



## Women in the market place — the international linkage

In all the developing countries from Bangladesh to Botswana to Brazil women do most of the work but get less of the benefits in relation to men. Women's widespread participation in economic activities — whether measured in terms of proportion of women who work, the percentage of workers that is female or the hours of work they put in — is a characteristic feature of the existing socio-economic scenario, although much of it remains officially unrecognised.

Much nearer home, in all of South Asia, women workers form an integral part of the whole economy, urban and rural. Most adult women in rural areas work extensively in the agricultural sector, often as unpaid and hence unrecognised family helpers in addition to their normal household chores. While this has been the pattern for centuries, female labour force participation in urban economic activities, both in formal and informal sectors, has been, relatively speaking, of much recent origin.

So far as the urban informal sector is concerned, women are mostly engaged in small scale production and such service activities as are generally the lowest paid and enjoy the lowest status in the job market. They are an assorted group which includes home-based workers, either self-employed or on the payroll of middlemen, like seamstresses, handicraft workers, food processors, leather workers, washerwomen, potters as well as wage workers like domestics, construction workers and the like.

Official statistics on these workers are hard to come by but a number of micro studies show that hours of work are long and wages insignificant. As far as is known, at least in Bangladesh, these workers produce mostly for the home market — they are yet to be organised on a scale large enough to be able to produce for the world market.

Even when their products reach the international markets — albeit on a small scale — it is the middlemen and not these women who reap the benefits. But this is not to deny the importance of their income to these women as either the only or the principal bread winners of their families.

Of much recent origin is the spectacular growth in manufacturing for export, rather than for import substitution in a number of developing countries, particularly in Asia. In the time-honoured tradition of global economic relationships, developed countries have been exporting manufactured goods and specialised services while their less fortunate trading partners in the developing world have been selling agricultural products, raw materials and cheap labour in the international market.

This pattern still holds good but of late a significant number of developing countries have started moving onto the global market by way of producing for exports rather than for import substitution. The main incentive behind this new internationalisation of production and marketing is the growing requirement of capitalist firms engaged in a fierce competition for making profits out of the



Garment workers remain in an economic area — characterised by low-cost labour, high production and high profit margins with little scope for themselves.

surplus value from the legions of unemployed labour in these countries.

To go back a little, western capitalist firms in their endless search for easy profits through the exploitation of cheap, abundant, submissive and poorly organised labour moved on, first of all to their internal peripheries (the American South, Western France, Mid-Wales) and the poorer neighbouring countries (Mexico, the Irish Republic, Southern and Eastern Europe), then further afield to Asia (Hong Kong, Taiwan, Korea, Singapore) and still later to the even poorer third world countries. Here in these countries even cheaper labour and the equally obliging governments serve as great attraction.

But this type of development is not and can never be an one-sided affair. In Bangladesh, for example, manufacturing of garment, first starting as a formal export oriented industry on a tiny scale in 1976-77, has by now emerged as a major foreign exchange earner for the country. The export value of the apparels in that year amounted to only Tk 98,000 (uss 2.76 at exchange rate of early 1991). But in little over a decade and a half the industry has expanded at a phenomenal pace with export earning standing at Tk 3000 crore in 1990-1991. It should however be borne in mind that since almost all the raw materials are imported the net foreign exchange earning is rather low but that of course is another story.

Being a labour intensive industry garment making ideally suits the socio-economic condition of a less developed South

by Zaheda Ahmad

Asian country like Bangladesh. These are the countries which have come forward to fill the gap left by the hitherto dominant apparel exporting countries relatively less advanced technology; investment requirement is also moderate compared to other sectors and the gestation period is also short. These are obvious advantages which combined with the assured quick profit from over-

including overtime, the labourers work, on an average, over 12 hours a day for 6-7 days a week. This in itself is a grueling schedule but life becomes even harder if and when, as it happens quite often, the workers have to perform a good deal of household chores also, wages are gratuity, pension, group insurance are non-existent. In the absence of such facilities, the workers, not surprisingly, suffer from a lack of sense of belonging and commitment.

Freedom of the workers to organise themselves has been excepted long ago as one of their inalienable fundamental rights. But the factory owners here have so far allowed little or no trade union activities in their firms. Past reported attempts at establishing labour union in one or two factories failed primarily because of the organisational weakness of the predominantly female workforce. This stems partly from lack of awareness, of motivation, lack of leadership and also of time. Born, bred and brainwashed in a male dominated society these women workers are yet to find their feet in the new cut-throat world of industrial employment.

But the most important reason, of course, is economic

seas markets have fueled the fast growth of this industry. Attracted by the lure of easy profit local entrepreneurs in large numbers have moved into the industry so much so that most firms, in Bangladesh at least, are under indigenous ownership.

