

Women's "Empowerment" in the Bangladesh Garment Industry through Labor Organizing

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To cite this article:

[Chaumtoli Huq. "Women's "Empowerment" in the Bangladesh Garment Industry through Labor Organizing." *Wagadu: A Journal of Transnational Women's and Gender Studies*, Fall 2019, vol. 20, pp. 130-154]

ABSTRACT

By critiquing empowerment in international development discourse and re-conceptualizing it, the article shows how Bangladeshi garment workers have used the trade union space to achieve socio-economic empowerment despite barriers to labor organizing. Further, it argues for the development of working class women's leadership.

Keywords: garment industry, garment workers, labor organizing, empowerment, leadership

"I have rights as a worker. I have rights as a woman. I have rights as citizen. But as workers we are being denied all of these rights.

- *Nasima Begum, Union Leader, Bangladesh Industrial and Garment Workers Federation.*

Empowerment language in development discourse is reasoning that the garment industry has emancipated Bangladeshi women from the patriarchy of home-life and culture, and hides the reality that women's socio-economic position has not in fact improved. Bangladesh's garment workers remain the lowest paid globally. This empowerment language has been employed to separate labor organizing from women's issues, because it allows the government of Bangladesh to appeal to Western donors while managing the growth of the garment industry in hopes of creating an industrial elite without having to make meaningful changes in the rights for women workers. It suffices to provide women jobs as proof of their empowerment, but stops short of any efforts to improve the working conditions of women or change the double-burdens they experience at work and home. In this regard, Nasima's quote is an astute observation of the denial of her rights as a woman and worker, but also as a citizen of Bangladesh who is entitled to labor rights and protection from the state.

This article will show how the trade union movement space in Bangladesh has provided, and can continue to provide women workers a platform and organizational vehicle to exercise their agency at the workplace, which might also include addressing issues in home-life. Women workers have achieved some success in realizing concrete socio-economic demands through trade unions and labor organizing despite challenges including social and legal barriers to labor organizing and patriarchal dominance of male union leaders.

However, this success is only possible if women are in leadership positions in their unions, and not in a paternalist role vis-a-vis their male trade unionists, and broader changes are made to labor laws. It is a space that feminists and other progressive allies must focus their time and attention if they truly would like to see women's rights improved, and more importantly, develop working class women leadership.

Brief Background on Bangladesh Garment Industry

Bangladesh's garment industry is said to be the largest formal manufacturing industry to employ women. (Abrar, 2002) Women make up over 80% of the estimated 4 million person workforce. The composition of the workforce was not by accident, but a confluence of an explicit domestic national economic policy to increase foreign investment, deregulation, and promotion of female labor as cheap labor for the industry. Bangladesh's independence in 1971 ushered a short-lived "socialist" economic vision, where industries were nationalized and managed by the state, often referred to as state-managed capitalism. (Rahman, 2014) It was not seen as socialist because the nationalization of industries allowed a politically connected class to gain wealth. This state-dominated economic policy quickly gave rise to a more private-sector economic policy through the 1975 Industrial Investment Policy, which withdrew restrictions on private-sector participation in manufacturing industries and allowed direct foreign investment. By 1979, 40% of the nationalized industries had been handed to private entrepreneurs. (Hassan, 2018) These domestic policy changes were welcomed by pro-market economic policies of the World Bank and allowed for greater deregulation in the 1990s, which many advocates characterize as reflecting a more neoliberal socio-economic policy. Here, I use neoliberalism broadly to mean a set of political, cultural, and

economic policies cohering to an ideology that among other features: favors free market, minimal regulation by state and civil society actors or necessitate private-public ventures; gives priority to corporate interests over promotion of social goods and benefits; views corporate actors as equal to individual, marginalized actors in our global economy; and promotes an individual-versus-collective vision of rights. (Harvey, 2007) This broader definition allows us to see how women's empowerment rhetoric from international development professionals expressed often in individual terms is aligned with free market economic policies.

