

Organising for Labour Rights

Women Workers
in Textile/Readymade Garments Sector in
Pakistan and Bangladesh



South Asia Alliance for Poverty Eradication (SAAPE)

SAAPE is a network of like-minded civil society organisations, mass-based groups and movements, academics, trade unions, community based organisations and activists from Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Maldives, Nepal, Pakistan, Afghanistan and Sri Lanka, working to jointly strategize and take actions to contribute towards poverty eradication and achieve effective changes in the economic and socio-political arena to combat the harmful economic policies of globalisation, privatisation and neo-liberalisation.

The Alliance aims to build solidarity and a shared civil society vision for the region, strengthen and support national level organisations working on key issues. The Alliance facilitates research to support advocacy and lobbying activities aimed at regional and national level decision-makers of the South highlighting the concerns and perspectives of marginalised groups and advocate pro-poor policies and to consolidate their struggles and experiences to influence the international players, particularly of the North.

The SAAPE Secretariat is based in Kathmandu at the office of Rural Reconstruction Nepal.

Pakistan Institute of Labour Education and Research (PILER)

Pakistan Institute of Labour Education and Research (PILER), established in 1982, is a not-for-profit, citizen sector organization engaged in research, education, policy advocacy and networking in the areas of labour rights, social justice, human development, regional solidarity and peace. PILER, as a resource centre, facilitates the labour movement in building a wider social consensus on core labour rights through advocacy and linkages with local, national, regional and global partners. PILER considers militarization, state conflicts and social intolerance as major barriers to realizing labour rights, and engages with peace movements at national, regional and global levels. PILER is active in a number of peace initiatives at regional level.

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Women Organizing for Labour Rights

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Introduction

Right to freely form and join organizations to safeguards one's economic interests and civil liberties at workplace is enshrined in international covenants and the countries' constitutions. Yet, women workers, by and large, are not able to exercise this right. The barriers that restrict women from organizing to bargain collectively for better pay and conditions include discriminatory attitude of male trade union leadership and co-workers, domestic workload and responsibilities, social attitudes, and restricted mobility. Anti-union tactics adopted by employers, i.e. dismissal from work, intimidation and harassment of union members and office bearers, also keep women away from organizing and participating in union activities.

Historically, workers' organizations and trade unions in the subcontinent have been male-dominated in terms of both membership and leadership, and restricted to the formal sector. In recent decades, trade unionism has weakened due to restructuring of work relations and expansion of informal economy compelling alternate forms of organizing and support mechanisms to emerge, even if weak and sporadic.

In the South Asian context, a key determinant of weak representation and organization of women as workers is the patriarchal construct of work and gender as embedded in the local culture and religious ideology. Women's growing induction in the manufacturing sector in Pakistan and Bangladesh—since the last three decades—and their increasing role in export economy, particularly in Bangladesh, have not led to strength-



ening of their representation and voice at workplace. Though in the current decade, Bangladeshi women workers in the ready-made garment (RGM) sector have emerged in the forefront of labour activism, spearheading workers' protests and contesting terms and conditions of work.

This brief paper attempts to investigate the status of women workers in textile/apparel industries of Pakistan and Bangladesh, and explore the extent of mobilization and organization of women workers in the context of weakened trade unionism in the two countries. The study seeks to analyze the nature and extent of women's contestation of barriers and negotiation of space as defined through the institutionalized mechanisms of control and cultural barriers in the Muslim societies of the two countries.

Methodology

This paper is based on:

Secondary research: Official data and recent surveys, civil society reports, research studies and articles, relating to different aspects of women and work in the textile/apparel sectors in Bangladesh and Pakistan;

Primary research in Pakistan:

A survey of 500 women workers in 79 garment factories in three towns of Karachi, Pakistan, based on structured questionnaire; four structured, information-sharing meetings with women's groups; one focus group discussion.

In Bangladesh:

Unstructured interviews/informal meetings with six Bangladeshi trade unionists/activists and four representatives of key labour organizations (see Annexure).

Status of Women

The two countries share a common history, religion and legislative framework—being East and West wings of one country (Pakistan) till 1971 when Bangladesh emerged as an independent nation through the struggle it waged against Pakistan's state oppression and military operation. Aside a shared patriarchal culture and religious ideology underpinning the status of women, the two countries differ in their ethnic and linguistic contours. While Bangladesh is a homogenous society, unified in one ethnic group and one language, i.e. Bengali, Pakistan comprises five major ethnicities—Sindhi, Punjabi, Baloch, Pathan, and Muhajir (and their respective languages). There are several minor ethnicities



as well, which are further divided in to sub-groups, each having its own nuances and sets of norms and boundaries for women.