Current employment strength in the industry is around half a million. The overwhelming majority of the workers — around 90 per cent — are women mostly coming from the underprivileged section of the society. Why this preponderance of female workers? The principal reason is, of course, that wages paid to most female workers are generally lower than the normal wage rates offered to male workers in other industries. Again women workers are generally found to be more submissive, less troublesome and demanding and hence much more manageable and therefore more preferable. Another equally important factor is the general agreement among employers that female workers are usually more efficient also than male workers in most garment operations. Relative youth of the work force is quite marked.

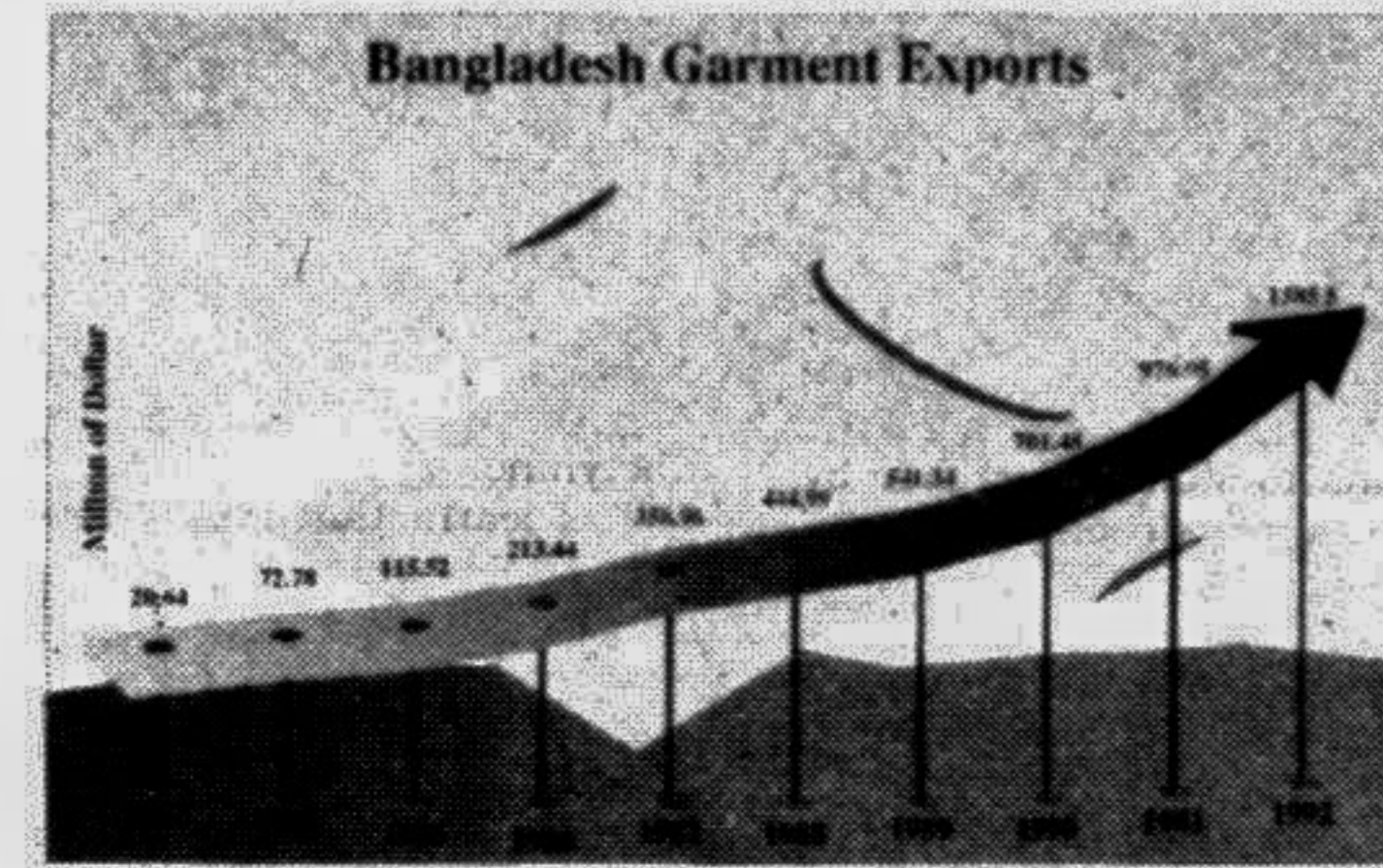
The garment workers of Bangladesh produce for the international markets and at the same time earn valuable hard currency for the nation. But what are the conditions in which they live and work? Do they receive enough wages for a reasonable standard of living? Do they enjoy those collective bargaining rights guaranteed by international laws? On both the above counts the answer is an emphatic "No". Working condi-

tions in most factories, with one or two honourable exception, are very harsh. Not only that minimum basic amenities on the factory premises are provided for the workforce the practice of keeping the window shut and exits locked from outside for security reasons is dangerous and had actually led to tragic incidents in the past.

