

The Faces Behind ‘MADE IN BANGLADESH’



Lamia Karim

In conversation with Lamia Karim, Professor of Anthropology at the University of Oregon, Eugene, and author of *Castoffs of Capital: Work and Love Among Garment Workers in Bangladesh* (University of Minnesota Press, 2022), which received the Gregory Bateson Book Prize Honorable Mention 2023.

The Daily Star (TDS): How did you transition to your new research focus on the garment sector in Bangladesh, given your previous extensive research on the prospects and implications of microloans in the country? What prompted this apparent shift from rural to urban settings in your research field?

Prof. Lamia Karim (LK): I am an economic anthropologist specializing in political economy and women's labor. My primary focus lies in the anthropological dynamics surrounding women's participation in the workforce, particularly the recognition of women as visible agents within the labor market. Historically, women have engaged in informal labor within the domestic sphere, contributing to their families and supporting their husbands. For instance, a male vendor selling food in the market often relies on female family members to prepare the food. Consequently, women's labor remains both invisible and uncompensated. Feminist scholars have long advocated for the acknowledgment and inclusion of unpaid work within economic policy.

My interest in this field is also shaped by my personal background. I grew up in a family where women were actively engaged in professional roles; my great-aunt (my grandmother's sister) was a published poet in the 1930s, my mother's first cousin was the first female photographer in what was then East Pakistan, and my mother, along with several of her female cousins, held academic positions as professors and principals of women's colleges. Thus, the sight of women pursuing professional careers was integral to my upbringing. However, I also witnessed the labor of women hired to work in our household—specifically, cooks and cleaners—whose work was often regarded as a natural extension of their identity rather than as respectful employment.

These life experiences made me particularly interested in examining the effects of both waged and unwaged work on women and how social forces condition us to view women's work. Bangladesh is home to two significant industries that center on women's work: the microfinance

into the primary contributor to the nation's economy? Despite witnessing a semblance of women's empowerment, how do you address the prevalent issue of widespread exploitation of women, which has unfortunately remained integral to this sector?

LK: The exploitation of women's labor within the manufacturing industry has a deeply entrenched and troubling history. An examination of industrialization in 19th-century England reveals how poverty forced women, men, and children to the cotton mills of Manchester, where they endured minimal wages and horrific work conditions. A pivotal moment in labor history occurred in the United States in 1911, when the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory fire claimed the lives of 143 workers, in factory conditions reminiscent of what occurred at the Rana Plaza factory collapse that killed over 1,100 workers.

Bangladesh is no different. A complex web of actors—including global retailers, government entities, factory owners, BGMEA, the families of these workers, and Western consumers—contributes to the systemic exploitation of working-class women, thereby facilitating the extraction of labor to yield profits and affordable goods.

The answer to your question is also embedded in cultural attitudes. We are a very class-based hierarchical society. Upper and middle-classes tend to treat people from the lower economic strata as less than them. Many factory owners, managers, supervisors, see the workers as lower than them on the social scale, and

They send home money for a brother's education, mother's medical expense, building a new roof, and so on. Their private lives are also precarious. Most of these women enter the workforce around the average age of fifteen. They are recent rural-to-urban migrants. They are usually brought to the city by a relative or a procurer. Most of them come to Dhaka with no prior knowledge of what it means to live in the city and how cruel and unforgiving the city can be. Many of the young women fall in love with men they meet in the city, who unbeknownst to them may already have a wife. These relationships are tragic and often involve severe domestic abuse. The men in their lives make constant demands on their wages, and if they do not hand the money over, the women are severely beaten. With no family elders, such as a father or an uncle to intercede for them, these women have to cope with these situations on their own. So, one on the one hand, they have attained certain autonomy, they earn wages, they have physical mobility, go to a movie, sit outdoors with friends and have some *fuchka*, met someone romantically, all the things that would be denied to them in rural society. On the other hand, they make many difficult decisions on their that often gets them into serious domestic precarity.