Pakistan is placed at the lowly 105th position out of 136 countries under Gender-related Development Index (GDI) that measures gender inequality in health, education and decent living. Bangladesh fares marginally better and occupies 102nd rank in the same index. Similarly, for women's economic and political participation, decision-making, and power over economic resources, Pakistan is ranked at the 66th position out of 75 countries under Gender Empowerment Measure (GEM) while Bangladesh is at the 67th bottom rung.¹

Hidden behind similar ranking of women's inferior status are noticeable differences in responses women have come up with to contest boundaries and hence the difference in the level of empowerment as is manifest in a few key indicators, particularly labour force participation. The responses, or the



Dhaka streets: women workers on their way to factories early in the morning.

forms of resistance, are shaped by different socio-economic conditions and geographic-cultural factors of the two countries.

Women in Labour Force

Economically active populations in Pakistan and Bangladesh are apparently almost equal in absolute numbers. In the year 2005-06 Pakistan had 50.05 million labour force² compared to 49.5 million in Bangladesh.³ Yet, the number of women workers is 12.1 million in Bangladesh with a female participation rate of 29.2 per cent compared to Pakistan where 10.41 million women are economically active and female participation rate is 19.1 per cent. The data is not fully comparable due to definitional variance: Pakistan picks out economically active population from those of age 10 years and above whereas Bangladesh has adopted international definition and enumerates economically active population of 15 years and older.

An comparison of women's participation in economic activity of the two countries,

based on uniform definition, is given below:

Data show that female economic participa-

South Asia: Women's Participation in Labour Force

Country	Female economic activity rate (%) (ages 15 and older) 2004	Female economic activity as %age of male rate (ages 15 and older) 2004
Bangladesh	52.9	61
Nepal	49.7	63
Sri Lanka	35.3	45
India	34.0	41
Pakistan	32.0	38

Source: UNDP Human Development Report 2006

Bangladesh and Pakistan: Economic Empowerment

Country	Female legislators, senior officials and managers (%age of total)	Female professional and estimated technical workers (%age of total)	Ratio of female-to-male earned income
Bangladesh	23	12	0.46
Pakistan	2	26	0.29

Source: UNDP Human Development Report 2006

tion rate in Pakistan is the lowest in South Asia, and the gap between Pakistan and Bangladesh is the widest. Bangladesh has a higher number of women in key positions—23 per cent compared to a dismal 2 per cent in Pakistan and the ratio of their earnings vis-à-vis men is better than in Pakistan.

**Shahida Sarkar,
President
National
Garments
Workers
Federation in
her office.**



Textile/Readymade Garment-Sector

Pakistan

Textile industry employs 38 percent of the total manufacturing sector labour force and contributes 61 percent to the country's total export.⁴ Pakistan being a cotton-growing country, its textile industry comprises a large component of spinning, weaving and processing of yarn. The share of apparel manufacturing is 11.73 per cent only, with around 4,000 manufacturing units of garments, knitwear and made-ups in the major cities - Karachi, Lahore, Faisalabad, Multan, Gujranwala, Sialkot.

An estimated 30 percent of the workforce in textile is female.⁵ Within the sector, women workers are concentrated in low-paid, labour-intensive down-stream production (readymade garments, linen, towels), while men dominate capital-intensive ginning, spinning and weaving processes. Employment of women in stitching is found to be between 41 to 75 percent of the total workforce in respective units.⁶

According to an estimate, 90 percent of the work in apparel manufacturing is sub-contracted, and a large portion to home-based workers.⁷ Yet the number of small, formally registered factories employing women is significant. A substantial portion of this work is for transnational companies. The extent of

global supply chain work, sub-contracted to home-based women is not known, as contractors do not share this information and state mechanisms for documentation are weak or non-existent.