This state-sanctioned shift in economic policy from state-managed capitalism under the guise of a socialist vision to neoliberalism, which favored trade and free markets, catalyzed the growth of the garment industry from 1.2 million in revenue in the 1980s to 22 billion now. Factors that favored the entry of Bangladesh into the global garment industry were the rising labor costs of production in the global North and the imposition of quotas on previous garment supplying countries such as Taiwan and South Korea, which made Bangladesh attractive for garment production for its cheap labor. This shift towards a market-oriented approach to economic development was also the result of structural adjustment policies of the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund (IMF) that focused newly independent countries on private market approaches to development and moving away from nationalization efforts.

The 1980s to 1990s was the height of neoliberal economic policies, and the garment industry was promoted, and is still promoted, as the economic development course for Bangladesh. During this time, many involved in the international development field through NGOs also praised the garment industry as empowering women by providing a pathway to industrial work. In fact, as discussed below, this promised empowerment of women did not bear out and served

to push women to urban areas from rural areas, disrupting social and kinship relationships that, while far from perfect, made them vulnerable to the precarity of the global market.

Critique of Women's Empowerment Rhetoric

In the late 1990s and early 2000s, critique of the empowerment rhetoric espoused by development professionals began to emerge, and now, the predominant narrative is that women have gained some economic freedom from working in the garment industry, but there is finally a recognition of the inherent exploitative nature of the industry. (Kibria, 1995) In “Engendering the Garment Industry”, a 2005 report commissioned by the World Bank, researchers acknowledged that while the garment industry brought unprecedented wage opportunities for women, it also gave rise to new vulnerabilities in terms of working conditions and health and living conditions in slums. (Majumdar, 2006) This acknowledgement by donors of the bitter-sweet nature of employment in the garment industry has not paved the way to any strategies and solutions to addressing the root cause of the exploitation. A 2011 report for the World Bank arrived at similar conclusions that “[d]espite the hard and exploitative nature of garments work, women and girls have gained autonomy and greater bargaining power within households,” but acknowledged that conceptions of empowerment focused “predominantly on individual and economic empowerment, and that this was at the cost of more collective and more political forms of power.” (Hossain, 2012) The empowerment rhetoric was thus acceptable in development discourse and even by Bangladesh so long as it continued to bring women into the garment industry for cheap labor. Here, I am using development discourse critically as a series of ideas that promote market approaches and capitalism as the path

to advancement of countries in the global south and the systemic arrangement of socio-cultural relationships within society to promote those ideas. (Naz, 2006)

For middle-class feminists in Bangladesh, it served as a liberal framework to speak about working class women without upending any economic framework or challenging the status quo. It must be mentioned that some women's rights NGOs did engage in consciousness-raising programs around women's rights, and in the 1990s we observed the early formation of trade unions in the industry. (Akter, 2014) Garment organizer Kalpona Akter spoke about "awareness classes" on labor rights at an event hosted by the Solidarity Center in Bangladesh then and how they helped workers form an independent union for workers called Bangladesh Independent Garment Workers Union Federation (BIGUF). (Akter, 2014, p. 46) Lamia Karim, in her piece, "Analyzing Women's Empowerment: Microfinance and Garment Labor in Bangladesh," attributes this attention on women's issues in the 1990s due to a series of conferences and projects at the international level including Cairo Population and 1995 Fourth World Conference on Women. (Karim, 2014) She writes that women's empowerment as both a model for economic development and women's rights "coincided with worldwide changes in economic restructuring and the opening of markets in many countries." (Karim, 2014, p.153) States like Bangladesh in this free market development model were encouraged to work with NGOs who were aligned with these policies. These NGOs typically provided gender sensitivity workshops and focused more on how many attended the workshops than any study on whether the trainings actually changed the behavior of participants or social norms around gender. Beyond consciousness-raising efforts, there was no organizing focused explicitly on the labor rights for women workers. This is in part because the state and industry stakeholders were not in fact committed to any change in gender relations or power relations of workers in the factories.

Despite fears that the industry would be in jeopardy once trade quotas from Multi-Fiber Arrangements (MFA) were eliminated, the garment industry expanded into the 22 billion dollar industry it is today. MFA was an international trade agreement on textiles and clothing from 1974 to 2004. There are still no efforts to change this expansion of the industry as the state looks towards a 2022 goal of \$50 billion export. So long as programs spoke about women's empowerment and rights without changing the power balance between employers and workers, the neoliberal narrative allowed for continued business as usual. These efforts were not linked to any organizing effort by workers.

