

# An Analysis of the Nexus between Female Labour Force Participation and Women's Empowerment in Bangladesh

By

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A thesis submitted to the Department of Economics and Social Sciences in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Bachelor of Social Science in Economics

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It is hereby declared that

1. The thesis submitted is my/our own original work while completing degree at BRAC University.
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3. The thesis does not contain material which has been accepted, or submitted, for any other degree or diploma at a university or other institution.
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## Approval

The thesis/project titled “An Analysis of the Nexus between Female Labour Force Participation and Women’s Empowerment in Bangladesh” submitted by

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## **1. Abstract**

This paper explores the links between Bangladesh's economic growth in recent years and the contribution of women to that development by highlighting the ways in which this growth has not always been conducive to women's own empowerment and establishment of rights and agency. It argues that while female labour force participation is growing, the scope that women have for working in Bangladesh has not qualitatively improved in a manner for work itself to be deemed as an empowering activity. The paper addresses the pressing need for formalising informal sectors and holding formal sectors accountable for their labour violations, especially when it comes to women, and highlights some of the harrowing experiences women have faced in the ready-made garments (RMG) sector.

**Keywords:** female labour force participation, women's empowerment, economic growth

## **2. Introduction**

### **2.1 Background**

In recent times, Bangladesh has consistently produced economic growth surpassing expectations. Growth rate has shown a positive sticky tendency around the 5-7% mark for the better part of the last two decades. In the current context of economic fluctuations and socio-political upheavals affecting traditionally economically robust countries, this persistent increase bears the hallmarks for a long-term improvement in livelihoods and standards of living across the country (7<sup>th</sup> Five Year Plan, FY2016-FY2020). Much of Bangladesh's growth has tended to rely upon the demographic dividend it has experienced as a result of the disproportionately large number of young people who are entering the labour force today. While this may be a blessing, it has also resulted in severe supply-side shortages and coupled with weak private investment, has called into scrutiny the weak infrastructure of employment, skill development and entrepreneurship.

Female labour force participation in Bangladesh has been increasing faster than that of men in recent years. According to Khatun et. al (2015), the increasing participation of women in economic activities over time is attributable to four elements, including the execution of family planning policies by the Government of Bangladesh, the microcredit revolution in the mid-1970s, industrial policies targeted towards export-oriented industries in the early 1980s, and the Food for Education programme which commenced in 1980. The employment summaries being tabulated and analysed by human rights organisations such as Asia Monitor has shown that despite this large boom in female employment, women continue to face precarious situations with regards to their place of work. Much of this growth has been attributable to informal arrangements of work, where women are hired on contractual basis to carry out hard labour. The biggest growth of female employment has been in the RMG sector, where surplus value is extracted from women's labour by paying them less than adequate wages in return for stiff daily working hours. While these arrangements could reasonably be expected to be formal sources of employment, the RMG industry is in fact rampant with informal arrangements, worker abuse and a penchant for placing profit over people (Siddiqui, 2015). In as much as new spaces of employment represent value additions to the economy and instigate multiplier effects across the entire value chain, the fact still remains that these spaces are dependent upon the legitimised expropriation of women's labour in return for profits.

The second fast growing market for female employment is the overseas labour market, where every year a large number of women migrate from rural areas to foreign states, most notably Saudi Arabia and other Gulf nations. While migration of workers is to this day hailed as the biggest source of foreign revenue for the government, and the sector which has almost single-handedly transformed the purchasing power and consumption levels of the urban poor, it is rife with worker's rights abuses that are either ignored entirely or that remain unaddressed both in destination countries and at home (Siddiqui, 2005). The overseas migration industry has also capitalised on the booming RMG market, especially as more and more women become skilled operators. These skilled operators respond to the persistently low level of wages that the national RMG sector provides by migrating out of the country and going to places like Jordan, Brunei and Mauritius, where a fledgling RMG sector has developed in recent years, and in the process adding not only to the growth of those respective economies, but also becoming the direct competitors of the Bangladeshi RMG industry. 54,000 women trained in the RMG sector have migrated to Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) nations under the government owned recruiting agency Bangladesh Overseas Employment and Services Limited (BOESL) in the last three years (BOESL, 2018). These migratory patterns reflect the poor employment infrastructure in place in the manufacturing sector for women workers, leading to the realisation that the aforementioned high proportion of young people, and the subsequent increase in growth rate of female labour force participation, has not been utilised in the best possible way (Afsar et. al, 2002).

## 2.2 Research objective

This paper attempts to draw attention to the irregularities and the abuses implicit in the success story of increasing female labour force participation. It further questions the qualitative nature of what has been accepted unquestioningly as empowerment in national development discourse and locates the potential for gender-based exploitation within it. In making this point, the paper asks whether the increasing participation of women in the labour force should be uncritically accepted as a positive phenomenon when little to no infrastructure for support and redress exist.

Furthermore, the paper explores the statistical projections regarding the establishment of formal structures of work for women in the coming years. If Bangladesh is to maintain this economic growth and complement it with the development of structures for decent, safe and empowering spaces where economic production takes place, then the pressing issue becomes addressing

irregularities in the informal sectors and the low levels of accountability that turn formal sectors into informal ones. This exploration is significant given the mandate of the newly elected government, under its adoption of the Sustainable Development Goals in the 7<sup>th</sup> Five-Year Plan, to establish decent working conditions and fair wages for all, irrespective of gender. As such, this paper intends to initiate a nuanced discussion on the fallacies of development discourse, specifically when it comes to women empowerment.

