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**Bangladeshi Housewives Turning into Garment workers and Labor Activists
– Challenges and Opportunities**

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Abstract

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The aim of this thesis has been to analyze the nature of the employment opportunities for poor women in the ready-made garment industry in Bangladesh, and the possibilities for these female garment workers to participate as members in labor unions. Through the use of the dual labor market theory, it attempts to shed light on the underlying factors of the rapid increase of female workers, named the ‘feminization of labor’, to the garment industry. When analyzing the negative and positive aspects of women’s work in the garment industry, feminist theories have been utilized.

The thesis has also discussed the organizational hinders that garment workers face when participating in labor union activities. With the help of existent literature and theories of unionization, I have made an interpretation of the current patterns of unionization in today’s Bangladesh. The findings point at that the conditions for female workers are mainly exploitative, with the lowest salary levels in the world. The labor unions in the garment industry are weak, due to political interference and strict organizational legislation. The forum of labor unions is male-dominated and often neglects the interests of its female members.

Keywords: Female workers, Garment Industry, Labor Organizations, Bangladesh

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1 Introduction

The garment industry in Bangladesh employs around 4 million workers, and additionally 10 million Bangladeshis are dependent on the salaries of these workers, of which 80 per cent are women (Ward et al., 2004: 4). Compared to other countries garment sector, the Bangladeshi workers receive the lowest wages in the world, US\$ 0.22 an hour or US\$ 37 a month (about half the levels than in the garment industries in neighboring India). The state regulated salary level is supposed to function as a minimum level, but in fact is often a ceiling of salaries (LO - TCO 2013). The low level of salaries, high number of unemployed person in Bangladesh (40 per cent of the population above 15 years), substandard worker's rights for unionization, low corporation tax and environmental protection, are all factors which attract transnational companies. In the 1980s the foreign-owned export oriented manufacturing sector (FEMS) began outsourcing the ready-made garment production to Bangladesh. Since then it has remained a safe haven for trans-national garment retailing companies that through garments exports from Bangladesh to the West can maximize their profit by keeping expenditures on factory salaries in Bangladesh to a minimum. Bangladesh is today the second largest country of garment production after China, but its workers have not yet seen the fruits of the profit-making business (Women's Wear Daily 2012: 1). While H&M, the largest garment producer in Bangladesh annually earn around US\$ 40 billion only from the garment exports from Bangladeshi factories, the factory workers only gets a small fraction (Sveriges Radio 2013; Chi & Hagström 2010). Working 12-14 hours a day, risking their health on the factory floor, the salaries earned are not sufficient to cover the inflating expenses of accommodation in the slum areas, costs of basic food and children's school tuition fees (Siddiqi 2013). Due to the harsh working conditions, the workers often leave the garment sector after a maximum of five years, often in a physically weak condition. While the state-owned garment factories provide better salaries and working conditions for its predominantly male workers, it is the privately owned garment factories with an absolute majority of female workers that offers the lowest working condition previously mentioned (Women's Wear Daily 2012). The phenomenon of the increasing share of female workers in the garment industry is labeled the 'feminization of labor'. "The feminization of labor in parallel with the feminization of poverty in poor countries, is a controversial topic in the field of development, especially with regards to foreign-owned export-oriented manufacturing sectors (FEMS)" (Pepper 2012: 142). The employment opportunities offered by the FEMS have been described by the World Bank and other international development organizations as a chance for women to reach a higher

socioeconomic standing and financial independency. The reasoning behind this claim is that women's entrance into the formal labor sector and access to an own income will lead to gender equality, which in turn is believed to foster development (Ricker 2012; Pepper 2012). According to Rahman (2010) "[t]he most significant achievement in relation to women's development in Bangladesh has been the generation of employment opportunity for them" (Rahman 2010: 60). When female workers several decades ago entered the then male-dominated garment industry was something revolutionary for patriarchal Bangladesh (Rahman 2010; Frobel et al. 1980). The presence of women entering the industries and the public spaces in Bangladesh still today spurs constant negotiations between traditional and modern values (ILRF 2013; Cook & Kirkpatrick 1997). The patriarchal society of Bangladesh often deprives women in comparison to men. Girls in general receive a lower level of schooling than their brothers, and have to marry young, sometimes through arranged marriages (Chowdhury 2011). The overall situation for many women in Bangladesh is difficult. According to the United Nations Development Programs' Gender Inequality Index 2012 which is "[a] composite measure reflecting inequality in achievements between women and men in three dimensions: reproductive health, empowerment and the labor market" (UNDP 2012); Bangladesh's gender equality receives a low ranking as country 146 out of 186, which is equivalent to the third lowest level of gender equality in Asia. Despite the gender inequality in the garment industry, the garment jobs remain a popular option for poor Bangladeshi women that find few other opportunities for waged work in the formal economy (UNDP 2013). As a result of the unfair conditions in the garment industry, some female workers have entered labor unions. Still, only one per cent of the members are active in labor unions in the garment industry (Rahman 2010; ILRF 2013). The organizational obstacles that prevail in the labor-excluding Bangladeshi state are many, and the path for labor union activists is tortuous, even more so if you are a woman (Ahamed 2012). The typical female garment worker is often a rural, low-educated female migrant between 16 and 25 years that move from their home village to join the urban garment industries. With little human capital, it is difficult for these workers to change their working conditions in the male-dominated forum of labor unions (Ahamed 2012; Cook & Kirkpatrick 1997).