Reconceptualizing Empowerment

In this piece, I draw from transnational feminist scholars of Bangladeshi origin such as Elora Halim Chowdhury, Naila Kabeer, Lamia Karim, and Dina Siddiqui, who have developed a robust critique of the empowerment rhetoric from their different disciplines such as economics, anthropology, women's studies, and on different issues such as micro-finance and labor as well as how it has been employed to address social relationships such as gender and Islam. (Chowdhury, 2011; Kabeer, 2011; Karim, 2014, Siddiqui, 2009) Siddiqui noted in her piece, *Do Bangladesh Factory Workers Need Saving?: Sisterhood in the Post-Sweatshop Era*, that empowerment discourse received scant scrutiny because it promoted the neoliberal economic policies of the time. (Siddiqui, 2009) Moreover, she noted that micro-credit policies of Grameen Bank and the employment opportunities of the garment sector were the two sites that "socially sanctioned faces of women's emancipation in Bangladesh." (Siddiqui, 2009)

In a critical study, "Does Paidwork Provide a Pathway to Women's Empowerment," Kabeer reconceptualizes empowerment broad-

ly to include "women's sense of self-worth and identity, their willingness to question their own subordinate status, their control over their own lives and their voice and influence within the family." (Kabeer, 2011) Kabeer noted that it is not paid work in of itself that was transformative but the kind of work. Women who had control over their income, had savings/insurance accounts in their own name, are able to move around in the public sphere, and know about their labor rights, are the most transformed by paid work. Relevant for this article is her consideration that empowerment cannot be limited to the individual level but must examine whether "paid work has impacted on women's political consciousness and agency, on their awareness of their rights, their agency as citizens and on their willingness to take collective action against social injustice." As such, Kabeer's definition of empowerment includes what she terms as agency, resources, and achievements. She defines agency as the ability to make and put into effect choices. Resources are how agency is exercised and achievements are characterized by outcomes. Empowerment she writes "entails change." (Kabeer 2011) I note that this definition echoes similar categories found in Nasima's quote at the beginning of this article on rights that translate in the workplace, their role as women and as political subjects.

Using Kabeer's definition of both personal and political transformation as a measure of empowerment, in the thirty-plus years of the garment industry, women have not been objectively empowered by their mere participation in the industry except perhaps by the tangible benefit of individual confidence from labor participation that some women have expressed they experienced. While this self-confidence is not to be underestimated, and serves as the basis for organizing and development of leaders, it is not sufficient. In this reconceptualization of empowerment, the criteria is whether this self-confidence impacts women's ability to make choices, increases awareness of rights, and allows them to take collective action

to bring about measurable outcomes and change. In this regard, garment worker participation in labor organizing has been empowering because it increases their awareness of rights, allows them to use organizing and the trade union space to bring about measurable changes and outcomes, and has motivated them to take on leadership roles in their factory level unions, and in some instances, national unions.

Changes in the lives of garment workers such as wages have increased due to labor movement agitation. Protests in 2013 and again in 2016 by garment workers led to the increase of wages. (Yardley, 2013; Safi, 2018) When women take this so-called empowerment rhetoric to organize for themselves through trade unionism, or other forms of collective action, employers, police and the state respond violently. During mobilization efforts for improved labor conditions, women are not spared by the police. In August 2014, when workers of the Tuba Group were mobilizing for their wages, they found themselves at the other end of rubber bullets and batons and were brutally beaten. Tuba Group was owned by Delwar Hossain, the same owner of Tazreen Fashions, where over 112 workers died in a garment factory fire. Labor organizer Hasina Akter of Bangladesh Center for Worker Solidarity shared her personal story of being assaulted by her employer's thugs when she attempted to organize a factory in Dhaka, leading to her hospitalization. More recently, in January 2019, police used water cannons and tear gas to disperse a group of workers striking for poor pay. Women were not spared because they were women organizing for their rights as workers through the trade unions. Violent responses to workers and women organizing are also happening in a political context where dissent is also increasingly suppressed. As such, mere participation and increased personal self-confidence from labor participation has not led to an empowered garment workforce because the state and political violence restrict women's

agency to improve their working conditions. It is only when women have organized collectively that they have achieved concrete gains.