Bangladesh

The sector is dependent on the import of high quality raw cotton yet textile occupies the most important position in the economy due to value addition. Ginning, spinning, weaving and handloom production is overshadowed by the readymade garments manufacturing (RGM) sector whose percentage share to total export rose from a mere 3.89 in the mid 1980s to 74 percent in 2004-05.⁸

Large-scale induction of women in export-based garments industry began in early 1980s when the local private sector took off as a result of an export-led growth strategy. The country's share of workforce, its gender component and the revenue the sector generates are larger than in Pakistan: textile industry accounts for 45 per cent of total employment in the manufacturing sector; women comprise 70 to 80 per cent of this workforce and the sector's share to the total export earnings stood at 78.2 per cent in 2004-05.⁹ Some 5,000 factories, scattered in and around three major cities (Dhaka, Chittagong, and Narayanganj) and in eight export processing zones,¹⁰ employ two million workers.

Demographic Indicators of Women Working in Garments Factories

Pakistan

Women workers in the apparel manufacturing sector in Pakistan are mostly young, unmarried, literate (few years of formal schooling), with large family size, living in low-income settlements surrounding the manufacturing units and factories in the cities, working either as home-based piece-rate workers or employed on contract basis in small or medium-sized enterprises producing for local markets or linked with global supply chain.

A study of women in urban manufacturing sector that included textile/garments undertaken in the year 2001 showed 47 per cent were of age between 14 to 24, and 64 per cent were unmarried. In Karachi, 46 per cent of women had eight years of schooling and none was illiterate.¹¹

Indicators 2009

A small survey of 500 women workers employed at 79 small and medium-sized units mainly in three towns of Karachi (Baldia, SITE, Orangi), was undertaken by PILER in collaboration with the Hoisery Garments Textile Workers General Union Sindh (a fledgling unregistered union/group with 500 members in Karachi) during February to May 2009.

As the factories do not allow outsiders in to the premises, the Karachi Hoisery and Garments Workers General Union activist, along with a PILER junior research associate, chalked out a strategy to approach women



workers. In the first phase, the two-member team visited factories located in close proximity in a given area, mostly during lunch break, either through contacts with women workers there, or disguised as job-seekers. Once the guard let them inside the factory, the team talked to a few women and got their home contact or mobile phone numbers. Appointments for interviews were sought for late evenings when workers return home or during their day off from work.

The Survey 2009 revealed 43.2 per cent women of age between 19 to 24 years and

57 per cent were unmarried. Thirty per cent had schooling up to eight years and 22 per cent were illiterate. An important indicator was ethnicity of the respondents. Women belonging to eight distinct ethnicities and languages were employed in the factories. The largest category (40 per cent) was of Urdu-speaking (a group that identifies itself as Muhajir who migrated from northern states of India during the partition), followed by Punjabi (20 per cent), Sindhi (15 per cent), Baloch (10 per cent) Hindko-speaking (9 per cent). These proportions, however, do not commensurate with actual population size of each ethnicity because different norms vis-à-vis women prevail in each ethnic group. For instance, Pushtun—the third largest ethnic group (after Urdu-speaking and Punjabi) in Karachi—do not allow their women to work outside home. The survey identified only 3 per cent of Pushtu-speaking women workers.

Though the indicators revealed in the 2009 survey and the 2001 study are not comparable due to different sampling size and methodology, a remark on Karachi's shifting demography and socio-economic indicators is warranted here. Karachi, being the largest city, constantly pulls an increasing number of in-migrants in search of livelihood from within the province of Sindh as well as from Punjab, NWFP and Balochistan. In recent years, the flux of in-migrants (with a different socio-economic profile than Karachiites) has increased due to political turmoil and armed conflicts in northern areas and Balochistan. Majority of the in-migrants who come to Karachi eventually settled down and become a part of Karachi's population.



Bangladesh

Women in the readymade garments manufacturing sector are generally young, unmarried, migrant from rural areas and mostly belong to poor and landless families.¹² According to a 2006 estimate, more than 60 per cent of women workers are up to 24 years of age and 50 per cent of these are unmarried.¹³ A 2002 survey indicated 7 years of schooling among these workers.¹⁴ Educational level of young workers is constantly on the rise due to Bangladesh government's policies and interventions to reduce gender gap in education. Another reason is the increasing pressure on social compliance and demand for educated and skilled workers in the global supply chain.

About 70 per cent of readymade garments manufacturing sector female workers are rural migrants. In the cities, they live in groups in rented private accommodation in low-income settlements/slums, and in some cases in relatively better conditions in hostels run by the state or NGOs. This is the first time in the history of the country that young, single women from the villages are allowed to live on their own, without male family members, in the cities.