Working hours are long — including overtime, the labourers work, on an average, over 12 hours a day for 6-7 days a week. This in itself is a grueling schedule but life becomes even harder if and when, as it happens quite often, the workers have to perform a good deal of household chores also, wages are gratuity, pension, group insurance are non-existent. In the absence of such facilities, the workers, not surprisingly, suffer from a lack of sense of belonging and commitment.

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Coming from weak or very poor economic background these workers have joined the labour market to supplement meagre incomes of their families — this is particularly true of the children workers who constitute around 15 per cent of the work force. Under the circumstances, these workers fall an easy prey to their employers who in most cases engage their workers even without any formal appointment letters. Without such basic written document, a worker is always at the mercy of her employer.

Because of its total dependence on the international markets, the industry though ex-

panding is subject to grave uncertainty about the future. This severely inhibits the growth of healthy organisational structure including enlightened labour management and trade unionism. Employers are most reluctant to allow trade unionism since demands for better terms and conditions on the part of the workers which in turn reduces the competitive edge of their products by raising their costs.

However, when all is said and done, the fact remains that the garment industry here, as in many other countries, has prospered on the sweat of its workers. Since, in Bangladesh, cloth and other materials are mostly imported, net foreign exchange earning is very small and mostly, derived from the only local contribution which is made by the local workers.

According to knowledgeable sources which include the World Bank also, three factors have contributed to the growth of the garment industry in Bangladesh. In the first place, under a system of quota, determined and controlled by the importing nations, Bangladesh gets guaranteed access to their markets for its products. These prophets of free market economy conveniently forget that a system of quota can have no place in such an economy. Secondly, our abundant supply of cheap labour on whose exploitation this industry has been built up. We, the signatory to the convention, do not hesitate to flout it by prohibiting collective bargaining practices in our garment industry. "Non-interference" by the government is cited to be the third

factor responsible for such expansion. What does that mean? We see government police using strong arm methods against demonstrating garment workers. So the state intervenes only on the side of the employers to protect their interests.

The state is not and can never be neutral, thus in the ultimate analysis we keep coming back to the same old proposition that it is the state as representing the ruling, exploiting classes — both national and international — which has to be changed before it can intervene decisively in favour of the oppressed, men and women alike.

## The girl child's silent sighs...

by Nasrin Yasmin

WITHIN the common framework of poverty, the birth of her brother brings a ray of hope and confidence for the future, while hers elicits dismay and anxiety, disgrace and humiliation.

Nobody prefers her, yet she enters the world, susceptible and unassured.

She is the girl child and her story on this subcontinent is unique, felt through her silent sighs that have stopped time in this land. The birth of a calf or a chicken would have been heralded with more excitement than Rokeya's. The third girl born to her family, her birth lowered her mother's position to the dust and shattered her future.

Her mother had tried everything in her power to give birth to a boy — spent her secret savings, drunk holy water, worn her talisman — yet Rokeya came along.

Because of Rokeya's birth, her father's marriage to a second wife was condoned by society.

It is lunchtime for this family of eight. The father is still working in the fields. The mother serves lunch to her four young children and her mother-in-law. She and her teenage daughter will eat later. Two eggs, cut in halves, are served with vegetables and green chilies. Half an egg is set aside for the father. The two sons each get half an egg. The remaining half an egg is shared among the two little girls and the mother-in-law, as women earn a higher position among themselves once their sons start earning.

The mother has put aside some vegetables and chilies for herself and her eldest daughter, who is around 12 or 14. The youngest girl, around five years old, finishes her share quickly and glances hungrily at her grandmother's plate. Her grandmother smiles indulgently and gives her a bit from her portion; but she also remarks to the girls' mother, "A girl child should learn to restrain her appetite. Nobody can assure her future."

Lower middle-class families in the urban areas often have little girls as housemaids. Ambia, 11 years old, has to work very hard as the single helping hand in her employer's family. She lives far away from her parents and is only allowed to visit them twice a year.