1.1 Purpose

The purpose of this thesis is to identify what challenges and opportunities Bangladeshi women face entering the ready-made garment industry. In order to discuss the prevailing gendered division of labor in the garment industry, I will use the dual labor market theory.

Additionally I will analyze the working conditions of the female garment workers utilizing feminist theories. The thesis will also focus on what cultural, hierarchical and political hinders that exist for female garment workers participating in the activities of labor unions. By utilizing theories of unionization; the thesis will investigate if female garment workers in Bangladesh are able to influence their working conditions by joining labor unions.

1.2 Research Questions

Question One

What are the opportunities and challenges for Bangladeshi women joining the garment sector?

Question Two

How do the patterns of unionization in the garment industry look like? How is the surrounding economic, cultural and political environment affecting the women's ability to influence their labor conditions?

1.3 Structure of thesis

In the introduction I will explain the subject, the aim, and the structure of this thesis. In the methodology part I will explain which research methods that are chosen for this thesis, and the limitations that come with the chosen approach. A short background will then follow about the case study of this thesis, Bangladesh and its ready-made garment industry. Due to the complexity of my questions formulations, I have chosen to divide them into two parts. I believe this disposition will give a clear overview over the issues discussed in this paper. Since the two question formulations are interlinked, the main findings of both of these will be concluded in the conclusion.

2 Methods

This thesis is based on secondary data collected from existent literature in various articles and books. I have made sure that the material used is peer-reviewed. I am aware of that when

writing a thesis based on secondary findings, the literature I have used are interpreted by the author, and secondly by me. I am also aware that when writing, is not possible to stay completely un-biased about the subject of writing.

In order to see which specific factors that can be connected to the experience of women in the Bangladeshi garment industry, I in my research chose to also look at the experience of male workers in the garment industry. To get a broader global outlook of the garment industry, I have also studied literature discussing the garment industry in other parts of Asia, and from other continents (Bryman 2012: 47, 314).

2.1 Limitations

In this thesis I will not discuss the realities of Bangladeshi women from the middle or higher social stratum. The thesis will only reflect upon the changing opportunities for Bangladeshi women from the poor social strata. It will discuss the experiences of young, low-educated women originating from the rural areas in Bangladesh.

There are two types of garment industries in Bangladesh; the privately owned which constitute of a majority of female workers, and the state-owned garment industry; where predominantly male workers are employed. While the state-owned garment industry has better working conditions, my focus will be on the privately owned garment industry, which is known for its appalling working conditions.

3 Background

3.1 Bangladesh

This part of the thesis will function as a short background to the social, economic and cultural elements that has shaped the prevailing situation for the Bangladeshi people, and why the country is positioned as the second largest garment-producer in the world. Bangladesh belongs to the group of low income countries, with the 27th lowest gross domestic product in the world. 76.5 per cent of its population is living on less than US\$ 2 a day. Garment workers earn a maximum of US\$ 1.5 a day (World Bank 2010; UNDP 2013; IMF 2012). The South Asian country of Bangladesh is situated on a relatively small geographical area, surrounded by a delta with large rivers which often over-floods, causing a constant loss of farmland. In a country with a low endowment of other natural resources, the agricultural land is one of

Bangladesh's most important natural assets, providing the large population of 150 million with food crops. Bangladesh is one of the most densely populated countries in the world. If e.g. Sweden would have the same population density it would have a population of 450 million people compared to its current 9 million. The rampant fertility decrease from 7 children per woman in 1978 to 2 children per woman thirty years later has been of major importance for the overpopulated country's development process (World Bank 2013). During the last decades, substantial improvements in health have occurred, such as an increased life expectancy from 44 to 66 years since 1970, and a maternity mortality rate which has been halved since 1986 (World Bank 2013). These improvements in health have been made possible through the involvement of non-governmental organizations (NGOs). Other beneficial factors for Bangladesh' development process is the provision of micro-credits to millions of marginalized, poor women through NGOs such as Grameen Banks, as well as millions of Bangladeshi women's' access to employment in the garment industry which today constitute of 85 per cent of Bangladesh's foreign export (Sveriges Radio 2013).

Since Bangladesh acquired its sovereignty in 1971, the country has fluctuated between an autocratic and democratic rule. Bangladesh has despite this succeeded to gain a well-established, although weak type of democracy. During the last decades, the Bangladeshi government has embraced neo-liberal policies with the advice and economic incentives such as loans, from institution such as the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the Asian Development Bank (SAPRI report 2003a). When Bangladesh and the International Monetary Fund's (IMF) Structural Adjustment Facility in the 1980s agreed to engage in an adjustment program of trade-liberalization and privatization policies, the transformation began from Bangladesh' past public-oriented, protectionist design to another type which aimed attracting investments to the private sector. The earlier industrialization approach of import substitution was gradually replaced by an export-oriented industrialization policy. A freer, deregulated market was introduced and changes were made in the capital movement with a re-orientation towards external trade. The goal was that capital should be able to operate in a more effective manner by freely moving over national borders to locations with the cheapest provision of labor (Gillan and Pokrant 2009). Bangladesh with its large supply of labor became one destination of the global capital. In 1976 the first garment factory opened in Bangladesh and in 1983 there were 134 factories with 4,000 workers. Thirty years later, the number of factories is approximately 5,000 with 4 million workers of which 80 per cent are