Work Conditions and Wages

Pakistan

According to a study¹⁵ investigating conditions in textile units producing garments for GAP and Levi Strauss in four cities (Lahore, Faisalabad, Sialkot, Islamabad), women are forced to work overtime with inadequate wages (less than Rs. 2,500 per month); 95 percent women have no appointment letters; 80 percent of the management do not provide health and safety equipment and 70 percent of women suffer from harassment at workplace.

In 2005, PILER investigated five factories in Karachi producing garments for global retailers. The study indicated that 95 percent of workers are not given any contract letters and all workers were hired on piece-rate basis. Most of the factories do not allow unionization and the workers have no knowledge of the companies' codes of conduct. The auditors were found to be more concerned with physical infrastructure of the workplace rather than wages, social security, the rights to unionize and collective bargaining of the workers.

During the textile workers' convention held at the PILER Centre in 2005, workers' representatives from the four provinces identified gender-specific issues faced by women workers. This included gender discrimination in wages, i.e. less pay for equal work, lack of separate toilet facilities, forced night shifts and overtime in late evening.

The 2009 PILER Survey of garments factory workers revealed 97.6 percent women were hired on temporary basis; 80.4 percent were

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not issued any identification card; 64 percent were getting less than the minimum wages for unskilled workers fixed by the government (Rs. 6,000); 92 percent were doing overtime; 73 percent did not get weekly holidays; 47 percent got maternity benefits and of them, only 21 percent received full three-months paid leave.

The Survey indicted better infrastructure at workplace: 96 percent women reported presence of separate toilet facility; 89 percent workers had access to safe drinking water and the factories were reported to be properly lit and equipped with fire extinguishing kits. Hidden behind these apparently better facilities are the stories of hardship and humiliation suffered by women factory workers. In focus group discussions, it was revealed that often separate toilets for women, in addition to unhygienic conditions, are located at distance and at premises closer to male working areas hence women had to endure catcalls in addition to supervisors' wrath on taking too much time to and fro toilet facility. Canteen facilities are also located likewise, else do not exist at all. Women complained that when they eat in the corridors or other areas they are reprimanded by supervisors for breaking the rules.

Bangladesh

Work conditions confronted by garment sector women workers are generally poor and exploitative. Employers do not issue appointment letters as required by the law. They keep women employees on temporary basis with no legal benefits and resort to dismissal without notice.¹⁷ The terms and conditions of work in the Export Processing Zones are relatively better.

A study indicated 67 percent of female workers received wages below the minimum wage of unskilled worker fixed by the government.¹⁸ In a survey of factories, undertaken by Karmojibi Nari in August 2006, women were found working from 9 to 12 hours in 54 percent of the factories and 12 to 16 hours in 45 percent factories. In 46 percent of the factories, women were putting extra hours without overtime pay.¹⁹ A 2009 research on 12 garment factories indicates 76.4 percent workers were forced to do overtime.²⁰ Women on average earn between TK 1,600 to 2,500, and with overtime they make around TK 3,000-4,000.²¹

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Trade Unions and Labour Support Groups/Organizations

Pakistan

Due to repressive legislation, dismantling of the public sector through privatization and increasing informalization of labour in the last two decades, the number and strength of the trade unions have diminished considerably over the years. At present, according to an estimate, less than five percent of the workers in the minuscule formal sector are unionized. The drop in the numbers of trade unions in the textile sector is the highest: from 318 registered trade unions in 1996, the number dropped to 39 in 2005.²²

The trade unions in the formal sector are male-dominated in terms of both membership and leadership. A survey of 15 trade union federations revealed only one had a woman as president. Women were found excluded from plant level unions as well.²³ According to the latest official data, out of 121,828 members of 721 registered trade unions in 2005, the number of female members was only 2,226 amounting to less than 2 percent.²⁴ In the informal sector women workers are not organized, unlike men who form informal labour organizations, or trade bodies, in various sectors in urban areas. It is officially acknowledged that women "...are culturally discouraged from forming organizations that might take on an active rights-based approach."²⁵

No specific data is available on trade unions in textile/garments sector in general. Power loom sector in the city of Faisalabad is, however, an exception where a strong large-scale mobilization of (all-male) workers has



led to improvement of minimum wage rates. Aside this sub-sector and the city specific informal trade unionism, anecdotal evidence suggests limited, or almost non-existent, trade union activities in the textile sector—unlike strong trade unionism in cotton textile mills in the early decades (1950s-1970s). No trade unions were reported in recent small surveys of manufacturing units producing for international brands or for local markets. A few trade union federations run workers' education programmes and legal counselling geared to male workers.

