



Revisiting Women Empowerment

A retrospect on the other side of Readymade Garment Industry

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Abstract

Empowerment in the garments industry is the pivot of a seesaw, where at one end there are women and then there's the other end that carries all the obstacles. This study works with women empowerment concentrating on Bangladesh garments workers. We might assume or take for granted that once these women are employed to also be consequently empowered. My ethnography intends to examine this notion by breaking the whole concepts in to aspects naming Economic, Political and Social Empowerment respectively. The results were rather positive and yet disappointing because these women workers are ironically bound to leave their jobs after a certain time and the supposed empowerment they achieved is at great stake or ravished at that stage. Furthermore, at one end being unemployed and at other end getting subjected to abuse and social struggles puts the built empowerment and its concept and existence to test.

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Chapter One: Introduction

1.1 Statement of the problem

Trying to pick up the paces with development, Bangladesh is currently ranked as the 8th populated country in the world, which calculates to that in every 46 people on the planet there is one resident of Bangladesh (United Nations Data, 2015). However, this vast number which at one point was the strength now has become a burden and owing to that, the country lagged behind for the longest period of time. One of the reasons is the social structure that tended to ignore the needed orientation of women in the labor force and the welfare that might be ushered on both the genders. In addition, development policy works has also inclined to neglect women's position as a separate interest group due to patriarchy as well as religious formation. The work of several NGOs and government intervention on making women a part the economy and in addition, the ever growing poverty that they face in an everyday basis has made women to work their ways out of home (Hossain, 2011). One of the key aspects of this impeccable social formation is the garments industry.

According to Labor Force Survey (1999-2000), those of who are above fifteen years of age, consists of 23.9 percent or 8.6 million of entire labor force (Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics 2005). The survey also suggests that the percentage of waged labor participation has gone over 52.3 percent in 1999-2000, which was 22.6 percent in 1995-1996. The biggest share of the women mentioned above work in the garment industry. To put it statistically, a total 69 percent of female employees are working in that sector. It is also to be mentioned that the garment sector accounts for one-fifth of women labor force in the manufacturing sector (Rahman, 2009).

The distinct scenario that this newly found employment of women has posited can be found in Shelley Feldman's words, where she describes the altered image of the streets of Dhaka. She found more women walking along the road than the last time she was here. The women were often in groups of six or more when the shift changes at the garment factories where they work. The factories

could be found throughout Dhaka city. The new image of women leaving for work every morning outstand Shelley Feldman's previous experience on how these women were hidden behind the doors, or even accompanied by male figures from their family wherever they went.

Resurgence of women has perhaps curtailed how normative women were symbolized, they now have more autonomy in their households, in marital decisions and in all the other decisions they were excluded from before has reversed with their newfound autonomy in the labor force. Women of lower, lower-middle class seem to be taken over the public/private sector now more than the early 1970's. These employment opportunities have certainly affected the distribution of power within the family structure as well the society given gender roles. Further work on this issue suggests that although their work on their husbands' farm didn't change their autonomy to affect decision making within household, it was somewhat equivalent to their household working hours, which is regarded as voluntary public service. However, wage income has significant impact on the decision making of women rather than unearned income (Anderson, Eswaran 2008).

However, women's empowerment growth has a back-story of the international employers need for docile, nimble fingered women for their intensive work (Ong, 2010). Women's active participation in the workforce as we see today was not initiated because the donor countries were solely being generous but their need for cost effective replacement for the expensive labor force they had back home (Rahman, 2009). Hence, even after being a fully functional formal sector in Bangladesh the employees of garment industries hardly receive their compensation money after they leave their jobs, or in most cases when they are laid off. Where the entire scheme involves into getting the cheapest labors out of the vast unskilled labor force who were never welcomed in any other formal sector before, giving the workers the basic facilities like deserved wage rate, occupational safety, pension and the rest is an unnecessary luxury their employers would not initiate.

This thesis work will shed light on the cyclical presence of women's autonomy in the lower class income families, as I have mentioned above the newly emerged garment sector have given women the long awaited independence but this is the vivid picture on one side of the story. Garment industry started in this part of the world years ago; many women have gained their autonomy through the financial support it has given, that is undeniable. Nevertheless, many women have also lost their jobs. The thesis takes concern on their stories, how they have survived life after that, whether their newly found autonomy ends when the job is out of the picture. This ethnographic journey will tell the tales of such struggling women living in the slums of Mirpur, Dhaka.

1.2 Objectives

As per the information provided up until now, it can be concluded that the inception of Ready Made Garment Industry has certainly changed economic, social and political autonomy of women. This thesis is interested to study the life of those women garment worker who have left the sector after working for at least 8 years. The specific objectives are:

- When and why the women garment workers could not pursue their profession?
- How empowered they were being garment workers?
- How the social substructure of empowerment has changed between the timeframe of getting and losing the jobs?
- Where does the political capability within the space provided for women stand now?
- Does employed truly means to be empowered? How does it affect women's economic autonomy?

Keeping the objectives in mind, the core research question of this thesis is to investigate whether women garment workers have managed to continue the empowered position that they seemingly possessed upon getting into the garments sector.

1.3 Methodology

Empirical study in the science of anthropology does not have any hard and fast rule like any other scientific method. This is for the benefit of the ethnography/ethnographer itself, since any basic pre-structured perception on studying any group will compromise the non-biased position the ethnography requires. Like how someone working in a biology lab will know how they may proceed and how should be the anecdote for their subjects. For anthropology, the proceeding method might be universal but how the subject shall be approached depends on the situation. Malinowski, in his earlier days was unprecedented on how to precede his work on the native islanders. As a result his first expedition was unsuccessful. However, when he learned the basics to study the natives of Papua New Guinea, for example the language proximity, the difference in socio-cultural position and the rest, the end result was his groundbreaking ethnography. Although those classical works may have turned into irrelevant for reference in recent studies, their core values had helped to set the ground for ethnography. In my case, I was completely influenced by my social position in selecting the cyclical empowerment history as my topic. Anyone in my position is more likely to choose this social spectrum since the knowledge available to me and the environment we are growing into calls for newer ways to see any social phenomenon, in this case the women workers who are perceived to be empowered were my subject study. Garments industry in particular because this industry single handedly employed 4 million workers in Bangladesh and 80% of this is women. There has been a vast number of research work on the garment workers and the industry itself, my literature review shall discuss some of them.

After the Rana Plaza incident that shook the whole world, the injured inactive workforce that was full functioning even a day ago raised a new question. How the women who were claimed to be empowered make living after they get laid off for something they could not control? The question was evenly crucial for the women who were not affected by the Rana Plaza incident. Hence, it was imperative to look into the matter involving the theories of gender and development.

This thesis shall use focus group studies and non-structured qualitative interviews in the data collection process.

Getting started on ethnographic data collection process shall require certain basic criterions. The key groups presented in this thesis includes, i) Women, ii) Women of low income scheme in both before and after leaving their jobs, iii) Women who have worked for garment industry, iv) Women in their late twenties, v) Women who lost their jobs for involuntary causes, vi) Women living in Dhaka city, viii) Women who worked at least for 8 years in the industry.

While observing any subject, first thing to keep in mind is that they are certainly not comfortable with my presence in their personal life. They might even take it as intruding into their own space. Since the class difference between my subject and me limits their acceptance of me as an equal counterpart, the key is to be as regular in their lives as possible in order to present myself a constant and consistent figure so that it somehow blurs my presence. However, since I will not be studying an entire community but some parts of it, my visible presence is inevitable. Having them, as free-minded subjects were also difficult, due to psychological issues women in their late twenties might not be the best option to open up about their day-to-day issues. The challenge here was to make the subject comfortable in my presence.

I have received help from my connections within the slums in order to get access to insights of the lives of these women; the first four of the participants live in a slum in Mirpur Pallabi. My house help Doli was the contact I used to reach out to them, she was there with me throughout the sessions. And rests of the four participants are from Eastern Housing, also in Mirpur. They are in the age range of twenty five to thirty years and been out of the industry for a little longer than 12 months on average.

The reason behind focusing Mirpur as the area of study was that the variety of industries it presides. While this area has garments working for high-end brands, on the other hand, it also has non-

complaint RMG factories. The variety was needed in order to get the broader picture in frame. The area of study has helped to underline that after organizations like Accord and Alliance's interference on several policies; loopholes exist in certain parts of the system. I shall explain this issue in chapter four.