Asked what she dislikes most, Ambia says, "I hate the employer's son. Whenever he gets the chance he forces me to the privy." Asked whether she feels homesick and wants to return to her mother, she says, "I do. But I can't, as we are very poor. My father counts on my salary." Her voice sinks. But again it echoes hope. "You know my brother, Dulal, goes to school. After a while when he gets a job I won't have to

work here any more. The girl child, stripped of her right to be loved from the moment of her birth, must adjust herself to the indifference of the adult world. From the

Why? Because she is a lifelong burden; her only identity is through marriage, where her place is at her husband's feet, not in his heart. "Please make a little room for me at



Girls often get less food than boys. These are two year old twins. The boy was nursed first and ate first. His sister got what was left. Malnourished girls face a greater risk of injury and death in childbirth later in life.

beginning she is trained to be second class, always to comply, never deny.

The key word is restraint. She restrains herself from everything, even the simple joys of life — like laughter and sports. She is discouraged from laughing loudly, especially in public, and told to avoid athletics.

She restrains and controls her biological needs. As most houses do not have proper sanitation facilities, women rise before dawn, taking advantage of the darkness, before the men are awake. The girl child is trained thus from poverty.

She is seldom wanted, never preferred. Only in relatively wealthy families is she welcome, after her brothers are born, as icing on the cake.

your feet" is the traditional love message for a woman. And the gateway to the land of marriage is dowry, irrespective of class. So the girl child is systematically trained to be ashamed of herself, to realize how unworthy she is.

Attitude leaves a deep scar on her soul, which she can hide but never erase. Her silent sighs and dry tears make time stand still in this land.

The Plan of Action of the World Summit for Children pledged nations to provide improved protection to children in especially difficult circumstances and tackle the root causes leading to such situations.

Who is in a more difficult circumstance than the girl child?

### Girl's Mortality Rates Higher

Higher mortality rates among girls aged 2 to 5 years have been found in demographic and health surveys in a significant number of countries.

Country	Deaths per year per 1,000 population aged 2 to 5 years	
	BOYS	GIRLS
Bangladesh	57.7	68.6
Pakistan	36.9	54.5
Haiti	47.8	61.2
Thailand	17.3	26.8
Syria	9.3	14.6
Colombia	20.5	24.8
Costa Rica	4.8	8.1
Nepal	57.7	60.7
Dominican Republic	17.2	20.2
Philippines	19.1	21.9
Shri Lanka	16.3	18.7
Peru	28.8	30.8
Mexico	14.7	16.7
Panama	7.6	8.7
Turkey	18.4	19.5
Republic of Korea	11.8	12.7
Venezuela	7.6	8.4

Source: Compiled by UNICEF from national survey reports of the World Fertility Survey programme. Reprinted from The World's Women 1970-1990, United Nations, 1991.

## Non participating majority

Women, a majority of the world's population, receive only a small share of developmental opportunities. They are often excluded from education or from the better jobs, from political systems or from adequate health care.

**Literacy** — Women are much less likely than men to be literate. In South Asia, female literacy rates are only around 50 per cent those of males. And in many countries the situation is even worse: in Nepal 35 per cent, Sierra Leone 37 per cent, Sudan 27 per cent and Afghanistan 32 per cent. Women make up two-thirds of the world's illiterates.

**Higher education** — Women in developing countries lag far behind men. In Sub-Saharan Africa, their enrolment rates for tertiary education are only a third of those of men. Even in industrial countries, women are very poorly represented in scientific and technical study: in Spain, the ratio of female to male third-level students in these fields is 28 per cent, in Austria 25 per cent and in Canada 29 per cent.

**Employment** — In developing countries women have far fewer job opportunities; the employment participation rates of women are on average only 50 per cent those of men. In South Asia 29 per cent, and in the Arab States only 16 per cent. Even when they do find work, they tend to get paid much less. In the Republic of Korea, women's wages are only 47 per cent those of men. Wage discrimination is also a feature of industrial countries. In Japan, women receive only 51 per cent of male wages.

**Self-employment** — Women's opportunities for self-employment can be restricted in a number of ways. In some countries they are still not allowed to own property, or to offer collateral for bank loans or even to drive.

**Politics** — In some countries, women are still not allowed to vote. And women almost everywhere are underrepresented in government. In 1990, they made up just over 10 per cent of the world's parliamentarians and less than 4 per cent of national cabinets. In 1993, only six countries had women as heads of government.

**Health** — Women tend on average to live longer than men. But in some Asian and North African countries, the discrimination against women — through neglect of their health or nutrition — is such that they have a shorter life expectancy. Indeed, comparing the populations who should be alive, based on the global mortality patterns, it seems that 100 million Asian women are 'missing'.

One of the greatest health risks for women in poor countries is childbirth. Maternal mortality rates in the developing world are more than 15 times higher than in the industrial countries.

