The Ready-Made Garments Industry in Bangladesh: A Means to Reducing Gender-Based Social Exclusion of Women?

Nidhi Khosla

The ready-made garments industry in Bangladesh:
A means to reducing gender-based social exclusion of women?

Nidhi Khosla[1]

Abstract

Women in Bangladesh have traditionally been excluded from taking part in social, political and economic activities by means of institutions such as the *purdah* (veil). However, the rise of the ready-made garments industry in Bangladesh since the 1970s has provided women with opportunities to work outside the home for wages. This change coincided with changes such as a decline in the rural sector, increased emphasis on girls' education and campaigns to improve women's health and reduce fertility. As a result of these changes, the social exclusion of women has reduced considerably. This paper analyses existing literature on women's employment in the ready-made garments industry in Bangladesh using a social exclusion framework. It finds that the impact of the industry on women's exclusion is mixed. Women have greater economic independence, respect, social standing and "voice" than before. However, harassment and exploitation persists. Given the important changes that this industry is helping to bring into women's lives, stakeholders should focus attention on making the industry a more humane and sustainable option for women.

Keywords: gender-based social exclusion, Bangladesh, garments industry

Introduction

Muslim women in Bangladesh have traditionally been excluded from taking part in social, political and economic activities on the basis of the institution of *purdah* which mandates women's seclusion from the society at large. However, many changes have happened in the lives of women in Bangladesh with the advent of the ready-made garments industry, that started in the country in the late 1970s (Kabeer & Mahmud, 2004). The industry employs primarily women workers(about 1.8 million), though supervisors are largely male (Kabeer & Mahmud, 2004). The social changes include greater acceptance of women's employment, increased participation of women in decision-making in the house and in decisions around childbearing and a reduction in fertility, among others. These changes have coincided with other changes such as a

decline in the rural sector and high levels of rural poverty (both of which have pushed women to seek employment in urban areas) and an increased emphasis on girls' education and on women's health as a result of advocacy by NGO (non-government organization) and government programmes.

Since the exclusion faced by women in Bangladeshi society is multi-dimensional, the use of a social exclusion framework that investigates the social, political and economic dimension of women's exclusion, is appropriate. The analysis in this paper is based on the existing peer-reviewed as well as "grey" literature in this field.

The paper asserts that the overall impact of the ready-made garments industry on women's lives is mixed. On the positive side, the industry offers women workers advantages not offered by the other limited and rather arduous avenues of employment available to women such as stone crushing, agricultural labour and paid domestic work(Kabeer, 2004). On the negative side, there is gender inequality and sexual exploitation (Siddiqi, 2003) in this industry. It is therefore important to develop a contextualized understanding of Bangladeshi society, economy and the role and position of women in Bangladeshi society in order to fully appreciate the benefits the ready-made garments industry offers to women, despite its exploitative conditions. The analysis also suggests that policies should be directed towards addressing the specific problems women workers face, in order to make the ready-made garments industry a more humane and sustainable option for women, and a vehicle for change.

Structure of the paper

The section below provides a brief overview of the social exclusion framework, followed by a description of women's social exclusion in Bangladesh. This is followed by a brief description of the important features of the ready-made garments industry in Bangladesh and the key literature on this industry. This is followed by an analysis of how the social, political and economic dimensions of women's exclusion have changed as a result of the ready-made garments industry. Next, the role of international, national and local stakeholders in maintaining exclusion of women, either deliberately or inadvertently is analyzed. The paper ends with acknowledging the limitations of this work, a call for action and concluding comments.

Social exclusion: A brief review

Estivill has defined social exclusion as, "… an accumulation of confluent processes with successive ruptures arising from the heart of the economy, politics and society, which gradually distances and places persons, groups, communities and territories in a position of inferiority in relation to centers of power, resources and prevailing values" (Estivill, 2003). Estivill's definition points to two important aspects of this concept. First, social exclusion has multiple dimensions such as political, social and/or economic. Second, social exclusion comprises dynamic processes. Social exclusion is not an either-or situation in which some entities are socially excluded, while others are not (Estivill, 2003). Instead, there is a continuum that ranges from exclusion to inclusion. Individuals can move along the exclusion-inclusion continuum, as a result of social, economic and political changes at the local, regional and global level(Estivill, 2003). Social exclusion is thus actionable.

Nobel laureate Amartya Sen makes a strong case for analysing social phenomenon using a social exclusion approach (Sen, 2000). He asserts that the concept of social exclusion helps us to appreciate important social, political and cultural deprivations in addition to economic deprivation. Social exclusion prevents people from participating in social, cultural and political life, which may adversely affect their access to opportunities, that in turn affect their income and health, among other things (Sen, 2000). As per Sen , the utility of the social exclusion approach lies in its ability to focus attention on the underlying causes of poverty that may otherwise be ignored; in urging the adoption of a broader definition of poverty (beyond economic deprivation) that will have a wider impact on the poor, and in fostering a richer mix of policy options to address deprivation (Sen, 2000) .