### 2.3 Research question

Is Bangladesh's steady economic growth, resulting, to a considerable degree, from women's increasing participation in the labour force, unequivocally conducive to women's own empowerment in the nation?



### **3. Review of Existing Literature**

#### **3.1 Understanding informality**

There exists a wide variety of attempts at standardising the definition of informality with regards to employment. However, most of them converge upon some basic characteristics that can be operationalised for the purposes of macro-economic analyses. Given that informality itself contains several accepted definitions, for the purposes of this research, the particular definition of informality that is of interest is a sub-section provided by the Asian Development Bank's (ADB) Country Report (2010), that outlined the breadth and scope of the informal economy and its contributions to the national economy. Section (v) of the ADB-proposed definition of informal employment states- 'Employees are considered to have informal jobs if their employment relationship is, in law or in practice, not subject to national labour legislation, income taxation, social protection, or entitlement to certain social benefits (advance notice of dismissal, severance pay, paid annual or sick leave etc.)... or jobs for which labour regulations are not applied, not enforced, or not complied with for any other reason.' (ADB, 2010). This definition significantly broadens the scope of the working definition of informality and can then be utilised to explore the patterns and trends of female employment in the labour-intensive ready-made garments (RMG) sector. The Labour Force Survey (LFS) 2016 also, under its own definition of informality, includes the RMG sector by stating that informality includes, 'all individual job-based informal employment – operationally comprising all employed persons in the non-agriculture sector, both wage and salaried workers (employees) with no pension or no contribution to a retirement fund'.

#### **3.2 Towards decent work, SDGs and women's empowerment**

The Sustainable Development Agenda 2030 has incorporated the demand for ensuring decent work for all, which involves 'opportunities for work that are productive and deliver a fair income, security in the workplace and social protection for families' (UN, 2015). These targets, which are measurable and broad in their scope, outline part of the global agenda towards fair, equitable and sustainable economic development. In the most recent assessment of Bangladesh and its progress in ensuring the implementation of the International Labour Organisation (ILO) Decent Work Agenda, the ILO Country Report highlights the particular systemic barriers that

still remain, citing, ‘Finally, there has been no progress in reducing the share of Bangladeshi workers engaged in informal employment, with women workers faring particularly badly in this regard... By and large, the minimum wage policy has been inadequate in terms of protecting employees, primarily because of non-compliance of employers and non-enforcement by the labour authorities’ (ILO, 2013).

It is pertinent, then, to point out that inability to ensure decent work, especially for women who are entering the labour force, is not in accordance with the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, of which Bangladesh is a signatory, specifically outcome 5.5 of **Goal 5. ‘Achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls’**, which demands member-states’ commitment to, ‘ensure women’s full and effective participation and equal opportunities for leadership at all levels of decision-making in political, economic and public life’. The most recent ILO decent work assessment has shown that the current condition of women’s employment in Bangladesh also falls short of outcome 8.8 of **Goal 8. ‘Promote sustained, inclusive and sustainable economic growth, full and productive employment and decent work for all’** which asks states to ‘protect labour rights and promote safe and secure working environments for all workers, including migrant workers, in particular women migrants, and those in precarious employment’ (UN, 2015). Given that there is significant international pressure to provide continual progress on reaching the development commitments outlined in the 2030 Agenda, the extent of persistent informality in our economic sectors becomes a cause for concern.

### 3.3 Discourse on empowerment, increasing employment

According to Mosedale (2005), women empowerment is considered to be a multifaceted concept. These facets are linked to society’s rules and regulations which pertain to legitimising women’s voice in society. Power in society is also elevated through collective action and as such, working together can help achieve more rather than individual efforts. This is also reliant upon women finding opportunities to come together and engage in discourse regarding their current circumstances, figuring out their strengths and formulating strategies to attain better standing in society as a group. Therefore, Mosedale states that ‘Women’s empowerment is the process by which women redefine and extend what is possible for them to be and do in situations where they have been restricted, compared to men, from being and doing.’ In order to improve

women's prospects of redefining gender roles, it is imperative to renovate the structures of society through the eradication of gender inequality.

In Bangladesh, majority of employed women work in agriculture and service sectors, with growing employment in the manufacturing sector, where there is a substantial increase in the share of informal employment. Bangladesh does not provide unemployment insurance, an essential instrument in protecting workers from severe economic fluctuations, and does not abide by the Social Security (Minimum Standards) Convention, 1952 (No. 102), or the Employment Promotion and Protection against Unemployment Convention, 1988 (No. 168). As such, many workers simply cannot afford to remain unemployed and are willing to work in the informal sector, where they are likely to earn far less than through formal employment agreements. Since women are generally responsible for taking care of family chores, flexible working arrangements are essential if they are to reconcile paid work with their family responsibilities. The absence of such arrangements in the formal sector also pushes women towards the informal economy, where necessary adjustments can be made. While the informal economy may, largely through self-employment, offer more flexibility in terms of working time and geographical location, the jobs to be found there are usually of low quality and poorly remunerated and provide no social protection.

## **4. Methodology**

The research will use data compiled by the Labour Force Survey, 2016 to look at the time-based changes to the rate of female labour force participation and the persistence of informality in women's places of work. This will be used to create projections based on average values till the year 2021-2022. Similarly, the trend rates of all three will be compared to draw analytical findings. Given that informal employment creates grounds for exploitation and violations of both established workers' rights and the stipulated norms under the ILO Decent Work goals, the research aims to establish the link between economic growth and unregulated worker employment leading to exploitative surplus appropriating practices. Based on several case studies that will be summarised as part of the research, there will be further exploration around the nexus between economic growth and labour participation conditions of women and the analysis will thus seek to complicate established connections between increasing employment rates and the notion of 'empowerment'.