There are few labour support organizations/groups involved in labour research, advocacy and workers' education at national or local level but none is involved in focused support to garments sector women workers. Several women NGOs are engaged in research and advocacy on women's rights issues and the issue of home-based women workers, but there is no significant engagement with garments sector workers.

Bangladesh

According to some estimates, between 5 to 7 percent workers are formally unionized in the manufacturing sector. Most trade unions are members of federations affiliated with mainstream political parties—Awami League, Bangladesh National party and Jatiya Party. Union leaders tend to perpetuate their leadership through political connections and indulge in corrupt practices seeking personal interests.²⁶ As majority of garments factories owners belong to political parties, union leaders' cooption with them undermine rank-and-file workers' interests. Unionization within the readymade garments manufacturing sector is weaker than in other sectors as factory owners curb the workers' right to unionize and resort to dismissal of trade union activists.

'There are about 32-35 trade union federations in the RGM sector but most exist only on paper. Most of the federations become active at the time of street protests and rallies.'²⁷ Only two trade union federations are



independent of political affiliations. Of all federations in the RGM sector, just five or six are active.²⁸ In an in-depth study of seven trade union federations, more than 2,000 RGM factories in the Dhaka City were found registered with the Directorate of Labour, and only 72 trade unions registered with the office of the Registrar of Trade Unions (amounting to 3.6 percent unionization of factories in the Dhaka City).²⁹

Federations' leadership of the predominantly female RGM sector is dominated by male political activists who did not originally belong to the garment sector. In a study, out of seven registered federations, only one had female leadership that emerged from within women garments sector workers.³⁰ Lack of leadership within the workers' community is cited as one of the reasons of ineffective mobilization of women workers. 'Key office bearers of federations are non-workers and

mostly male hence this mode of unionization is not working out.'³¹

Active federations provide support to member trade unions' activists and non-member women workers. The support ranges from legal aid to institutional strengthening of unit unions.³² The National Garments Workers Federation, with 30 trade unions has a membership base of 23,665 members, of whom 75 percent are women.³³ The Federation has branch offices in six cities and runs training and education programmes, provide legal assistance, and organizes campaigns. Established in 1984, it elected female president only twice.³⁴ In addition, a number of women's NGOs focus on labour issues and actively engage with women workers including workers in the RGM sector. Prominent among them are Nari Uddag Kendra (Centre for Women Initiatives), Karmojibi Nari, Ain-o-Salish Kendra.

Women Organising for Labour Rights

Though socio-economic conditions in Pakistan and Bangladesh do not differ much and the workforce of the two countries have much in common—weak and shrunk unionization, anti-trade union legislation, ineffective trade union leadership, poor terms of work and conditions, non-implementation of labour rights, and restrictive cultural-religious ideology—yet garment women workers in Bangladesh differ significantly with their counterparts in Pakistan.

Firstly, women in Bangladesh are in the forefront of RGM workers' struggles around issues of wage and overtime. They have been part of street protests and rallies since early 1990s, a manifestation of solidarity and a sense of belonging to their collective identity as workers. Secondly, women constitute 90 percent of RGM unions/federation's total membership even though overall unionization in the sector is limited and the trade unions/federations leadership still largely male-dominated.³⁵

Though mobilization of women workers in Bangladesh, visible on the streets, has not been effective in the sense that it could turn around the situation and change the terms and conditions of work, the process of mobilization is gathering momentum, throwing up female leadership and improving workers' negotiation skills. In contrast, there is no visible, or invisible, mobilization of women workers in Pakistan in textile-apparel manufacturing sector though awareness on workplace rights, including the rights of organizing and collective bargaining is increasing. In the 2009 Survey, 56 percent women work-

ing in garments factories knew that workers have a right to form unions to negotiate for better terms and conditions. But no trade union/workers group membership was reported by 500 respondents of 79 factories.