Even with women's participation in the industrial labor force, they still shoulder the majority of the household work, which indicates how gender norms have not changed. This is no different than women's unpaid work in the household as part of rural economies, except in home-based small-scale agricultural production, where women exercised some limited autonomy at home because they assisted in agricultural production. This raises another bias of development professionals and middle-class women in women's organizations, that rural women were new to "labor" or work. In "Class, Patriarchy, and Women's Work," Cain, Rahman and Nahar found that the hours of work for men and women in rural Bangladesh were the same, except men devoted more of their time to income-earning work through wage work and crop production, whereas women allocated time to home production, which includes food processing such as rice, firewood gathering, food preparation, and cultivation of crops near their home. (Cain, 1979) With increasing poverty reflected in their data from 1976-1978, probably caused by changes in national economic policies, poor women without male or kinship support were left vulnerable to "fend for themselves." (Cain, 1979) Cain, Rahman and Nahar recommended policies to create employment for rural women and cautioned against the mechanization of food processing which would erode the already "fragile female labor market" where women have found some income potential. Their study, although from 1970, helps us to understand how the push towards export oriented industries as a path to development for the newly independent Bangladesh meant that rural women were displaced from their primary role in agricultural work such as preserving seeds, caring for livestock, post-harvest processing along with home-based farming to meet self-sufficiency. Pushed to urban areas, women no longer could rely on joint household structure of rural

economies for support in household work. This has resulted in their share of household work increasing in comparison to their involvement in home-based agriculture.

Women in the garment sector also do not necessarily maintain control over their income. Workers often report handing over their wages to the male head of household, if one exists. What women are often left with is an abstract sense of empowerment, without the material or socio-economic conditions of change. Naila Kabeer describes this complexity well in her essay:

From the point of view of women workers, it is clear they do not see work in the garment industry as a humanely sustainable livelihood option in the long run. On the other hand, it has had significant effects in the personal arena of their lives, including in their capacity to negotiate with dominant family members ... to be perceived and valued as earning family members. What it has not done is to enable them to organize themselves as workers and to use their collective power to negotiate a better deal for themselves at work or in society at large. (Kabeer, 2004, p. 152)

Women's Organizations and Garment Workers

Given this history and framing of empowerment, poor and working class women in Bangladesh have had limited spaces to resist, both as workers and women. Mainstream women's organizations in Bangladesh have not been able to adequately incorporate the issues of working class women, specifically garment workers. The mainstreaming of women's organization under the development agenda has meant women's organizations raised issues of working women broadly, but have not been able to incorporate garment workers issues into their cause. Lamia Karim suggests that due to "deep penetration of development discourses through

NGOs" that have shaped feminist discussions "one should not be surprised by the lack of attention paid to working class by Western donors." (Karim, 2014) Chowdhury notes that while the NGOization of development provided feminists resources to mobilize and build transnational networks, they were unable to form "transformative alliances across class, ethnicity and grass-roots based agenda." (Chowdhury, 2011, p. 167)

There is no reason to think women workers would not be responsive to women's organizations. Uniformly, women union leaders at the factory level that I have interviewed as well as the few women leaders at the national level articulated clearly what would be feminist demands. Fatima Begum, a member of National Garment Workers Federation, shares that she sees no difference between men and women, and urges female workers to come forward to take leadership positions at their factories. This is echoed by other female leaders at the factory level at other unions. Anju Begum, an elected factory leader and member of Bangladesh Garment and Industrial Workers Federation said: "I want women workers like me to take a leadership role and try to become president of the union." (C. Huq, A. Begum Interview, 2015) It is possible that this consciousness around gender is attributable to their participation in garment work from the last twenty years, but it is most probably due to the fact that the women I interviewed were part of labor organizing efforts.