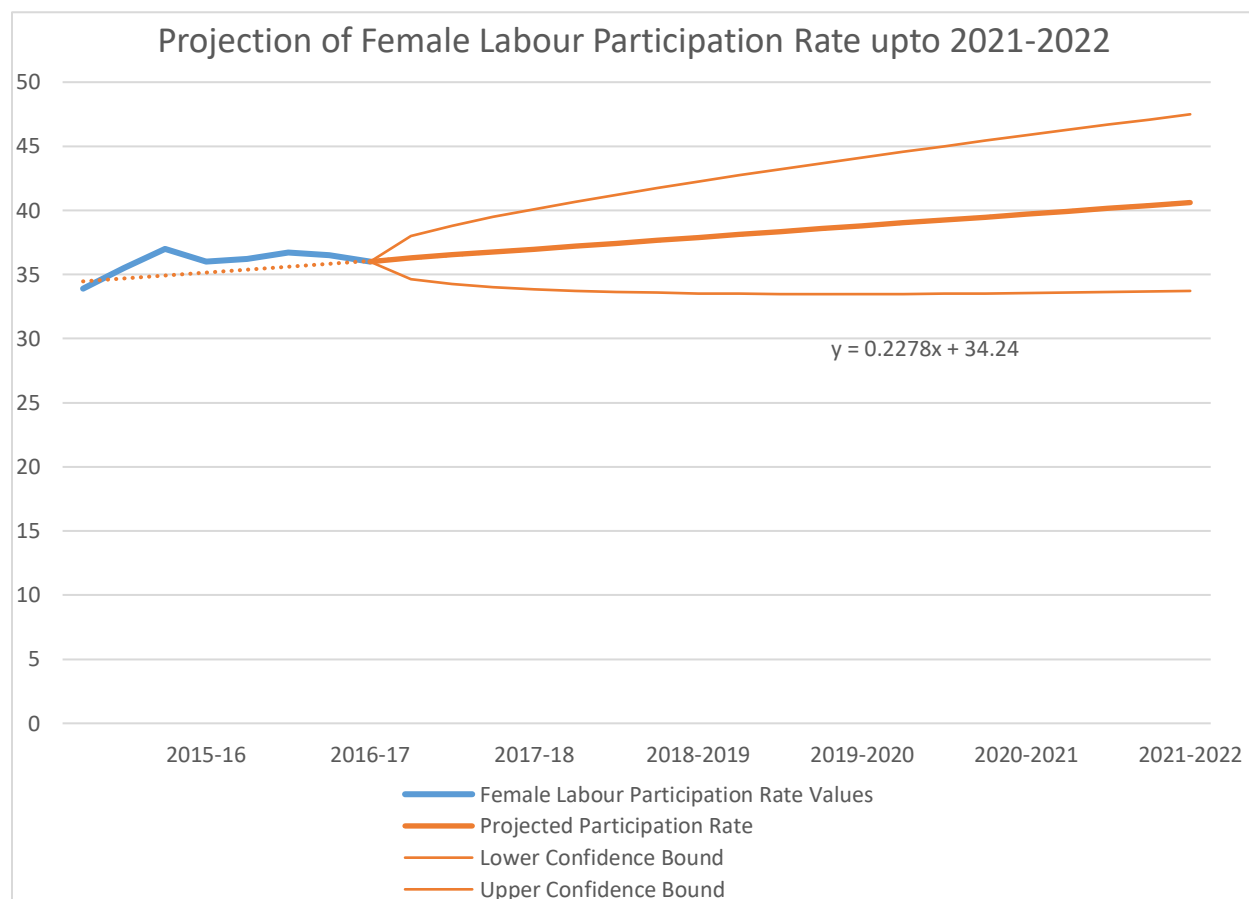
The links between growth, labour force participation and quality of employment have long remained unchallenged in economic discourse in Bangladesh. Given the promising growth figures that the country is presently boasting and the recent announcement of Bangladesh's potential graduation into a 'Middle Income Country', it becomes pertinent to explore the qualitative shifts in the development of the country's economic structures as well as the changes said development brings in the lives of people. The reports of gross worker exploitation and unchecked malpractices, both in the RMG sector, display a penchant towards flouting accountability and best practices.

The analysis section is divided into three subsections. The first section provides an overview of female labour force participation and presents recent employment data and thereby provides analysis on the role of informality in economic growth, having followed the ADB definition of informality. Second, an exploration into the reported worker rights' violations in the RMG sector is then analysed by highlighting the overall scope of worker rights' violations in informal employment structures. Case studies will be added to accentuate the analysis. This section provides collected data on RMG employment of women along with reports on worker rights, and practices that ensure worker safety and wellbeing compiled by BRAC, Accord and other relevant stakeholders.

Finally, the third section will aim to summarise the insights presented in the above two sections and will look at the programmatic, policy and organizational initiatives that have been taken in recent times in an attempt to mitigate the negative externalities of informal employment for women. The paper will then conclude by providing a list of recommendations that should be implemented to effect the informal economic practices and introduce more accountability and cognisance towards the rights of women workers, such that qualitative empowerment can be achieved.