For data collection process, I was in their community for several times. As I mentioned before, working on a part of an entire community certainly means visible presence. In order to make it less obvious, I was visiting the families a few times in a week. At one point they seemed in ease to share their information, I was no longer someone outsider. My contact for the thesis Doli's presence also made it seems quite normal for me to visit them often. Although I interviewed each of them individually, considering they lived in the same slum I wanted to do a group discussion. On my last day visiting them I bought some snacks, invited them to join for an informal discussion on their life. It did not seem anything overdone as they were used to offering me tea, snacks on my every visit. I perpetuated the meeting and snacks as a thank you gesture from me. The same was done on the other group residing in Eastern Housing. The group discussion brought in light some dire issues I did not conceive to be present.

The participants asked to measure their past empowerment condition through a scale of 0 to 5, where 0 being absolutely no autonomy, where 1 explained little/almost no movements within the space provided for them, 2 was little movement with negotiation power, 3 depicted moderate autonomy, 4 was scaled as nearly perfect empowerment but with a few drawbacks and lastly, 5 was completely empowerment even after losing their jobs. I used Likert scale in order to measure their personal experience within the space provided for them.

These women have been unemployed for a very long time (on average more than twelve months) and any person who shows interest to work on their situation appears as either a NGO worker or someone representing donor organizations to them, in hope of help most of the women asked me

whether I would be able to provide them a solution on their ‘thrown out of status queue’ condition. Answering their questions was a big challenge for me, although the questions helped me quite a lot to understand them.

It is important to re-establish that my concentration of the research is on female workers and how it completely alters the autonomy and living standards of a woman after leaving the sector. All kinds of ethical considerations will be taken, and the interviewee will only be asked further detailed questions if he/she agrees to share. Furthermore the information collected will only be used for the research if the interviewee provides full consent on sharing such information about their life.

1.4 Theoretical Analysis

A theoretical perspective is significant in order to conceptualize the changing scenario in women empowerment. Patriarchy has been a major obstacle to women empowerment and since my research is based on women working in the garment sector, capitalism is another notion to study on. Hence the dual system theory of feminism that has the characteristics of Marxist and Radical feminism respectively is an important theory to connect with my research. Furthermore, the dual system consists of an economic system or the concept of capitalism and a sex-gender system that we call patriarchy. According to Hartmann (1979), capitalism and patriarchy are both linked together to create a single entity which is termed is “Patriarchal Capitalism”, where the radical feminism incline patriarchy as the reason to women’s oppressions, in the mean time Marxist feminism perceives patriarchy as the cause of such oppression created from aspects of economic systems. To strengthen Hartmann’s (1979) notion of capitalism and patriarchy being connected, it is crucial to understand the women’s position in the households and labour markets. Domestic activities in households regulate women to gain access into labor market and as a consequence they are mostly depended on their husbands for economic and financial supports, hence the two systems are said to be connected. Hartmann’s (1979) work on dual system reflects that he two systems – Radical and Marxist, leads to

a common interests. However Walby (1988), argued that despite both being associated to each other they do not share a common interest. She further stated that she intends to work not just on the degree of patriarchy but also the formation of it where she bisects patriarchy in to two forms- private and public. In the meantime, private patriarchy is essentially the household activities and being the center for women's oppression whereas public patriarchy is about their employment status.

Patriarchy- formed within the social construction has always been the core to women oppression. Living beneath the lashes of men women could never actually stand for themselves. The impractical treatment has changed over time. Women being productive only at household activities always depended on their husband or the dominant male in the household, hence all decision for the women were taken rather than the women deciding for themselves. Here, an important issue is of concern presided on the social construction of male dominance being created and reinforced happens due to the ownership of capital, dividing the ability and power between men and women. A key feature of capitalism is that it functions through the exploitation of the working class. Including women as a part of the working population maximizes the exploitation from the deployment of even more unskilled cheap labor. It can be an argument whereas patriarchy confines women to work domestically in the private sphere and limit their access to the labour market or not and the legitimacy of women joining the industry being a form of empowerment. This can be accepted at the very initial stages when women slowly started crawling out from the shackles of patriarchy but overtime low wages and differing wages among men and women clearly indicated that whatever empowerment has occurred yet is to be revised. Marx's approach to capitalism of un-sustainability and the drive for profit, explains the creation of subsequent, uprising from the working class which will eventually overthrow the system. This may seem irrelevant to my context but the uprising of the working class is important. In case of the garment sector where a large number of women are involved, a question arises whereas the women become empowered to a certain extent that they could actually stand for themselves to the garment industry's capitalists? There are cases where they

in fact fought for adequate wages but most of the time they accept what wages are offered owing to a previous shackle. Before the emergence of RMG sector, the influences of micro credit and other employment schemes created by NGOs, only garment jobs were a major access to employment for women. Furthermore, in case of Bangladesh most female employees leave their jobs due to various reasons. Be that as it may, in most cases the garment factory itself let go of considerably older workers. They prefer unskilled women of lower age since they do not have the autonomy to negotiate. In circumstances where women no longer belong to the sector and their only work expertise is limited to specific skill sets such as cutting materials or sewing buttons at the factories, majority of all factories do not provide any form of pension scheme that might provide the women to self-sustain until she learns how to perform a new kind of task and find a job. Meaning that despite women having access to workplaces after a certain time the empowerment that was established is dented. The class structure in the society is also a concern, a woman belonging to middle class or lower class means that it is likely that she will have to survive through oppression of different forms. To be added to consequence of the previous notion, it is well-nigh established that the capitalist class will exploit these women by paying low wage and the women has little or no options left to accept it. This is perhaps the irony of belonging to a lower class automatically sets a standard for women. How the upper classes perceive them is normative and set. And the empowerment created through the social construction is always questioned.

1.5 Significance of the study

Ever since garment factories started dotting throughout Dhaka city, the fear of losing their house help were on raise among the housewives. Garments industries gave these house helps an elevated social ladder through this new found career path. Which in time turned out to be true, I saw the women in life blaming garment factories for taking away their negotiation power as the ones who did not leave for the newest career path had the monopoly in house help market. The asking price for house helps increased due to the same reason. As the time passed, age group as young as ten year

olds started joining the factories. They did not have to have any specialized skill set and their income only added a bonus to their family. Hence the factories could pay them lower wages and get the same work anyone much older can provide but certainly requires better wage scheme. Our house help's 10 year old girl was employed by one of the local factories; she gets paid 2800 BDT per month. As fortunate as that amount might sound for someone of her age, it does not get any significant raise as her age and responsibility increases. So the opportunity cost for her not joining school is technically nothing if the two variables are calculated.

When people such as her get laid off after a certain time with no education and only a minimal skill, where is it that they go? Karl Marx's theory on alienation of labor should be applicable in this scenario, since there are only a few jobs they can work on. Hence, there needs to be a recheck on the issue of empowerment and awareness on how we see the issue on hand. I have tried to find literature work on this subject matter; unfortunately anything likewise does not exist at the moment. Hence, keeping that in mind, I am hoping my work in this field can add to the variety of issues garments industry has given rise to and at the same time, shed a light on the policy implementations needed to be done for them

1.6 Structure of the thesis

The thesis is explained through five chapters. Chapter one includes the introduction to topic and significance of working on this thesis. This also includes the main objectives and the questions that shall be asked and the methodological components of fieldwork as well as secondary data collection are written. Chapter two contains the literature work previously done by scholars working on the same field. Chapter three contains the finding I have gathered to far and their analysis. Chapter four includes three of the case studies. And finally, chapter five is the conclusion on the note of my experience on the field so far.

This chapter has discussed the introductory issues, objectives, significance and structure of the topic of concern. Additionally, I have also discussed the methodologies which were focus group study, likert scale and non-structured qualitative interviews. Lastly, it also states the theoretical framework of the research where I tried to connect dual system theory to my topic. The next chapter shall review the literature work of several scholars in relation the issue of my concern.

Chapter Two: Existing Literature on Empowerment

This chapter will discuss the concept of empowerment, its evolution throughout the years, the social diameter, economic credibility and political autonomy through the work of scholars who have previously done their research on this topic.