Shahida Parveen Shikha, of the Bangladesh Trade Union Kendra shares in a video recorded interview that women's organizations can play a specific function in terms of raising demands, and mobilizing civil society for support around those demands. In fact, in the early 1990s, some women's groups did do this but these efforts were not sustained. However, for Shikha, it is only through collective labor bargaining with employers that workers can realize those demands in the workplace and use the negotiation process to expand

rights. Outside of the organizing space, she argues that women's groups can only raise women centered demands, but there are few mechanisms for those groups to actualize those demands. The use of the collective bargaining process within labor contract negotiations to obtain women's specific demands is practical if we observe the snail's pace at which legislative process has progressed on changes to the labor law. It is in this context, women workers are empowered because they are able to use their collective power to achieve concrete goals such as enforcement of maternity leave benefits and promotion of women to supervisory roles.

Feminist or women-centered organizations can be potential allies in articulating demands for workers. Women groups have articulated the demands of garment workers but not in any sustained, collaborative way. Chowdhury in "Transnationalism Reversed" details the complexities of the role of women's organization in Bangladesh as complicit with a neoliberal economic agenda, but also as dissidents pushing the boundaries. (Chowdhury, 2001, p. 159) She notes that many women-specific NGOs tend to have a "class-based characteristic" often headquartered in urban areas and led by western educated urban elites. (Chowdhury, 2011, p. 160) This confirms my own observation that women's organizations and trade unions interact infrequently, and it is often women trade union leaders that raise women worker's issues. This leads to my conclusion that the development of women labor organizers and their leadership are critical to addressing issues of women workers in Bangladesh, and to challenging the male dominance of trade unions.

Framing Workers' Rights Through A Gender Lens

The failure to see women both as workers and their social relationships as women has led to policy myopia among women's organizations, trade unions and global labor advocates. The male domi-

nance in trade unions and the elitism/classism of women's organization may explain some of this myopia. However, the neoliberal economic policies of the past decade that constructed women's issues as distinct from labor issues were also a contributing factor.

This failure by labor advocates to recognize specific women's issues for women workers was apparent in the Rana Plaza disaster. In the summer of 2013, I interviewed survivors of the Rana Plaza tragedy and learned that pelvis fractures, injuries to reproductive organs, and urinary tracts were common due to the building collapsing on their bodies. Media and labor advocates focused on limbs lost and campaigns to get prosthetics through donor agencies. There was no mention of the impact of the building's collapse on women's reproductive health or inability to maintain intimate sexual relations. Survivors of the earlier Tazreen Factory fire confided to me that they feared their husbands would abandon them; neither can they work nor can they bear any children. The majority of the women working in the industry are at the peak of childbearing age, between their teens and thirties, and so, this fear is a real concern. Mental health services focused on post-traumatic stress counselling. There was no conversation on these gendered aspects of mental health concerns and worries. As such, without a gendered lens, there was a gap in reproductive and also mental health services for women as well as comprehensive healthcare services for garment workers. Even where factories are required to have health clinics, women centered health services are absent.

The omission of gender was also apparent in the compliance codes passed after Rana Plaza such as Accord and Alliance, as detailed by scholars Farheen Alamgir and Ozan N. Alakavuklar in their paper, "Complicant Codes and Women Workers (Mis)Representation and (Non) Recognition in the Apparel Industry of Bangladesh". They accurately describe this omission as representing workers as "gen-

derless” (Alamgir, p.2) They found that by categorizing and generalizing women factory workers solely as workers, the Accord and the Alliance has legitimated the misrepresentation of their unique needs, rights and entitlements. Further, based on their findings, they argue that “there have been no structural, social, or cultural changes in terms of women’s status at the workplace” (Alamgir, 2018, p. 12). Nasima’s quote above also reflects the importance of this distinction of her rights as a worker and her rights as a woman.

More recently, there has been greater awareness of the particularized issues that women workers face in the garment industry such as sexual harassment, but more needs to be done.