## 5. Data Analysis and Findings

### 5.1 Female labour force participation and its ancillaries – nuances in the notion of empowerment



**Figure 1**

Female Labour Force Participation Rate (%)			Years
35.6			2015-16
36.3			2016-17
Upper Confidence Bound	Projected Participation Rate	Lower Confidence Bound	
40.1	37.2	33.9	2017-18
42.3	37.9	33.5	2018-19
44.1	39	33.5	2019-20
45.9	39.7	33.6	2020-21
47.5	40.6	33.7	2021-22

**Table 1**

Looking at the Labour Force Survey, it seems to be the case that on the surface, Bangladesh’s demographic dividend is paying off handsomely for the country. The LFS 2016 shows a promising growth trend of females aged 15 and above who are entering the labour force (i.e. those currently employed or in the process of actively seeking employment). In the past year, this growth rate has dwarfed that of males entering the labour force. Using the statistics for the 2015-16 and 2016-17 labour force participation rate, the values are forecasted until 2021-22 using a 95% confidence interval rate and the yearly average estimation, as illustrated in Figure 1, with the yearly data shown in Table 1. The findings show that the female labour force participation by 2021-22 may increase to 40.6%, with an upper confidence of 47.5% and a lower confidence of 33.7%.

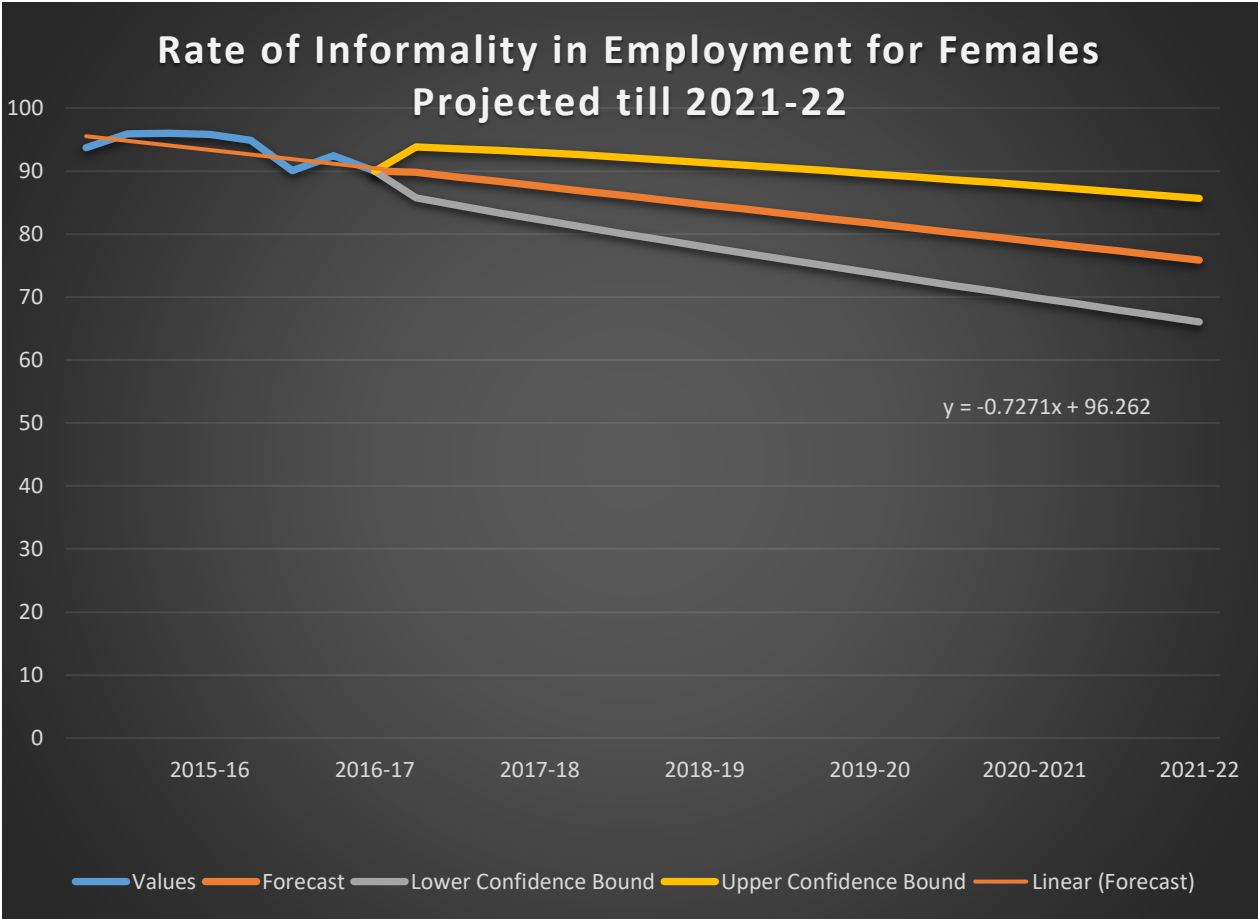


Figure 2

<b>Rate of Informality in Employment for Females (%)</b>			<b>Years</b>
95.4			2015-16
91.8			2016-17
<b>Upper Confidence Bound</b>	<b>Projected Rate of Informality</b>	<b>Lower Confidence Bound</b>	
92.9	87.6	82.3	2017-18
91.4	84.7	78	2018-19
89.6	81.7	73.9	2019-20
87.7	78.8	69.9	2020-21
85.7	75.9	66.1	2021-22

Table 2

The informality rate data forecasted till 2021-22 provides some scope for positivity but in keeping with the number of jobseekers that will be potentially ‘active’ by 2021-22, particularly female ones, this is still well below the ideal rate of ‘formalising’ employment practices and bringing them into systems of accountability. Figure 2, supported by Table 2, shows that roughly 75.9% of jobs for women look set to be stuck in informal sectors by 2021-22, while the more negative predictions show 85.7% (virtually no change other than offsets made by population growth) and optimistic accounts might place this at 66.1%. These are all highly speculative predictions, and must not be viewed as definitive verdicts on the structural persistence of informality in the economy, especially for women, in Bangladesh. It may very well be the case that the actual process of formalising ‘informal’ settings will be much more positive in the coming years. However, the trend data has shown a paltry decrease in overall informal jobs being carried out by women every year, averaging at around 3%. The majority will continue to face unprotected work environments with potentially little regard to the safety, dignity and well-being of the women themselves.