**National statistics** — Women are often invisible in statistics. If women's unpaid housework were counted as productive output in national income accounts, global output would increase by 20-30 per cent.

Source: Human Development Report 1993, UNDP

## When mother is away

by Shaheen Anam

WHEN I announced my plans to be away for a month for professional reasons there was almost a pandemonium at home. "How can you be away for so long wailed the children joined meekly by the father. Yes that is true. How can I be away for such a long time. For heavens sake, this family cannot take responsibility for getting bread for breakfast, leave alone run the entire household for a month without me. I toyed with the idea of cutting short my trip, even cancelling it. In my mind I was trying to come up with all kinds of excuses to justify my assumption that the family could not function without me. The more I thought about it the more preposterous it seemed that I could be away for a month without causing some serious psychological damage to the family. After all who will put the little one to bed and sing a song for her or who will listen to the unreasonable, unrealistic demands of the teenager and pretend that she is making sense. And what about the man of the house? Can he really get through the day without my help?

But that is all in the past now. I did leave, and though they were in my thoughts all the time. I did manage to have a wonderful time. Yes, the family did survive and survived well as I found no trace of trauma on return. It is rather ego shattering I must say, so I probed and questioned to at least find some sign of helplessness that the family must have faced without me. Well, after a lot of investigation, my four-year old kindly said that

she missed me when she was trying to wear her socks and it just wouldn't get in! Well! So much for the glorified role of motherhood. The role that all women must fulfill in order to find fulfillment. But I discovered to my immense pleasure and surprise that the family emerged so much stronger, so much closer from this experience. Not that the ordeal was very easy for them. The older daughter had to take time off from friends and from the telephone to spend time with the little one.



She was responsible to see that she completes her homework and reach school on time. The all important man of the house had to take total charge. Not only did he feed and bathe the little one; he even instructed the cook on the menu. "What happened when unexpected guests came?" I inquired continuing my investigation. The older one actually ventured into the

kitchen and made sandwiches! There were a number of family crisis during my absence. It was the night before Eid and the tailor could not deliver the clothes on time. They promptly went out and bought some readymade clothes. Impressive isn't it? When the little one was down with a flu and high temperature the rest of the family stayed up all night to take care of her. When I am around, just making anyone run a small errand after they have gone to bed is a major task.

Not that I have any intention of denigrating this glorified position but it is now time to seriously question it. It works both ways. Society has designated women to be the care provider for the family. She is supposed to look after everyone's needs besides her own. It is she who has to take full responsibility for the overall well-being of the family. She is of course blamed when

any problem arises and seldom praised when things go right. Society, for its part has glorified this position by eulogising and taking it to heights that is far above the capacity of humans to reach. Women, on the other hand totally bought into this. They seriously believed that this was the only path to fulfillment and anyone deviating from it has no right to call herself a woman. Women also tend to be indispensable, without who the family could not really function. Consequently they started to guard and defend this position jealously. Even if it meant dependence, lack of freedom and in many cases subservience. Women thought this is where their strength lay. And let's face it, it does give us a sense of power and we want to hold on to it.

Times are changing, and so must we. Women are, luckily no longer where they were 20 years ago. We have to now realize that our strength is not from holding on to some make belief power that society at some point had bestowed on us. Our strength must come from within us, and our ability to grow and adapt to the changing situation both in the society and the family. Our strength should be from the fact that we can now accept the challenges of the outside world and yet be the nurturing, loving person that we want to be. Our strength should be our ability to persuade our families to support us when we at times leave home to pursue something which is important to us, just for us.

## Poorest of the poor

Cutting across all classifications of the poor in terms of the underlying system of production is the gender question. Among the most vulnerable households are those headed by women, which numbered about 76 million with a total population of approximately 377 million in the mid-1980s in 114 developing countries. The percentage of female headed households is high (ranging from 9 per cent of rural households in Asia to 31 per cent in sub-Saharan Africa), and is rising — as is the number of women living below the poverty line in 114 developing countries — a figure 47 per cent greater than in the 1965-1970 period.

Estimates of the number of rural women living below the poverty line in 114 developing countries, 1988

Region	Total number of rural women living below the poverty line (millions)
Asia	374
Asia (excluding China and India)	153
Sub-Saharan Africa	129
Near East and North Africa	18
Latin America and the Caribbean	43
Total 114 developing countries	564
Least developed countries	149

Source: The State of World Rural Poverty

Notwithstanding the increasing female responsibility for agricultural production and income generation in rural areas, women have the least access to means of production, receive the lowest wages, and are the least educated. The poverty question has thus become inseparable from the gender question.

Source: The State of World Rural Poverty, IFAD