998:4). None of these women spoke about leaving the factory in the near future. One of the women interviewed had worked 13 years in the industry. She felt well and contented with her life.

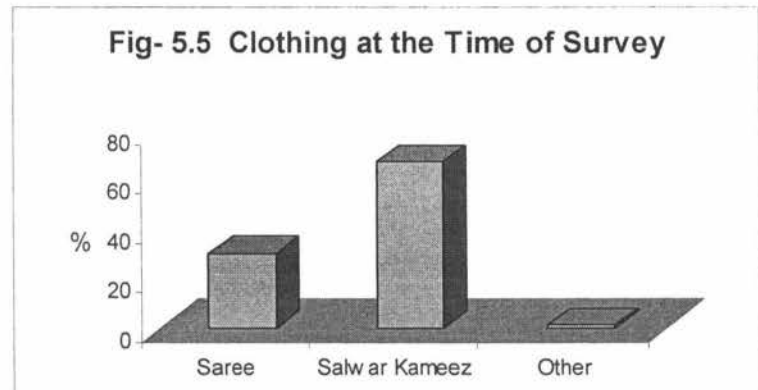
#### *Wages earned*

Since garment workers rarely have a written contract with a stipulated basic wage, respondents were asked the amount of wages received each month for the past few months. Wages included remuneration for regular hours worked and overtime. Twenty

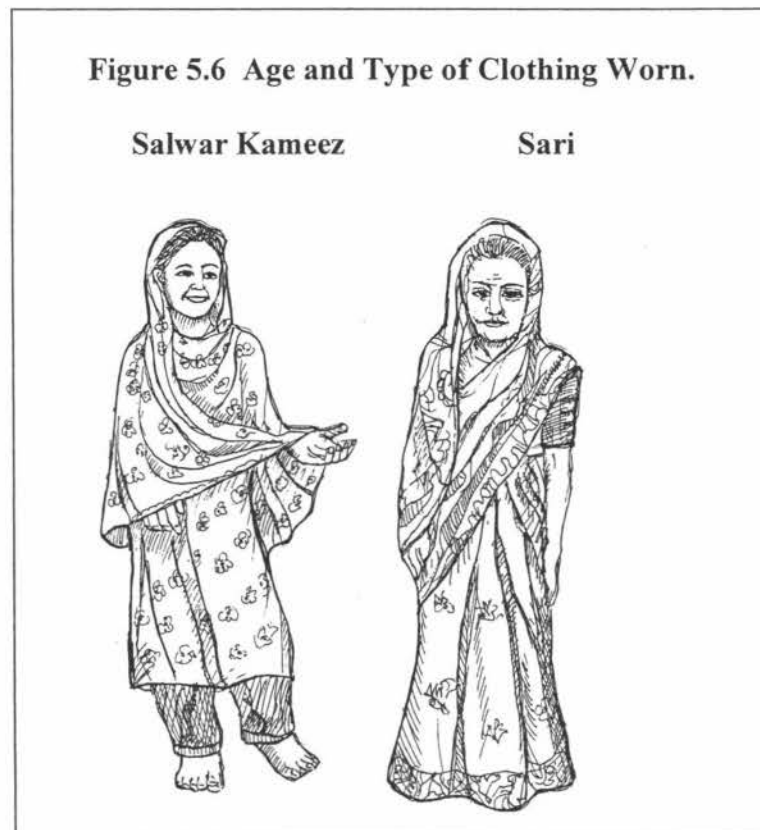
percent of the workers, all of them helpers took home from 500-1000 Taka in wages per month (presently NZ\$23-45). This represented 62.5% of the helpers and suggests that they were slightly better paid than those in Hossains's survey (2001:7-8) where 71.7% of helpers received less than 1000 Taka per month. Of those working as operators 38.6% took home less than 1500 Taka per month. Given that all the women worked considerable overtime hours, my survey findings indicate many workers were probably being paid less than the legal minimum basic wage of 930 Taka per month for helpers and 1450 Taka for operators. While 47.7% of the operators received take-home wages of between 1501 and 2000 Taka per month, 13.6% received between 2001 and 2500 Taka. Ironers/finishers received similar wages to operators as did quality controllers. No workers in this study received more than 2500 Taka in monthly take-home wages.

*Type of clothing worn:*

As seen in Figure 5.5 more than two-thirds of the garment workers were wearing a salwar kameez at the time the survey was carried out. This included

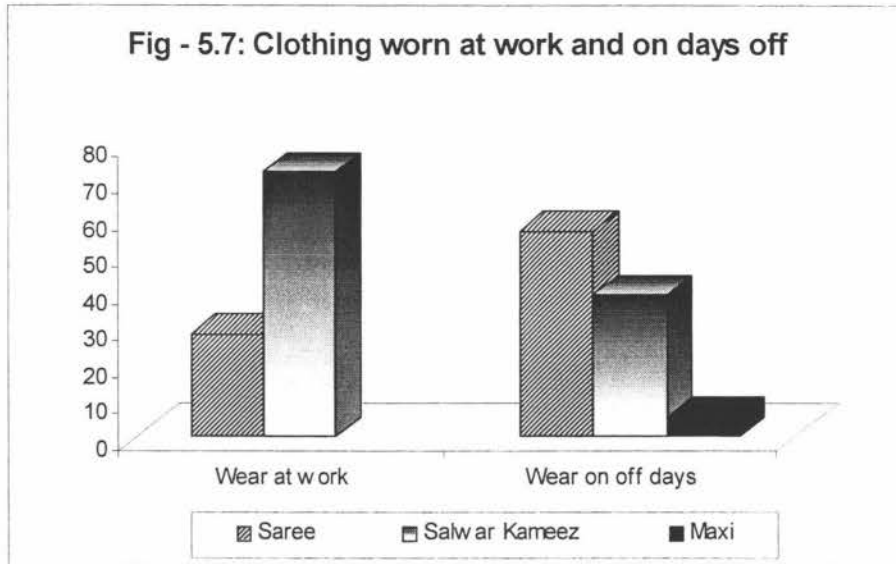


all but two of the unmarried respondents and half of the married workers. One worker was wearing a 'maxi', a long loose dress, rather like a full-length night dress.. About four-fifths of the women observed entering the factories were also wearing a salwar kameez. The type of clothing the women were wearing when surveyed was in most cases the type of clothing the respondents wore to work. Age also appeared to influence the choice of type of clothing. More than half of the survey respondents aged 25-30 and all those over 30 years of age were wearing a sari at the time of interview. My observation of female garment workers at the WVEC Centre and those entering their factories revealed that those workers wearing a sari certainly looked older than those wearing a salwar kameez. Figure 5.6 which is a sketch of photos taken of two garment workers attending the WVEC Centre confirms this.



*Source: Sketch done A. Wahyudianto from a photo of garment workers taken by the author*

When asked reasons for choice of type of clothing worn, 60% of the survey respondents gave practical reasons, while 26.6% mentioned family pressure. Most of the other respondents, mainly unmarried girls, chose to wear what they thought looked good. The type of garment chosen for practical reasons was almost always a salwar kameez. However 16 of the 17 women whose decision about type of clothing was influenced by family pressure wore a sari.



As shown in Figure 5.7, marked differences are noticed between what the women normally wore at work and away from work. While more than 70% of the women wore a salwar kameez to work, 60% of them wore a sari when not at work. When correlated with marital status, it was found that more than three-quarters of the married women wore a sari when not at work. These findings seem to indicate that the trend of married women to wear a salwar kameez is mainly because it is seen as a practical work attire. However later in this study efforts will be made to see whether there is any connection between this trend and aspects of women's empowerment.

Having looked at selected characteristics of the women who took part in my research, it is now time to investigate some of the impacts employment in the garment industry has had on female workers in Bangladesh and the consequent effects on how these women perceive they have changed as persons.

### **Economic impacts**

My research findings show that work in the RMG industry has had an economic impact on the worker's own life, the living standards of her household and the long term development of her family.

*Impacts on the workers' own lives*

Work in the garment industry has led to increased personal earnings for 92% of the women surveyed, maintained previous earnings for a further 5.3% and decreased earnings for the remaining 2.7% of workers. Almost all FGD participants and those individually interviewed spoke of personally earning money as the principal change occurring in their lives since starting work in the garment industry. This money has enabled them to purchase food, clothing, health care, and even little luxuries for themselves. This is a radical change in the lives of those women who for the first time are earning their own money. As one FGD participant said:

*Before when I was hungry, I had to wait for someone to buy me food or give me something to eat. Now I can buy something for myself*

while another young woman remarked:

*I'm now able to wear smart clothes and buy some nice things for myself. I couldn't have done that if I didn't have this job.*

Both comments indicate a sense of being able to do something for oneself in the here and now.

Several of the unmarried FGD participants spoke of how earning an income means they could personally do something about their own future. The practice of dowry given by the bride's family to the groom's family, although illegal, is almost universal in Bangladesh and places enormous burdens on already impoverished families. Scarcely a day goes by without a report in the major daily newspapers of some poor woman being murdered by her husband or in-laws because her family cannot meet dowry demands. Comments made by several workers during FGDs show that they saw work in the garment industry as a way of helping deal with this problem:

*What's good is that we can do something about our own future. In a poor family, those girls working in the factory can prepare their own wedding expenses. Before we had no future, or a very bad one, if our father died before he could get us married.*

Or as another young woman said:

*Before, when a father had no money he could not think of marrying his daughter off.... I've bought a cow as an investment for my future. I'm going to buy other things too.*

Many workers had set up bank accounts, some specifically for saving for their own marriage. The ability of these young women to gradually prepare their own dowry has made their families less likely to force them into an early marriage. This in turn has given them the opportunity to experience a period of adolescence, something that is denied girls who are thrust straight into adulthood by marriage at 13 –15 years of age (Amin et al.1997:7).

The income earned impacts not only on the garment worker's own life, but also means that she can contribute to the household to which she belongs.

#### *Ability to influence the living standards of worker's household and family*

All workers in my research financially contributed towards meeting the day to day expenses of the household in which they resided. Many also sent some of their earnings to meet household expenses of family members living in rural areas

This financial contribution is essential for the basic survival of some households. This is revealed in statements such as:

*I have to do this as my family has nothing. [or] Since my husband seldom finds work, all my wages are needed for the day-to-day expenses of the family*

the 'families' being referred to in these cases being also the worker's household. This is particularly true for solo mothers in the industry. As one abandoned wife said:

*Without my wages my children and I would probably be out on the street begging.*

In quite a few cases the wages of these female garment workers supplemented those of other earning household members, enabling many families to move into better quality housing, eat a more nutritious diet and pay for facilities such as electricity, gas and running water.