Role of Trade Unions and Labor Organizations to Create Working Class Women’s Space

Trade unions or collective labor organizing spaces can play a unique role in creating a working class women’s space to articulate both their rights as workers and women. To do so, they must cultivate and develop leadership among the poor working class women, be comfortable to move outside the traditional domain of labor organizing, and address patriarchal inequities in the home. Here, I am including organizations that are not formally registered as unions, but actively mobilize workers. Given the politicization of the union registration process, some labor groups fail to obtain registration as formal unions though they are engaged in labor mobilizing work. An example of such a group is the Bangladesh Garment Workers Solidarity coordinated by photographer and organizer Taslima Akter. Further, in referencing trade union spaces, I mean to include not only the formal organizations of unions, but also the informal socio-political space created by those formal structures that foster cooperative activity, and social interaction. (Hickson, 2018). Hickson writes that the value of trade union activity is not limited to in-

fluencing decisions at the workplace or a check on employer mistreatment, but it also gives individuals a "distinct space" to develop a "solidaristic community" and connectedness based on mutual cooperation and trust. (Hickson, 2018)

In making this argument, I am mindful of the complex and varied governance structures of trade unions in Bangladesh, some of which are closely aligned with dominant political parties, and their overall disunity, as discussed in Ahmmed, Hossain and Khan's article, "Building Trade Union Unity in Bangladesh: Status, (In)Effectiveness Factors, and Future Strategies." Even there, the authors note that despite challenges to overall trade union effectiveness, trade unions have opportunities to work outside political party influence and can mobilize workers outside of the present political formations. It is within these constraints and from my research that I have observed that spaces for women workers are promising.

In a 2009 International Labour Organisation report submitted by Bangladeshi Institute for Labor Studies (BILS) on women's participation in trade unions, researchers found that the overall legal restriction on unions, the governance structures of trade unions, and hostility of male family members and male union members posed systemic barriers to women's participation. (BILS, 2009) Not surprising, unions that have proactively cultivated policies to recruit women members and made space for women's leadership led to the increase of women membership. Still, women's issues remain relegated to women's committees separate from the leadership team, but trade unions need to integrate women's issues into the overall governance of unions. From my interviews of factory level-elected union leaders, women's issues become integrated when women take on leadership roles in the union, and more women are doing so because they see their leadership as resulting in concrete economic gains for their families.

In the last fifteen years, trade unions have been actively organizing women in the garment sector and we are observing some early yields of this work. In the 1990s, scholar Petra Dannecker observed that women did not participate in labor unions, and there were few unions. (Dannecker, 2000) This is an accurate observation, as it was around this time that women led Bangladesh Independent Garment Workers Union (BIGUF) began forming. I echo here Dannecker's observation that while much of the literature around the garment industry centered on their exploitation, there are few writings demonstrating how women are actively resisting this exploitation and organizing. I attribute this absence of writing at that time in the 1990s to the dominant discourse on women's empowerment discussed above, which focused solely on labor market participation and not the more recent reconceptualized forms of empowerment that Kabeer discusses which looks at collective action. This piece seeks, in fact, to explore this gap through individual interviews, focus groups, and observations. In the last decade, we have seen visible, women leaders on the national level, such as Kalpona Akter and Nazma Akter, and many more women at the factory level.

Women's leadership in trade unions is a contributing factor on whether women's issues are addressed. (PRI Report, 2015) Women labor leaders face the dominance of male leaders in the garment industry. Nazma Akter shares a common problem where female organizers are often engaged in tasks or the field level organizing, but are not brought into strategic decision-making. (N. Akter, personal communication, 2015). While women may occupy leadership roles at the factory level, they are still not able to take on leadership roles in the larger union or federation of unions which comprises of several factories.

Women garment workers were not always susceptible to organizing. Organizers see a shift in women's perception of organizing in

the last decade. Unions will have to make a concerted effort to cultivate and develop the leadership of women in their unions. This will not only involve educating them on their rights as workers, or skills to negotiate with employers, but unions will have to be comfortable with engaging on issues that fall outside the traditional domain of labor demands, and engage with workers on issues at home.

As some progressive minded trade unions have begun to center women in their organizing efforts, women's participation in unions have increased. In an 2015 interview, factory level male union leader Mustafa Kamal shared with me the importance of making maternity leave benefits for workers a central demand and links the failure to provide health benefits to women as general workplace safety concerns. (C. Huq, M. Kamal Interview, 2015) The logic he shares is that if women are not able to obtain healthcare, they will not be healthy at work, and this could lead to more workplace accidents jeopardizing all workers. In the example of BIGUF, the bylaws of the trade union require women in executive leadership. Women's active participation is not only the benevolence of progressive male trade unionists, but institutional measures have been put in place to ensure and cultivate their leadership in the unions, which has led to women centered demands being raised.