The literature on social exclusion also urges us to investigate the role of various actors at the local, national, regional and global level, that contribute directly or indirectly to maintaining exclusion(Estivill, 2003). Investigating specific policies and measures that different actors can adopt to address exclusion, is important as well (Estivill, 2003). This will be explored in this paper with respect to the ready-made garments industry in Bangladesh.

Social exclusion in Bangladesh

In Bangladesh, social exclusion can be said to be manifested as the discrimination faced by the very poor in health services(Bates, Islam, Al-Kabir, & Schuler, 2003; S. R. Schuler, Bates, & Islam, 2002); as women's exclusion from the formal economy and from social transactions (Amin, Diamond, Naved, & Newby, 1998; N. Kibria, 1995) and as discrimination against marginalized groups such as males who have sex with males, injecting drug users, *hijras*(transsexuals) and sex workers (Shale Ahmed, 2003).

Gender-based exclusion of women in Bangladesh

Purdah, literally meaning veil or curtain, acts to restrict women's mobility by defining their proper space as being within the boundaries of the home (Oommen, 2005) . *Purdah* rules seek to minimize interactions between persons of the opposite sex (Amin, et al., 1998). Accordingly, women are relegated to domestic matters and men are given charge of all matters outside the house (N. Kibria, 1995). *Purdah* is a powerful source of exclusion since it serves to isolate women and defines the socially acceptable behaviour for them to be submissive, ignorant and dependant on men. As a result, girls are not expected to use education in their adult lives and their education is thus relatively neglected as compared to that of boys. Poor families also feel that investing in a girl's education will not bring them any returns since the girl will get married and live in her marital home. Further, girls are married in their teenage years since dowry demands increase with a girl's age and have early pregnancies (S. F. Rashid, 2006). Parents also fear that older unmarried girls may face sexual harassment or crimes such as rape (S. F. Rashid, 2006).

Due to the above-mentioned factors, women's capabilities in the social, economic and political spheres, have previously been compromised in Bangladesh. Females have played mostly filial and marital roles only and moved directly from being girls to becoming women, without passing the intermediate stage of adolescence (Amin, et al., 1998). Despite performing household duties, they were not recognized as productive

economic actors. Employment outside the house was frowned upon. In addition to the isolation caused by *purdah*, women were married off in villages other than their natal village and were thus further isolated (N. Kibria, 1995).

At this point, it should be noted that in the past few years, government and NGOs have helped to bring positive changes such as a greater demand for girls' education, involvement of women in micro-credit activities and a reduction in fertility, among others (Sidney Ruth Schuler, Bates, Islam, & Islam, 2006). It is also possible that women in Bangladesh have much more agency and say in their lives, than has been reported in the literature. So it can be concluded that while the condition of girls and women in Bangladeshi society has not remained static but has improved, wide gender disparities still exist.

The ready-made garments industry in Bangladesh: Key features

The ready-made garments industry in Bangladesh consists of many small to medium garment factories, both registered and unregistered, that produce garments catering to foreign buying houses (Kabeer & Mahmud, 2004). In 2004, there were 3480 factories that employed 1.8 million workers of which 1.5 million were women (Kabeer, 2004). The export income from this industry alone is one of the top three sources of economic growth in Bangladesh (Gibson, Mahmud, Toufique, & Turton, 2004). Some factories offer formal appointments and benefits, while many others have arbitrary hiring and employment practices (Kabeer & Mahmud, 2004). The rapid growth of the ready-made garments industry in Bangladesh has been facilitated by the following factors: cheap labour; lack of employment options for women; simple technology; small amount of capital required; and economic changes and policies that encouraged the growth of this particular industry(Kabeer, 2004; Kabeer & Mahmud, 2004; N. Kibria, 1995; M. A. Rashid, 2006). These factors are inter-related. The relatively cheap cost of labour in Bangladesh is the reason for its comparative advantage internationally since goods can be produced at a lower cost in Bangladesh than in many other countries. This cheap cost of labour is in turn a result of national policies, massive unemployment and the willingness of women to work for low wages (Kabeer & Mahmud, 2004). Women's relative lack of marketable skills and education makes garment work highly attractive to them. Combined with the high supply of labour relative to the jobs and the rising demand for dowries (Amin, et al., 1998; Nazli Kibria, 1998), garment work is highly sought after.