Many workers mentioned the ability to better care for their parents and young siblings as a primary motivation for working in the garment industry, one that brought them great personal satisfaction. As one worker said:

*I can help my parents. My father is sick so he can't work now. Without my wages they would not survive.*

Another stated with pride:

*The thing that makes me really happy is that I can look after my mother and father. They are the most important people in my life.*

All the unmarried workers gave a substantial part of their wages to their parents. Many saw it as a debt of gratitude owed to their parents for having 'brought them up'. This fits in with traditional concept of 'parent repayment' which Foo and Lim found was strong amongst the Muslims Malays, Confucianist Chinese and Hindu, Muslim and Christian Indians in their study. It was viewed by the women workers as a 'voluntary, natural, logical and a rational act of reciprocity-repaying one's parents for all they have expended on one during one's childhood and growing years (Foo and Lim 1989:218).

*Ability to impact on the long-term development of their families*

The main reason given by some of the female garment workers for taking up employment in the garment industry, and an important reason for many other workers, was the ability to send their children or siblings to school, or to a better school. Comments made during FGDs included:

*My income means my children can now go to school [and] I'm happy being able to help my younger brothers and sisters go to school.*

Several women expressed their desire that their children be educated so that they would have a more agreeable, better-paid job than one in the factory. The education of family members is seen as a valuable way of improving the future situation of the family, not only economically, but also socially. As one woman said:

*We can live on my husband's wages, but if I wasn't working we couldn't send our children to a good school. It's costing me 500 taka a month school fees for our two children. That all comes from my wages. If my son or daughter becomes an engineer or doctor, then you can imagine what that would mean for our family!*

It was also found that several female garment workers had used part of their salary to help their husband get a job overseas, with the hope that he would then be able to send regular remittances home. Other workers had helped set a family member up in business locally. This was seen as giving the rural family members a long lasting source of income, which would also decrease their dependence on the garment worker. This was clearly expressed by one FGD participant:

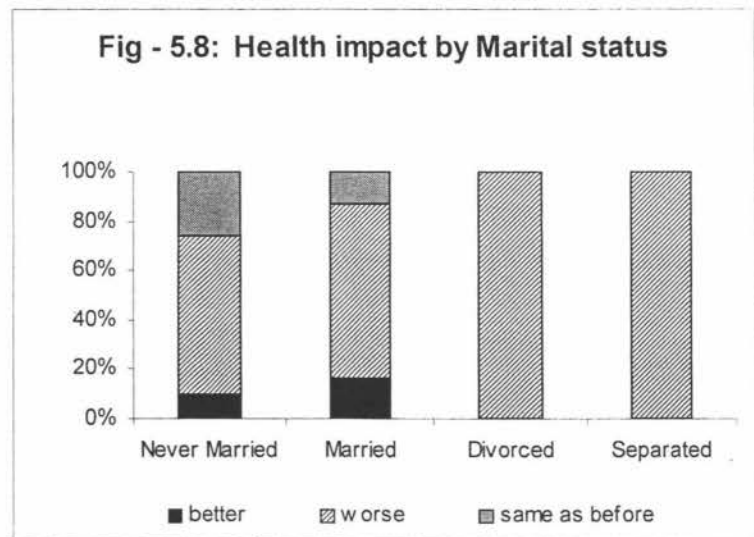
*I've helped my father start up a little store in the village. Now he can make some money to keep the family going, so he doesn't need to get money from me all the time.*

The findings of this study therefore indicate that the long-term wellbeing and betterment of the female garment worker's household and family were major determining factors in many of these women seeking employment. Their children and siblings are being better educated than would have otherwise been possible and many of their families are gaining greater financial viability. Employment in the garment industry appears to have given these women a real sense of being personally able to do something about their own and their family's present situation and hope for the future.

Nevertheless much of the improvement in household/family living standards and long-term development has been brought about at real personal cost to the workers, especially in terms of their health.

## Health impacts

Seventy two percent of the workers surveyed believed their health had deteriorated since beginning work in the garment industry, including all the separated and divorced respondents. There was only a small difference between the



responses of unmarried girls and women presently living with their husbands as seen in Fig 5.8.

Several of the FGD participants spoke of how their health had deteriorated, the most common complaints being chronic fatigue and constant headaches. Neither of these complaints is surprising given the excessively long hours of concentrated work that these women must put in.

The worker's mental health is also being affected. A participant in one of the FGDs remarked:

*It's not good for my health...We don't always get paid every month. I'm always anxious about how we are going to pay our rent, buy the food and other things.*

Earning an income may be a big step forward for women previously completely financially dependent on a male guardian. However, as female workers are increasingly obliged to take on the role of major or sole breadwinner for the household, they are faced with the mental tension inherent in carrying this responsibility.

Nevertheless my survey findings concerning health impacts were more positive than expected, with 17% of the total respondents stating that there had been no change in

health status since beginning work in the garment industry, while the health of another 11% had actually improved. Apart from Hewett and Amin's study (2000) which found that the general health of female garment workers in Bangladesh was no worse than rural women of a similar age, all the other the research literature reviewed in Chapter 3 suggested that work in this industry damages the health of more-or-less all workers.

Only three of the 24 FGD participants mentioned health issues as an important change that had occurred in their lives. None of them spontaneously mentioned physical or sexual abuse personally suffered at work or while commuting to and from work, although they acknowledged it has happened to other workers. This does not mean such things have not occurred to the participants in this research. Maybe they just didn't feel comfortable talking about them with an outsider or they were not seen as major changes in their lives. Discussions during the weekly health seminars indicate that some sexual harassment, physical and emotional abuse is still taking place. However most workers are adamant that such abuse is rapidly decreasing in frequency and intensity.

Interestingly half of those women whose health had improved had worked more than seven years in the garment industry, while only one had worked less than a year. Of those workers whose health has remained unchanged, 81.8% had worked less than 3 years in the industry. My survey was only a small one. Findings would need to be replicated in larger studies. However they could possibly indicate that the negative impacts on worker's health are greatest amongst those who have been working 4-6 years in the industry. Maybe those working longer than six years in the RMG industry have successfully adjusted to the adverse working conditions and so no longer see them as a health problem.

Jobs in the garment industry in Bangladesh have not only impacted very favourably on the female workers' economic well being and rather negatively on their health: they have also had a social impact on the lives of these women. In the next section research findings concerning changes in relationships with significant others and reconstruction of *purdah* will be presented.

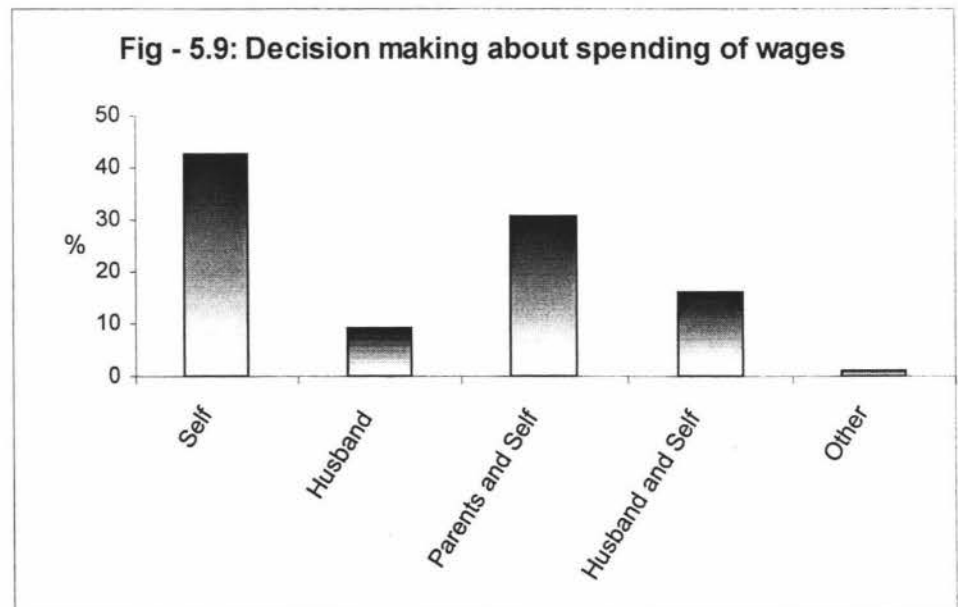
## Social impacts

### *Impact on relationships with significant others*

As already mentioned in Chapters 2 and 3 women, in the strongly patriarchal society of Bangladesh, are culturally required to remain under the guardianship and authority of successive male kinsmen at all stages of their life cycle. As a result women are often not capable of making decisions for themselves or are prevented from doing so (Islam 2002:5). The requirement for women to be submissive and servile to their male kinsmen, is not reciprocal. Men have no social obligation to acquiesce to the wishes of the women of their household/family, or even involve them in decision-making.

The findings of my research reveal that employment in the garment industry in this country has led to significant changes in inter-personal relationships, particularly in the realm of decision making, for most of the female workers. Female garment workers not only personally earn money. Eighty nine percent of the workers surveyed stated that they had gained more say in how they spend their earnings. This demonstrates the importance of women's income generation in increasing their economic decision-making power.

Figure 5.9 shows that almost 43% of the survey respondents had sole decision-making power over their wages. This was higher



than the 35% of workers in Paul-Majumder and Zohir's study (1994:199) who had total control over expenditure of earnings.

When characteristics of those workers who have achieved full decision-making power over their earnings were looked at, it was found that neither age of the worker nor length of employment in the industry seem to play a noticeable role. However workers with more than 7 years or only 1-3 years of formal education were markedly more likely to be able to decide on their own how to spend their earnings, than were women with 4-8 years education. This may be indicative of more conservative behaviour that is often found in the middle range of social structures. However further research would be needed to determine this.

Eighty percent or more of divorced or separated survey respondents had sole decision making over expenditure of earnings parents. As shown in Table 5.1, very similar percentages of married women (33.3%) and unmarried women (32.3%) decide by themselves how their earnings will be spent. While husbands completely controlled the earnings of 23.3% of the married workers, another 43.4% of married workers shared control with another, most often with their husband.

<b>Who decides how worker's earnings will be spent?</b>	<b>Marital Status (%)</b>				<b>Total (%)</b>
	<b>Never Married</b>	<b>Married</b>	<b>Divorced</b>	<b>Separated</b>	
Self	32.3	33.3	80.0	88.9	42.7
Husband		23.3			9.3
Parents and Self	64.5	6.7		11.1	30.7
Husband, Male Relative and Self	3.2	36.7			16.0
Other			20.0		1.3
<b>Total (%)</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>100</b>

N = 75

The above table shows that 64.5% of the unmarried workers decided in conjunction with their parents how their earnings should be spent. Questions asked during health education seminars revealed that about half of the unmarried workers reside with their parents in Dhaka. Several of the unmarried workers, whose parents were still in the village, were kept largely by an older sibling in Dhaka and remitted most of their wages to their parents. It therefore seems that getting married neither increases nor decreases the garment worker's control over her wages. The control that parents have over the wages of unmarried workers is simply transferred to, or shared with one's husband.