During meetings and focus group discussions with women workers, fear of dismissal and loss of work was cited as a major reason for lack of initiative for collective action. 'We are afraid to talk about unions because we know we will be fired immediately and we cannot afford to lose this meagre income.'³⁶ However, most of the women narrated incidents of taking stand against unlawful cuts in wages, denial of sick leave, lower than minimum wages and other unfair practices. The strategies used by them included verbal confrontation with employers/supervisors in a group (of 4-8) and work stoppage to demand a raise, timely payment or gazette holiday. The outcome was mixed as reported by women. 'At times they listen to us. This happens particularly when men stop work in greater number. But mostly they tell us to get lost. They use bad language and hurl abuses on us. It is difficult to take this humiliation. Once two women in my factory demanded minimum wage but the supervisor was abusive and his language was dirty that the women felt so degraded and ashamed that they did not return to work.'³⁷

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Conditions Enabling Mobilization and Organization of Women Workers

Rights to organize and form associations for collective bargaining at workplace are fundamental political rights that can be realized through mechanisms of representation and voice. Trade union is a mechanism that endows workers with a collective voice and strength to negotiate and obtain due rights. But to utilize this mechanism, in addition to the knowledge of trade unionism and motivation for collective struggle, workers must have a certain level of empowerment, or confidence and conviction, to stand up and speak for their rights. Empowerment is an internal state of wellbeing that comes through access to basic rights for self-preservation and dignity. External factors, or support mechanisms also play a role in strengthening the sense of empowerment.

Indicators of Empowerment

It can be argued that one of the factors leading to Bangladeshi women workers' mobilization (irrespective of its level, effectiveness and outcome) is a higher level of empowerment that has come about through women's enhanced access to some of the social and economic rights—family planning facilities, education, employment and credit opportunities—as a result of the state's strong political will, state policies and NGOs' multi-pronged interventions (i.e. BRAC, Grameen Bank).

Though many indicators reflect on women's deprivation and secondary status in the Bangladeshi society (i.e. high maternal mortality rate and higher prevalence of violence against women), the level of women's



empowerment as indicated through their participation in household decision-making, their mobility, and control over their personal earnings is significant.³⁸ Almost 31 percent of married women with cash earnings reported that they alone decide how their earnings are used, while 56 percent decide jointly with their husbands. Two thirds of women go alone to the health centre facilities. An additional 16 percent of women go to these health facilities.³⁹ In a survey conducted in 2000 by Nari Uddag Kendra, approximately 52 percent of women reported that their husbands had begun to share domestic chores.

Many women now make their own decision about marriage (when and whom to marry) and opting for late marriage.⁴⁰ In 1991, the average age of marriage was 16 for girls and in 2000 the mean age of marriage for women was reported to be 20.⁴¹ Currently 99.9 per-



Young workers waiting in the balcony outside the factory housed in a multi-storey building in central Dhaka. The door opens at exactly 8 AM.

Mobility, Spatial Boundaries and Autonomy

Mobility—one of the key indicators of women empowerment—appears to have played a significant role in the RGM women workers' autonomy. Majority of these young female workers have come from villages explicitly in search of work, leaving their families and the rural-cultural milieu behind. A key external factor of rural-to-urban mobility of women has been the state's strategy of export-oriented industrialization and supportive policies to spur growth of domestic enterprises, inducting vast available female labour force. The employment of women in the export-oriented industry is said 'to exploit the comparative advantage of women's disadvantages, that is, through lower wage cost, their greater docility, the non-involvement in the trade union, the fact that they are more easily dispensable....However, women's employment in export-oriented industries exposes them to the wider world wherefrom externalities may arise to enrich their life.'⁴⁶ In the cities most of these female workers live in all-female groups in rented accommodation in poor settlements and walk 3-4 km to and from the factories. Clad in shalwar-qameez-dupatta—the modern urban feminine attire instead of traditional sari in Bangladesh—walking in groups early in the morning and late evening, they have altered the cognitive map and collective consciousness of the city vis-à-vis the image and perception of 'woman' that conventionally relegates her to private space through the custom of purdah (literal meaning 'curtain') or segregation.