TDS: In your research, you explored the private lives of garment workers, delving into their intimate spheres of love, marriage, and romance. This perspective offers a novel way to understand them beyond the confines of economic analysis. How do you perceive the generational shifts among workers in this sector,

workers, belonging to the middle class signaled the exit from their poverty-stricken rural backgrounds. Factory employment had moved them up the economic scale. Similarly, taking the label of middle class set them apart from the poorer people they encountered in the city. As garment workers they were not like the women who worked as day laborers, cleaners, maids, cooks, and the like. They worked in brick buildings, operating industrial machines. That endowed them with a sense of pride and achievement when compared to their poorer rural and urban counterparts. They were the new symbol of "Made in Bangladesh" that is youthful, shiny, and hopeful. The combination of these factors gave them a sense of a new world of opportunities and their entrance into middle-class status.

TDS: Could you share insights from your conversations with the 16 interlocutors who are older or have aged out of the workforce about their initial aspirations? Additionally, could you discuss the differences observed in their ultimate realities, particularly regarding the changes in life after reaching a mature state within the garment sector?

LK: The sixteen older women, between the ages of 45-55 approximately, I interviewed had earned a limited form of sovereignty over their lives. They left abusive spouses, stood up to factory management when they faced workplace injustices, and tried to create better lives for their children through education. For these factory women, class mobility was a cherished goal that they saw as worth sacrificing for. Their goal was to help their children reach the new middle class

BGMEA, and the government. This is an ongoing struggle.

I did not inspect factories since that was not what I was doing. Safety measures vary across factories. There are factory owners who are forward looking and want to improve work conditions; there are others who think of workers as disposable bodies. The answer to your question requires investigative journalism.

TDS: As automation advances, Bangladesh's impending graduation from the category of least developed countries (LDCs) looms, coinciding with a gradual decline in women's participation in the sector. What are your thoughts on the garments industry as a whole, and what potential changes, both minor and monumental, do you envision that could reshape the prevailing landscape?

LK: With the garment sector accounting for Bangladesh's largest export, generating \$47 billion in 2023 and employing approximately four million workers whose earnings sustain the Bangladeshi economy. To effect meaningful change, it is essential to improve wages, enhance workplace safety, and provide accessible housing, healthcare, childcare, and education for their children. Factory owners resist these improvements, citing pressure from Western buyers who are reluctant to increase costs.

Bangladesh will face increased competition from other LDCs. The Ethiopian government sought to attract Western buyers by guaranteeing wages as low as \$22 per month for workers. Conversations with several garment factory owners regarding the potential loss of



Garment worker enjoying a snack on their day off



Garment worker holding a shirt she bought for her son



Older worker Monoara in her kitchen

they take it for granted that they can treat workers poorly, such as using vile language or to physically hit them. Firing workers under all sorts of fictional pretexts and defrauding them of wages is another way that workers get exploited.

To tackle the problem of violence against women at work, the way forward is the unionization of garment workers, a movement that remains significantly underrepresented in the Bangladeshi apparel industry. Legal NGOs and Human Rights Organizations should be watchdogs scrutinizing the factories for compliance to safety standards. The government too has a crucial role to play in supporting workers' rights. If all these actors could come together, viable change is possible.

TDS: What have your research findings revealed about the daily experiences of women laborers in the apparel manufacturing industry? You mentioned that instead of facilitating sustainable improvements in their lives, the neoliberal economy has perpetuated precarity in their work. Could you elaborate on how this has impacted the lives of these women?

LK: One is the precarity of global supply chains where workers are at the mercy of the global economy. During the pandemic for example, stores closed in the West, factories had to close in Bangladesh, making many workers lose their earnings. This dependence on the global economy is precarity at its worst manifestation because the workers who are the bottom of the supply chain do not control what happens to them. There are no safety nets to support them. Importantly, these workers do not understand how supply chains work, and how a sudden loss in demand in the US or EU will have tremendous effect on their livelihoods.