Several key pointers regarding the scope and mode of female work can be expanded upon once we look at the key sectors where women’s labour force participation is increasing and the gender-based distribution of informality in each of those sectors.



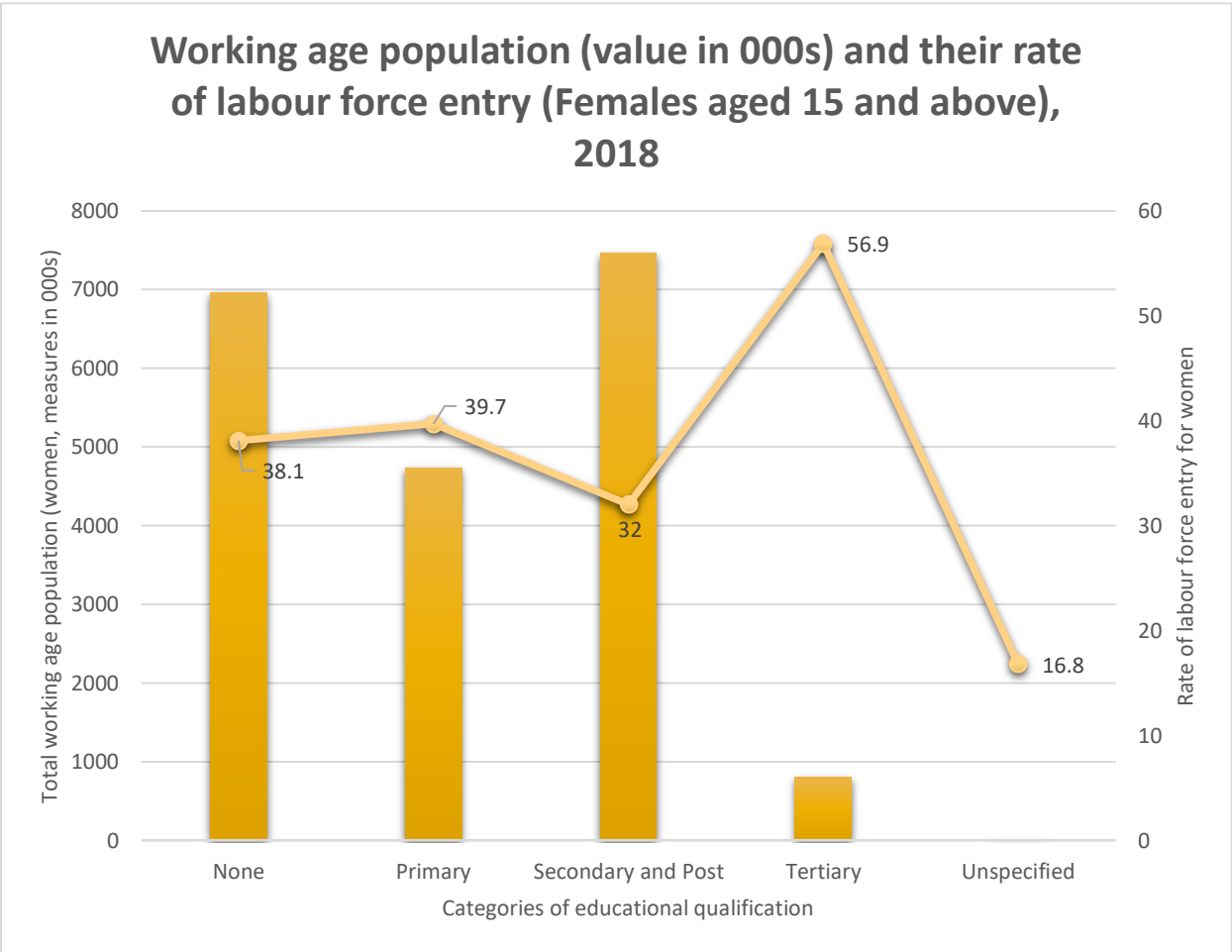


Figure 3

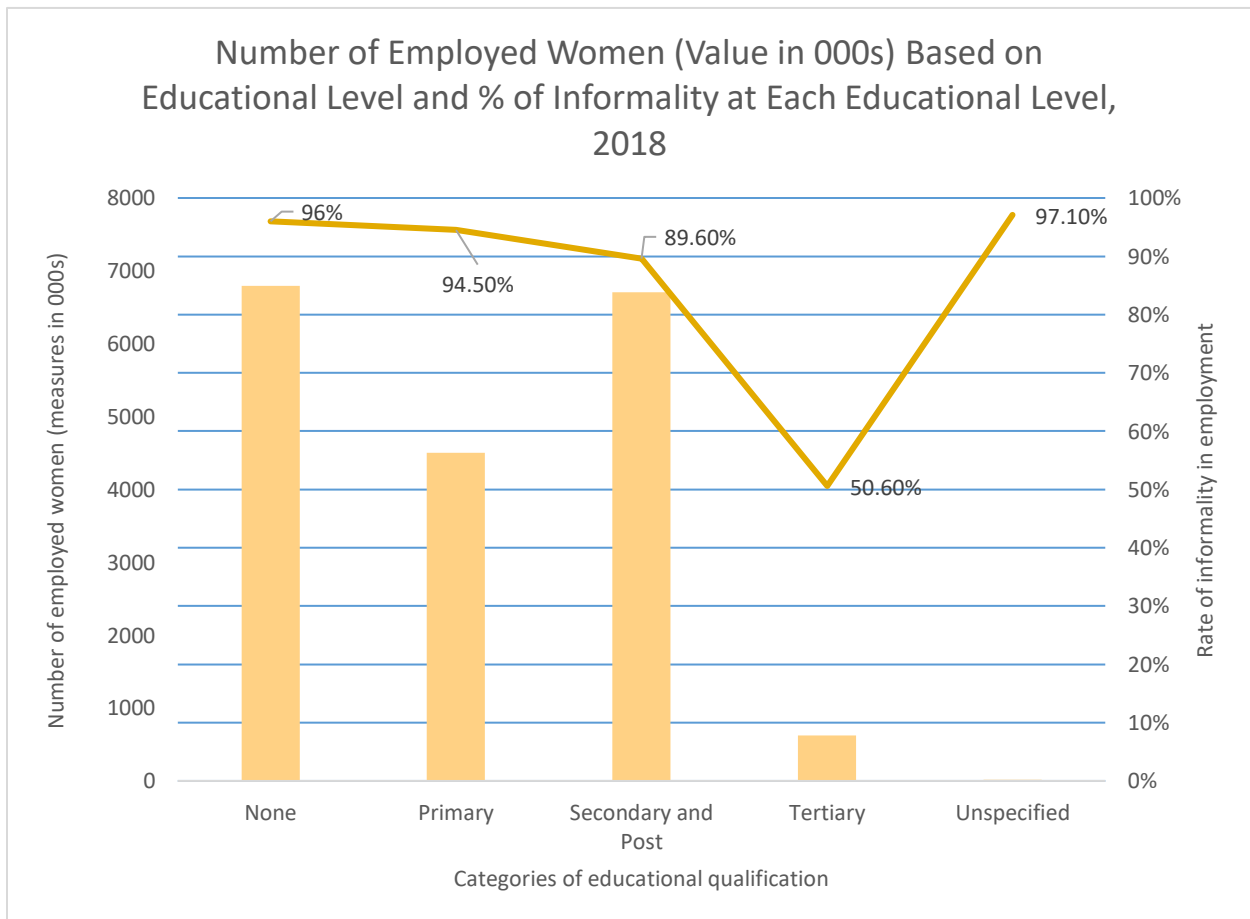
<b>Categories of Educational Qualification</b>	<b>Total Working Age Population (Women, Measured in 000s) in 2018</b>	<b>Rate of Labour Force Entry for Women (%) in 2018</b>
None	6965	38.1
Primary	4732	39.7
Secondary and Post	7466	32
Tertiary	798	56.9
Unspecified	14	16.8

Table 3

Figure 3, supported by the data in Table 3, shows that of the population of females joining the workforce every year, the highest entry rate is amongst the women educated in the tertiary level

(university level) at 56.9%. However, the total *number* of this category is close to nine times smaller than the categories of uneducated and, secondary and post-secondary level educated women entering the job market. Their participation rate has been judged at 38.1% and 32% respectively. This means that in absolute terms the number of women entering the job market is highest for those who are uneducated, followed by those in the secondary and post-secondary category of qualification.

The above trend can be validated in the graph showing employment data coupled with the percentage of informality of employment distributed among women with differing educational levels. The trend line has shown a decreasing trend with higher levels of education. However most informality is present especially among the uneducated group of women employed. In absolute terms, again, this means that the number of informal jobs is still on the rise as more uneducated women are entering the job market, as shown in Figure 4 and Figure 5.



**Figure 4**

Categories of Educational Qualification	Number of Employed Women (Measured in 000s) in 2018	Rate of Informality in Employment for Women (%) in 2018
None	6792	96
Primary	4505	94.5
Secondary and Post	6706	89.6
Tertiary	627	50.6
Unspecified	14	97.1