2.1 Conceptualizing Empowerment

The intention of my research is to experience how the expanding garment sector has conditioned the lives of women after leaving the manufacturing sector. It is imperative to understand the income structure of the worker while working and after leaving and also including how much the sector has altered the autonomy and independency of women. The existing literature does not specifically discusses about the changes in lives of women while working and after leaving their job, however there are relevant information that can support my motive. The significance of going through the current literature would to be constructing a strong base for my research. The lack of study particularly with my subject is not something I have singularly experienced, even in researches done by Heath & Mobarak (2015) also faced similar problems when they were studying the lives of women in manufacturing sector in Bangladesh. Before proceeding, it is also crucial to know why the lack of previous research is limiting my work; this is because most of the researches are quantitative solely focusing on economic adaptation, whereas my research is ethnography as mentioned in the

methodology. To understand how the garment sector has changed the life of a female worker, there has to be some indications that interpret the changes. Heath & Mobarak (2015) used marriage, education, childbearing and participation to measure the changes. Within their research the results came out as expected where due to current access to manufacturing sector, more and more female workers gain autonomy through personal income, which further influences education, marriage and childbearing. Now as a part of my research I am not only emphasizing on income but also the expected autonomy that is experienced through empowerment, which has been a marvelous phenomenon for women after the involvement of them with the industry. Within the region of Southeast Asia, Bangladesh is now considered to be the most gender equal country in this region, however one question urges significantly. “Empowerment of women”-as a form of measure for gender equity, does empowerment of women actually is about what it appears to be? Hence it is important to know what empowerment is and how it has evolved over time. Extensive researches done by Simeen Mahmud, and along his associates -Nirali M. Shah and Stan Becker clarified that what we know of empowerment and what it indeed has become for women differs within the sector as well as the society. Considering the case of Bangladesh, working in the garment sector allows women to be more independent and offers more autonomy but at the same time they are subject to more responsibilities and domestic violence. Mahmud et al., 2013 termed the case as “latent phenomenon that is not directly observable”, and according to them one definition of women’s empowerment is to have a range of choices for a woman, when chosen their choice must be able to portray the value that the women has for that particular choice. With the influences of globalization the garment sectors have boomed and in researches like Broken Promises of Globalization by Shahidur Rahman in 2013, a key finding is that during the initial stages of the expansion of the sector, it was a pinnacle for the empowerment of women. Furthermore, to understand how much the sector has helped reduce subordination of women according to Hossain (2012), her research stated that it has become a controversial topic on how much the sector has influenced the lives of women to

become livable from the bottom of poverty line. Now before moving further to explain more about empowerment it is salient to mention again that my research is based on women and the proposition of empowerment derives from the notion of gender inequity. Further work done by Judith Lorber in 1994 in *Paradox of Gender* stated that the idea of sex, sexuality and gender are all a part of social construction where sex being defined by biological differences. Hence the idea of empowerment slowly has developed over time ever since the subordination of women and to overthrow the shackle has been a significant part of the society. To conceptualize empowerment further three things is crucial to understand, first the subjectivity and consciousness of women about the situation and looking for a change, second the control of resources of women and third to understand the necessity of becoming collective, stated Kabeer (2012). According to her research the ability and control over important aspects of a women's life and how much a woman contributes to the society is key to understand their empowerment. Furthermore, the idea of being collective and to become institutionalized to challenge the injustice becomes far more effective than individual actions and thus promotes empowerment; however she also stated that this sort of homogeneity was missing. Further definitions of empowerment can be found in Naila Kabeer's (2012) work where a paper of the World Bank (2005), stated that a community could be empowered if they have the capacity to make effective choices about what they desire. To be added, according to the United Nation (2001), women's empowerment can be defined by five components, women's sense of self-worth; the right to have and determine choices; the right to have access to opportunities and resources; the right to have power to control over their lives both inside and outside home; and ability to influence the direction of social change. To clarify more, Kabeer (2012) also narrated about empowerment with a feminist approach, that if women can strategically form an institution, which can fight the constraints of the subordination they are facing. Overall many researchers would provide different definitions of empowerment and I perhaps too at the end of my work can provide a meaning, which can be as efficient as they are now. Since my research is based on quantitative ethnography I should concern

about the social and logical aspects. Mahmud et.al's (2013) work also narrated that to create the framework of women's empowerment some key social aspects has to be considered like marriage, living conditions, household wealth and characteristics of influential family members. Mahmud et.al, (2013) further studied that empowerment is a dynamic process and its indicators are crucial for the measurement of the topic itself. In addition to their research, which also cited other researches where empowerment indicators varied from rural to urban, the initial indicators are commonly education, income and media exposure. Furthermore, they also have studied the multi-dimension of empowerment process that includes social, economic and political, and one determining factor about empowerment is the context that differs from one situation to another. For example a woman from a family that has a healthy amount of wealth is likely to have more freedom and autonomy, but considering the fact that my study is in Bangladesh and it is a patriarchal society, most women are confined to homes compare to western countries. Thinking about the results of Mahmud et.al's (2013) work, their measure of empowerment was based on various dimensions like self-esteem, decision making and access to mobility, where in all dimensions showed that empowerment differs with contexts and what we know of it and how it develops is extremely complex and even if a woman is employed it does not necessarily mean that she is empowered.

2.2 Empowerment throughout the ages

Envisioning the idea of empowerment is perhaps the luxury the women of Bangladesh can experience for the last few years. As context vary within the diameters of cultural ideologies, religious framework and sociological preferences, how empowerment is seen can alter within them. What was a sign of empowerment for women in earlier times can merely be a basic right for women of these days.

It is imperative to overview and differentiate the past and present conditions of women empowerment. The indicators of women empowerment are in fact quite complicated and the

indicators that were used before should be altered or modified to fit in the changing society. Schuler, Islam and Rottach (2011) stated that the current indicator presents the existing situation of women where they have little or limited autonomy but changes in these indicators are important as they can help study cross-sectional researches over time especially on small communities. The changes that come over time must be considered as it provides further explanations of empowerment and the changes that take place in process of empowerment. During the very initial stage, the development of garment sector has allowed the women to have work and establish a decent financial position and since the economic condition is an indicator to empowerment we concluded that women are empowered. Significant to that observation, it inquires doubts whether earning money has any impact on their autonomy. Studies done by Anderson and Eswaren (2007) stated that despite having existing patriarchy, better economic conditions in terms of finance that has assured higher autonomy for women, this process of change has occurred over time. The changes that have come to empowerment can be elaborated with the work of Shelly Feldman (2001). A detailed research done by Feldman S. (2013), found that there has been significant changes in the lives of women, not just as a living condition and dependency but as having more autonomy. Her study within a span of five years elaborated the fact that how much women has become more mobile and has the ability to decide and chose for themselves. Furthermore, there has also been significant change in the marriage culture, where the women could decide when to marry as well as whom to marry. To shed light on women employment, their gender as a role and how they cope and manage their past identity also needs to be discussed. Shelley (2013) took the concept of "Purdah" and vividly explained how women's autonomy gets associated with it. In her research, Shelly (2013) tried to contrast how westernized ideologies interpret the veiled women of Bangladesh and how the women make a bargain out the "purdah" that is conceptualized as a form of oppression. There was once a time when "purdah" was considered as forced modest wear for women. After a few decades, women found their way out of home through the veils of the purdah, it was their way to fight back to the patriarchy.

Women found the only way to beat the societal boundaries is to work through the disadvantages. It was either bargain or stay home. Similar work has also been done by Deniz Kandiyoti (1988), where her study argued the systematic analysis of women to cope with the conditions they grew through being part of a culture. Just how much the construction of factories changed the scenario is staggering, Feldman (2001), stated that in 1984 there were just around 50,000 female workers and by 1989 the number of women workers went up to 225,000 and finally 1996 there were around 1.2 million female workers working in garment factories. Within a time span of two decades women found access to the labour market and gained financial security among the neighborhood. Shelly Feldman's study also emphasized on changes in patriarchy and how it has held the empowerment of women thus far. The changes in contribution in the society have been nothing but dramatic. During the 1980 Bangladesh's population was rapidly increasing and with half the population consisting of women, to understand why their contribution was so low it is important to look at the society and culture of Bangladesh stated Rahman (2013). He further argued that being living in the patriarchal society where women were always subordinated and also being part of a Muslim community where the norm for women was to observe "purdah", the life of women were always meant to live within the boundaries of their home and perform domestic work. Rahman (2013) also stated that there were social institutions like "shamaj" and "shalish" that restricted women's participation in the labor market. Due to the formation of garment factories and with expanding manufacturing sector women of Bangladesh found an opportunity to get involved in the labor market and become financially stable stated Rahman (2013).