Though still 'a strong cultural ideal in Bangladesh..., purdah, as an element of the

cent of married women (15-49) in Bangladesh have knowledge of contraceptive methods. In 2007, 80 percent of ever-married women of reproductive age reported having used a family planning method,⁴² compared to 30 per cent contraceptive prevalence among married women in Pakistan.⁴³ Female fertility rate is also higher in Pakistan (3.7) than in Bangladesh (2.8). In Pakistan, there were 14 million girls in primary schools in 2006, compared to 18.3 million boys, indicating a Gender Parity Index of 0.76.⁴⁴ In Bangladesh, gender disparity in primary schools has almost disappeared and at the secondary level has turned in favour of girls. Access to micro-credit is acknowledged as a contributing factor to women's empowerment in Bangladesh. The Grameen Bank has 6.6 million members-beneficiaries and 95 percent are women.⁴⁵

existing gender order, has never been something static but always negotiated and redefined through changes and social interactions.⁴⁷ This is similarly applicable to Pakistan where purdah assumes different connotations and manifestations at different spaces and circumstances. Purdah as a mechanism of segregation is used at different levels by different actors. Hence, in the factories women are segregated—both in Bangladesh and Pakistan—in separate halls or floors (supervised and guarded by males).

The crossing over of spatial boundaries—both in the public domain (from rural to urban and from home to factory) and private sphere (living with male-female family members to living with all-female co-workers)—has brought about significant changes in the way they perceive the world and their own self. Confronted with a new set of social relations and totally different issues in day-to-day living, women workers are compelled to learn new strategies in order to survive in a harsh male-dominated world. The issues faced by women workers have been studied in-depth and documented at length by women researchers, academicians and activists in Bangladesh.

The positive impact of work on woman's personal life, family and society has also been documented. For the first time in their lives, women are now spending a portion on themselves (i.e, clothes, recreation), have opened bank accounts and aspire to save in order to buy assets (gold or in rare cases a piece of land).⁴⁸ Majority of women remit one fourth of their meagre income to their villages (compared to 25 percent male garment sector workers who remit). With the help of



their daughters' earnings, 43 percent of the families now live in brick houses as compared to 22 percent before their daughters' employment in the garment factories.

In Pakistan, women's mobility is quite restricted. Due to increasing landlessness and rising poverty, rural to urban migration for livelihood options is on the rise, yet it is only men, or nuclear families together, that make a move. With the exception of women with professional education, single women stay put in home towns and struggle to find work in nearby urban centres. In the cities, increased mobility of women who take up wage work in factories does not necessarily result in their empowerment. In a 2001 study, though women workers were commuting to work, most still needed permission of the head of the household and were usually accompanied by a family member to visit friends or relatives or to go shopping.⁴⁹ The study indicated that if male members of the family were earning enough, the women would not have gone out of the house to work. Focus group discussions and meetings held recently with factory women workers revealed similar desire of women to quit work if economic conditions of the household were not so dire.

External Support Mechanisms

Trade union federations

Trade unions, globally and historically, have been male-dominated and deeply entrenched in sexist norms, more so in the Indian subcontinent. In Bangladesh, due to unprecedented induction of women in the RGM sector, the left-leaning trade union federations are gradually opening up and facilitating small, fledgling women workers' groups/unit unions to emerge and operate in the factories. The office bearers of active federations (including women activists) engage in mobilizing women workers. "We go to the factories and workers' residence, interact with them and share their problems. When mutual trust is built, we talk to them about their rights at the workplace."⁵⁰ At the next stage, a committee (of 7-8 activists) is formed that undertakes to motivate 30 workers in the factory to form a union. The federation helps the unit union to register. The process can be long as most of the factory owners fire workers when they learn of their union activism.⁵¹

The male leadership of trade union federations cite several constraints in organizing women, including women's refusal to risk-taking. "Back in the villages they were living with families. In the cities they live on their own, independently. They say they would rather be free than unionized. If they get involved in unionism, they might be sacked and would have to go back to the village."⁵²

A few of active federations provide legal support to unit activists and member-workers and negotiate with factory owners on behalf of workers (unlawful dismissal, disputes over wages, lay-offs etc.).

Institutional support to fledgling units includes guidance in registration process, financial help and labour rights education.⁵³ One of the federations is running workers' education programmes since 1996 on labour laws, trade unionism, and sexual discrimination with financial support from international organizations.⁵⁴

A few of active federations provide legal support to unit activists and member-workers and negotiate with factory owners on behalf of workers (unlawful dismissal, disputes over wages, lay-offs etc.). Institutional support to fledgling units includes guidance in registration process, financial help and labour rights education.

