women have been hired as workers in the export garment sector.

In late November 2007, with Aminul Alam of Brac, I revisited Manikganj to see how Saleha, Boshiron, Shunabon, Sufia, and the other village women we had begun working with in the mid-1970s, were doing. Some of the more dramatic changes in Bangladesh were visible on the drive from Dhaka city to Manikganj town: the urbanisation of the population marked by the massive expansion of Dhaka city in all directions, the industrialisation of the economy marked by the countless factories around the periphery of Dhaka, the construction boom marked by countless high-rise buildings, and the extensive sand dredging along the haurs and rivers to the west of Dhaka.

As we left the industrial suburbs of Dhaka and Savar, the countryside became more rural and the drive more familiar: jute straw stacked near fields, jute fibre hanging to dry, fields-upon-fields in different shades of green interspersed, occasionally, with mustard yellow. Amin informed me that less-and-less mustard was being grown in Bangladesh, and that maize had replaced tobacco in the Manikganj area. After a quick cup of tea at the Ayesha Abed Centre on the edge of Manikganj town, where over 700 women (and some men) are engaged in block printing, screen printing, tie dyeing, embroidery, and tailoring for the Brac chain of Aarong stores. We turned off the main highway onto a country road.

In the late 1970s, this road was roughly paved with brick. Horse carts and bicycles were the main modes of transport. Today, the road is surfaced with a tar composition. Motorcycles, bicycle rickshaws, and public buses are alternative modes of transport.

In the late 1970s, there were no shops in the villages. Today, there are small grocery stores in some villages and small markets at some village cross-roads, with tailoring shops, and shops selling corrugated iron (CI) sheeting, food staples, and other daily necessities.

In the late 1970s, most of the houses were made of mud and straw with thatch roofs -- CI sheeting for a roof was a luxury. Today, most of the houses are made of CI sheeting with cement floors; some are made of cement with CI sheeting roofs.

In the late 1970s, all of the women wore plain blue or green saris with narrow woven borders, did not wear blouses, and went barefoot. Today, most of the women -- except very poor or widowed women -- wear colorful patterned saris with matching blouses and rubber sandals.

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In the late 1970s, when Brac started its poultry programme, women raised local-breed chickens on a free-ranging basis. Today, many women raise improved breeds of chickens, both in coops and free-ranging, and there are poultry farms scattered throughout the villages.

What has become of Saleha, Boshiron, Sufia, and Shunabon? The economic status of all of them has improved -- but to varying degrees. All of their homes are made from CI sheeting with cement floors. All of them have or had (until they became too old or frail to work) multiple sources of income, mostly Brac-sponsored productive activities.

Saleha was an active -- indeed charismatic -- leader of her local women's association. Although she raised poultry and silkworms, Saleha remained more interested in political power and social status than in entrepreneurial activity, perhaps because she was married and her husband tilled their small plot of land until he died. Today, Saleha's married son, who lives next door, works in a Brac horticulture nursery; her married daughter lives nearby. Still strong and active, although in her 70s, Saleha laments the decline of her political power and social status when Brac shifted a local production center from her household to a larger plot elsewhere.

Boshiron, widowed as a young mother with four young sons, was the most entrepreneurial -- taking up various Brac-sponsored productive activities, including poultry and silk rearing; investing her earnings in land to augment what she and her sons inherited from her late husband; and sharecropping out her land. She also became a leader, not only of the local women's association but also in her village. Now thin, frail, and in her 70s, Boshiron was once recognised as a female equivalent of the traditional elder (matbar), and called upon to give advice and settle conflicts. Two of her sons are rickshaw pullers, another works as a local program officer with Brac. The fourth son has twice migrated for work, first to the Middle East and then to the