2.3 Empowerment and economic credibility, what aspects have changed?

The idea of economic empowerment needs to make the market adjust to accept the involvement of women and empower them enough to compete in the market stated Kabeer (2012). Furthermore, it is important to adjust the policy to make the markets work and women to become collective to have an effective outcome. She further cited another definition from a paper published by SIDA that

women's economic empowerment occurs when a woman has control over economic decisions that influences their lives and priorities in the society. There have been many attempts to conceptualize economic empowerment with overlapping features but there are few differences. Most of the time economic empowerment is used as a process to indicate development goals and where the definitions are termed completely based on economic aspects rather than the life of a woman. Kabeer (2012) further mentioned about inequality and how the policy should be reshaped for easier access for women to get in the market. Based on the research of Anderson & Eswaran (2008), the dependency and autonomy of women is termed as a "stylized fact" in the sector of development economics. Considering the economic conditions as dimension income is an instrument of measuring wealth. In case of garment's workers it is almost irrelevant to consider their wealth as whole rather than concentrating precisely on income. However, Anderson & Eswaran (2008) cited from another research that the state of wealth influences the future of women. Basically, what I intend to explain here are based on the finding from their work, is that a woman decided to work at first place because she does not have enough wealth. She starts working in expectation to someday leave the industry with some form of wealth to opt for a better lifestyle. These raise two questions, does a woman decides to join the industry regardless of having a little bit of inherited wealth or not and how are we defining wealth. Within the concept of economies wealth is not just measured in income but also in physical properties. If a woman decides to work despite having a decent wealth state, this probably happened because of the autonomy that has come forth from the changes in culture and society as a form of opportunities in the labour market. Anderson & Eswaran (2008) did work on how wealth has influenced women to decide for their future, through aspects of marriage, work or education etc. Economic indicators are important to consider economic empowerment of women. Schuler, Islam and Rottach (2011) in their studies included economic indicators like land, house or cash savings. On the other hand, Anderson & Eswaran (2008) used value of women's asset and ability to make important decisions as a measure of economic empowerment. Now despite the traditional low

autonomy on economic resources of women of Bangladesh, the ability of women to control the way of spending their income has varied over time. To be added, most women involved in the garment sector have full control on how they decide to spend their income, stated Kibira (1995). Kibria (1995) dissected the class structure of women where the urban working class and the middle-income working class women are the most important because my field of research is based on these sections. Kibira (1995) stated that female workers at urban society often gave away their income to their husband, which is then spend for the household and the whole income is then considered as the household fund. However, middle-income class women tend to take permission to have control on their income or in some cases have control on majority of their income. Hence, the outcomes is that despite being involved in the garment sector does not yield in women achieving full economic empowerment but however as Kibira (1995) mentioned that it varied over time and perhaps now it is more economically lenient. Hossain (2012) also stated that the wage gap among women and men has fallen and increase rate in women's wage has been comparatively higher than of men but such changes has been noticeable in the public sector. The garment sector does provide employment but the career is short and one thing that comes as an outcome is that a massive number of women have been involved with the factories rather than two million women workers that were counted, stated Hossain (2012). This increase in women participation is not only significant but at the same time raises the question of my research that what happens to these women when their career as a garment worker ends?

2.4 Seeking the social diameters of empowerment

Another dimension that is extremely significant to inquire is the social aspect of empowerment as perceived by people and society itself. Due to the nature of patriarchal society, women's recognition and contribution to the society as a whole was limited to household work and often agricultural work within the context of Bangladesh. The development of garment industry has kindled a social change in the lives of women, stated Rahman (2013). Not just that woman are getting involved with the

labour market but also have empowered in the society and has managed to tackle the barriers that were set by the society. Furthermore social class is also important to understand the development of women empowerment stated Kibria (1995). She further stated that economic necessity can allow women to get in to the labour force despite the fact based on the social traditions women are not supposed to get involved in the outside work places. The term “classical patriarchy” of Kandiyoti (1988) is in accordance of the normative patriarchal system of Bangladesh. However the autonomy of women increases over age and the family system of Bangladesh for women is circled with the social institution of ‘purdah’, according to Kibria (1995). Overall the traditional social state of Bangladesh does not favour the autonomy of Bangladesh but the emergence of garment sector has provided them with social status and has finally stepped out of their home to contribute to the society through the labour market. To further understand empowerment from a social dimension the indicators are important. Schuler, Islam and Rottach (2011) used mobility, media exposure and self-efficacy as good indicators of social changes. The mobility of women has been a rare thing in the past to witness as Rahman (2013) mentioned as an example that a common scene in today’s Dhaka city, every morning is that a group of woman travelling for their work place. Media exposure is also important as they allow women to know what changes are happening in the society and hence they can act on them. Self-efficacy is a much important social factor as before it was rare to find women who can produce results about what they desire which over time has changed, stated Kibria (1995).Hossain (2012) also included fertility, maternal mortality and basic education as measure of social indicators. The most significant change that happened was the fall in gender gap through education and due to the change more girls tend to enroll in school rather than boys, stated Hossain (2012). Social changes are perhaps the most important as in the past there were little autonomy of women in the society.

2.5 Political autonomy of women, what signifies the change?

The political dimension is also crucial for reviewing current empowerment scenario. Despite two of our political leaders being women Bangladesh's women has contributed less in the political sector. The Bangladesh parliament thus reserves thirty percent seats to represent women but very few women actually receives endorsement and most of the time they represent male nominees who faces disqualifications, stated Hossain (2012). Hossian (2012) also argued that the access to justice and security for women have been a concern because they are subject domestic violence. Evidence does not suggest that violence have been increasing but most women are likely to suffer from domestic violence once in their lifetime (WHO, 2005). Few indicators are important to understand. Schuler, Islam and Rottach (2011) used access to political leaders like Member of Parliament as an indicator. They further stated that influences of NGO and the government on education and legal issues have made women much more aware particular about their marriage registration. Women who were empowered under such conditions was aware of inheritance rights; marriage registration; the statutory minimum age of marriage for girls; marriage registration known as "kabin" where the husband gives a sum of money to his wife after marriage; whether women can initiate divorce if abused; child custody and child support in case of divorce and the procedures for seeking traditional mediation commonly known as "shalish" or formal legal remedy when legal rights are violated by a husband or family member.. Schuler, Islam and Rottach (2011) also stated that both campaigning and voting in terms of political participation has increased and also a significant change that happened was that women could now take part in the tradition mediation institution like "shalish". How far the garment sector has influenced women to be more concern about political and justice based issues is matter to view but one thing that appears for sure that the employment that happens for women gives them the core to act at these certain dimensions.

This chapter has taken concern on previously done work of academics and tried to give a vivid picture of the issues we want to look at through the research work. The next chapter will discuss the fieldwork finding and the analogy of it.

Chapter Three: The Other Side of Readymade Garment Industry

This chapter shall scrutinize the unquestioned side of readymade garment industry through explaining the socio-economic characteristics of the respondents, their economic revise, social dogmas that has formed over the years and their political autonomy. In addition, this chapter also includes the scores of empowerment perspective of them and the pattern that occurred frequently throughout data analysis.

3.1 Socio-economic characteristics of the respondents

I have divided my study population in to two groups based on the geographical area of my study. The first area of concern is a slum in Pallabi-Mirpur containing four interviewees. Based on my interview sessions few patterns came out to be similar among all the interviewees. However that is the output, which I will be discussing broadly later, as of now the demography of the interviewees is at process. All the four women I interviewed lie between the ages of 25 to 30 and have worked up to 10 years in the garment industry. To be added it has been at least 1 to 2 years since my respondants has left the RMG sector. All of them migrated to Dhaka city in search of jobs, hoping for a much better life, which is obvious however there are reasons for them to migrate to the busy city. Two of the respondent's reason to come to Dhaka city was to work and earn so that they could repay the loan that their household had to burden. Getting hired in the garment sector with the initial motive to repay loan is a common reason among many garments workers. Despite access to the labour market and having a monthly paid job were not enough because the wages they were paid was barely enough to

sustain all the expenses of the month, rest assured that they **already** had to slash out a proportion of income to repay the loan. On average all my interviewee used to earn an average of roughly BDT 4000 every month. I would again mention that my work on rethinking empowerment is based on workers who left the industry; hence the wage scale few years back was quite low and similar to the average figure mentioned. Furthermore, after leaving the sector the only income source for some of them is insurance policy and for the rest, taking loan from the slum community that eventually will have to be repaid with interest. Education was scarce among them; most of them continued education till standard seven or eight. Belonging to families who falls among the low-income group or could be living under the poverty line, already sickened with loan burden their families could never earned enough to continue to pay their education fees. Furthermore, the families were at such a state that instead of spending behind income they would rather send them to work and help the family to survive. All the respondents in Pallabi, Mirpur are married. This might seem to be a positive indication that even after leaving the industry and having no jobs, at least the women can survive with the help of their husbands, however this was rare thing to witness as most of these husbands are infected with various kind of diseases making them unable to work and the rest are voluntarily or temporarily unemployed. **Meaning that despite being married and the hopes of having a decent standard of living achieved from a combined effort of being husband and wife being demolished, the present situation was becoming worse.** Health is another key factor here. While interviewing I have noticed and found that most of them suffer frequently form different kinds of disease. The possible reason could be that since they do not earn enough they cannot buy themselves nutritious food and to be added the living condition and the working condition does not help improve the situation. On the other hand their income is also not enough to buy proper medicine for their treatment.