While some literature suggests that most female workers are younger and unmarried, Kabeer (2004) argues that this is an incorrect stereotype. Her works indicate that instead about 40-50% percent of women are married and many are working mothers (Kabeer, 2004). The motivations for joining garments work include both "push" factors such as poverty, marital breakdown and family conflicts as well as "pull' factors such as the desire to improve one's social and economic standing (Nazli Kibria, 1998) and to save for one's dowry (Amin, et al., 1998; Nazli Kibria, 1998). Entry of women into garments work may be opposed by their family. There is often a complex process of negotiation with family members as well as defiance that characterizes this process (Kabeer, 2000, 2004; Nazli Kibria, 1998).

The literature on the ready-made garments industry has described the problems faced by women workers (Absar, 2001; Paul-Majumder & Begum, 2000; Siddiqi, 2003); the impact of employment in this industry on adolescence, health, fertility and marriage

of garment workers(Amin, et al., 1998; Naved, Newby, & Amin, 2001; S. F. Rashid, 2006); sexual exploitation of workers (Siddiqi, 2003) and the impact of the industry on women's position in society and in their families (N. Kibria, 1995). The impact of globalization on labour market decisions by women workers has also been studied (F. E. Ahmed, 2004; Kabeer, 2004).

The existing research appears to conclude that employment in this industry although exploitative, offers women an income and may enable them to postpone marriage and childbearing since their income is valued by their families. Positive changes in other aspects of women's lives have been mentioned but do not appear to have been evaluated as strongly.

By expanding the focus of investigation to include the hitherto social exclusion of women, this paper suggests that the impact of the ready-made garment industry on women's lives may be more significant than has been previously thought to be. The paper investigates whether the ready-made garments industry can be an agent of change by helping to reduce the social, political and economic exclusion faced by women in Bangladesh.

Impact of the ready-made garments industry on different dimensions of exclusion

As has been stated earlier, a social exclusion approach is helpful in identifying the deprivation of social, economic and political capabilities of individuals (Estivill, 2003). This section examines the positive impact of the industry on reducing economic, social and political exclusion of women. This is followed by a discussion of how women's exclusion ironically gets fostered in the same industry.

Economic capabilities

Economic capabilities of women have been enhanced by the employment generated by the ready-made garments industry. In previous decades women were engaged in paid work to a limited extent in the agricultural sector, at construction sites and as domestic maids (Amin, et al., 1998). These activities were not counted in national statistics (Kabeer & Mahmud, 2004). Now in the ready-made garment industry, women on average have the opportunity to receive higher and possibly more regular wages in the industry than in other alternatives open to them. Mahmud (2002) cited in Kabeer and Mahmud (2004) compared wages in the ready-made garment industry and the rural wage labor market(Kabeer & Mahmud, 2004), which is the other main alternative for women that work in the ready-made garment industry. The analysis showed that in the 1990s real wages in the agricultural sector declined, stagnated in the services sector and rose in manufacturing(Kabeer & Mahmud, 2004). However, during some periods, wages in the ready-made garments industry did not keep up with inflation, making survival hard. Nevertheless, employment in garments factories enhances women's economic capabilities to spend, save and invest their incomes. Some are able to save for their dowry, which is a big motivation for the unmarried women to join this industry (Amin, et al., 1998). Others are able to send their children including daughters to school, and manage to hire private tutors for their children out of their limited earnings (Sultan Ahmed & Bould, 2004). After meeting their basic needs of food, rent, clothing and medicines, most garment workers remit a part of their income to their families in the countryside thus meeting their familial obligations as well (Amin, et al., 1998).

Social capabilities

Women's social capabilities have been enhanced as they are now able to develop an identity for themselves, have social visibility and command respect in their additional role of earning members of society (Amin, et al., 1998; Kabeer, 2004). Many women garment workers now report being bolder, more confident and knowing of the ways of the world as they negotiate their work spaces, salaries etc. in an often harsh environment (Amin, et al., 1998). Other changes such as having job designations; switching to the urban dialect spoken in Dhaka that is considered more sophisticated than the rural dialect; and a change in attire, from the relatively formal *saree* to the relatively informal *salwar kameez* that is suitable for the shopfloor, also connote modernity and help women feel confident about themselves (Amin, et al., 1998).

There is a change in aspirations of women and girls and their families towards education, employment, marriage and child bearing. Earlier girls got married upon attaining puberty, thus transitioning abruptly from childhood to womanhood (Amin, et al., 1998). The lack of expectations about future monetary rewards acted as a disincentive to invest in the health and education of girls. There is evidence that now more families are investing in girls' education with a view to engage them in the garments industry (Amin, et al., 1998; S. F. Rashid, 2006). This is occurring simultaneously with changes in attitudes and practices towards girls' education in Bangladesh as a result of sustained advocacy and ground work by many non-government and government organizations (Chowdhury, R, & K., 2003; Sidney Ruth Schuler, et al., 2006).