Trade unions have benefited women workers. This is probably why the women workers I interviewed during my research are unions' most vocal supporters. In fact, globally, women and ethnic/racial minorities in the United States tend to highly favor unions despite internal challenges of racism and sexism because on balance participation in unions counters the race and sexism of labor markets. (Institute Women's Policy Reserch, 2015) Women in elected factory level leadership positions can use procedural mechanisms through the union's collective bargaining and negotiation process, as well as informal means, to advance their demands. The women

workers I have interviewed, for example, have used the trade union structure to collectively enforce their entitlement to maternity benefits. While Bangladesh labor law allows for maternity leave benefits, it is rarely enforced in the garment industry. As soon as an owner learns a worker is pregnant, she is terminated. Even if she is not, she is not given the legally owed benefits, which can have deadly consequences. In one case shared by Shornali Akter Yasmin of Sommolito Garments Sramik Federation (SSGF), a mother expecting another child was unable to afford quality prenatal care because her employer did not provide her legally entitled maternity leave benefits, and as a result, she died during childbirth. Yasmin spoke of using collective power to seek compliance of maternity leave benefits, and how with the union, the employer is legally required to negotiate with them.

Women workers being able to seek compliance of maternity benefits through union and labor organizing reveals that the trade union space is a means by which their demands *can* be raised. However, it should be noted that in those instances, the leadership comprised of women and male co-workers who understood the importance of these demands as mentioned earlier in the case of Kamal. So, it is not enough to use the existing trade union mechanisms, given the male dominance of union, the slow pace of legislative change, and existing patriarchal social relations without proactively building women's leadership at the factory level.

Women labor leaders involved in the trade union movement, especially those at the factory level, expressed confidence from their participation in labor mobilization efforts and often endure obstacles at home in their unionization efforts. (C. Huq, A. Begum Interview, 2015) I observed factory level leaders adept at navigating and managing family relations as they continued their work within the union. They share stories of speaking to the husband and

extended family about the benefits of the union for the family when they identify a female worker as a potential leader but know her family may prevent her participation in the union. The trade union space allows women to utilize these informal advocacy strategies as a collective to address patriarchal barriers to their leadership. Even in instances where the worker complains of domestic violence at home, fellow union members have spoken to the husband to stop the violence. These efforts by union leaders reflect an understanding that it is not enough to focus on issues at the workplace, but many barriers at home prevent women workers from participating in collective organizing efforts and taking on a leadership role in their unions. In a few anecdotal instances, speaking to husbands of labor leaders, like Fatima Begum and Nasima Begum, they have remarked on their initial objection to their wives participating in unions, but were persuaded as they saw tangible benefits in the household. Specifically, they observed labor organizing has led to some modest benefits such as small raises and job security. As food and housing costs rise, but the wages of workers have not risen in comparison, worker households would need to see prospect of the economic gains of unionization.

Increasingly, you can observe women garment workers protesting in the streets for wage demands and, at times, taking strong protest actions. It is not uncommon to see a visual of a garment worker face to face with police armed with shields and batons. Whether such confidence existed before, but because of our racialized gendered stereotypes of garment workers as being docile, early literature on the industry did not comment on it, or whether it is due to a recent change with increased visibility of female leaders, the confidence is clearly observable now. This increased confidence is often attributed to labor market participation, and while some of it can be attributed there, as women find themselves an income earner in their households and supposedly exerting greater say, I argue it is

mainly attributed to the labor organizing that has been taking place in the last 20 years with groups like National Garment Workers Federation, Sommolitho Garments Sramik Federation and BIGUF among others.

Conclusion

Since the 1980s, the garment industry as an export oriented industry has grown tremendously and while women's labor market participation has also increased, it is not clear that their mere participation has led to their empowerment or economic changes that benefit women workers. Garment workers are still the lowest paid in the world. Despite these challenges in using the collective labor organizing spaces or more formal trade unions to articulate women's workers issues, as women's leadership is developed and unions move beyond the traditional domain of labor demands, women's issues have come forward on the agenda.

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RESUME

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