The second area of concern is a small slum community in Eastern Housing Society consisting of four interviewees where they share similar patterns on the first area like marital status, average income while working at RMG sector, education, age and health. However in Eastern Housing it

appeared that their average standard of living is comparatively higher to that of the slum in Pallabi. A possible reason is that their husbands are all employed and the women I interviewed there were all employed too, meaning that they managed to teach themselves new skills. These major differences in these two areas are quite surprising and at the same time coincidental and require a different set of research approach to know the reasons for the differences. However the responses such as the abuse of the domestic violence or the problems of teasing faced in slums appeared to be similar.

3.2 Economic revise after years of struggle

Empowerment from an economic dimension can be segmented in three different parts. First the situation before and the initial stage of the emergence of RMG sector, second the situation while working in the sector and finally third the situation after leaving the sector. I have provided literature about the condition of women labour market and how it has changed after the establishment of garment sector. The access to employment gave women a status and the ability to choose for themselves. However the query remains that how far are they empowered after leaving the industry. Most of the respondent has worked up to ten years and within this time the growth of income and their work designation was limited. To be added since they did not have enough education and most of them could not complete Secondary School Certificate (SSC) level, at best they could be promoted up to an operator. As a result, since they could not go higher their income remained stagnant and also one other way of having a higher wage or promotion is by having decent association with higher ranked officers and also by consistently pampering them. Before I have mentioned that most garment worker has migrated to Dhaka City to earn so that they could repay their family's loan burden. This was a major barrier to their economic development because their most of their insignificant wage had to be transferred to their home town so that the loan could be repaid.

As one of the respondents Afsana mentioned,

“All that I have earned for the 10 years have gone behind the debt I never took, I paid for the wrong decision my father initiated and 10 years later, here I am left with no money, no support system”

After all the family expenses assuming that the wife contributes to a family fund along with her husband there is barely enough left to save and use in the future. The struggle does not end there; the economic condition could have been better if the husbands were contributing more. Of all the respondents I talked with most of their husband do not work because they are either infected with some form of disease or is voluntarily unemployed.

“My husband’s profession? He’s a 420!”

Says Laizu, when I asked about her husband’s occupation. Not to mention 420 is a term used to describe someone who is impudent or in other word, a cheat.

Therefore all the family expenses depend on whatever earning the wife could manage, thus the women regardless of being employed could not manage to make important decision that would make her economically empowered.

Now after leaving the sector life become worse for these female workers, since they do not have any form of earning and at the same their husband is still unemployed. Now it may obvious to think that since they have been working at a garment factory for so long there has to be some form of pension scheme that would help them after leaving their jobs. However this was a rare scene to witness as all my interviewee responded that despite the organization having pension schemes there were different conditions needed to be met but form many garment workers such conditions were rarely achieved. Hence when they leave the factory they are never provided with any sum of money or even if they do provide the amount is insignificant. One story shared by a garment worker that

the factory she used to work in, a worker could work their up to ten or more years and they have a pension scheme where the worker will receive a sum of money provided with the condition that they cannot opt to leave the factory by their own will rather they will have to retire and will receive pension payment if the factory lay off their workers. The factory policy appeared fine but as Sheuly explains the scenario,

“The workload at some point becomes so much that the factory workers by themselves decide to leave and as a result they are exiting the jobs without any form of payment.”

To continue living, these people take small loans from the slum community, arranges some other informal loans like from relatives or friends or breaks long terms savings/insurances.

“I know these loans will repeat the same consequence I faced, this time my daughter will have to start working for the loans I took and could not pay off. She’s only three and I am already two years down in loans, but is there any way out?” I quote Nazu as she explains her present condition.

Most of the respondent I interviews did not work any place else after leaving the sector other than being house maid which was not the case for all of them rather was common in just two cases. The reason behind this could be that they cannot acquire new skill easily and perhaps also being part of a patriarchal family. Overall, the combined influences of losing a job without any form of pension, and their spouses being unemployed and rather a subject to domestic violence, then not being able to get easy access to different jobs due to lack of skills and finally also taking loan from slum community which has to be repaid with interest making it extremely difficult to continue enhancing whatever empowerment they achieved form an economic dimension.

3.3 Social dogmas with a new theme

There is no doubt that the emergence of the Ready Made Garment sector has enhanced empowerment from a social dimension. However how far this has improved is a matter of

concern. Bangladesh belongs to a patriarchal society, despite the fact that the restructure of the modern world has brought significant changes, but the inconvenient truth is that it has not brought massive amount of changes among the people below the middle class. Most of the garment workers I interviews yet subjected to domestic violence still consider that leaving their husband is a form of sin. Even though they know that often their spouse might have extra martial affairs and at the same time bares brutal domestic violence. Despite the fact that the husband do not work and do not contribute much to the family and at the same time keeping her under his lashes, these women still cannot choose to let go or file divorce.

“What is the guarantee that the next one is going to be any better?” asked one of my respondents when I inquired whether she ever had the thought of divorcing her husband.

I would like to mention that this situation has become better from what it was in the past that women now has more access to legal system the cases of stepping upfront in this lower classes is a rare site seldom seen. There are reasons behind such actions and believe of these women towards their spouses. According to the responses it appears that women need to belong to some form of social institutional arrangement such as their own family or being married to someone, if not they are subject to further exploitation from people living around them. They would rather prefer to cope with the harassment and abuse they receive from being a part of their own family than to the struggles they are likely to experience from other people. The struggles does not end there, if the women are not married or belong to somewhere like a family they are subject to teasing while travelling for work and even at work place.

“In this community, belonging to somewhere is important. You see we all are exploited somehow, but one or two exploiter is way better option than many at a time.” QuotingNazu, my fifth respondent.

Flashback to Feldman's (2001) note on how "purdah" was perceived as cover for women, which act as a bargain with patriarchy, this perception does not exist among these garments workers. They believe that they must do "purdah" because they need to cover themselves up or else it will be an act of sin. This religious aspect of "purdah" and sticking to their husband despite the suffering is what stands out from many existing literature.

The emergence of the garment sector has provide many social empowerment through mobility, media exposure, improvement in self-efficacy, education and even the reduction of gap in gender but this appear to be not the case everywhere. Even if women have the ability to choose they end up restricting themselves because the social construction that is around them. To be added these was a case where after leaving the garment industry the woman could not work again because they she could not move from one town to another where there were job opportunities because she has to live with her husband and the husband unwilling to shift home because it was convenient for him to go to his workplace from where they already live. As she said,

"After you get married, you have to stay where he stays. So I couldn't move, even though I wanted to. The salary was needed for the father who cannot work anymore"

Social status was another factor to look at, because as I have mentioned the average income and when asked about what difference they might see if they were not a garment worker and rather be working someplace else like housemaid, they responded that they see no difference because the amount of money they can earn being a housemaid and a garment worker is the same and in some cases pay is even better than that of a garment worker.

"What dignifies me is the money I earn. In a factory, 18 hours of work as a worker will give you not more than 3000/4000 BDT where as a domestic servant the work is only until five and pay can be upto 10000 BDT" Amena's words after I questioned on the social dignity of a domestic

help.

They simply are not bothered about social statuses and hence subjugated by the society, limited by lack of education these women simply cannot experience the change that is happening elsewhere due to consistent expansion of the garment sector.

3.4 Political rights revised, autocratic or absolute autonomy?

Empowerment from the political dimension has also developed in a vaguely manner. Based on the existing literature, a woman is likely to be a victim of domestic violence at least once in her life. Even if some women do step up and raise voices against the domestic violence such as beating they suffer, the legal system is not effective enough. In fact one has responded that they do not have any kind of faith on the legal system and has shared a story where she called for emergency police services but when the police came to inquiry the actions were not effective enough and the husband did not care much, rather surprising the women has to pay off the police to leave. Political activity has improved, and in fact almost all women do take part in community elections. One of the two areas I visited, the slum in Mirpur was hosting an election to become elect the slum community council leader. The candidate is a woman and due to such most of the women in the slum was excited about it and rather was enjoying the election vibe with community's political gossips. However this was not the scene everywhere because the small slum community in Eastern Housing Society, the slum leader was a man and women has rarely any power to decide anything for the community. However women do have access to "shalish", where they can complain about their struggles and often they are met with positive judgments. The same respondent who took legal assistance for the abuse she was receiving also said that after failed attempts with the local police she took her case to "shalish" where she was provided with assurance and in fact the judgments made by the community about her husband was effective.