women. The disadvantageous working opportunities for women in the garment industry, called the 'feminization' or the 'sexual' or 'gendered division of labor' is part of what the global left and feminist critics named 'New International Division of Labor'. According to them the division affects the poor women the worst (Rahman 2010: 47). "If the peasant was the victim and unsung hero of the first wave of resistance against territorial imperialism in India, it is well known that, for reasons of collusion between pre-existing patriarchy and transnational capitalism, it is the urban, sub-proletarian female who is the paradigmatic subject of the current configuration of the International Division of Labor" (Spivak 1988: 29 from Siddiqi 2009). The hardships encountered by women joining the garment industry are many. Labor activism is one known method to improve workers' standing in the society. As part of the trade liberalization policies, the organizational liberties in Bangladesh have been narrowed down at several occasions. Especially the labor activism and its organizational liberties in the export processing zones (EPZs) are restricted due that they are located on Bangladeshi soil, but outside Bangladeshi legislation. It is only the workers in the textile and the ready-made-garment industry that has some influence over conditions' of workers. But workers and labor unions are in general divided and left with little influence (LO-TCO 2013). Reasons for the workers discontent is their low salaries, salaries that are often irregularly paid. The workers also complain about dangerous working environment, mandatory, unpaid over-time and gender discrimination. There is a lack of proper contracts to guarantee a worker employment safety and benefits such as for example maternal leave. In cases where proper contracts have been used breakages of those are common (Absar 2001). Despite all these deficits, very few Bangladeshi workers are active in labor organizations; only three per cent out of the male and female garment workers, compared to the overall level of five per cent for other workers in the formal economy (Bangladesh Institute of Labor Service 2005; Centre for Policy Dialogue 2008a).

3.2 NGOs' involvement in the Bangladeshi development

When it comes to workers' labor and unionization rights in Bangladesh, local and international NGOs are and have been important elements in order to raise awareness for worker's struggles at a both local and global level. Much through the efforts of NGOs in Bangladesh and its international connections, the fight for fair labor rights in the garment industry in Bangladesh is well known globally (BBC 2013). At present, there are almost daily updates in international media about the conditions for workers in Bangladesh. Garment workers in similar situations in for example Pakistan or Sri Lanka do not get the same

attention. The availability of the internet has been crucial in enabling the creation of political alliances and in reaching out to the general public (Pepper 2012). The local efforts of NGOs in Bangladesh includes e.g. to spread information and to educate workers about their legal labor rights (Chi & Hagström 2010). The NGOs work also includes giving financial support to many of the labor unions. Through the economic assistance the labor organizations to a larger extent can remain more independent, than what is the situation for the politically connected labor unions. The assistance from international donors and NGOs is not something new, but has during several decades been an occurring element in shaping the development agenda and policy implementations in Bangladesh (Arora-Jonsson 2009; Chowdhury 2011). Human and women's rights organization have during the years reached out to different groups and developed their personal networks in Bangladesh. Their work has e.g. strengthened the legitimacy of their aim and the movement of women's issues (Human Rights Watch 2012). NGOs were a crucial influence in the 1980s and 1990s rapid expansion of female labor force in the garment sector, as part of a NGOs combined effort to empower the Bangladeshi woman. The United Nations Decade for Women, 1975 to 1985, led to an increased focus on the importance of women's social and economic mobility. In the 1970s and 1980s feminist activists as well lobbied for that woman should take part of the development in their countries by entering the labor market (Safa 1995: 33). Concepts such as 'empowerment' and 'participation' gained momentum in the development discussion, a discussion that certainly influenced the Bangladeshi women chance for participation in the labor market. Women's access to credit and training was distinguished as essential steps in order to reach development, and led to the expansion of the micro-credit sector, led by Grameen Bank. Governmental and non-governmental organizations initiated investments that began opening up a public scene for women, women that previously would have remained within the four walls of the home (Feldman 2009). The women's participation in the public sphere and the working arena led to an exchange of ideas between them. During the independence struggle in the beginning of the 1970s, Bangladeshi women had an important role in what led to Bangladeshi independence in 1971. NGOs established projects of rehabilitation that later in the mid-1970s were altered into development programs, aiming at improving women's financial contribution to the household. World Bank supported a Women's Program of Rural Women's Cooperatives and Population Planning by the Integrated Rural Development Program, which focused on the provision of literacy training, credit provision and income-generating opportunities. NGOs began working with (and still works) with female empowerment; Nijera Kori, with consciousness building for women, informing them about

their political and social rights. BRAC with health and literacy training, while Grameen Bank gave rural women access to micro credits. The NGO Proshika worked for women's right to land security. When the women left their home taking part in these new NGO activities or in waged labor, their network of relations expanded. Therefore these NGOs activities were all important bricks in building the foundation making it possible for Bangladeshi women to join the labor force (Feldman 2009).

4 Question One

What are the opportunities and challenges for Bangladeshi women joining the ready-made garment industry?

In the following part of the thesis I will attempt to answer Question One. With the help of the dual labor market theory I will analyze the underlying factors for the rapid increase of female workers in the garment industry. The nature and the outcomes of this occurrence will be discussed through using a selection of feminist theories.