The potential to get promoted within the factory, creates an upward aspiration for women which is something new and not available in occupations such as domestic work (S. F. Rashid, 2006). Upon gaining experience in the industry, some women change factories as this may improve their prospects for getting higher wages (S. F. Rashid, 2006). Amin et al (1998) say that this "occupational mobility" is unlike that seen in other industries in Bangladesh. Most entrants in the ready-made garments industry are new entrants into the labour force, a pointer to the social changes taking place(Kabeer, 2004).

Women and adolescent girls now have better access to nutrition than before (F. Ahmed, Hasan, & Kabir, 1997) which will improve their health and that of their children, through intergenerational effects. Women also report being able to negotiate their role within families, delay marriage, delay childbearing and have a greater say in their lives (Amin, et al., 1998; S. F. Rashid, 2006). This is significant at the population level since Bangladesh has the highest fertility rate of 147 per 1000 girls for the age group 15-19 than anywhere in the world (S. F. Rashid, 2006). Further, the spillover effect of women's employment in the ready-made garments industry may be that it contributes to changing the existing community norms of early marriage for all girls and not just for working girls. For instance, the Population Council and International Centre for Research on Women (ICRW)reported that lower proportions of girls were married by the age of 20 years (67 % among workers and 83% among non workers) in an area that sends girls for work as compared to 92 % among areas that do not send girls to work (Population Council & ICRW, 2000).

Earlier, security was linked with dependence on males and hence sons were valued more than daughters (Sultan Ahmed & Bould, 2004). However, with the advent of the ready-made garment industry as well as other social changes in Bangladesh, women garments workers are now providing income support and, in some cases, a home for their

parents or widowed mothers. These functions could previously be fulfilled by sons only (Sultan Ahmed & Bould, 2004). This can change the expectation of the support that an adult daughter, married or unmarried is capable of providing and may contribute to equalizing sons and daughters in the eyes of their parents (Sultan Ahmed & Bould, 2004).

The impact of work in the ready-made garments industry on household dynamics is mixed. Blumberg(1984,1991) cited in Kibria(N. Kibria, 1995) has noted that power is derived not from the possession of economic resources per se, but on whether the control of these resources can be exercised. So the question is whether earning an income actually increases a woman's power. Nazli Kibria (1995) conducted 34 in-depth interviews with women workers drawn from five factories. She found class-based differences in whether women retained their earnings or handed them over to the male family members. However, in all cases, the handling of wages served to reaffirm male superiority, by either signifying the women's earnings to be peripheral to that of the man, or signifying that the man was the decision maker for the household. Amin et al speak of how women look upon their income as part of the family income and do not necessarily participate in household decision –making (Amin, et al., 1998). This indicates that women's greater economic freedom may not necessarily change the other aspects of their lives. On balance, however the impact is expected to be positive.

Political capabilities

Women's political capabilities are also being enhanced as women workers especially those in the export processing zone (EPZ) factories, are more aware of their rights now. Strikes in garment factories now make national and sometimes international news ("Garment workers revolt in Bangladesh," 2006). Pressure from the disruption and strikes of 2006 paved the way for discussions with factory owners and government officials ("Garment workers revolt in Bangladesh," 2006), that eventually yielded a new minimum wage for garment workers and other concessions. However trade unions are still dominated by males and they do not necessarily address concerns specific to women such as child care, sexual harassment and problems in getting safe transportation, especially when working late at night (Kabeer, 2004; Kabeer & Mahmud, 2004; Siddiqi, 2003). Some trade unions have started women's wings but the coverage is still low (Kabeer & Mahmud, 2004). Still this is a beginning and has the potential to cultivate female leadership in the years to come.

Exclusion of women within the ready-made garments industry

After examining the largely positive changes brought about by this industry, it is pertinent to examine how exclusion gets fostered in ready-made garment factories. This section looks at gender inequality, poor working conditions in factories and sexual harassment.

The massive employment of women in the ready-made garments industry while a boon for poor, unemployed women is ironically also a reflection of the unequal treatment given to women both within and outside this industry. Garment factories prefer women workers because women are docile (Amin, et al., 1998; Kabeer & Mahmud, 2004; N. Kibria, 1995; Nazli Kibria, 1998; Paul-Majumder & Begum, 2000). Women are often placed in jobs that require lower technological skills, as compared to men (Paul-Majumder & Begum, 2000). As a result, as jobs become more technologically intensive,

men's earnings rise faster than women's who get concentrated in low-skill, low-pay jobs (Paul-Majumder & Begum, 2000). Even after controlling for education and experience, women are paid lower wages for the same job as compared to men. Further, wages are often paid with a backlog and overtime is not recorded properly (Paul-Majumder & Begum, 2000).

Women workers also experience stress due to long hours, few breaks, repetitive work and poor working conditions such as poor lighting and ventilation, unhygienic surroundings and inadequate toilet facilities (Kabeer, 2004; Paul-Majumder & Begum, 2000). Weight loss, fatigue, head and ear complaints and eye problems among women garment workers have been reported (Amin, et al., 1998). Many factory structures are unsafe. Building collapses and fires that injured and killed many persons have been reported (M. A. Rashid, 2006).