In each FGD and most individual interviews, these female garment workers mentioned control over earnings as an important change that has occurred in their lives since taking up employment in this industry. However controlling one's earnings was not always correlated with positive outcomes. With increased decision-making has come the burden of increased responsibility. As one FGD participant commented:

*I now have more say about money, but I have a headache all the time trying to do the right thing.*

However another FGD participant mentioned that she not only has complete control over her earnings, but her husband gives her his wages too. With a broad smile on her face she added:

*When he needs something he asks me for money. He trusts me and says I'm good with money.*

Many of the workers had gained not only decision making power in the spending of their income, but also the right to express their opinion in other important areas of their lives. Those survey respondents who had ever been married, were asked whether they took part in decision making about whom they should marry. With a strong tradition of marriages arranged by one's guardians, the prospective bride, particularly if she is uneducated and from a poor family, is generally not accorded any say in the choice of marriage partner. Surprisingly, the survey responses showed that overall 53.3% of the respondents had some part in choosing their spouse. What has led to this change? The women's own

comments suggest that as families become financially dependent on their wage earning daughter, they are reluctant to offend her and they also start asking her opinion more.

Who decides how worker's earnings will be spent?	No. of Workers participated in decision-making about her marriage partner		Total
	Yes	No	
Self	3	19	22
Husband	0	7	7
Parents and Self	1	0	1
Husband / Male Relative and Self	6	7	13
Other Male Relative	1		1
<b>Total</b>	11	33	44

No =44

When cross-tabulation of data concerning decision making with regard to one's prospective marriage partner and that concerning power over expenditure of earnings was carried out, some interesting findings were revealed.

Table 5.2 shows that many of the women who had no say in choice of marriage partner had sole control over expenditure of their monthly earnings, while most of those who did have a say in selection of spouse, shared decision making in financial matters with their husband. This is not necessarily negative. It could indicate greater sharing of power between spouses in all areas of life, something that would help redress the present gender imbalance. What is more, comments made during FGDs and individual interviews indicated that most of the workers still believed that families should have some say in choosing a girl's husband, so that they would help out if the marriage got into difficulties. This was in line with the findings of Paul-Majumder and Zohir's study (1996:120). Not only were many of these female garment workers being given some say in choice of marriage partner, they were also delaying marriage and childbearing. This gave them the opportunity to enjoy some form of adolescence. Their comments indicated deep

appreciation of this chance 'to see and do things'... 'to enjoy life' before they were thrust into the responsibilities of adulthood and parenthood. Their earning power was the leverage they could use in doing this. As one young woman interviewed said:

*My parents are not forcing me to get married young, as I am helping the family so much. If I got married I might not be able to buy things for them.*

During the survey, workers who are currently married were asked about any change in the quality of their relationship with their husband since they began working in the garment industry. Sixty three percent of the women considered their relationship with their spouse had improved, while 26.7% felt that it had deteriorated. The remaining 10% of married women noted no change. Comments made during FGDs and individual interviews indicated that some of the husbands were involving their wife more in decisions making, generally according her greater respect and also helping more with child-care and household tasks. Greater equality in the spousal relationship of some of these female workers was evident in remarks such as the following:

*I share my money with my husband. We decide together what is needed. It has made our relationship more equal.*

Similar remarks were made by at least one woman in each of the four FGDs.

However other married women in the FGDs explained how the relationship with their spouse had deteriorated. One such participant complained:

*My relationship with my husband has got worse. He is suspicious of me all the time because I come home late from work.*

Nevertheless my research findings suggest that in general, working in the garment industry helps rather than hinders the couple's relationship.

Not only were these female garment workers often more respected by their spouse, the vast majority of survey respondents stated that they had gained increased respect from

their natal families. Several FGD participants mentioned how their parents and siblings now valued them more because of the assistance they can provide to the family, especially in times of crisis. One participant remarked:

*When my father was very sick, I did so much for him. I spent 10,000 taka when my mother died. Why then would my family not respect me?*

Only 6.7% of the survey respondents felt less respected by their own families, four of these five women being married. A traditional belief that a woman's husband should be able to fully provide for his wife and children may be a causative factor. No separated or divorced woman in the survey felt less respected by her family of origin. Some of them remarked that without this job in the garment factory, they would have had to return to their natal home, thereby placing a burden on their own poor families and causing increased tension in their relationships within the family.

Although 59% of the married female garment workers surveyed believed working in the garment industry has earned them increased respect from their husband's family, 28% of these women felt they were now less respected by their in-laws. Diminished respect from the worker's own family or in-laws was often connected to the worker mixing with non-related men. As one woman complained:

*My in-laws don't respect me, because they think I should have kept purdah.*

Let us now look at how the female garment workers are dealing with the requirements of *purdah*.

### *Reconstruction of purdah*

At first glance it would seem that working in the garment industry is not compatible with the demands of *purdah*, which have been explained in Chapter 3 and shown to be intimately tied up with the honour of the family. That is probably the reason that so many people look down on female garment workers, describing them as 'spoiled girls' in the sense of having lost their purity. The workers in my study were themselves very much

aware of this social perception, which arises particularly in the rural areas. The following comment reveals their awareness and concern:

*Working in the garment industry means that many people think badly of us. They think we are bad girls. But it is not true. There are so many good girls here.*

They also make efforts to rationalize why some people might think this way:

*I think its because they [the village people] are uneducated and many of them have narrow minds. It's different here in Dhaka. People are more open...Here they see lots of ways of doing things.*

Survey findings revealed that although 40 % of the female workers believed society now thought worse of them, 42.6 % of the total respondents felt they were thought of as better and 10.7 % felt there has been no change. A further 6.7 % of respondents stated that city people thought better of them, but rural people looked down on them. Comments made during the FGDs support these findings. Women spoke of how society appreciates them because they are actively doing something to overcome the poverty of their families, instead of begging on the streets. Others said many people in society now realize the important contribution they are making to the economy of the nation.

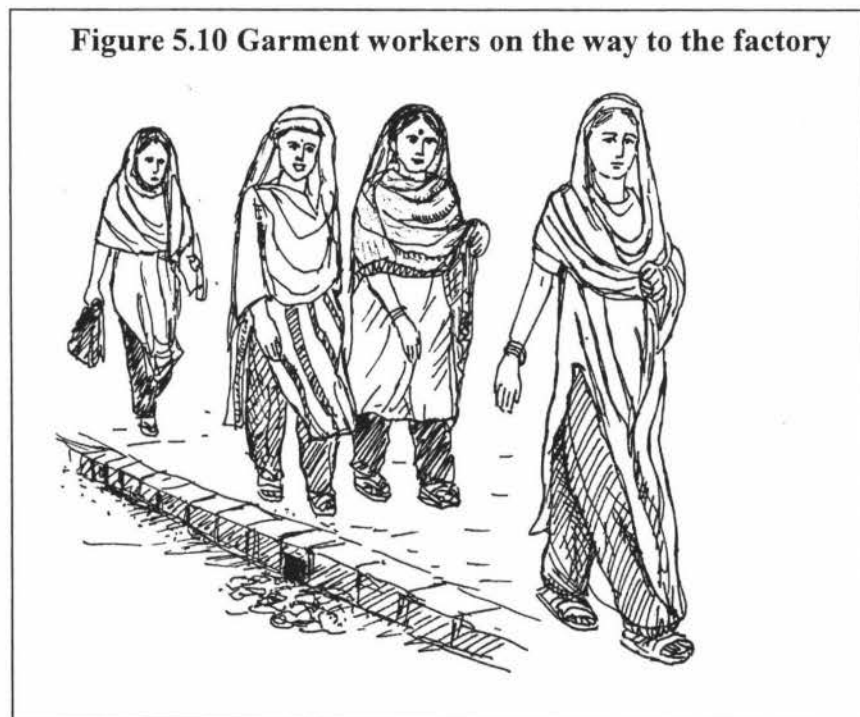
It was noticeable that all of the divorced and most of the separated women in my research believed that society now thought more highly of them. This corroborates the statement, often heard in this country, that the garment industry has not only enabled poor divorced or abandoned women to survive, it has also accorded them some respect. When research participants brought up the issue of society having disdain for them, it was almost always in the context of a presumed loss of purity, due to working outside the confines of the home in the company of unrelated men.

This negative attitude of certain sectors of society towards female garment workers appears to have some impact on their chance of finding a marriage partner. While 53.% of the survey respondents believed that garment workers could more easily find a husband because of the economic contribution they could make to the household, and

24% thought that it made no difference, 23% said that being a garment worker made it more difficult to find a spouse. Comments made in this regard indicated that the chances decreased mainly in rural areas because of the strong suspicion amongst rural people that girls working in the garment industry have their purity tainted.

Be that as it may, the female workers in my research were adamant that they could work in the garment industry and still maintain their purity. They admitted that it could be difficult at times, especially when returning home late at night along dark lanes where 'bad boys' are loitering around. However they stressed the importance of their own behaviour and attitudes.

*If you behave like a good girl and are strong inside, then those bad boys can't do you much harm.*



*Source: Sketch done A.Wahyudianto from a photo of garment workers taken by the author*

Still they also stated the need to take the precaution of always walking to and from the factory with other workers, if at all possible. My personal observation of female garment workers arriving at the factory or at the WWEC Centre, is that they travel with modest

comportment, most of them with their heads covered, in the company of other women workers.

These female garment workers place high value on their sexual purity and will go to great lengths to preserve it. The following story is a poignant reminder of this. A young machine operator attended our WVEC Centre clinic with a terrible fungal rash over much of her trunk. It was being greatly aggravated by her constant perspiration during work hours. When we suggested that she ask the supervisor for a machine under one of the fans, her reply was prompt and adamant:

*Oh no, I'll never do that. It might mean I'd have to sleep with the supervisor. I'd rather keep this itchy rash.*

Garment workers are not only going to great pains to preserve their purity, they are also managing as a work group to largely seclude themselves from non-related men. In this way they are reconstructing the principles of *pardah* within the garment industry, in ways that are having important ramifications for women in other sectors of the formal work force in Bangladesh. This is largely possible because women make up more than two thirds of the workforce in the RMG industry, compared to the 15% female workforce across the entire manufacturing sector in Bangladesh (CPD 2002:1). Within the factories, female and male workers are generally seated in separate working areas. The only men who have contact with the female workers are the supervisors. The women listen to instructions and comments given by these men, but do not engage in any needless conversation with them. Discussions with workers attending the WVEC Centre have confirmed this reality, and revealed that workers try as far as possible to find employment in the same factory as their spouse or other relatives, albeit distant relatives. Often the factory owner or management staff are also from their own village and can thus be considered as a father or uncle figure, a kinsperson.

All of the above factors may help in creating the image of the factory as an interior space, where a woman's physical seclusion from unrelated men is largely possible and therefore her purity and honour are protected. This of itself would not help women working in

sectors where they are a minority. However discussions with garment workers during my research have shown that they have not simply transferred the physical seclusion of the home to that of the factory. By their modest comportment, they are reconstructing *pardah* as essentially a state of mind, an interior conviction that guides one's relationships with non-related males. The principles of this religious and social convention can thus be lived in a busy working environment. The example of the female garment workers has already led to a shift in society's conception of *pardah*, especially amongst the urban, better-educated part of the population, and is surely contributing to women's increased participation in other sectors of the workforce.