4.1 Survey of the field

4.2 Village women searching for work in the cities – traditional values meets modern

For decades women and men have moved from the rural to the urban areas in Bangladesh. The implementation of less labor-intensive farming methods such as the green revolution and the mechanization, in combination with declines in land security, led to increased unemployment levels in the rural areas (Pyne & German 2010). As a reaction to declining economic opportunities the last decades, migration has become a method for income diversification for the rural families. Every year hundreds of thousands urban Bangladeshis in the search of greener pastures move to the capital Dhaka, making it one of the fastest growing cities in the world (Pyne & German 2010; the World Bank 2010). According to one study by Ward, 1000 girls move every day from villages to the cities in their quest for work (Ward et al. 2004). The migrating girls/women often belong to the poor social strata and have very few chances to earn their own living if remaining in the rural areas (Feldman and McCarthy 1983). Many of these girls have the goal to gain employment in the garment industry. Even though the poverty is widespread in the countryside in Bangladesh, it is not without complications women move away from her family and community to the cities to join e.g. a garment factory.

Some conservative forces in the Bangladeshi society consider the jobs in the garment industry as going against the values of *purdah*, since the women mix with male workers on the factory floor and traveling alone to and from the factories go against the patriarchal values of *purdah* (Feldman 2009). According to Rahman (2010), a work in the garment industry gives women a chance to move around without the permission of a brother or husband, etc. "As such, their independent commuting has become an accepted norm against traditional social values" (Rahman 2010: 158). Kandiyoti has described Bangladesh as a "classic patriarchy" (Kandiyoti 1988). The level of patriarchy the Bangladeshi women experience varies depending on the educational level, social class and location (Kabeer 1988; Rahman 2010: 52). Patriarchy and *purdah* is typically more influential in the rural areas of Bangladesh. According to *purdah*, the women are supposed to remain at home and within the near community. Patriarchy and *purdah* govern the economic mobility of women, since these values can limit their participation in waged work and therefore maintain an economical dependency on men (Rahman 2010: 52). According to Caraway "[c]onservative interpretations of religious texts about women's proper role in society are on factor that can severely curtail women's labor force participation rates, and these rates are low in many countries where Islam is the predominant religion" (Caraway 2007: 76). These strict interpretations can cause restrictions on women's ability to take part in activities in the public space, and may limit them to take part in the labor market, as well as being active in labor unions.

There is a constant negotiation between the more modern values such as women's right to participation in the labor force, and the traditional values that discourages such participation. The reasons why the traditional norms and values still are present are many. These norms are especially present on the village level in the shape of women's families, the local communities and social institutions. Social institutions are for example the *shamaj*, a community that upheld the moral and social codes, and *shalish*, an informal court in the rural areas that judge in favor of the traditional values compared to more modern ones such as women's right to waged labor (Kabeer 2000; Rahman 2010: 121).

5 Theoretical Framework

5.1 Early thinkers and current theories on women's entrance into waged work

There exist different opinions regarding if there is a link between waged work for women in

developing countries and female empowerment. The international discourse has during the years emphasized how important a waged job in the formal economy could be for “[t]urning the country’s womenfolk from victims of backwardness and social discrimination into a self-reliant group who would then escape the strictures of conventional domesticity” (Siddiqi 2009: 165). During the years the portrayal of the garment jobs as solely emancipatory and progressive for women has faded slightly. “In the national imagination, garment workers’ bodies oscillate from being national assets to threats to the moral order of things” (Siddiqi 2009: 164). The general view of the state is that the increased visibility of female garment workers in the public space has spurred an empowering process of the woman in the Bangladeshi society, a society shaped by patriarchal and traditional values. Early feminists such as Ester Boserup argued that women’s marginalized position in society was due to their exclusion from the formal sector employment, and that an access to this sector could be a way out of their marginalization (Boserup 1970). However, on hindsight of women’s entrance in the labor market several scholars have noted that “[t]he massive incorporation of women into formal-sector work in manufacturing has had such a limited effect on diminishing gender inequalities in labor markets” (Caraway 2007: 154). Feminists have distinguished the negative aspects of this occurrence, i.e. the creation of “feminized ghettos in the labor market” with wages dumping (Caraway 2007:4; Elson and Pearson 1981a, Joekees 1987).

The proponents for the ‘exploitation thesis’ argues that women in the developing countries where already integrated in the development process, and that the increasing female labor participation in the export-industry has led to more negative than positive effects on the empowerment of women. The view of the exploitation thesis claims that the female labor has a weak position on the labor market, due high competition for jobs with low wages (Rahman 2010). The exploitation thesis implies that “garment workers should enjoy fewer advantages than in other kind of waged labor available to them” (Ruiz and Tiano 1986: 91). According to the ‘integration thesis’ Boserup claims that women’s integration and participation in the labor market could benefit the women in intangible ways, and help them escape their position of subordination in society. The opportunity for women to work in the industry would according to the “integration thesis” provide women with life skills, an income, and the chance to contribute to the society (Boserup 1970).”

The ‘female marginalization thesis’ originates from Ester Boserup. In it she presents how the productive and traditional roles of women were changed due to industrialization and women’s

waged work. The thesis concludes that the development seen in the last decades has privileged men in the access to education and new technology, this leading to a difference in productivity between women and men. Due to this, it is more difficult for women to compete for jobs in the labor market, resulting in the men gaining the well-paid jobs, creating a female dependency on men (Ruiz and Tiano 1986).