Precarity at the factory—low wages, long hours, poor quality of housing, poor diet, abuse at the hand of factory management, is constantly compounding precarity in worker's lives. It is well-known that the wages they receive do not cover their living expenses. The women also support their extended families, by extension, another twenty million people (mothers, father, siblings) indirectly depend on their wages.

from the macroscopic view to the individual human experience?

LK: I wanted to understand the attitudinal differences between older and younger women workers. The older women entered in the 1990s, some even in 1980s, at very low wages. All the older women shared a similar background. They came from landless and impoverished families. They described the before and after of coming to work as "Before I could not eat, now I can eat, before I could not send my child to school, now I can send my child to school, before I lived in a house with a leaking roof, now I live in a house with a roof that does not leak." The women had basic literacy of class three or five in a rural school. They could not read their hiring documents, making it easy for factory managers to fire them by making them sign on a document they could not read. Most of the older women came as married women with children, but their husbands had abandoned them. The women had to raise the children on their own. By the time they entered the factory, they already had many familial responsibilities. These women saw themselves as poor women whose goal was to get their children educated and moved up the economic social ladder. After twenty plus years of working, these older women's bodies and hearts were broken.

The younger women were entering with higher levels of education, often between class eight to ten. They could read their hiring documents. The younger were mostly single when they came from the village. They also came from poor families, but they entered factory work at higher wages. They would buy new *salwar-kameezes*, go to the beauty parlors to get their eyebrows threaded, openly hang out with their boyfriends. They did not have children to take care of. Familicidal responsibilities were less burdensome for them. Some of them told me that they would delay marriage because they wanted to experience life and make some money. These younger women exercised more sexual autonomy. They saw themselves as moving up the social ladder. They always called themselves middle-class and they would call the factory "office" and not *karkhana*. They eschewed the term *kormojibi* or *sromik*.

To the younger garment factory

that was unfolding through industrial capitalism in Bangladesh. Yet only two sons of the older female workers had made it to the new middle class, one as an accountant at a factory, and the other as an IT technician, the rest of their children had either entered the garment workforce or they were in other low-paying jobs as vendors, shop-keepers, guards. These older women recognized the limits of upward mobility in a deeply hierarchical society due to their lack of social capital. As one older woman said to me, "My son has received his bachelor's degree. He wants to work in a government office, but I do not have the contacts to help him. He has ended up working at a store." But their voices remained laced with traces of hope—if not for them, then for their children.

These older women entered the workforce when wages were very low, so they had little savings by the time they were forced out of factory work. They suffered from poor health. Their eyesight, fingers, arms were affected from long-term factory work. Kidneys were affected from not drinking water at work to avoid taking toilet breaks, something frowned upon by line supervisors. Many of them suffered from lung infections from breathing the air inside factories that is full of debris of clothing. Many workers were provided masks, but workers did not wear them because they felt hot and uncomfortable. It was a zero-sum game for these women.

TDS: Have you noticed any significant changes in the trade union movement or apparent enhancements in safety measures within this sector following the Rana Plaza incident?

LK: The trade union movement, still insignificant compared to the scale of the workforce, has become more visible after the Rana Plaza factory collapse. After the accident, the global retailers and EU did not have a fig leaf to cover their complicity in ignoring the safety conditions in the factories they were sourcing from. EU, Canada, Australia, and US to a lesser degree, became vocal about the right to unionize and the safety accords were written and implemented, with their many limitations. Trade union leaders have told me that now they have a voice with factory owners,