Employment in the garment industry has not only led to a reconstruction of *pardah* and effected the workers' economic situation, health and social standing. It has also affected the way the workers feel and think about themselves.

### **Psychological impacts**

At the time of my survey 92% of the respondents felt personally more positive about themselves than they did before starting work in the garment industry, while the remaining eight percent of respondents were equally divided between those who felt no change had occurred and those who felt personally worse about themselves. During the FGDs the participants were also encouraged to discuss how their self-perception has changed, this topic being given special emphasis in two of the FGDs. The remarks made by the women during all of the FGDs and individual interviews provide evidence of the generally positive changes in self-perception that have occurred in the lives of these female workers.

Nevertheless, for several of the women in the study, physical exhaustion from long hours of work, coupled with added responsibility for financially supporting the family, appear to have led to a state of mental depression. The negative perceptions other female workers had about themselves seem to be related to imagined or real feedback from others. One woman spoke of how her husband's constant verbal abuse and ill-founded

mistrust of her, had made her feel a really 'bad' person. Since she had only taken up this job in the factory because her husband couldn't find regular work, she felt both physically and mentally abused. This made it very hard for her to think anything positive about herself.

Interestingly, all the research participants with ten or more years formal education mentioned some sense of shame about working in the garment industry, because of presumed negative feedback from others. As the most highly educated worker in this research said:

*Sometimes I feel no good about myself. I'm ashamed to say that I've got a degree because then people think that there is something wrong with you for working in a garment factory. They say 'Why haven't you got a good job?'*

However this young woman showed her intelligence and realism when she went on to say:

*But I couldn't get any other job and I saw what my aunt who works in a garment factory has been able to accomplish.... I said to myself 'It's better to be working in a factory than to have no job'. But I haven't told the manager yet that I have a degree. Maybe later on I will.*

Two characteristics stood out when the research findings indicative of positive changes in worker's self-perception were examined: the workers' growth in self-confidence and their sense of freedom.

### *Self-confidence*

Both during the FGD and individual interviews, the garment workers frequently spoke about being more confident. This increased confidence appeared to be based on a heightened sense of their value as a person, which was often closely connected to their ability to do things that previously they could not do, plus the positive affirmation they have received from family, friends and other people in society. One young woman expressed the change that has occurred in this way:

*My confidence in myself has grown a lot. I've seen what I can do. I was a very quiet village girl, but now I can speak up... When we don't get our wages on time, I've had to explain things to my landlord and get him to understand. Now he's very good to me.*

The ability to speak out in front of people of higher rank, is a really new experience for most of these women and one that did not come easily. A FGD participant who had already been working six years in the factory said:

*I am much stronger than I was before I went to work in the factory. I've had to learn to stand up and fight for what is right...even with the supervisors and management.*

Many of the workers expressed their conviction that they are now mentally and emotionally stronger in themselves. The reason most often given, were their personal ability to look after themselves and their dependents, which all the survey respondents affirmed they could do, if need be. Undoubtedly this is a major change for women who, before taking up work in the garment industry, were usually completely dependent on their husband or another male relative for financial resources. This ability to cope single-handedly with the demands of looking after oneself and one's dependents, often accompanied by positive feedback from others, seems to have given divorced and abandoned women in particular an enormous boost in self-confidence. One FGD participant expressed it this way:

*My husband ran away when my daughter was only three months old. It was hard having a daughter without a father. However after first being very critical of me, people now see how I have coped. I'm now more respected by others because they see that I can provide for myself and my daughter.*

Being liked by other people had also increased the worker's positive feelings about herself. One of the women individually interviewed stated:

*I'm really liked by lots of people. In the factory most of the people are nice to me. My relatives show me lots of affection. That makes me feel good about myself.*

While a FGD participant exclaimed, with a delightful smile on her face:

*Now lots of people love me. I have lots of friends. It wasn't like that before. Now they invite ME to weddings and other celebrations. Before they never did that.*

This young woman saw that she was important in her own person, not because she was some one's daughter, wife or mother.

A sense of pride in what the worker had managed to do and the type of person she had become was revealed in comments such as the following made during a FGD:

*People say how courageous I am and that makes me feel good about myself. Its true I've done a lot of things that I never thought I'd be able to do...that helps me so much when there are many problems.*

The worker's heightened sense of value as a person therefore appears to be a consequence of increased confidence in her personal capabilities, coupled with affirmation from others. It also seems linked to a growing sense of freedom.

#### *Sense of freedom*

Listening to these female workers talking about what they see as important personal changes that had taken place since they took up work in the industry, I was struck by the number of times their comments implied a new-found sense of freedom and independence. They mentioned the joy of increased physical freedom to go out on their own to buy things, see new places and enjoy new experiences. This was particularly true of those workers who have come from the rural areas to take up work in the garment industry. For many of these women it was the first time they have been physically separated from their parents.

The freedom to make decisions for oneself was also a highly valued change. As a recent entrant to the industry stated:

*I like making decisions for myself. It's good to be independent. I never had that experience before.*

This new found independence is something workers are reluctant to give up. Even while expressing her dream of marrying a man who was sufficiently rich that she wouldn't have to go out to work anymore, a young woman interviewed went on to say:

*Yet I'd miss not being with all my friends here and being free to do so many things. I'd have to find a very good husband to be willing to give all this up!*

Many of these female workers indicated that they were now mentally and emotionally more free with regard to what others might think of them or say about them. This appears in part due to increased self-esteem. However, the broader range of experiences they have in Dhaka than in the village, also seems to have contributed to this freedom of mind. Quite a few of the workers talked about how narrow minded people in the village can be and the way they spend so much time gossiping and pulling people down, saying things like 'Allah forbid, did you hear what she did....?' As one young girl said:

*Here in Dhaka I can freely say what I think and people don't tell you off like they do in the village. There they always say 'You shouldn't say that. What will other people think of our family?'*

These comments show a marked change in a society such as this, in which the 'familial self' described by Roland (1988) is usually more dominant than the 'individual self'. Maybe the garment worker's need to face and overcome the often negative perceptions segments of society have of her, is what is obliging her to develop a very strong sense of self, one that can withstand criticism and opposition.

## **Conclusion**

The findings of this research indicate that employment in the garment industry has had important economic, health, social and psychological impacts on the personal lives of the female workers. The following rather lengthy extract from an interview with one young worker in many ways sums up the changes that have occurred in the lives of so many these female garment workers:

*I was very little when we came to Dhaka. We lived in a slum beside the railway line...My mother and us children would go collecting paper and plastic bags on the street. Then we'd sell it to a man near our slum. If my father didn't find work, or we never got much from the street, we would go hungry ... Someone near our place told them [the parents] that I could get a job in the garment factory where she worked. My parents sent me with her and I got a job as a helper. I would sit or stand beside a machine operator all day and cut threads. It was hard...However I felt safe and it was good to be inside during the rainy or cold times of the year. I earned about 200 Taka a month at first and it increased each year. It helped our family buy food when my father didn't get any work. After three years as a helper another girl in the factory taught me how to operate a machine...Now I earn about 1350 Taka a month. Because I was earning more as an operator I was able to help my family rent a room in a paka [permanent] house. It is small, but much better than the slum. We have electricity and share a gas burner with only one other family. When it rains the water does not come inside our house like before...I look at the girls from the slum where we lived and I know my life is better, Of course I have to work very hard and I feel tired much of the time. But I know that our family will have something to eat each day. I feel better about myself because I can help them. They don't tell me now that I'm a problem because I'm a girl and need a lot of money to get a husband...My family respects me more. That makes me feel good... Now I see more girls from our old slum coming to work in the factory. People respect you more as a garment worker than as a rubbish collector.*

The overall impression gained from listening to the female garment workers throughout my research is that they feel more in control of their lives. Although work in the garment industry often takes a toll on their health, they now have the basic financial means to care for themselves and their dependents. They are also developing a real inner strength, based on a deeper sense of their own worth as persons, which is enabling them to make decisions for themselves and actively do something about the challenges that life in a strongly patriarchal society places before them. These are all major personal changes in their lives. In the following chapter attempts will be made to see whether these personal changes point to increased empowerment of these female garment workers and if so, whether there is any symbolic significance of their empowerment in the type of clothing worn by them.

## **Chapter 6 Empowerment of women working in the garment industry in Bangladesh**

### **Introduction**

The aim of this chapter is to address the second and third questions of this research, namely, to see whether the personal changes that have occurred in the lives of these female garment workers in Bangladesh are indicative of their increased empowerment, and to ascertain if there is any relationship between the type of clothing worn by the garment worker and aspects of her empowerment.

To do this I shall first examine the changes that have occurred in the lives of the women studied, in terms of Rowlands' (1997) and Kabeer's (1995) approaches to empowerment and other important concepts explored in Chapter 2 of this study. This will be done using as headings the three dimensions of empowerment presented by Rowlands: personal, relational and collective empowerment. By doing this I hope to show whether the female garment workers studied have been empowered or disempowered since taking up work in this industry.

It was the female garment workers' challenge of the cultural norms regarding type of clothing worn by married women that first stimulated me to delve more deeply into the question of empowerment of these women. I shall therefore, before concluding this research, try to highlight any correlation between change in attire and empowerment of the wearer.

As this is the final chapter of the thesis, I shall begin it by briefly summarizing the main findings of each of the preceding chapters and conclude by drawing overall conclusions of my research.

## Summary of thesis chapters

*Chapter 1* revealed that women's employment in the formal sector of the poor, densely populated country of Bangladesh is strongly marked by gender segregation and gender subordination. At the same time paid employment in the RMG industry appears central to the development process of the million or more poor women working in this industry. Most of the research done on garment workers in Bangladesh has concentrated on their work conditions. Very few studies have focused primarily on the empowerment of the female garment workers employed in the RMG industry.

*Chapter 2* discussed theory to show how religious and cultural norms, both strongly influenced by patriarchy, have influenced gender roles and relations to the general disadvantage of women. Development efforts to improve the situation of women over the past four decades have been rooted in the WID, the WAD and finally the GAD approach, which sees the empowerment of women as the solution to their disadvantaged position. Empowerment implies a certain gaining of power, which according to the basically similar models of Kabeer (1995) and Rowlands (1997) is achieved in linear progression. These writers say that women first need to achieve 'power within' or 'personal empowerment' before they can develop 'power with' or 'relational empowerment'. Having achieved these, women as a collective group will have the 'power to' mobilize for change in line with their own interests and needs. Since higher levels of empowerment need to be built on the woman's own inner power, a positive sense of self is vital. In a collectivist culture such as that of Bangladesh, a woman's self-perception is made up, not only of the attributes she personally recognizes she has, but is also strongly influenced by what her family and significant others think of her.