Compared to Bangladesh, trade unionism in the garment/apparel sector in Pakistan is almost non-existent. In large manufacturing units producing apparel for global supply chain, union activities are not allowed. In the informal sector small and medium size units workers who try to form unions are immediately expelled. Unlike federations in Bangladesh, trade union federations' outreach and mandate is limited. By and large there is no connection between garments/apparel worker and the existing federations with the exception of a few loosely organised workers' groups or unions in the informal sector.

Civil Society Organizations, Labour Advocacy and Research

Contribution of NGOs in Bangladesh in participatory development and women's empowerment has long been recognized as substantial both for its outreach, rural masses (particularly women) and diversity of services: health, education, employment-generation, micro-credit, communications, and human rights. There is strong likelihood that in the empowerment of most of young rural girls entering the garment sector, the services provided by one or the other civil society organization would have played a role. For instance, one of the studies indicated nearly 100 percent girls and 81 percent of boys in the families of Grameen Bank borrowers attended school in the 1990s.⁵⁵

Compared to the NGOs engaged with women's rights and human rights issues and providing tangible services, the number of NGOs involved with women's labour rights advocacy and related services in Bangladesh is limited. Nari Uddug Kendra is a prominent women's NGO and the first to focus on women workers in the RGM sector since its very beginning in 1991. It has reached out to women in 64 districts of six divisions in Bangladesh and has been supporting 1,250 women-headed local organizations, primarily through capacity-building and service provisions (i.e. health and accommodation facilities to women workers). Cognizant of constraints in unionizing women, Nari Uddag Kendra is the first NGO to initiate a focused social compliance, remediation and advocacy programme that engages management and workers both and is aimed at improving working conditions and to protect workers' rights.⁵⁶ NUK

believes that since old modalities of unionizing are not responding to new realities, innovative mechanisms are required to empower workers and since pressure from international companies is increasing for labour compliance, owners and management of the factories need to be motivated and trained to ensure labour compliance.⁵⁷ NUK undertakes social audit of factories, provide technical support to management and labour education to workers in the premises of the factories. It has so far reached out to 136 factories.⁵⁸

Karmojibi Nari was the first initiative to engage with women workers in the agricultural sector on both labour and civil rights issues. Later it extended its work to the garments manufacturing sector. Since 1991, it has reached to about 450,000 women garments workers in four out of six administrative divisions.⁵⁹ It mobilizes women workers door-to-door; forms cells of 10-15 women in the communities and provides training on labour rights, organization and leadership skills. Currently, through one of its projects, it plans to reach out to 5,000 women workers in 40 readymade garments factories.⁶⁰ Karmojibi Nari also meets with owners and middle management of garments factories to discuss and provide training on social compliance.⁶¹

The number of small NGOs focusing on gender issues in Bangladesh runs in thousands, in addition to prominent national NGOs (BRAC, Grameen, Proshika, Association of Social Advancement, Gonoshahasthaya, Ain-o-Salish Kendra). In contrast, the outreach and impact of civil society organizations on women empowerment has been less significant in Pakistan and there is no

National Garments Workers Federation's office: providing support to women workers.



NGO or labour support group entirely focusing on women workers' issues.

In Bangladesh, the issues of labour relations in the RMG sector and the role of women in it, dynamics of women empowerment and analysis of women's mobilization and organization have been studied extensively by researchers, academicians and labour activists. In comparison, the evolution of women's induction in labour force and the current status of women empowerment have not been studied fully in Pakistan.

Conclusion

The brief and cursory comparison of the status of women workers in the textile/garments manufacturing sector in Bangladesh and Pakistan indicates that despite apparent similar socio-economic conditions of the two countries and the shared patriarchal culture and religious ideology underpinning the status of women, female workforce in the garment sector in Bangladesh is better mobilized and is increasingly contesting its rights at the workplace. The contributing factors are identified as greater self-empowerment of women realized through increasing access to basic rights (education, reproductive health, micro-credit) and external sup-

Greater self-empowerment of women realized through increasing access to basic rights (education, reproductive health, micro-credit) and external supportive mechanisms facilitate women's awareness of their rights at workplace and build their capacity for representation and negotiation.

portive mechanisms that facilitate women's awareness of their rights at workplace and build their capacity for representation and negotiation. Though women in the RMG sector are still far from reaching the goal of unionization and collective bargaining, external factors and the larger environment is conducive to their struggle.

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Annexure

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