"I went to the police, it didn't help. I called his family, it didn't help. But I once I informed the shalish of our village, it worked like magic. Look it's his call, I am not going to receive, it's almost

prayer time and he's been calling me all day, says he's missing me. I know it's because he's scared of the shalish" says Mitu.

One important indicators of political empowerment is the marriage registration named as “kabin”, this appeared to be insignificant as many do not even know about such marriage registration system and even if they know they do not intend to implement such policy perhaps due to the social ties.

“It's us who have to pay, not them. Although I wish it was how you're saying it, sister!” says Tara.

Furthermore, the idea of divorce if abused is not even in contention because as I have mentioned before they consider this as a sin. Despite these ups and downs hope for further improvement is still at potential level, there is an ongoing discussion about garment visa where these female workers can travel abroad and work, which will increase their autonomy much further because not only they can earn but also they can see, learn and experience the empowerment that is happening in the world. They told me about it when we sat for the group discussion,

“Did you see that lady who was asking for our vote? She's one of them; she was abroad for a while. She came back only because they were torturing her, other than that she was earning well.

Did you see how well dressed she is? It's all the money she earned working there”

Although garment visa did not appear as a legitimate option, I could see the desire to leave behind all the dilemmas, socials ties and start a new life.

3.5 Measuring empowerment through their perspective

During my interview sessions I asked all my respondents to score themselves about economic, social and political empowerment respectively. The basic of rating was such that each of them will score themselves form a figure out of possible five and the figure they provide will judge the level of empowerment. The scale of empowerment is in ascending order meaning that zero would mean no empowerment and five would be highly empowered where 0 being absolutely no

autonomy, 1 explained little/almost no movements within the space provided for them, 2 was little movement with negotiation power, 3 depicted moderate autonomy, 4 was scaled as nearly perfect empowerment but with a few drawbacks and lastly, 5 was completely empowerment even after losing their jobs.

They were asked to comment on their societal respectability, economic autonomy and political ability in decision-making both within and outside their household after losing their jobs. Since questioning them on theoretical terms will not yield any fruitful results, operational definition were used to give the terms more vivid understanding.

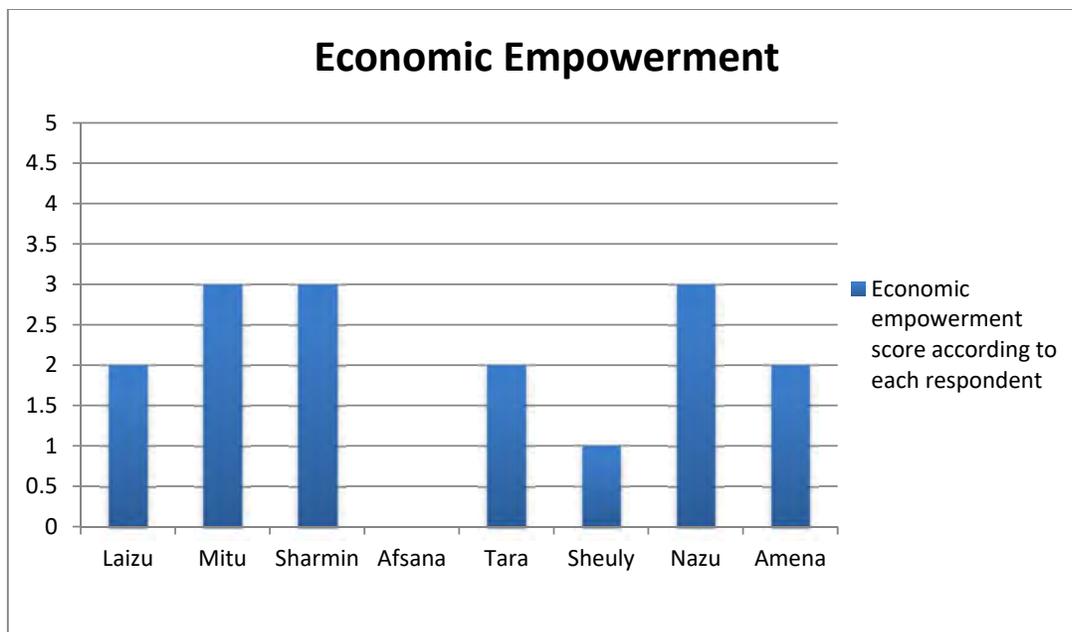


Figure 1: Economic autonomy scores after losing the jobs(Source: Fieldwork 2016)

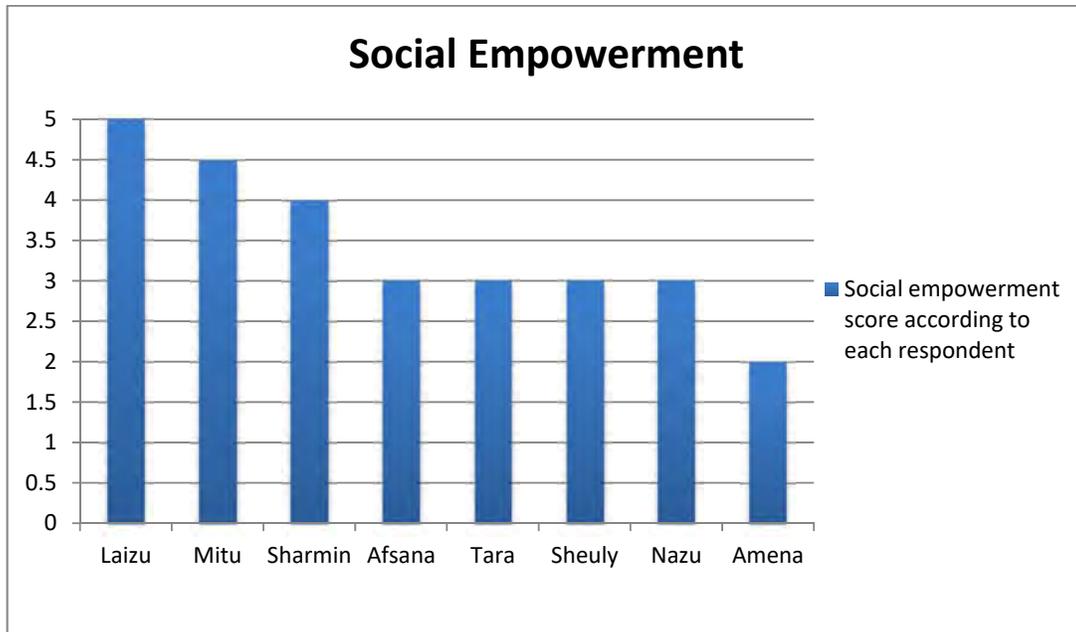


Figure 2: Respectability scoring among the respondents (Source: Fieldwork 2016)

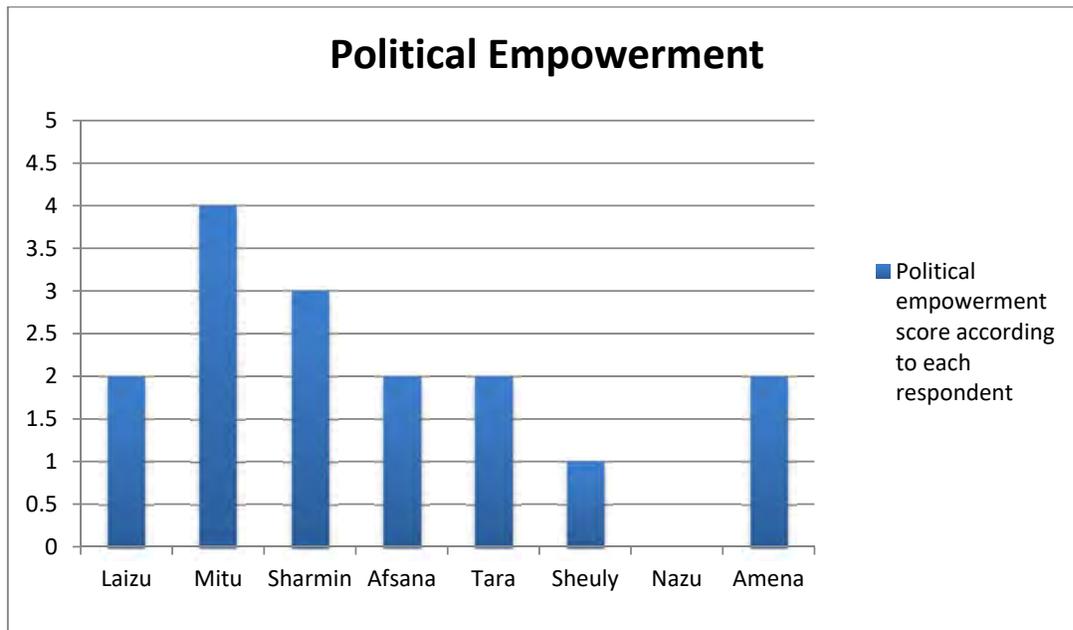


Figure 3: Exercise of power among the respondents (Source: Fieldwork 2016)