In *Chapter 3*, which was a review of literature concerning the RMG industry in Bangladesh, it was found that this industry has rapidly grown to become the country's most important export earner, because the cheap labour of poor, traditionally dependent and docile Bangladeshi women has made its garments competitive on the world market. This female workforce is characterized by the predominance of young, unmarried and

poorly educated women, many of whom are rural migrants from landless families. Work conditions in the industry were found to be disturbing. Recruited informally by relatives and friends, female workers rarely received a letter of appointment and chances for promotion were few. These women worked on average a 12 hour work day in an unsafe environment, with few facilities and little paid leave, for generally less than 2000 taka (\$NZ 80) per month. Nevertheless employment in the RMG industry had improved the economic situation of the worker herself, her household and the long-term development of her family. The worker's financial contribution to the family had also gained for many of them the right to make decisions about expenditure of earnings, choice of spouse and other family matters, as well as the ability to delay the age of marriage and childbearing. However work in the RMG industry was found to have almost always a negative impact on the workers' health. A positive impact of employment in this industry was seen in the female garment workers' heightened sense of self, the latter seemingly a consequence of their new-found capacities.

*Chapter 4* explained my personal involvement with three organizations for garment workers: Bangladesh Independent Garment Workers' Union (BIGU), Bangladesh Independent Garment Workers Union Federation (BIGUF) and the Working women's Education Centre (WVEC), and my interest in studying, from the female garment workers' own perspectives, the changes that had occurred in their lives since taking up employment in the RMG industry in Bangladesh. It was shown that most research done on female garment workers in this country involved quantitative data collected through large scale structured surveys. Difficulties in obtaining access to factories meant that much data was collected outside the factory setting. My desire to carry out a feminist form of research that would itself help promote the empowerment of the female garment workers attending the WVEC Centre, meant that primary importance was given to qualitative methodology, in the form of four FGDs and nine individual interviews. A survey questionnaire on 75 workers was used in a supporting role. The above methods, helped by the women's confidence in the WVEC, an obviously 'pro worker' environment, were found to have yielded many valuable insights into the changes the

women themselves perceived as having occurred in their lives since taking up work in the RMG industry.

*Chapter 5* showed that the age, marital status, wages earned, position within the factory and number of years in employment of female garment workers in my research, were similar to those of women in the literature reviewed in Chapter 3. However my study included fewer recent rural migrants, a higher percentage of illiterate workers and more well educated workers than other studies. Most workers in my study chose to wear a salwar kameez as work attire because of its practicality, while wearing a sari when not at work. Women wearing a sari to work usually did so because of family pressure. Most of the women studied considered earning a living as the major change in their lives since taking up employment in the RMG industry and the cause for their improved economic situation, decision making power and relationships with significant others, as also described in Chapter 3. While working in the RMG industry had impacted negatively on the health of three quarters of the workers, the others noted no change or an improvement. The findings concerning society's perception of female garment workers were also not as negative in my survey as in other literature reviewed. By transferring the physical seclusion of the home to that of the factory and by their modest comportment, these garment workers have reconstructed purdah in a way that is making women's work in the formal sector more socially acceptable. Important psychological changes were also revealed, with 92% of the women feeling more positive about themselves, mostly due to increased confidence in their own capabilities and value as a person, as well as a new-found sense of freedom and independence.

I shall now try to analyze these changes that occurred in the lives of the female garment workers studied in terms of their increased empowerment.

### **Personal Empowerment**

As explained in Chapter 2, although the word empowerment is difficult to define, it is rooted in the notion of obtaining some power that is presently lacking (Kabeer 1995:224).

That same Chapter briefly described how girls and women, in the strongly patriarchal society of Bangladesh, are very much victims of gender subordination, delegated to inferior positions in almost every sphere by the men who control their lives. Only when women become conscious of the existing power relationships in their lives and realize that their apparently individual problems are actually socially constructed and shared with other women, can 'the transformation of the self as the key route to women's self-empowerment' (Kabeer 1995:249) begin. The awareness of gender subordination and what it has done to her life enables the woman to gradually undo the effects of internalized oppression and reinterpret her needs and her rights within the family, at work and within society, as a sense of self develops. This process is made possible by the power generated within the woman herself, a power that manifests itself in her self-confidence, self-esteem, recognition of her own dignity and sense of her own capabilities (Rowlands 1997:15). While Kabeer terms this level of empowerment 'power within', Rowlands calls it personal empowerment. Both see it as a pre-requisite for progress towards greater levels of empowerment.

Analysis of the research findings in terms of personal empowerment leaves no doubt that most of the female garment workers studied have achieved some degree of personal empowerment. Several of the workers during the FGDs and personal interviews spoke of a sense of powerlessness in their lives, before taking up work in the garment industry. As a FGD participant said:

*I used to wait for my father or brothers to tell me what to. It was as if I didn't have any power to do anything on my own. I really didn't believe that as a girl I could make good decisions.*

After all, most of these women had been told since birth that they were a liability for the family, simply because they were girls. For many of the women this had led to a sense of worthlessness and incompetence (Rajeevan 2001:26). They felt that they did not matter as persons.

Nevertheless the women studied revealed that since taking up work in the garment industry they had gradually become aware of how they had been socialized to consider themselves intellectually inferior to men, less capable and thus of less worth. They also realized that they had been denied equal access to resources. Although they did not use terms specifically denoting 'power relationships' or say that they realized their gender subordination was socially constituted, they indicated awareness of these realities in comments such as the following made during one FGD:

*My husband won't listen to me, but he thinks he's got the right to tell me what to do...It's the way things are for us women in Bangladesh. But I don't think its right.*

Taking up work in the garment industry had been, as women in both the personal interviews and FGDs said, 'an eye-opening experience'. For many of them it had involved leaving their very restricted experience of life in a village. For all of them the world of work on the factory floor was vastly different from anything they previously knew. They had to learn new physical skills, adapt to new ways of thinking and acting and at times face unfair, even abusive treatment. As these female garment workers grew in awareness of their gender subordination, they have been able to start out on the road to empowerment (Karl 1991:109), progressively overcoming an internalized oppression by developing a sense of self that had hitherto been lacking. The words of the following young worker during a personal interview encapsulate the ideas expressed by several other female garment workers. She said:

*I took it for granted that if you were a girl you should never think of yourself. Our job is to listen, to obey and to serve. That's what everyone taught me from as far back as I can remember... The only advice my mother gave me the night before I got married was 'Do whatever your husband tells you to do and serve him. In that way you will be a good wife'.... I never thought that I was important, that I had rights. My life has changed a lot since I started work in the garment industry. It's like my eyes have been opened. I've learnt a lot from girls who've been here [in the garment industry in Dhaka] longer than me. Coming to these seminars at the WWEC Center has also made me realize that I have rights. I'm important too...*

This sense of self is made up of the attributes the woman sees herself as possessing, plus the feedback concerning herself that she receives from others (Witte 1991:108-9).

Affirmation received from others leads to increased self-esteem, based on the woman's increased awareness of her own capacities and confidence in herself as a person. Negative feedback can diminish or destroy self-esteem.

The female garment workers studied appeared adamant that their self-confidence had grown since taking up work in a garment factory. Not a single survey respondent thought that her confidence in herself had decreased. Comments made during FGDs and personal interviews about being stronger as a person, able to make good decisions, no longer frightened and timid of making her needs and desires known, confirmed that finding. The physical demeanour of the garment workers, which is often in stark contrast to that of other Bengali women of their age and social status, also suggested a high level of self-confidence. While still maintaining a modest comportment, they walk and talk with assurance. During the fieldwork on which this research is based, I was constantly struck by the ability of these young, often uneducated or poorly educated women to be able to unhesitatingly voice their personal opinions.

As shown in the research findings in Chapter 5, these female garment workers are now able to do many things that previously were not possible for them. Through their economic earnings they can enable or assist their own households to survive, as well as contribute to the long term development of their families, especially through education of their children or siblings. Gaining an income has given many of the workers basic economic independence, allowing them the possibility of choosing to leave abusive relationships and look after their children on their own, or to survive if they are abandoned by their spouse. They can stand on their own if need be. This sense of self-reliance is demonstrated by the following remark made by an abandoned wife in a FGD. She said:

*Now I see that I don't need a man to look after my daughter and myself. My husband only brought me trouble, so I'm not looking to marry again. I now believe we women can look after ourselves. I know we can!*

This woman's self-confidence had also been enhanced by the fact that she felt more respected by her family and other people because she was proving that she could provide for her daughter and herself.

Being more highly valued by their families and their in-laws, appreciated for what they are doing for the economic well-being of the country and personally liked and regarded highly by others were mentioned by the female garment workers studied as factors that had helped them grow in self-confidence. Knowing that their families recognize the sacrifices they have made, was also a deep source of personal satisfaction for some of these workers: As one young woman remarked in a FGD:

*When I go home to see my family they cry when I'm leaving. They say I have lots of courage to go off to Dhaka to work in a factory. They're proud of me. They know I'm doing this for them and for our country.*

Leaving the domestic sphere to take up employment in the formal sector had increased the female worker's physical mobility and permitted her to have many new experiences. As mentioned in Chapter 5, many of the workers had come to realize how narrow minded some people are, especially those in the rural areas, and how much their own horizons had broadened. These women were still aware that large segments of society look down on them for being garment workers, believing that their chastity has been defiled through mixing with non-related men. More than 40% of the workers in the survey believed that society in general now thought worse of them. Nevertheless 92% of these same women said they felt better about themselves as persons now than they did before joining the garment industry. This shows that most of them had developed a sufficiently strong sense of their own worth to be able to cope with the negative comments of others. Repeatedly during discussions, workers would say that although some people still say garment workers are bad girls, they themselves know that they are good people. By reconstructing purdah as a set of moral principles that guide their relationships with non-related males, instead of strict physical separation from them, these female garment workers maintain that factory work is not necessarily incompatible with the requirements of purdah. They can be as pure as their sisters who are confined to the home.

Nevertheless for a few workers in this research, constant criticism from their husband or in-laws, usually due to unfounded suspicions about lapses in purity, had made them feel even worse about themselves as persons. These same women also complained of chronic overwhelming fatigue. For these few women there was no sense of having personally gained any power since taking up employment in the garment industry. However for the majority of women who took part in this research, there had been real personal empowerment since they started work in the factory. They had undone many of the effects of internalized oppression and developed a strong, positive sense of their own self. A consequence of these women's self-empowerment was the increased ability to make their own choices about their lives and also in their relationships with others.