Sexual harassment of women workers is rampant, both at the workplace and during commuting. Women's employment and visibility in public may be perceived as a threat to male dominance in society, and various forms of harassment of working women may be an expression of retaliation by males (Siddiqi, 2003). As a result of sexual harassment, many women report shame, embarrassment, inability to concentrate on work, a decline in productivity, fear, anxiety and depression (S. Ahmed, Koenig, & Stephenson, 2006; Siddiqi, 2003). Many leave the job if they are able to afford to do so financially (Siddiqi, 2003). The true incidence of sexual harassment is not known since women are reluctant to reveal personal experiences of harassment (Siddiqi, 2003). At the same time it must be noted that, there is a competing perception as well that garments work entails lower sexual harassment than other forms of employment such as stone crushing, agricultural labour and paid domestic work (Kabeer, 2004; N. Kibria, 1995).

Women's vulnerability to sexual harassment gets increased due to the informal recruitment practices, lack of documented proof of employment, the fear of losing one's job, fear of retaliatory violence in response to filing a complaint and the absence of woman-friendly legal provisions (Siddiqi, 2003). Due to lack of evidence, it is difficult for bodies such as trade unions to pursue such cases successfully (Siddiqi, 2003). Now giving an identity card to all workers has been mandatory under the Bangladesh Labour Law 2006 (GTZ, 2007). This may contribute to strengthening workers' position. Another positive change is that with the passage of the Bangladesh Labour Law 2006, unions are allowed in all factories (GTZ, 2007). The law also has guidelines for setting up "Participation Committees" that have membership from the workers and the Management, and work towards improving workers' welfare and productivity(GTZ, 2007). However, it is not known how well the law is being followed.

Role of different stakeholders in maintaining social exclusion

Various stakeholders at the international, national and community level (Estivill, 2003) contribute to social exclusion, knowingly or unknowingly. A look at these roles and consequences is helpful in order to examine where interventions may be targeted to counter the exploitation of women in this industry.

Internationally, first, as business houses shift their production to places with the lowest cost of production, they inadvertently worsen women's exclusion. This is because in response to such implicit or explicit threats to shift production, factory owners respond by trying to produce at even lower costs, therein cutting back on amenities for workers,

8

reducing their wages and increasing demands for overtime. Demands for overtime adversely affect primarily women since they have household responsibilities and face threats to personal safety when travelling at night (Kabeer, 2004; Siddiqi, 2003). Second, international NGOs fighting for a "social clause" have demanded that certain core minimum labour standards should be imposed through international trade agreements with possible sanctions by the World Trade Organization (WTO) against countries that fail to comply (Kabeer, 2004). The likely consequence of this is that factories will have to spend more money in order to comply with these regulations. In turn, the reduced profitability may force factories to further cut back on amenities or to shut down (Kabeer, 2004). Women may have to then take recourse to other work options which are actually more hazardous such as sex work and pay even lesser than garment factories. Such unintentional negative consequences of well-intentioned policy moves have occurred in the past. For instance, the Harkin Bill of 1993 sought to deter the import of goods produced by child labour into the United States. As a result, factory owners in Bangladesh fired more than 50,000 child workers who subsequently had to find other employment while about 20,000 children remained in the industry (Population Council & ICRW, 2000). The International Labour Organization(ILO) and the United Nations Children's Fund(UNICEF) found that many children that were displaced as a result of the introduction of the Harkin bill shifted to even more hazardous occupations(Population Council & ICRW, 2000; Kabeer, 2000), such as street hustling and stone crushing (Alam). Further, it was easier for boys to get jobs than for girls(Alam). Thus, this well-intentioned bill ended up producing a lot of harm, because it was not informed by the ground realities in Bangladesh (Kabeer, 2000). Further, closure of factories may remove the financial incentive for those parents that educate their girls in order to subsequently engage them in garments work (Paul-Majumder & Begum, 2000). This may adversely affect the current trends of delay in marriage and childbearing.

Nationally, the Bangladesh government has offered negligible social protection mechanisms to women workers in the industry. Laws such as the law that prohibits women's work after 8 pm are not enforced (Absar, 2001). The *Nari O Shishu Nirjaton Domon Ain* (2000) law has made sexual harassment a criminal offence (Siddiqi, 2003). Yet this law uses language that is obsolete and vulnerable to misinterpretation, and does not have special provisions for the workplace (Siddiqi, 2003). The new Bangladesh Labour Law 2006 also does not have any mention of sexual harassment per se, though it prohibits discrimination on the basis of "sex, color and creed" (GTZ, 2007). In the meantime, incidents of violence against women that are employed as garment workers have increased (Siddiqi, 2003). In 1998, while female garment workers accounted for only 2-3% of the total population of women in Dhaka Metropolitan area, they accounted for a disproportionately high 11 % of rape cases (Paul-Majumder & Begum, 2000).