The dual labor market theory was developed in the beginning of the 1970s with influence from Marx's theory of capitalism and the feminist concept of patriarchy (Eisenstein 1979; Hartmann 1979). The dual labor market theory defines that the market is made up on gendered sectors, by two different types of jobs; the primary and secondary. The dual labor market theory attempts to explain the concentration of women in the labor-intensive jobs, such as the ones in the garment industry. The theory explains the division of jobs due to pressures from the market and its requirement of worker's specific skills (Caraway 2007: 9). The primary jobs can be found in markets that have a constant demand of the products produced, while the secondary jobs are in e.g. the manufacturing of products with an unstable demand.

It is argued that women's access to resources is an important piece of the puzzle of female emancipation. Scholars points at women receiving an own salary spend more of the money on education, food and health care, compared to the expenditure patterns of men (World Bank 2013). Therefore women's access to work in the garment industry could be effective in reducing poverty in Bangladesh (The Economist 2012). It is mostly rural women with low education that work in the garment industry. The few other employment options for Bangladeshi women could be to work with agriculture, in their home as a piece worker or become a domestic servant (Kabeer 2004). Pratima Paul-Majumder emphasized the vacuum of opportunities for waged work for Bangladeshi women before the emergence of garment jobs (Paul and Majumder 2004). Naila Kabeer writes that in the situation of impoverishment and Bangladeshi women's limited access to paid jobs in the formal and informal sectors, the actual availability of work in the FEMS has opened up new possibilities for women. Even for a few women from a higher economic class, the job might be a "respectable" way to earn money used for their own expenses. Teri Caraway finds that the demand for female workers in the garment industry can spread to other sectors and raise the demand there for female workers as well (Caraway 2007). Progressive feminist writers have reached similar conclusions and emphasized the opening up of the social space and the arena of waged work

for middle class women, but state the main importance of the garment work to be the opportunity and normality for working class women to participate in industrial labor, a revolutionary change in the patriarchal Bangladeshi society (Azim 2005). Dina Siddiqi (2013) writes that the participation of women has not led to personal liberation or revolution for the individual women, but has however given them a certain type of freedom, i.e. the use of public space. The author states that the waged work in the garment industry have resulted in hundreds of thousands of women to walk the streets to and from their work every day, an occurrence that would be unthinkable a few decades ago due to the patriarchal nature of Bangladeshi society (Siddiqi 2013). The internationally well-known study from 2002 by Naila Kabeer; 'The Power to Choose: Bangladeshi Garment Workers in London and Dhaka', argues that the working conditions for the female workers in the Bangladeshi garment industry in one way is exploitative, however that the garment jobs and the self-earned salary provides a certain level of independency and decision-making for the individual working women (Kabeer 2002). Amartya Sen claimed that garment work have increased the women's status in the household and in the community in Bangladesh (Sen 1990). Fardous Ahmed (2004) argues something similar, that women's participation in the labor force can increase the women's level of decision-making in the household. The author claims that for rural, unmarried, poor women, the move to the capital city Dhaka and a job in the garment industry would be a way to move away from the demanding obligations from parents to their daughter that are an important part of the Bengali culture (Ahamed 2012). If a rural woman remains in her home village, she could expect her future marriage to be arranged by her parent, and a future husband and mother-in-law to control her duties and obligations. In Bangladesh and the rest of South Asia, it is almost obligatory to marry young. The girl/woman could instead choose to move to the city and get a job in the garment factory. A self-earned income could be a key to a more independent life, where perhaps the women herself could decide whom to marry (Kabeer 2000; Paul-Majumder 2001). However, research has shown that a large part of the women working in the garment industries surrender their earned income to their husbands. In this way, the women's hard work in the factories could be seen as contra-productive for female emancipation. Some scholars such as Kamrul Islam and Dilara Zahid (Islam and Zahid 2012) claim that poor women are left with no other choice then to take a job in the garment industry, where the harsh working conditions are more exploitative than empowering (Islam and Zahid 2012: 82). Naomi Hossain writes in the World Development Report 2012 from International Labor Organization that "[b]y virtue of their gender, women typically enter the industry with comparative disadvantage in terms of pay, conditions and promotion prospects.

Irregular wage, overtime and bonus payments have long been and remain one of the most significant problems workers face in the industry” (Hossain 2011: 16). The working life is difficult to combine with a marital life, and can partly explain why female workers typically work in the garment industry only a shorter period of maximum few years. The absence of child care facilities and maternity leave is other contributing explanations. According to Teri Caraway one of the positive aspects of women’s waged work is that when the employers’ demand for female workers is high, the parents of daughter invest in their education to a higher degree (Caraway 2007). This is important in the Bangladesh context where traditionally the parents invest more in boys’ than girls’ education. Due to the parents’ likelihood of investing in girls’ education, and through governmental provisions in education, the proportion of girls attending school has risen in a higher pace than for boys. In 2005 90 per cent of the girls were enrolled in primary school, a number slightly higher than for boys (The Economist 2012). Pepper (2012) critiques the likeliness of the single factor of female employment to spur educational investments in girls. Pepper sees the connection between increased female participation in waged work and the improvements in school enrolments and literacy levels of girls, while she emphasis that “[...] many of these ‘benefits’ are only benefits if we assume that they were not already part of women’s daily lives or that women would not have otherwise developed them without inclusion into the export manufacturing sector. The factor that most weakens the argument, however, is the short duration that firms tend to remain in a community” (Pepper 2012: 146). In relation to the critique by Pepper of that the claim garment sector have led to increased e.g. literacy rates for girls, I argue that it is perhaps not accurate to attribute all positive changes for women that have occurred in Bangladesh during the last couple of decades to the presence of the garment industry. Surely the establishment of the garment industry in Bangladesh has had positive aspects on women’s development. The garment industry has however not been noticed its female empowering characteristics.