### **Relational empowerment**

I will now move on to examine whether the women studied have achieved any relational empowerment, that is any increased power in their relationship with others. This is the second dimension of Rowlands' model of empowerment and consists of the ability to communicate, negotiate and get support within a relationship, as well as the ability to defend one's own self and the rights of self/ others. It requires a deep sense of self in relationships, a sense of self that is the fruit of personal empowerment (Rowlands 1997:120). Only when a woman believes deeply in her own worth, as someone who has rights as well as responsibilities, can she start redressing the imbalances of power in gender relationships. Since women in Bangladesh have been subjugated for so long that they 'experience subordination as inevitable and interpersonal... their collective strength is seen as the most important transformatory resource at their disposal in order for empowerment to occur' (Kabeer 1995:253). That is why Kabeer stresses solidarity and forming of alliances with other women in her second level of empowerment, namely 'power with'. Comments made by female garment workers during this research indicate that it was often by seeing the self-assurance of other women workers and the way this had changed their relationships with others, that they believed this new way of being and doing was possible also for themselves.

In order to identify any experience of relational empowerment or 'power with' of the female garment workers' studied in this research, the workers' relationships with their husbands and families will first be examined, then their relationships with Bangladesh society and finally their work relationships.

It appears that most of the married workers in this study had achieved some degree of empowerment in their relationship with their husband since taking up work in the garment industry. As garment workers almost always come from the poorer strata of society, the money they earn is often necessary for the basic survival of the household. My research findings showed that the economic contribution made to the nuclear family by the female garment workers had often given them increased ability to negotiate and get more support within the marriage relationship. As already mentioned in Chapter 5, many of the women studied could negotiate the use of their earnings and influence decisions about family matters, as well as obtain greater support from their husband with childcare and domestic chores. There was definite evidence of greater equality in the relationships between some of the couples, as their interpersonal communication and shared decision-making increased, both based on increased respect for each other.

The same was also true of the relationship of most of the workers with their own families and if married, with their in-laws. Through their ability to financially contribute to the well-being of the family and provide help in crisis situations, many of the female garment workers in this study had gained increased respect and greater involvement in family decision making. However, as shown in Chapter 5, slightly more than one-quarter of the women surveyed noted that their relationship with their spouse or in-laws had deteriorated since they began working in the garment industry, mainly because of doubts about their ability to maintain high standards of purity within the work environment. If the woman's self-esteem is not sufficiently strong to stand the onslaught of constant suspicion and criticism by significant others, then work in the industry does not lead to her relational empowerment.

Positive evidence of these garment workers' increased power in social issues such as marriage or women working outside the home, are also signs of relational empowerment of these female garment workers. While it is rare for poor, uneducated women in Bangladesh to be given any say in choice of their spouse, findings presented in Chapter 5 reveal that over half of the women in this study were accorded this right. Families who have much to gain from a daughter's earnings were more likely to ask her opinion on issues affecting her and less likely to force her into marriage against her will. Consequently many young workers seemed able to delay the age of marriage and thus have the opportunity to experience a time of adolescence, denied many unemployed girls of their age and social class (Amin et al. 1997:7). Comments made by several married workers during FGDs and personal interviews revealed that the financial contribution to their families gave them the right to demand support with childcare from families. At the same time, earning a wage allows the garment worker, as explained in Chapter 3, to move out of a violent marriage relationship, something unemployed females often cannot do. The following comment made during a FGD shows how important this financial independence is:

*I'm no longer forced to stay with my husband if he treats me badly because I can look after myself and my children. My sister is beaten often by her husband, but she has to stay with him. Our parents have died and our brothers will not keep us for more than a day or two.*

All the above indicates empowerment of these women in their relationships with others.

Another area where some degree of relational empowerment is seen is that of society's changing attitude towards women working outside of the home. Traditionally Bangladesh society is not at all favorable towards women taking up outside employment. Rich Bengali families can still afford to have their women practice purdah in its strict sense, confining them within the home and covering them in veils whenever they must venture out. Those women who need to participate in outside employment are considered by large segments of Bangladesh society as being polluted in some way and a potential source of shame for their family, because they have stepped outside of their rightful boundaries and into a 'man's world' (Rozario 1992:1). Comments made by many of the

women in this research confirmed those made by female garment workers in other research discussed in Chapter 3, namely that they were aware of the social stigma associated with being a garment worker. However the fact that most of them believed society's opinion of them has improved since they took up work in the garment industry, shows that a change is occurring in attitudes towards women's work in the formal sector. As explained in Chapter 5, female garment workers have taken up employment, not as one or two women in an office or organization, but as large groups of women working together on the same factory floor and commuting to and from the work area in the company of other women. This has enabled them to remain within a largely female environment where, in solidarity with other women, they can protect and support one another. In doing so they are showing that taking up employment outside of the home need not taint a woman's purity, nor her family's honour. These female garment workers are therefore achieving some degree of empowerment in relationship to Bangladesh society, which is also starting to acknowledge the important contribution these women are making to the country's economy (CPD: 2002:1)

This research did not specifically look at relationships between female and male workers in the garment factories. However, comments made during the FGDs and personal interviews indicated that there is a long way to go before female workers achieve any degree of equality with the male workers. As Otani (2000) also found in her research on garment factories, male workers are better paid, given more opportunities for training and promoted more rapidly to senior positions than are female workers. Still the latter are starting to stand up and speak out for their rights or those of other women workers. Some female workers made remarks about how sitting alongside male garment workers from the same factory at WWEC Centre seminars and together learning about things such as workers' rights and gender issues, was helping make their male colleagues more aware of the gender imbalance of power in the workplace.

Research findings therefore indicate that many female garment workers have, since taking up work in the garment industry, been empowered in their relationships with their husband and family. They are also gaining power with regard to marital choices and

gradually changing Bangladesh society's attitudes towards working women. Although relational empowerment is far from being achieved in the workplace, some positive move in this direction is noted.

### **Collective empowerment**

The previous sections on personal and relational empowerment have shown that most of the female garment workers studied in this research now have a strong sense of self. Working in a largely female environment, learning from the example of other women and receiving support from them in coping with difficulties, many of the female workers are gaining a sense of solidarity with other women. However as Kabeer wrote 'Empowerment must entail as an ultimate goal the ability of the disempowered to act collectively in their own practical and strategic interests' (Kabeer 1995:256). This final level of empowerment which she calls 'power to' equates with Rowlands' 'collective empowerment' where women with a sense of collective agency work together to change situations in groups, thus having a greater impact on women's empowerment than individual efforts could have (Rowlands 1997:15).

Although this present research did not specifically seek data on the collective empowerment of these female garment workers, the fact that the women studied have even come to the WWEC Center is evidence of a move towards collective empowerment. Few women come to the Center alone. Rather, they come as groups of women from different factories, usually after a heavy day's work. Some may come simply to accompany their friends, or because a free supper (typically a bread roll, an egg, a spring roll and a banana) is offered. Presumably most of these women come to learn about important issues affecting their personal and working lives. Spontaneous comments made by the workers during FGDs and personal interviews indicate that attending the WWEC Seminars has given them the sense that as a group they can do something positive to improve the situation of women in this country. As one worker personally interviewed after a seminar on Bangladesh laws concerning oppression of women and children said:

*I had no idea that there were laws like that in Bangladesh. Then why are we women still being beaten, raped, even killed? It doesn't seem like anybody cares much about the laws...Now I can see its no good waiting for the police to do anything about it. They're not much interested in us women. We [women] have to get together and do something...*

The fact that several of the workers studied have become members of the garment workers trade union BIGUF is another possible sign of collective empowerment. Founded by female garment workers and still headed by women, BIGUF does try to improve the situation of women workers. Nonetheless, few female workers who attend the WWEC Center seem to have joined a trade union yet. Comments made by the workers in this regard indicate that they are still afraid of incurring the wrath of factory management staff who dislike union activities. Other workers said they were keeping away from trade unions because they think they are more involved in party politics than in helping workers.

Although most of the workers studied do not appear to be formally involved in collective action for the empowerment of women, some of them are informally banding together to improve their lot. Some of these female workers have an unofficial credit union, where they give and receive loans to one-another within the group. Others share childcare facilities or even accommodation, especially when a landlord will not rent out a room to a solo mother and her children. Therefore, although it can be said that the female garment workers studied have not yet experienced collective empowerment to any great extent, research findings do show that first steps are being made in that direction.

Having now looked at the changes that have occurred in the lives of these female garment workers in terms of their personal, relational and collective empowerment, it is now time to see whether the type of clothing worn by the worker is in any way indicative of increased empowerment.

### **Relationship between type of clothing worn and aspects of empowerment**

When I began working with garment workers at the beginning of 1996, I was surprised to discover that many of the women wearing salwar kameez were married women, because I

had frequently been told since my arrival in the country 18 months earlier that it was not socially acceptable for married women to wear a salwar kameez. They should wear a sari. This change in dress code of many of the female garment workers therefore signified a major change in the life of a married woman in Bangladesh, one that is now seen in the lives of many married working women working outside of the garment industry. It prompted me to reflect on why these women were apparently disregarding social norms, even though it meant facing a lot of public criticism. Is it a result of increased empowerment?

There were 30 married women in the small survey carried out as part of this research. All of them stated that married women in their home area would be wearing a sari. Nevertheless, at the time of interview exactly half of these women were wearing a sari and the other half a salwar kameez. Since the numbers of women involved are small findings cannot be considered statistically significant and no doubt factors other than clothing are involved. However, it is still interesting to see whether there are any differences between married workers wearing a salwar kameez and those wearing a sari.

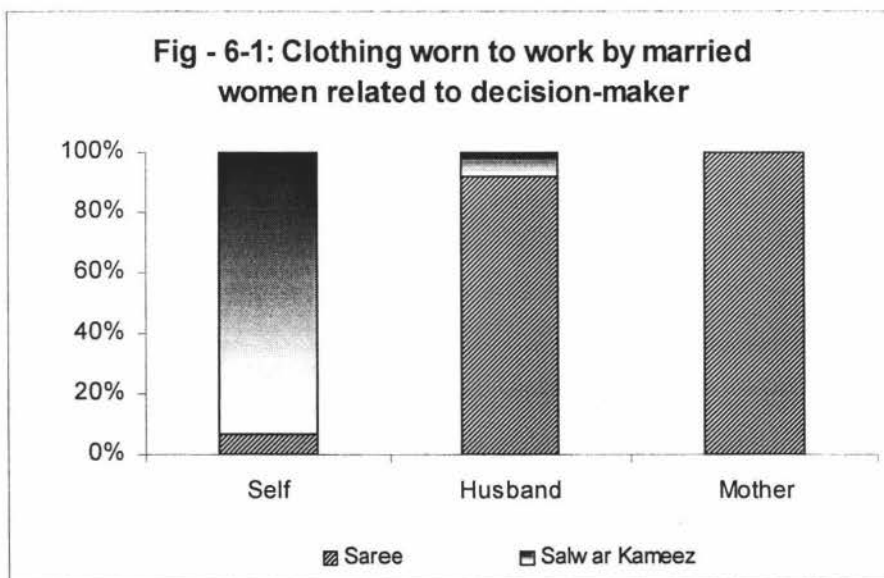


Figure 6.1 shows that when the women themselves chose what to wear, 93% of them chose to wear a salwar kameez. This represented fifteen out of sixteen married workers. However when the husband made the decision, as was true for 12 of the women, he

decided almost always that his wife should wear a sari. For the remaining two married workers the decision was made by their mother and was that a sari should be worn. This evidence that husbands and mothers thought married women should wear a sari shows how strong the cultural norm in this regard still is. The fact that two thirds of the women wearing a salwar kameez at the time of survey believed that society's opinion of them had worsened since they took up work in the industry, in comparison to one third of those wearing a sari, lends credence to this. Married workers who are wearing a salwar kameez have thus made a personal choice that is counter-cultural. This choice pertains mainly to working hours: ten of the sixteen women who wear a salwar kameez to work, still wear a sari when not at work, as shown in Table 6.1 below.