After vivid discussions and explaining how are they supposed to rate the most horrid ratings came from economic aspects. Everyone was quite certain and concern about their economic state and hence rated poorly. Soon after leaving the garment sector most of them are unemployed and even if they are employed most of them work as housemaid that is also temporary. As a result with low or inconsistent income it is almost certain that none of them could score themselves a higher rate of empowerment.

When it comes to social empowerment it would be too wrong to say that they are not empowered at all, the level may not be adequate but at certain cases the scores appear to be quite high. The social struggles that all of them faces may not be the same among all of them, that is, not all my respondents face social obstacles. For example, Laizu, she said that what other women might face in the slum community, she usually does not face such problems like abuse or eve teasing. Perhaps that is why she scored herself a five out of possible five.

Politically, empowerment also varied among my respondents. Some were too involved and some were not allowed or did not bother to get involved. Mitu was highly involved with the community election unlike all the others in her neighborhood however the rest were moderately and even not even involved at all. One case was Nazu who after leaving the garment sector she now works as a housemaid and as a result she can provide some form of economic stability and as I have mentioned before these people do not differentiate much about working in garment factories or as a housemaid Nazu's social status was decent to her. However when it comes to political score she has no involvement at all.

Overall one thing that is needed to be mentioned that these women are scoring themselves and it will not be too unlikely that the way the score and their thought process would match their score. The reason is that they do not know much about empowerment, what they think is a very good position may not be one to the eyes of those who are much better off.

3.6 Similar patterns within their space

Among all my respondents few things were highly common. Such pattern carried through all of them. The most common was being a victim to domestic violence. Despite their husband do not working in any form of institution and depending on their wives, these women are still subject to domestic violence. However there are exceptions, Sharmin after leaving the sector managed to find her another job. She contributes to the family along with her husband. However the job is not permanent yet and with one child she said that during her transitions in between work she did not had to face domestic violence from her husband.

Another aspect that appeared to be similar and such is the challenged political autonomy among them. Even though some of these women are active in slum community election, despite the involvement their view about their marriage remained the same. Most of the respondents do not have the idea of “kabin” and even if they do have they were not assured any such contract and those who know about kabin and was not provided still accepted the marriage, perhaps accepted to live within the social ties. Almost all of these women are subject to domestic violence but none of them decides to file divorce or leave their husband because they consider this as a sin. All of these struggling women are ready to accept all the abuse and suffering they face but yet they will not leave their husband.

Religion and the society have also influenced similarly occurring incidents. They believe that leaving their husband will not be accepted in Islam and they will commit a sin, here the religion appears to be a binding force in the society.

In addition, a fourth pattern that emerges among most of them is about existing in the society. Meaning that most them has to be married or belong to some form of institution like family to belong to the slum community. This can be one reason why most of them do not leave their husband.

The power dynamics of loan should also be considered as an occurring pattern here. Ninety percent of the participants joined factories in order to support their families to pay off the debt. And when they lost jobs, the ones with no backup support such as a husband who earns are repeating the same mistake. What changes is the people they are taking loans from, but it is their children who will again be thrown into the shackles of debt.

Overall these patterns came out to be similar but with a much broader and empirical research more patterns could be visible.

In this chapter, I have explained the data analysis of the information I have gathered through my extensive fieldwork. The next chapter shall write on the stories of three of my respondents.

Chapter Four: Leaning into Their Lives, Stories Untold

This chapter shall represent the stories of three of my respondents. Case study of their lives will be helpful to understand the scenario.

4.1 Case Study One

Visiting the slums of Mirpur for the last one month taught me several things. Before deciding to work on this topic, I was particularly over enthusiastic to regenerate my gender and development course works in the field. ‘Patriarchy and global forces coming together to exploit our women force and they have every right to know what are fed in the name of empowerment’, this was my initial statement as the purpose of this thesis. Nonetheless, as the fieldwork was on process I had hard time trying to place the theories and what I was experiencing on a parallel line. Some of them made sense and some, on the other hand, was contrary to the theories I have studies so far.

Mitu, my first respondent had worked in the sector for the last 13 years. She is 25 now, married for 3 years and mother of a child. When I met her for the first time, she hardly looked 18 to me. Malnutrition and years of psychological exploitation had its work severely done on her. Of all my respondents she was the most spontaneous which had me guess her age wrong. On the day of our one to one interview, I asked her to define her life and the life she aspires.

“Shabnoor like, but life rather wants me to be the backup dancer. Not the one who might get a chance to share screen with Shabnoor, I am the other one. The one who only has ‘waiting’ written on their fate. So I dance for the joy of life”, she replied looking at the movie playing on her television.

She came to Dhaka 13 years ago, with her family who were in grave debt prior to her father’s death. Her mother who used to work with her in a garments factory now works as house help. At the age of 12, she started as a print worker (helper) for a local garments factory in Mirpur. 13 years later, now that she is not working she says her priorities changed during the years but only looking after herself was never the concern. At the first few years, it was the debt that bounded her to work. Two third of her salary used to go behind the debt installments and the rest was for family expenditure. As she had her two brothers and one sister also working on several other jobs, even when the money was of scarce amount for the labor she was putting into, it did not matter. She was married off immediately after they were done with the debt installments. Hereafter, a new concern was validating.

Her husband, Mohammad Kayes is a seasonal construction laborer. Seasonal in a sense that if the weather suits his mood, he might go to work. If it does not, she might get beaten instead. The amount she cumulatively (regular and overtime duty) earned was spent behind family amenities. In the 13 years since she started working, the salary moved from 1000 BDT to 4300 BDT in the pay scale. After paying the rent, the rest were spent on food and other basic spending as a result Mitu has no

savings. After she lost her job because of her health condition, she said she sees herself doing the same mistake her father did which eventually led her to this profession.

“I know taking the loan might harm the future of my child but this is the only way I have now. My husband does not pay me at all. I cannot go back to the factory; it is suffocating to work in there.

Not too many options to work with”, she mumbled.

Even if she wanted to go back to the factory the pay scale will not move significantly. This is the scenario for most of my respondents; as they do not have the educational qualification, the posts above operator are restricted for them. The hierarchy in the factories as they informed me are, i) helper, ii) operator, iii) supervisor, iv) line chief, v) production manager, etc. and from above the post of supervisor you at least need to have a Higher Secondary School Certificate which most of them do not have.

4.2: Case Study Two

However, my second respondent Laizu crossed that barrier through her network within the factory. She came to Dhaka in 1996 from Bhola. 9 years after, she left her job with a salary of 7500 BDT per month. Where the position of operator requires the minimum equivalent of a primary school degree, she was an operator with no educational background. The success in professional life did not result in any kinds of alteration in her economic or social autonomy. She and her husband both suffer from pulmonary disease. While she continued to work, her husband has been unemployed ever since they got married. With apt time and her money to spend, he got involved in extra marital affair. She figured it out a few days later and when questioned every time, her husband used to get violent and she also had to be hospitalized once.

I asked her opinion on *kabinand divorce*, whether she has been well informed about her rights or not. Kabin was an unknown term and divorce was not even an option.

“Divorce? That’s absolute sin! And there’s no guarantee the next husband is going to be better than this one. He’s lazy, an utter failure, but society’s not pointing their fingers on me at least. I would rather stick to this one”, she replied.

She has been unemployed for around 14 months, the last of her insurance bond that she broke in a premature stage is going to last her one more month. Since her physique will not let her work in factories anymore, she has plans to move to her village afterwards. Laizu has a three years old daughter who does not go to school yet.