Table 4

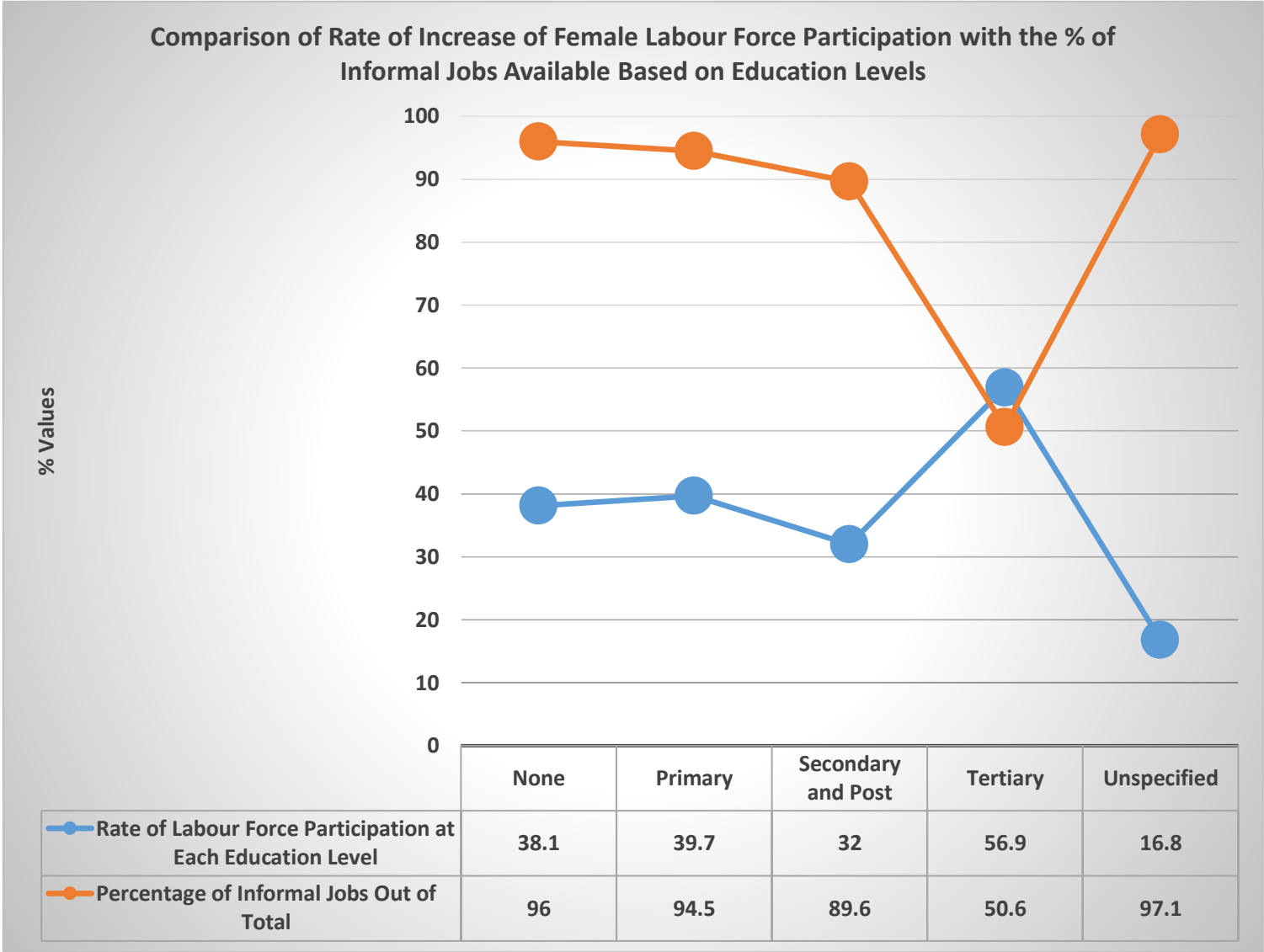


Figure 5

Apart from those who receive tertiary education, all other women, be they uneducated, or educated till primary or secondary or post-secondary levels, can overwhelmingly expect employment that is either informal in nature or informal as a result of poor enforceability of laws.

## 5.2 Women's participation and experiences in the ready-made garments sector

The sudden and meteoric boom in the foreign and contractual ready-made garments sector in Bangladesh coincided with several market-friendly reforms the government implemented in order to boost up foreign direct investment and to mobilise the labour heavy demographic of the country (Kabeer and Mahmud, 2003). The market reforms led to the expansion of rich multinationals looking to move into cost-friendly borders in order to expand the scope of their bottom lines. For the RMG sector, this took the form of contractual outsourced work orders from large clothing brands that were readily taken up by newly formed local firms. These firms, consequently, tapped into the long-neglected potential of the female labour force, always growing and increasingly breaking away from traditional patriarchal structures of labour divisions, shifts that relied as much on the change in social eras as they did on the creeping precariousness of poverty and unemployment. More than 80% of the RMG workforce comprises of women, mostly women with negligible educational background who migrate from rural areas into urban slums and settlement housing, looking for work and the opportunity to sustain their families (Kabeer and Mahmud, 2004). However the situation that usually awaits them is one of cruelty and inhuman expectations of profit in a cut-throat bidding economy. The situation is best described by Kabeer and Mahmud (2003):

*“Although the export garment sector is, strictly speaking, in the formal economy and hence subject to national labor legislation, it is characterized by informal economy characteristics: easy entry and exit, an absence of written contracts, irregularity of payments, violations of health and safety regulations, long hours of overtime, low levels of unionization and high rates of turnover in the workforce.”*

Compared to other formal sectors, the RMG industry in Bangladesh provides among the world's lowest wages. Studies also show that female garment workers are vulnerable on their route to work and often walk in groups to provide some protection. Some stay the night at the garment factories. Others have reported having to pay ten percent of their wages for 'protection' (Kakuli and Risberg, 2012). Women employed in the RMG sector are employed in lower paid, lower skill-requirement areas with little decision-making responsibility. Women are also often the first to lose their jobs in this and other export-oriented sectors where job cuts in response to market fluctuations is a very common scenario. At times, these job cuts come with no prior notice and/or severance pay (Kalam and Al Amin, 2016).

The growth of Bangladesh's RMG industry has been characterised by low wages, poor enforcement of labour legislation and the availability of a large pool of unskilled women workers. While some have viewed the 'feminisation' of the garment sector as a positive step towards women's emancipation, this has only happened in a highly exploitative context (Alam, Blanch & Smith, 2011).