Other stakeholders at the national level such as various trade unions and political parties also inadvertently contribute to exclusion by not representing the specific interests of women workers such as lack of childcare, safety during commuting, problems with night shifts, lack of toilets etc. (Kabeer, 2004; Kabeer & Mahmud, 2004). Such non-representation of women's problems appears to be the situation of trade unions in most industries in Bangladesh (Kabeer, 2004). Trade unions' involvement with political parties also makes employers reluctant to deal with them (Kabeer, 2004). Entities such as political parties have also not addressed women's problems in the industry.

At the community level, negative attitudes and actions towards women's employment in the ready-made garments industry act as a hindrance to women's integration into the formal economy since most women need to rely financially and emotionally on family and social networks for starting this work (Amin, et al., 1998; Nazli Kibria, 1998). Negative attitudes have been expressed towards garment workers who worked late due to the demands of their jobs, as having a sexually dubious character and being disobedient to their elders (Amin, et al., 1998; Kabeer, 2000). Religious leaders are known to have delivered sermons against the trend of women working in ready-made garments factories, as such work was seen as a threat both to public morality and to the social order (Kabeer, 2000). Not withstanding the fact that while the economic contributions made by women are individually valued, at the same time collectively, many experience social stigma (Amin, et al., 1998). Research suggests that community norms do change when small but noticeable numbers of women start work that is different from the existing practice (Gibson, et al., 2004). While community attitudes towards garments workers have begun to change, yet there is scope for much more improvement (Amin, et al., 1998).

Policy options to counter exclusion

Given that social exclusion is a process, economic, political and social changes can help individuals and groups move along the exclusion-inclusion continuum, from being excluded to being relatively included (Estivill, 2003). These changes can be purposively initiated and/or facilitated by the stakeholders interested in improving the situation of women garment workers in Bangladesh. Such stakeholders include the women workers themselves, the factory owners, foreign buyers, the Bangladesh government, governments of major foreign trading partners, aid agencies, local NGOs and human rights bodies that are interested in facilitating sustainable development and women's empowerment in Bangladesh .

Previous policy measures to counter exclusion include initiatives for the education of garments workers, housing for garments workers, day-care facilities for their children, legal literacy for women and documentation of the work of different agencies working with garments workers in order to prevent overlap and disseminate information. These efforts have been undertaken by associations of garments factory owners, NGOs and aid agencies.

Future policy options

There is an urgent need for action to improve the condition of women workers in the ready-made garments industry of Bangladesh. Future policy initiatives should be directed not only at the root causes of women's exclusion but also towards addressing the specific problems that women workers face, in order to make the ready-made garments industry a more humane and sustainable option for women. Based on the problems being currently faced by women garments workers, further emphasis and action should be on the following:

Organise women

First, women need to be organized and made aware of their rights (Kabeer, 2004). One study found that only about 23% of women in factories located in the relatively elite export processing zone were aware of Bangladesh's labour laws (Kabeer & Mahmud, 2004). By coming together, women can generate social capital and by cooperating instead of competing, they can gain even without being formally registered as a group (Baruah, 2004). Women's groups and NGOs are more aware of community realities and are respected more in the community than alternative forms of organizations such as trade unions (Kabeer, 2004). NGOs and women's organizations can initiate a beginning by offering safe spaces where women can share their experiences and discuss options to prevent harassment. They can help build women's confidence and resistance to harassment of various kinds. This might lead to a natural growth of women workers' advocacy bodies with time. Local and foreign aid agencies as well as factory owners can support such initiatives.

Counter sexual harassment

Second, the sexual harassment laws need to be made more specific by correcting the dated language that is couched in terms of a "woman's modesty" (Siddiqi, 2003). The law should protect against all forms of gender-based harassment and not just sexual harassment and at all places, and not just the workplace (Siddiqi, 2003). Support for a broader definition of harassment can be drawn from the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) to which Bangladesh is a signatory (Siddiqi, 2003).

Create awareness of ground realities

Third, stakeholders advocating for a social clause need to be made aware that despite harsh working conditions, the ready-made garments industry represents genuine and better avenues to women (Kabeer, 2004). Thus the effort should be to understand the ground realities. Foreign trading partners need to help Bangladesh to enforce better labour standards such as better working conditions, transport for workers and childcare.