6 Analysis

6.1 The feminization of the labor force

The rapid increase of female workers into the labor force is called the ‘feminization of labor’. “The feminization involves both the definition of new jobs as realms of women’s activity and the redefinition as women’s work of jobs previously held by men” (Caraway 2007: 5). The

‘feminization of labor’ can be described as an opportunity for female labor participation and chance for empowerment (Richer 2012). In the Bangladeshi context, the feminization in the garment industry has also brought harsh working conditions, wage dumping and a gendered segregation of the work force. According to Teri Caraway the gendered segregation of the labor force and the gendered disparity in salaries are persistent characteristics of the industrialization (2007). By hiring female workers to a lower wage than the male ones, the feminization is a method for employers in the competitive export-oriented and labor-intensive industries to increase productivity without increasing workers’ salaries (Caraway 2007: 104). The foreign companies are often Western, while outsourcing their production to Bangladesh and other developing countries. The chosen states in the developing world are often corrupt with a low level of human rights and gender equality. The Western companies may abandon the strict protection of human and worker’s rights in their home countries, and instead hire Southern workers to exploitative conditions. The low level of human capital of the female workers and little experience of labor unionism complicates for workers bargaining for better labor conditions with the foreign firms (Pepper 2012: 142).

The gendered segregation is displayed in the Bangladeshi garment industry in several aspects. The gender-dependent differentiated view of female contra male workers pervades in the processes of e.g. hiring and disciplining of staff in the garment factories. Mills (2003) writes about how the ‘international capital’ when recruiting and disciplining staff in the garment industry draws on entrenched gender ideologies (Mills 2003). While the male workers are simply viewed as breadwinners, almost all higher positions are given to men, while the majority of the workers in the lower-status and low-paid jobs in the factories are women. This is leading to a power imbalance between the two genders. The level of sexual harassment of the female workers is a normal element in the garment industry. The power imbalances between male managers and female workers are one reason to this. Additional factors to the prevailing sexual harassment is according to Dina Siddiqi (2004) that the ‘factory girls’ are judged depending on their perceived sexual availability (Pepper 2012, Siddiqi 2009). Due to the public concern of the morality of ‘factory girls’, the profession is surrounded by a social stigma, a stigma that is utilized against the female workers as a method to control them, both inside and outside the industries. Siddiqi (1996) writes that female staff is judged depending on to what degree they follow moral codes. In this way the ‘good girls’, viewed as morally disciplined are separated from the “bad girls,” deviating from the strict moral codes of conduct. In cases the women are not seen as individuals but as sexualized objects, judged by

their behavior, and their presumed sexual availability. This is displayed by the relatively high level of verbal disciplining, and openly sexual harassment towards the female garment workers (Siddiqi 1996).

According to a study by Siddiqi, (2004) the level of sexual harassment are at a considerably lower level in another major industry employing women in Bangladesh; the electronic industry, compared to the level in the garment factories. If defining the female worker's welfare by the level of sexual harassment, the workers in the garment industry are worse off compared to workers in other industries such as e.g. in the electronics industry. This perspective could be connected to the 'exploitation thesis' to explain the reality for workers in the garment industry. In the ready-made garment industry, there also exist stereotypes that women accept more flexible, un-secure working conditions, are more docile and less likely to organize in labor unions. Other stereotypes towards female workers include that women's mentality is more fitted to work with the monotonous work of sewing. Their nimble fingers are according to these stereotypes supposed to suit the detailed work of sewing (Feldman 2009; Gillan and Pokrant 2009). Pepper (2012) argues that "[t]he 'nimble fingers' argument that relies on patriarchal definitions of femininity is blatantly sexist and functions only to disguise the true incentives of the firm in favoring female labor; women's higher level of exploitability due to the gender wage gap, and their lower social status that often implies less political and legal representation and protection. These are only some among many weaknesses in the formal economic argument" (Pepper 2012: 145). Other reasons than the above mentioned to why the phenomenon of 'feminization' has become so widespread in the garment industry are that the labor-intensive industry is state-promoted; the Bangladeshi governments has through different measures in fact enabled the 'feminization' of the garment industry. Governmental (as well as NGOs') efforts have resulted in stable improvements in education and rampant fertility decreases, which has boosted female participation in waged work (Caraway 2007: 63). Additional reasons that have enabled such a widespread 'feminization' are that the state has undermined the rights of labor unions (Deyo 1997; Caraway 2007: 12).). The unions have during the years been demobilized by the labor-excluding Bangladeshi state and its inability to enforce protective legislation (Deyo 1997; Caraway 2007: 12). The Bangladeshi state could have protected the rights of labor unions, so that they would have been able to operate freely in Bangladesh. Through centralized bargaining for salaries, labor unions could have prevented employers from undermining male workers' salaries. The labor union could have worked as an important element in obstructing

the ‘feminization’ and protecting the labor rights of the female workers. The docility of Bangladeshi labor unions has instead allowed the employees to replace male workers by hiring female to lower working conditions (Caraway 2007: 5; Hall and Soskice 2001).