<b>Wear</b>	<b>At Work</b>	<b>On day off</b>
Salwar Kameez	16	6
Sari	14	23
Maxi	0	1

N = 30

When asked reasons for choice of work attire, fifteen of the sixteen women who wear a salwar kameez to work said they did so for practical reasons. Comments, such as the following made during the FGDs and personal interviews, indicate that the women considered the salwar kameez more practical as work attire because:

*you can walk much faster than in a sari ...it is more comfortable...it protects you more from bad men.*

Such comments show that the woman was more concerned about her own needs than what others might think of her and imply that she has developed a sense of self, prioritising what she personally needs.

The situation appeared to be very different for those thirteen women who wore a sari to work. Eleven of them said that family pressure was the deciding factor in what they wear. Family pressure comes not only from husbands and parents/in-laws, but also from teenage children. As one woman in a FGD remarked:

*I have a 16 year old daughter. She said she would be ashamed for her friends to see her mother wearing a salwar kameez.*

The two remaining workers who wore a sari to work did so because they considered it looks good to others. Ask almost any man in Bangladesh what he thinks women look best in and he will invariably say the sari. Thus it appears that the garment workers wearing a sari to work are doing what others want. The choice of clothing is not based on their personal needs.

<b>Level of Self Worth</b>	<b>Sari</b>	<b>Salwar Kameez</b>	<b>Total</b>
Increased	13	14	27
Same as before	2	1	3
<b>Total</b>	15	15	30

The survey findings, as shown in Table 6.2, also revealed that a slightly higher number of women wearing a salwar kameez mentioned that their confidence in self had increased since taking up work in the garment industry. The women wearing a salwar kammez during the FGDs and individual interviews also seemed more self-assured than those wearing sari.

The above findings seem to suggest that generally those married female garment workers wearing a salwar kameez are likely to be those starting to assert themselves in order to meet personal needs, even though this means going against traditional cultural norms. As Rita Manchanda, a South Asian writer whose ideas on the change from 'sari to salwar kameez' are very similar to mine says:

All over South Asia the males readily gave up their own national or ethnic attires for the basic shirt and trousers, while shifting the burden of cultural and ethnic sartorial responsibility onto the women...It is precisely the meanings that dress conveys which makes the salwar kameez both an expression of choice and an object of disapproval (Manchanda 2001: 29)

It therefore appears that wearing a salwar kameez is for most of the married women in this study, evidence of a new sense of self and sufficient self-confidence to make choices in the face of negative public opinion. This is indicative of aspects of personal empowerment .

It now remains to be seen whether there is any correlation between married female garment workers clothing are wearing and signs of empowerment in their relationships, including how they communicate and negotiate relationships with significant others? Do salwar kameez wearers have the right to make decisions about issues that directly concern them and their family? Are they supported in their decisions and actions? If the answers to these questions are 'yes' then Rowlands (1997:120) would assert that these women have gained some degree of relational empowerment.

Correlation between the type of clothing worn by the married woman at the time of interview and decision making about spending of her earnings is revealed in Table 6.3.

<b>Who decides how wages are spent?</b>	<b>Sari</b>	<b>Salwar Kameez</b>	<b>Total Respondents</b>
Self	8	2	10
Husband	4	3	7
Husband and self	3	10	13
<b>Total</b>	<b>15</b>	<b>15</b>	<b>30</b>

The above table shows that women presently wearing a sari are most likely to decide on their own how their wages will be spent, while those wearing a salwar kameez tend to share this decision-making with their husband. At first glance this may seem to indicate

greater empowerment of women wearing a sari. However the survey results also reveal that of the eight married workers who had a say in choosing their spouse, five were wearing a salwar kameez at the time of survey and all but one of these women shared decision-making about spending of earnings with their husband. Comments made during FGDs and personal interviews suggest that shared decision-making in money matters does not mean these women have less power within the spousal relationship. On the contrary it seems to indicate increased communication and sharing in general between the couple and a significant movement towards gender equality in the relationship.

<b>Level of Respect</b>	<b>Sari</b>	<b>Salwar Kameez</b>	<b>Total Respondents</b>
Increased	10	9	19
Decreased	2	6	8
Same as before	3	0	3
<b>Total</b>	15	15	30

However, as expected, survey findings revealed that of the 15 women wearing a salwar kameez six noted that their in-laws' opinion of them had deteriorated since taking up work in the RMG industry, while only two of the 15 women wearing sari thought this was true of them. Nevertheless, in the FGDs and individual interviews women wearing salwar kameez spoke more often about the affirmation and person support they receive from their spouse than did women wearing a sari. Perhaps this positive feedback and support has helped counteract the effects of negative feedback received from their in-laws. Fourteen of the fifteen women wearing a salwar kameez still maintained that they now felt better about themselves as persons than they did before taking up work in the garment industry.

These findings cannot prove that married female workers who wear a salwar kameez are more empowered than those who always wear a sari. However, they do seem to suggest that this culturally significant change in dress code is a symbol of more important

changes taking place within the woman herself. Manchanda supports this when she says that there is a:

definite perception of the South Asian salwar kameez wearer as a modern and empowered working woman...Besides, it [the salwar kameez] will always have pride of place of being the attire that helped in the process of the liberation of the South Asian women (Manchanda 2001:27-19).

## **Conclusion**

This last chapter has been an attempt to analyze in terms of empowerment, changes that have occurred in the lives of a particular group of female workers in the Bangladesh garment industry. The evidence of a continuing strong social stigma associated with working in a garment factory and evidence that it takes a heavy toll on the health of many of the workers, suggest that employment in this industry as disempowering for women. Nonetheless, the research findings indicate that most of the women studied have experienced personal empowerment. This increased power within themselves, manifested in a stronger sense of self, rests on the important contribution they are making to the well-being of their household, family and nation, as well as their ability to cope on their own if need be. A new-found sense of freedom, together with the experience of being liked and valued by others, have led to increased self-esteem for most of these women. This in turn is helping them to gradually overcome the deep sense of powerlessness and inferiority to men, ingrained since birth in this strongly patriarchal society.

The research findings also point to some degree of relational empowerment in the lives of many of the women studied. This is manifested in the workers' participation in decision making about when and whom they will marry, as well as about spending of their earnings and other family matters. Few of these women had any decision making power before taking up employment. It is the workers' income and their consequent value in the eyes of their family, that have given them the bargaining chips to exert greater power in intra-household and family relationships and elicit support in the area of domestic chores and child care. The increased sharing of power and responsibilities between spouses is leading to more equal relationships.

By personally choosing to wear what they see as being in their own interests, married workers wearing a salwar kameez are making a stand against cultural traditions imposed on them by men. These women are also demonstrating the ability to negotiate with their husband, to make decisions and receive support for those decisions. Therefore the change from sari to salwar kameez, as the preferred work attire of this group of female garment workers does seem to be related to aspects of the worker's personal and relational empowerment.

Registering at a working women's education center (WWEC) and attending the seminars there, is evidence that these garment workers are interested in gathering with other women to learn how to improve their situation. It would be useful in the coming years to study the long-term impact of the WWEC programs on the lives of the female garment workers. Some of the workers indicated during this research that they are convinced that women need to try collectively to change the unjust situation they find themselves in. However, apart from a few workers who have joined a trade union, there is as yet little indication of collective empowerment. This is not surprising, given that the socio-economic structures mentioned in Chapter 3 as having supported the development of the ready-made garment industry in Bangladesh, actively discourage women's collective empowerment.

Despite often terrible working conditions, the vast majority of women whose voices are heard in this study, now feel better about themselves and believe that their own life has improved since taking up work in the garment industry. These positive changes can hardly be due to the effects of the actual work in a garment factory, where gender subordination is still rife. Instead they seem to be brought about by the opportunity provided by employment in the garment industry for poor, lowly educated women in Bangladesh to move out of a very restricted home environment and earn a living. The findings of this study are only representative of those women who attend the WWEC Center. They do not purport to represent Bangladeshi female garment workers in general. A much larger, more comprehensive study would be needed for that. What can be said is that for many of the women in this particular research, earning an income has already led

to increased power within the worker herself, as well as in her relationships with significant others. If these women have attained greater empowerment since taking up employment in the garment industry, then the same could be true for many other female garment workers.

However the next few years will be crucial for both the garment industry in Bangladesh and its female workers. Just as the economic development of Bangladesh is largely tied to the success of the ready-made garment industry, so too the well-being of over one million female workers and their dependents hinges on employment in this industry. Unless the Bangladesh garment industry can successfully negotiate the formidable challenges to be faced as a result of the phasing out of Multi-fibre Agreement in 2005, as discussed in Chapter 3, it may well not survive. This would spell not only economic disaster for the country, but could also counteract the significant steps towards empowerment, that at least some of the women working in this industry have already made and the opportunity for other female workers to do likewise.

## Appendix 1 Survey Form

### সার্ভে ফর্ম

সার্ভে নং

১। শ্রমিকের বয়সঃ

- ক। ১ বছরের কম
- খ। ১৯ বছর থেকে ২৪ বছরের মধ্যে
- গ। ২৫ বছর থেকে ৩০ বছরের মধ্যে
- ঘ। ৩০ বছরের বেশী

২। বৈবাহিত অবস্থাঃ

- ক। এখনও বিয়ে হয় নি
- খ। বিবাহিত
- গ। স্বামী স্ত্রী বিচ্ছিন্নভাবে বসবাস/ তালাক দেওয়া
- ঘ। বিধবা

৩। গার্মেন্টস্ এ কত বছর কাজ করেছেন ?

- ক। ১ বছরের কম
- খ। ১ থেকে ৩ বছর
- গ। ৪ থেকে ৬ বছর
- ঘ। ৭ বছর বা তার বেশী

৪। কারখানায় কোন পদে কাজ করেন ?

- ক। হেলপার
- খ। অপারেটর
- গ। আয়রনার/ ফিনিশার
- ঘ। কাটার
- ঙ। সুপারভাইজার
- চ। কোয়ালিটি কন্টোল পরিদর্শক
- ছ। অন্যান্য

৫। আপনার শিক্ষাগত যোগ্যতা?