State action

Fourth, the State should focus on industrial diversification so as to protect workers in the event that factories close down as a result of the volatility in the demand for ready-made garment goods, or for other reasons (Kabeer & Mahmud, 2004). The State and NGOs should provide skills training for women so that women are able to receive higher paid jobs within and outside the industry (Kabeer, 2004). The State needs to ensure compliance with laws. This would require hiring more labour inspectors, instituting random inspections, curbing corruption and enforcing penalties for non-compliance with the law (Paul-Majumder & Begum, 2000)

Address negative attitudes towards women's work

Fifth, negative attitudes associated with women's work need to be changed further. These could be addressed by opinion makers such as the media and religious and social leaders.

Improve girls' education

Sixth, the age old recommendation of improving girl's education continues to be relevant. The benefits of girls' education for their overall wellbeing are too well known to need an elaboration here. Specifically in the ready-made garments industry, educated women workers are more aware of their rights and able to earn better salaries than their un-educated counterparts (Kabeer & Mahmud, 2004). Special schools by NGOs that can serve the educational needs of adolescent and adult female workers should be supported by the State and other stakeholders such as buyers. Buyers can attach conditionalities such as a stipulation that factory owners must devote a part of their profits to women's and girls' education, after consulting with local NGOs that may be better aware of the pros and cons of such a strategy and be able to advise on implementation issues.

Limitations

This study has the following limitations. First, the analysis is based on secondary sources, and does not present fresh statistical data. Second, some of the data sources are dated since latest data is not available. Third, most studies cited are cross-sectional studies which precludes establishing causality. Fourth, none of these studies conducted a thorough direct comparison of living conditions and attitudes among non-working women and those employed in the garments industry. The claim of changes brought about by the garments industry is thus based largely on the reports of garment industry workers alone. Hence further documentation of changes in the society due to the ready-made garments industry is recommended. However, the thrust of the paper is not statistical, and hence, these limitations should not prove to be major.

Conclusions: Women's exclusion and the ready-made garment industry

This paper set out to analyse the impact of the ready-made garment industry on women in Bangladesh using a social exclusion framework. The paper sought to identify the various sources of exclusion and the impact of the industry on these. Estivill's assertion (Estivill, 2003) that social exclusion is a dynamic continuum, wherein relatively socially excluded people can be moved towards inclusion, as a consequence of changes in the environment, seems to be supported by the evidence from Bangladesh. Changes brought about this industry have reduced the political, social and economic exclusion, faced by women in Bangladeshi society. This is reflected in the relaxation of norms regarding *purdah*, a boost for girls' education, a delay in marriage and child bearing, reduction in family size and the changing role of women in society, varying degrees of which can be attributed to this industry. While these changes are most evident for women that actually work in this industry, the change in social norms benefits women outside the industry as well.

Women have capitalized on the advantages offered by employment in this industry and found creative ways to negotiate and manage the expectations of their families with their own desires for income and autonomy. A key factor in the assessment of the contribution of the ready-made garments industry to the lives of women garments workers in Bangladesh is that made by the women themselves. As Amin (1998) says, "Women themselves value the modern nature of their work, consider garment work to be a lesser hardship than most forms of agricultural labour, and value the autonomy and independence that come with earning an income" (Amin, et al., 1998). The ready-made

garments industry is almost like a natural experiment that illustrates that change in the economic environment such as the growth of the ready-made garments industry and women's employment therein, can spur further changes in other aspects of women lives. The policy implication is to create more avenues for women's employment so that such change can be more widespread.

Yet sexual harassment and unequal treatment of women persists in this industry. These contradictions in the impact of this industry exist since deep seated inequalities in society are unlikely to go away as a residual effect of economic changes alone. As Estivill contends, different stakeholders at the international, national and community level have an active role to play in reducing exclusion (Estivill, 2003). This analysis identifies policy areas where stakeholders should act to safeguard women's rights and thereby contribute to reducing exclusion. Further research is needed to enhance the understanding of these changes and how they might be initiated and sustained.

References

Absar, S. S. (2001). Problems surrounding wages: the ready made garments sector in Bangladesh. *Labour and Management in Development, 2*(7), 1-17.

Ahmed, F., Hasan, N., & Kabir, Y. (1997). Vitamin A deficiency among adolescent female garment factory workers in Bangladesh. *European journal of clinical nutrition, 51*(10), 698-702.

Ahmed, F. E. (2004). The Rise of the Bangladesh Garment Industry. *NWSA Journal, 16.2*, 34-45.

Ahmed, S. (2003). Social justice and the human rights of MSM in Bangladesh. In D. M. Siddiqi (Ed.), *Human rights in Bangladesh 2003* (pp. 235-245). Dhaka, Bangladesh: Ain o Salish Kendra (ASK).

Ahmed, S., Koenig, M. A., & Stephenson, R. (2006). Effects of domestic violence on perinatal and early-childhood mortality: evidence from north India. *American Journal of Public Health, 96*(8), 1423-1428.