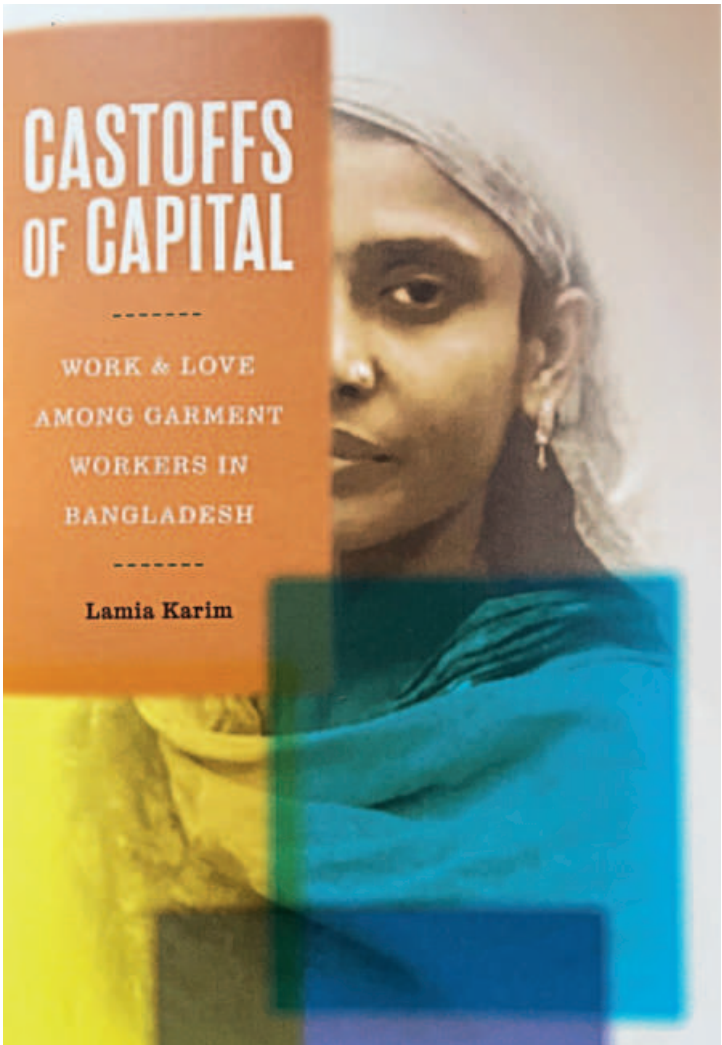
business to competing countries revealed a prevailing belief in their logistical advantages. However, as evidenced by the presence of garments labeled "Made in Ethiopia" in H&M stores, capital will invariably pursue profit at the expense of workers unless robust unionization efforts are undertaken. Such collective action represents a crucial avenue for genuine empowerment and systemic change.

I would recommend diversification from the garment industry to other sectors, and to invest in the domestic market. Here I am arguing for import substitution, so we are not wholly dependent on the vicissitudes of the global economy. While China has transitioned from low-wage apparel manufacturing to high-value sectors such as semiconductor processing, Bangladesh remains stuck on its garment industry. The nation's economic landscape necessitates a forward-looking approach, emphasizing diversification away from apparel manufacturing and the training of workers for more sustainable employment opportunities. But there is an intangible paradox here between the welfare of workers and the welfare of capital. The logic of capitalism is to chase lowest production costs across the globe, devouring the poor and dispossessed on its journey. To harness unfettered capitalism, one needs a systemic change to the economic structure. I do not see that on the horizon.

My goal in writing *Castoffs of Capital* was to humanize these women, to glimpse their world through their eyes, as they graciously allowed me into their lives. I envisioned a future where a Western consumer, poised to purchase a simple tee-shirt or a pair of jeans, could not only see the garment but also feel the pulse of those who made it. I wanted them to visualize the women, to empathize with their stories, and to reflect on the profound consequences of their consumer choices. In this way, I hoped to weave a deeper understanding of the interlocking human tapestry that sustains our global economy.

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The interview was taken by Priyam Paul of The Daily Star



sector pioneered by Nobel Laureate Professor Muhammad Yunus and the overseas apparel production industry. Both sectors have emerged as prominent examples of women's work as empowerment, a debatable point, within the framework of neoliberal capitalism. Therefore, I perceive my intellectual trajectory not as a shift but as a natural progression of my scholarly pursuits.

TDS: How do you interpret the trajectory of the garment sector in Bangladesh, which originated from a global capitalist restructuring that heavily relied on exploiting cheap labor, and incidents of so many accidents eventually evolving