- ক। নিরক্ষর
- খ। ১ম - ৩য় শ্রেণী পর্যন্ত
- গ। ৪র্থ - ৫ম শ্রেণী পর্যন্ত
- ঘ। ৬ষ্ঠ - ৮ম শ্রেণী পর্যন্ত
- ঙ। অষ্টম শ্রেণীর বেশী।

৬। সাধারণ আপনার মাসিক বেতন ( ওভারটাইম সহ )?

- ক। ৫০০-১০০০ টাকা।
- খ। ১০০১-১৫০০ টাকা।
- গ। ১৫০১- ২০০০ টাকা।
- ঘ। ২০০১- ২৫০০ টাকা।
- ঙ। ২৫০০ টাকার বেশী।

৭। গার্মেন্টস্ এ ডুকোর আগে কোথায় থাকতেন ?

- ক। গ্রাম অঞ্চলে
- খ। জেলা শহরে
- গ। বিভাগীয় শহরে
- ঘ। অন্যান্য

৮। এই মুহর্তে কি পড়েছেন ?

- ক। শাড়ী
- খ। সেলওয়ার ও কামিজ
- গ। অন্যান্য

৯। কাজের সময় সাধারনত কি পড়েন?

- ক। শাড়ী
- খ। সেলওয়ার ও কামিজ
- গ। অন্যান্য

১০। এ ধরনের কাপড় কাজের সময় পড়েন কেন?

- ক। সুবিধা আছে
- খ। সুন্দর লাগে
- গ। সঙ্গীদের কথা মেনে নিয়ে
- ঘ। পরিবারের কথা মেনে নিয়ে
- ঙ। অন্যান্য

১১। ছুটির দিনে সাধারনত কি ধরনের কাপড় পড়েন?

- ক। শাড়ী
- খ। সেলওয়ার ও কামিজ
- গ। মাক্রি
- ঘ। অন্যান্য

১২। সাধারণত আপনি যে কাপড় পড়েন তা কার সিদ্ধান্তে ?

- ক। নিজে
- খ। স্বামী
- গ। অন্য কোন পুরুষ আত্মীয়ের
- ঘ। মা
- ঙ। অন্যান্য

১৩। আপনার গ্রামে আপনার বয়সি বিবাহিত মেয়েরা কি পড়ে ?

- ক। শাড়ী
- খ। সেলওয়ার ও কামিজ
- গ। অন্যান্য

১৪। আপনার বেতন দিয়ে খরচ করার সিদ্ধান্ত কে নেয় ?

- ক। নিজে
- খ। স্বামী
- গ। অন্য কোন পুরুষ
- ঘ। নিজে ও মা বাবা
- ঙ। নিজে ও স্বামী বা অন্য কোন পুরুষ আত্মীয়
- চ। অন্যান্য

১৫। যদি ১৪ নাম্বার প্রশ্নের উত্তর জি থাকে তাহলে আপনার বেতন থেকে নিজ ইচ্ছায় কত টাকা খরচ করতে পারেন ?

- ক। টাকা ২০০ থেকে কম
- খ। টাকা ২০১ থেকে ৫০০ এর মধ্যে
- গ। টাকা ৫০১ থেকে ৭৫০ এর মধ্যে
- ঘ। টাকা ৭৫০ এর বেশী

১৬। গার্মেন্টস্ এ দুকার পর কি কি ভাবে আপনার জীবনে পরিবর্তন হয়েছে ? নিম্নলিখিত প্রশ্নগুলোর উত্তর দিন।

১। গার্মেন্টস্ এ দুকার আগের তুলনায় এখন উপার্জন করেন?

- ক। বেশী
- খ। কম
- গ। আগের মত

২। দুকার আগের তুলনায় এখন কি ভাবে টাকা খরচ করেন আপনার সিদ্ধান্ত নেওয়ার ক্ষমতা

- ক। বেড়ে গেছে
- খ। কমেছে
- গ। একি রকমই

- ৩। দুকার আগের তুলনায় এখন নিজ পরিবারের যত্ন নিতে পারেন ?
- ক। আরো ভাল ভাবে  
খ। এতো ভাল ভাবে নয়  
গ। একি ভাবে
- ৪। দুকার আগের তুলনায় এখন আপনার স্বাস্থ্য কেমন ?
- ক। আরো ভাল হয়েছে  
খ। নষ্ট হয়েছে  
গ। কোন পরিবর্তন হয় নি
- ৫। গার্মেন্টস্ এ দুকার আগের তুলনায় আপনার নিজের বাড়ীতে আপনি মর্যাদা পান কি ?
- ক। বেশী  
খ। কম  
গ। আগের মতই
- ৬। গার্মেন্টস্ এ কাজ করার ফলে সমাজের চোখে আপনার মান সম্মান ?
- ক। বেড়ে গেছে  
খ। কমেছে  
গ। কোন পরিবর্তন হয় নি  
ঘ। শহরের লোক মনে করে বেড়েছে কিন্তু গ্রামের লোক মনে করে কমেছে।
- ৭। আপনার কি মনে হয় গার্মেন্টস্ এ কাজ করার ফলে বিয়ে হওয়া সম্ভাবনা ?
- ক। বেড়ে গেছে  
খ। কমেছে  
গ। আগের মতই  
ঘ। শহরের বেড়েছে কিন্তু গ্রামে কমেছে।
- ৮। আপনার বিয়ে ঠিক করার সময় আপনার মতামত প্রকাশ করতে পেরেছেন ?
- ক। হাঁ  
খ। না  
গ। এখনও বিয়ে হয় নি
- ৯। গার্মেন্টস্ আগের তুলনায় আপনি কাজ করেন ?
- ক। বেশী  
খ। কম  
গ। একি পরিমাণ

১০। এ কাজ করার আগের তুলনায় এখন আপনার নিজ বিষয়ে ও নিজ পরিবারের ব্যাপারে কোন সিদ্ধান্ত নিতে আপনার আত্মবিশ্বাস কি?

- ক। বেড়েছে
- খ। কমেছে
- গ। একি পরিমান

১১। এ কাজে নিয়োগ হয়ে আপনার নিজের চোখে কি মনে করেন আপনি ব্যক্তি হিসাবে ?

- ক। আরো ভাল হয়েছেন
- খ। নষ্ট হয়েছেন
- গ। একি রকম

১২। গার্মেন্টস্ এ কাজ করার ফলে আপনার জীবন কি ?

- ক। আরো সুন্দর হয়েছে
- খ। নষ্ট হয়েছে
- গ। আগের মতই

• বর্তমানে বিবাহিত মহিলারা নিম্নলিখিত প্রশ্নগুলির উত্তর দিবেন।

১৩। দরকার হলে আপনার ছেলেমেয়েদের সহ নিজ পায়ে দাঁড়াতে পরতেন ?

- ক। হাঁ
- খ। না

১৪। আপনি কি মনে করেন আপনার গার্মেন্টস্ কাজের ফলে আপনার স্বামীর সাথে আপনার সম্পর্ক কেমন ?

- ক। আরো ভাল হয়েছে
- খ। নষ্ট হয়েছে
- গ। কোন পরিবর্তন হয় নি

১৫। আপনার গার্মেন্টস্ কাজের ফলে আপনার শশুর বাড়ীর মানুষের চোখে আপনার মর্যাদা কেমন ?

- ক। বেড়েছে
- খ। কমেছে
- গ। কোন পরিবর্তন হয় নি।

## Appendix 2 English translation of Survey Form:

Survey number:.....

- 1) Respondent's age: a) <18 b) 19-24 c) 25-30 d) more than 30
- 2) Marital status: a) never married b) married c) separated/divorced d) widowed.
- 3) Number of years worked in the RMG industry: a) <1 b) 1-3 c) 4-6 d) 7 or more.
- 4) Position within the factory: a) helper b) operator c) ironer/finisher d) cutter  
e) supervisor f) quality control inspector. g) other.....
- 5) How many years of formal education have you had?  
a) 0 b) 1-3 c) 4-5 d) 6-8 e) more than 8.
- 6) My monthly take home wages are usually the following amount of taka.  
a) 500-1000 b) 1001- 1500 c) 1501- 2000 d) 2001- 2500 e) more than 2500
- 7) Before beginning work in the garment industry, where did you live?  
a) in a village b) in a rural town c) in a major city. d) other
- 8) At present wearing :  
a) sari. b) salwar kameez c) other.....
- 9) What type of clothing do you normally wear to work?  
a) sari. b) salwar kameez. c) other.....
- 10) Why do you normally wear this type of clothing to work?  
a) for practical reasons b) it looks good c) peer pressure d) family pressure.
- 11) What type of clothing do you normally wear when you have days off work?  
a) sari. b) salwar kameez c) maxi d) other.....

12) Who usually decides what type of clothing you wear?

- a) self b) husband. c) other male relative d) mother e) other.....

13) In your area what do the married women of your age usually wear?

- a) sari b) salwar kameez c) other

14) Who decides how your wages will be spent?

- a) self b) husband c) other male relative d) self + parent(s) e) self and husband/other male relative f)other .....

15) If your answer to question '12' is 'd' or 'e' then how much of your own monthly wages do you have control over?

- a) less than 200 Taka b) 201-500 Taka c)501-750 Taka d) more than 750 Taka.

16) In what ways has your life changed since you began working in the RMG industry?

Please answer the questions given below:

16.1 I now earn *a) more b) less c) same amount* of money as before .

16.2 I have *a) more b) less c) same amount* of decision making as to how I spend my money.

16.3 I can now care for my family *a)better b) less well c) the same* as before I started work.

16.4 My health is *a) better b)worse c) the same* as before .

16.5 My family of origin respect me *a)more b) less c) the same* as before.

16.6 Working in the RMG industry has cause society to think

*a)better b) worse c) the same* of me as before.

d) city people think better of me, village people think worse of me.

16.7 I think working in the garment industry *a)improves b)reduces c)makes no change d) improves in the city and reduces in the village* the chance of finding a marriage partner.

- 16.8 I took part in decision making about whom I should marry. a) *Yes* b) *No*  
c) *not yet married.*
- 16.9 I have to work a) *harder* b) *less* c) *the same amount* as before.
- 16.10 I have a) *more* b) *less* c) *same amount* of confidence in making decisions about my own life and that of my family than I had before starting work..
- 16.11 I feel a) *better* b) *worse* c) *the same* about myself as a person than I did before starting work.
- 16.12 I believe that working in the RMG industry has made my own *life* a) *better* b) *worse*  
c) *the same* as before

**Questions for presently married respondents only. This includes separated, but not divorced respondents.**

- 16.13 If need be, I could look after myself and my children on my own. a) *Yes* b) *No*
- 16.14 I believe that working in the RMG industry has made my relationship with my husband  
a) *better* b) *worse* c) *the same* as before.
- 16.15 Working in the RMG industry has cause my husband's family to respect me as a person  
and my opinions a) *more* b) *less* c) *the same* as before.

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