Alam, S. Harkin bill and child workers in Bangladesh garments Retrieved November 19 2009, from http://www.banglarights.net/HTML/garmentsworkers.htm

Amin, S., Diamond, I., Naved, R. T., & Newby, M. (1998). Transition to adulthood of female garment-factory workers in Bangladesh. *Studies in family planning, 29*(2), 185-200.

Baruah, B. (2004). Earning Their Keep and Keeping What They Earn: A Critique of Organizing Strategies for South Asian Women in the Informal Sector. *Gender Work and Organization, 11*(6), 605-626.

Bates, L. M., Islam, M. K., Al-Kabir, A., & Schuler, S. R. (2003). From home to clinic and family planning to family health: client and community responses to health sector reforms in Bangladesh. *International family planning perspectives, 29*(2), 88-94.

Chowdhury, A. M. R., R, N. S., & K., C. R. (2003). Equity Gains in Bangladesh Primary Education. *International Review of Education, 49*(6), 19.

Population Council & ICRW (2000). *Adolescent Girls' Livelihoods. Essential questions, essential tools: A report on a workshop*.

Estivill, J. (2003). Concepts and Strategies for Combating Social Exclusion. An Overview (pp. 131). Portugal: International Labour Organization/STEP.

Garment workers revolt in Bangladesh (2006). Retrieved November 24, 2008, from http://libcom.org/news/article.php/bangladesh-garment-revolt-140706

Gibson, S., Mahmud, S., Toufique, K. A., & Turton, C. (2004). *Breaking New Ground: Livelihood Choices, Opportunities and Tradeoffs for Women and Girls in Rural Bangladesh*.

GTZ (2007). Salient features of the Bangladesh labour law 2006 related to the RMG sector

53. Retrieved from www.gtz-progress.org/2008/index2.php?option=com_docman&task=doc_view&gid=5&Itemid=32

Kabeer, N. (2000). *The Power to Choose: Bangladeshi Women and Labour Market Decisions in London and Dhaka*: Verso Books.

Kabeer, N. (2004). Globalization, labor standards, and women's rights: dilemmas of collective (in) action in an interdependent world. *Feminist Economics, 10*(1), 3-35.

Kabeer, N., & Mahmud, S. (2004). Rags, Riches and Women Workers: Export-oriented Garment Manufacturing in Bangladesh. In M. Carr (Ed.), *Chains of Fortune: Linking Women Producers and Workers with Global Markets* (pp. 133-164): Commonwealth Secretariat.

Kibria, N. (1995). Culture, Social Class, and Income Control in the Lives of Women Garment Workers in Bangladesh. *Gender and Society, 9*(3), 289-309.

Kibria, N. (1998) Becoming a garments worker: the mobilization of women into the garments factories of Bangladesh *Vol. 9. Occasional Paper* (pp. 1-23). Geneva: United Nations Research Institute for Social Development, United Nations Development Programme.

Naved, R. T., Newby, M., & Amin, S. (2001). The effects of migration and work on marriage of female garment workers in Bangladesh. *International Journal of Population Geography, 7*(2), 91-104.

Oommen, M. (2005). Crossing boundaries and stepping out of *purdah* in India. In S. Aikman & E. Unterhalter (Eds.), *Beyond Access: Transforming Policy and Practice for Gender Equality in Education* (pp. 263): Oxfam GB.

Paul-Majumder, P., & Begum, A. (2000). *'The Gender Imbalances in the Export Garment Industry in Bangladesh: Policy Research Report on Gender and Development'*. Washington, DC: World Bank.

Rashid, M. A. (2006, 2006). *Rise of readymade garments industry in Bangladesh: entrepreneurial ingenuity or public policy.* Paper presented at the Workshop on Governance and Development, Dhaka.

Rashid, S. F. (2006). Emerging changes in reproductive behaviour among married adolescent girls in an urban slum in Dhaka, Bangladesh. *Reproductive health matters, 14*(27), 151-159.

Schuler, S. R., Bates, L. M., Islam, F., & Islam, M. K. (2006). The timing of marriage and childbearing among rural families in Bangladesh: Choosing between competing risks. *Social Science & Medicine, 62*(11), 2826-2837.

Schuler, S. R., Bates, L. M., & Islam, M. K. (2002). Paying for reproductive health services in Bangladesh: intersections between cost, quality and culture. *Health policy and planning, 17*(3), 273-280.

Sen, A. K. (2000). *Social Exclusion: Concept, Application and Scrutiny*. Manila: The Asian Development Bank.

Siddiqi, D. M. (2003). *The Sexual Harassment of Industrial Workers: Strategies for Intervention in the Workplace and Beyond*. Dhaka: Centre for Policy Dialogue.

Sultan Ahmed, S., & Bould, S. (2004). " One able daughter is worth 10 illiterate sons": Reframing the patriarchal family. *Journal of Marriage and Family, 66*(5), 1332-1341.