The Constitution of Bangladesh guarantees equal rights to women and men, and national laws are in place to safeguard women's rights. One example is the 2006 Bangladesh Labour Law, which protects the fundamental rights of women workers, including the right to maternity leave. At the international level, Bangladesh has ratified the UN Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), as well as ILO Convention 111 on Discrimination in Employment and Occupation. The reality is that, despite such legislation, women workers' rights are ignored. Women workers perform poorly paid jobs, face severe labour rights violations and do not enjoy their legal entitlements. Statutory maternity rights are rarely provided, overtime is compulsory and excessively long working days add to the burden of domestic responsibilities, denying women any rest periods or time with their children.

The following case studies outline some of the predicaments faced by women workers in the Bangladeshi RMG industry (Alam, Blanch & Smith, 2011).

#### Case Study 1- Sultana

“Sultana was the eldest of three children, whose father died while she was still at school. As a result, she had to give up her education since her mother was unable to bear the costs of raising the two other siblings on her own. Sultana found work at the lowest level in a garment factory, and was forced to work night shifts. She fell ill after two and a half months and had to leave her job. She then joined another garment factory, but again fell sick after five months. “Whenever I started working in these garment factories, I became sick,” says Sultana. “Yet I had no choice but to continue my work as I had to bear all the family expenses, including the education costs for my brother and sister. When I fell ill at my last factory, I applied for sick leave but I was denied it. I returned to the factory after four or five days and was denied my wages.”

#### Case Study 2- Nazera

“Nazera started working in the garment industry at the age of 16. She is one of four sisters, and her husband has spent long periods unemployed. She was forced to switch from one factory to another over the years before settling in her current workplace. Her wage has had to support her husband as well as the rest of her family, although he has now also found work in the garment industry.

At the end of her first pregnancy, in the absence of any medical facilities, Nazera gave birth to a stillborn baby. When she became pregnant again the following year, she applied for maternity leave. “I applied to the authorities according to the law,” explains Nazera, “and the management received my application as required. Yet the day I was due to go on leave, I was informed by the compliance officer that I would not be paid.”

### 5.3 Whose empowerment?: Recent reforms and the nuances of economic growth

Reforms on the conditions of workplace safety, decorum and facilities for women, by and large women who are less-skilled or those who only have a basic level of education, has come about as a result of long decades of lobbying by civil society and interventions developed and carried out by NGOs. The fact remains that women from the abovementioned groups are predominantly the ones who lose out to wealthy enterprises and face exploitation from wealthy and politically backed company owners. The strategy that the state has utilized in this instance is one that we have witnessed in the kind of progress China has made and the one that India is making currently. However, there is little evidence to support this formula for cutthroat industrial development as sustainable in the longer run, where the majority of those already on the margins

of society are pushed towards further precarity by a state that has liberally used development and empowerment as key categories for mobilising support for its agendas.

The challenge, then, is to move beyond such assumptions and explore how women can achieve actual empowerment at home and at work through policies and laws that ease what is often known informally as the ‘double burden’ of work at home and in their place of employment. Long grueling work hours at factories and establishments that do not adhere to the minimum stipulations already present in the legal framework of the country, is followed by more unassisted chores at home that are socially understood as the woman’s responsibility. The politics that govern family dynamics and the patriarchal values that regulate women’s access to public spaces and the expectations placed on them in private have remained unchallenged, even as more and more women are expected to work outside of home. Combined, they legitimise a false discourse of empowerment that continues to expect both types of labour from women. Patriarchal power dynamics have long held women’s labour as inferior and valourised male labour as more productive, or valuable or somehow better in terms of quality. The narrative of empowerment and economic growth, especially those propagated via the mainstream economic thought in this region also embrace this prejudice, which for many is deemed as commonsensical in nature. To what end can we qualify current conditions of life and livelihood for women as acceptable, especially poor and less educated working women who are the majority, if their empowerment entails labouring at home and at work and expecting unequal and unfair treatment in both spaces? The tendency for women’s work spaces to display informal characteristics and entrenched potential for abuse can be said to simply mirror the similar potential it carries at home as well. What we generally accept as a sign of economic development, the GDP growth rate, is not sufficient to fully encapsulate the complexities of social relations that resist changes to existing dynamics even as economic capacities increase. A more accurate assessment would place the individual, and the larger collective, at the heart of this query, similar to how Amartya Sen characterized the idea of development as the realisation of human freedom to fulfill their capabilities. Economic growth, too, should add to its existing definition the increase in the ability of people to take decisions regarding where, how and in return for what, the extent, nature and intensity of their productive energy will be expended. Only then could we safely claim that economic growth leads to empowerment.

## **6. Conclusion**

In closing, there needs to be some acknowledgement of the very significant work that is being done every day by citizens and representatives of some promising state institutions to eradicate malpractices from women's workplaces and to equip more and more adolescent and young women with the capacity to organise among themselves and mobilise against injustices. These foundational efforts are crucial to ending systematic exploitation of women's labour. Only collaborative action between state and society can transform the current conditions. To that end, it is important to critique and be critical of the state and its assertions on economic growth and women empowerment. It is equally important to acknowledge and appreciate the good work that it has done – the establishment of multi-sectoral response and support systems for survivors of gender-based violence, the eradication of child marriage, the eradication of community hearings intended to shame women, the inclusion of gender responsive policy guidelines for each ministry, and many others. Nonetheless, as long as most employed women continue to work in informal sectors and shoulder the 'double burden' of labouring at home and at work, economic growth in Bangladesh, resulting from increasing female labour participation, will not be conducive to women's empowerment in the nation.



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