6.2 Women’s work in the garment industry – exploitation or empowerment?

In this section I will with the help of the earlier mentioned theories discuss in what way the poor Bangladeshi women are affected by working in the foreign-owned export oriented sector such as the ready-made garment industry. The reality of the female garment workers in Bangladesh can be viewed from different angles. Viewed from the perspective of a Western critic, the labor conditions are mainly exploitative. For a Bangladeshi woman in economic hardship, a job in the industry could signify an opportunity to economic independence. A garment job could be a way to integrate in the formal sector with a salary that is higher than in other unskilled professions in Bangladesh, such as a job in the agricultural sector, where work is known to be heavier than in the garment industry. The salaries the female workers earn in the garment factories are small, but it is more than nothing. In today’s’ situation in Bangladesh today, with a large unemployment rate of 40 per cent, a job in the garment factory is by many women perceived as a way to integrate into the waged labor market. This view can be related to the concept of the ‘integration thesis’ (Ruiz and Tiano 1987). However, the ‘integration thesis’ implies that the working women would have no other entry point into the formal economy, is however not totally correct in the case of the garment workers, since there are other, however small, opportunities for formal work in other sectors. This paper argues that the garment workers’ destiny is more closely connected to the ‘exploitation thesis’ than to the ‘integration thesis’, since the employment opportunities offered to the Bangladeshi women in the garment industry, does not provide any long term benefits, such as e.g. work security or a possibility of savings for the workers (Ruiz and Tiano 1987). They women are not able make a career in the industries; a female manager in the garment industry is e.g. unheard of. The women are due to deprived economic circumstances almost forced into the employment in the garment sector to make their living and provide for their family. However, the salary given to the workers is hardly sufficient to pay for housing even in the slum areas, school fees, or even the most basic food. The physical working environment is often dangerous with frequent occurrence of fires, and even collapses of factory buildings. The psychological working environment is characterized by sexual harassment from male managers towards female factory workers. One factor to high prevalence of the sexual harassment is the unequal power balance between the dependent female workers and the

powerful male managers (Siddiqi 2004). While the female factory workers are not forced into the factories, the vulnerable economic situation combined with the very few other opportunities for waged work for poor Bangladeshi women leads them into the garment sector (The National 2013).

The dual labor market theory can be applied to the situation of the garment workers of unstable nature of employment, low levels of education. The theory could explain the marginalized situation for female garment workers in Bangladesh as a combination of capitalistic repression of the lower social classes and the patriarchal system reigning over women (Caraway 2007: 38). The workers in the secondary jobs in the garment factories are often untrained, either since their work tasks is unskilled, or because the factories employ workers that have previous experience from other garment factory jobs, and where work skills are transferable to the new job. Since the secondary jobs have a minimum expenditure on training and recruitment, it is not an issue for the employers if the circulation of workers is high; such as in the garment factories. Due to the inherent traits of the secondary jobs and in the garment factories, the workers in this segment are unlikely to advance to more qualified jobs with better working conditions, but are likely to get be trapped in the in a vicious circle of secondary jobs with harsh working conditions (Caraway 2007: 37-38). It is not a coincidence that it is female and not male workers that work under the worst conditions. The ‘gendered division of labor’ is clearly displayed in the female dominated Bangladeshi garment industry. The neoclassical and Marxist political economists believed that the ‘feminization of labor’ will in time level out inequalities in gender. The length of the equalization time span is however not specified in e.g. Marx theories (Blau and Ferber 1992, Caraway 2007: 4). Therefore, the future working conditions for female workers compared to male workers perhaps remain to be seen.

7 Question Two

How do the patterns of unionization in the garment industry look like? How is the surrounding economic, cultural and political environment affecting the workers’ ability to influence their labor conditions?

In the following part of the thesis I will attempt to answer Question Two. Through an overview of the existent literature of the organizational hinders of labor unions in Bangladesh,

and with the help of selected theories of unionization, I will make an interpretation of the patterns of unionization.

7.1 Survey of the field

7.2 The Bangladeshi legislation behind the worker's right to organize in union

“These women and men are not commodities to be used and disposed of by the global market, nor are these trans-national firms without a human face and the ability to feel shame. Weaknesses in trans-national legal action allow individuals to desert their crimes across borders, but the individual victims and activists who defend them have the opportunity to confront those responsible and demand change” (Pepper 2012: 149).