“I have made bruises on her body because she was nagging for 6 taka this morning. How do I gather around 2500 for her Madrasha by tomorrow?”

Laizu says after confessing her wish to admit her daughter in a Madrasha, but to her upmost surprise Madrasha education is no cheaper than regular schools.

4.3: Case Study Three

My third participant, Afsana, also did not receive any education. After her mother died, she had an accident and that left her with a painful limp in her left leg. Even after that, she worked as a helper for 8 years and an operator for 4 years. Both the jobs require long hours standing on one’s feet.

Her family back in village took a home loan from ASA (an international NGO), the incapability to repay the loan resulted in losing their house until they could pay the money back. Hence, like thousand others, the family headed to Dhaka. 27years old Afsana’s the only unmarried participant among the eight I have interviewed. Her father who is now in pesticide business did not want to marry her off since that will discontinue the money she was bring home every month.

Unlike my other participants she has worked for the same factory for 12 years and that according to the unwritten, unspoken yet explicit rule of factories here, makes her eligible for one-time pension

money. However, the garment factories had even better reasons not to pay her stating that Afsana was unfit for the work she was doing for most of her job period.

In a nutshell, what she gave to the company was much lesser than what she has received over the years. Hence, they are not obliged to pay her anything extra. Afsana did not think of appealing to that.

Afsana's older brother, who lives in the same slum with his family, does not want to keep any connection with his siblings. Afsana lives with her younger brother who is now taking care of her expenses. As her condition worsened, he is the one taking her to the doctors; her father does not want anything to do with her ever since she has lost her job with no compensation money. She never set any savings account or insurance policy since her father ensured her of her future. After losing all of it to ill fate, Afsana does not know what to hope of the future.

She considers herself lucky to have a brother who is looking after her.

“Married women pay for their unemployed, vagabond husbands and unmarried ones like me are paying prices for the things their family did. No one here is without any struggle. Allah gives trouble; he's also the one who sends its solution. I have struggled all my life with this miserable leg, but even for once did not stop working. May he blesses Bodrul (her brother) for all that he is doing for me”, Afsana stating her untold story.

This chapter has discussed the stories of my respondents in order to understand the depth of this research. The next chapter shall conclude the work of this thesis with recommendation, limitation and summary of the findings.

Chapter Five: Conclusion

This chapter shall conclude my extensive work on women garment workers. Here I shall discuss in brief of my findings, limitations and recommendation for further work on this topic.

5.1 Summary of the finding and analysis

It is quite surprising how far the society has come till today and how it has adapted to the new changes. Long before when patriarchy was the glue to the social construction, which perhaps somewhat still is today, has travelled long and overtime it lost its stiffness. As a part of the society and being an anthropologist this weakened position of patriarchy is the sign of joy because the subordination of women from massive has fallen by a certain level. However what we know of empowerment and what actually it has evolved to, is lot different and inconveniently the evolution is not on the positive end. My work on empowerment of female garment workers has come to such conclusion where I can summarize in certain ways. Firstly, if we recall the definition of empowerment it occurs when a person has the freedom to choose according to his or her desires without any restriction. The idea of empowerment that we know is the ability and freedom to spend our own earnings and decide what to do with it, whether contributing to the

family or spending behind our own lifestyles. When we talk about the wage of a female garment worker which is on average of BDT 4000, the biggest problem to this is that there no growth in their salary but within that amount she has to pay for her own expenses, her family and in some cases for her husband too. The reason for me to bring this scenario back is because what we perceive of empowerment is vague with the idea that there is empowerment if she has the ability to spend, should be altered and rather think in a way that empowerment should be the process of development which is sustainable. Working for 8 to 10 years and after leaving the industry with nothing and still confined within the patriarchal boundaries limits the process of empowerment. Furthermore, the growth of worker in the garment factories is limited due to education. If this so why do factories hire workers with low education? The most obvious answer is low wage; however that was not the concentration of my research. To summarize the whole findings of this research is that in in terms of economic empowerment it is a disaster after they leave the sector. With sources of income like small loans does no repair the damage that they suffer rather they go through further problems.

Secondly, from a social aspect there are improvements after leaving the sector but to a very low extent because most of the status earned was from their workplace which after leaving gets slashed by a major amount. To be added, the way they mobilize in the society becomes a problem because most of them often get teased and at the same time domestic violence keeps on mounting pressure. The worst is perhaps the domestic violence because not just these women are abused but at the same time most of them has to find ways to create finance because some of these husbands do not work and even if they do they do not provide much financial support to their spouses.

Thirdly, from political aspect their involvement remains up to a certain extent only to community as a whole such as slum community election but if it is about their marriage or “kabin” their view remains the same. Socially and economically devastated yet they do not attempt to take any actions such as legal. Even if they do the patriarchal confinement is so strong their action goes in

vain. Despite they do get positive responses from social and political institution like “shalish” which impacts the living together as a family, but these are not legal institutions and in modern world where everything rests on legal strengths these social constructed institutional processes are hardly sustainable.

5.2: Recommendations

If I am to provide recommendations firstly, the factories should hire workers with a minimum education of at least ten years or train their workers according to their work. Another initiative that can be taken by the factory owners is that to create pension funds on behalf of the workers so that when they leave they can have a lump sum amount to spend something productive. In addition, Bangladesh Garment Manufacturers and Exporters Association should advocate on not just making the policies but also on implementing them in right places. The factories I have worked on were both compliant and non-compliant. Where the compliant ones to some extent had policies to help the workers afterwards, non-compliant factories completely lacked that. I believe the location of the factories also had an influence on the loopholes that has been created. Nonetheless, it is the workers who will be suffering no matter where they have been working, their productive years were spent behind the factories and they deserve a pension scheme. It is high time BGMEA look onto the matter with utmost priority.

Secondly, to create awareness about marriage and contracts like “kabin”. Different NGOs are spreading words about them but these without law enforcement from the government will not be possible. To be added the law enforcement authority should be more active when it comes to conflicts among slum dwellers.

Third factor is about alienation, after working up to ten years at garments factories and doing the same work over and over again, alienates these workers. A worker working so long and performing the same task over and over again with little care for his/her social ties the whole

industrial system is alienating the worker from their colleagues and also from the society. To resolve such issues it is important to invest more in training institutions where people could be trained to do other kinds of work.

My fourth advice would be that to create a strong rural background of these people. Most of them migrated to Dhaka city to repair their broken conditions in their hometown, sustainable initiatives in rural Bangladesh would mean that these migrating people would have less pressure mounting on them. NGOs now are doing certain things to make rural life better but the question remains, are their actions sufficient enough? Perhaps along with NGOs the government should also accompany with them to create successful development.

Fifthly, the social safety net program introduced by the government of Bangladesh has had a profound impact on poverty reduction. However the limitation of this is that majority of these program focuses on rural population, while on the other hand urban poverty is on the rise with lesser programs exclusively dedicated for them in comparison with the rural population (Ahmed, 2007). There needs to be an entire social safety net program concerning the women garment workers of Bangladesh keeping in mind the vast amount of rural women that have been employed by this industry. Although they are a part of rural Bangladesh, most of them permanently reside in Dhaka city now and introducing safety net program for them would help both rural and urban population.

5.3: Further Research

This field of empowerment is diverse in many ways. There should be more research on how we see respectability of these people who had worked in the garment industries and eventually left. It is imperative to work on such cases because perhaps, all of us does not might think the way these subordinate people might think which can create a gap between opportunity and using the opportunity which can help these struggling people. It is important that more work is done from

the view of both sides- the workers and ourselves, so that that we can know the clear differences and obstacles and work on those. Academics should also incorporate empowerment, NGO and rural Bangladesh in one to see how all of these work together. There are empirical researches but if this could be done from an ethnographer's point of view and along with empirical work, the results could portray what actually is happening and how much it has progressed. Bangladesh is vast and the population is now a burden, which makes things extremely difficult for the government to cope and mend all the areas. NGOs are a must here to help support these peoples. Further researches should also support NGOs in a way that they can know where exactly to work on rather creating investment plans as a whole. However these are all long run measures but the present conditions need to be worked on so that the existing people can make their life better now.

From my fieldwork a pattern emerged where almost all of them suffer from same kind of problems. This suggests that such struggles in not common among few workers rather present in many. Since we consider empowerment as a "whole" rather than "individual" it clearly contradicts with the results because the 'whole' is not empowered rather positioned behind the curtains of struggles which goes unnoticed. In the end I would not say that empowerment has not improved but empowerment has not got better either.

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