To a larger extent than in many other Asian countries, the Bangladesh state recognizes in several conventions that labor rights such as collective bargaining, freedom of association and the right to strike should be protected. In reality however, the levels of unionization in Bangladesh is one of the lowest levels in Asia due to poor enforcement of the labor law (Rahman 2009). According to the study by Rodgers and Berik (2006) which surveyed labor rights in Bangladesh from the 1980s, when the garment sector experienced a fast growth in Bangladesh, the rights for labor unions and their members have actually diminished rather than developed (Rodgers & Berik 2006). “Time series data based on US State Department Reports indicate that over the 1981–2006 period, worker rights in Bangladesh changed from being ‘fully protected’ during part of the 1980s to ‘somewhat restricted’ during the 1990s to ‘severely restricted’ after 2001” (Cingranelli-Richards 2008 from Rodgers & Berik 2010: 14). One of the reasons to the labor unions weak position is that they in Bangladesh and other developing countries were given a late start. The establishment of labor unions in Bangladesh occurred as late as in the 1970s and 1980s, at a time when unemployment levels were on the rise, and labor unions in developed countries were already established since a long time (Cox 1987). What has further deteriorated the situation for Bangladeshi labor unions is the lack of support from employers (Dicken 1998; Robert 1983; Rahman 2009: 85). It is unfortunate that the existing legal framework for labor rights is not enforced by the Bangladeshi judiciary

system. In 1972 and 1998, Bangladesh ratified two anti-discrimination conventions from the International Labor Organization, conventions that since then only partly have been implemented (Kucera 2004). The Bangladesh Industrial Relations Ordinance (section 176 b) forbids discrimination by employee towards members or organizers of labor unions, and protects the labor unions and their members from civil liability. In reality, the lack of enforcement of this law does not protect labor union members from being penalized when taking part in labor unionization (Faruque 2009). There have been reports of active members in labor unions that have been harassed, abused and even killed (Utrikespolitiska Institutet 2013; Chi & Hagström 2010). According to the 1974 Special Powers Act, trade unionists can be detained without charge. If the government would like to interfere in a strike, a protesting worker could be arrested on offences such as “[o]bstruction of transport’, that carry exorbitant penalties of up to 14 years’ forced labor” (International Trade Union Confederation 2012). The Bangladeshi government also has the right to ban a strike, if they consider it to be a ’threat to national interest’. The question is, what ’national interest’ is more important for the Bangladeshi government, the welfare of workers or the welfare of the FEMS?

7.3 The garment workers’ mobilization into labor unions

“In fact, the ready-made-garments sector workers are largely deprived of their rights and benefits due to the absence of a trade union and the associated collective bargaining process. As a result, labor unrest in common” (Ahmed 2012: 12).

Since 2006, the ready-made garment sector (RMG) has experienced more labor unrest than previously. Workers from thousands of different of factories have protested, hundreds of factories have been ravaged, and several workers have been killed in the clashes with police and security forces (Ahamed 2012). The more violent has proven to be the most effective measure for workers and unions to influence their working conditions. Dina Siddiqi writes that "It was wildcat strikes in May and June 2006 that led to the signing of a tripartite agreement” (Siddiqi 2009: 163). As well in the summer of 2010, the mobilization of workers and union members managed to raise the garment worker wages. Due to violent protests hundreds of factories had been temporarily shut down when the government agreed to raise the minimum salary from US\$ 26 to US\$ 37. The increase did however not correspond to

increases in cost of living and inflation levels. The raise was also considerable lower than the US\$ 75 the workers demanded (Utrikespolitiska Institutet 2013; Chi and Hagström 2010). Is it not common that demands from labor unions are met. One of the reasons to this is that the labor unions are weak in nature due to their short history of collective bargaining. There is a persistent rivalry within, as well as between the unions due to their political party affiliation (Ahmed 2001). In the bargaining process, it is often the female labor activist that loses out. The gendered marginalization on the factory floor often persists in the traditionally male forum of labor unions (Ahmed 2001). Caraways writes that labor unions in the garment industry are “[g]endered institutions, as is evident in the memberships, their leaderships, and the policies they pursue” (Caraway 2007: 140). While men are more frequently active in labour unions only one per cent of the garment workers are involved (Khanna 2011). The female workers are often young, poor, rural, low-educated and some-times illiterate, have difficulties to raise their voice and claim their rights in the male-dominated structure (Franzway 1997: 129). Furthermore, the Bangladeshi women are traditionally not socialized for questioning authority, such as in labor-rights uprisings (Ahmed 2004).

7.4 Organizational obstacles for garment workers

There are several regulations regarding how to organize a labor union in Bangladesh. The establishment of a union at a factory needs prior approval by the government. It is only registered labor unions that have the right to take part in collective bargaining. 30 per cent of all the workers must be behind the creation of the union (Absar 2003). When the workers file the registration applications to join a union, the process of approving is often slow, and many of the applications are dismissed although the application procedures have been followed. The name of all workers joining the union must be mentioned in the application, and the information which worker who is joining the labor unions will be available for the employees (International Trade Union Confederation 2012). In the EPZs where Bangladeshi law does not apply. In some factories as well, the management might have forbidden the creation of labor unions, and instead allowed the constellation called “welfare committees”. These have fewer liberties to organize than the regular labor unions. Not all workers are able to join these committees, but only a few workers chosen by the factory management. The representatives in these committees as well need prior approval from the Registrar of Trade Unions (ILO 2004; Ahmed 2012: 12). Representatives in the committee talk about issues the factory managers have approved. Subjects such as working benefits, wages or working hours can be discussed (Ahmed 2012: 12). The committees were not allowed to associate with other groups

from other factories, unless more than half of the workers' welfare societies in one zone agreed to create a common federation. The committees/labor organizations were not allowed to cooperate with non-governmental organization in their work (Rahman 2008). The union has to be connected with a specific company, and not with sectors, such as for example the ready-made garment sector. The labor union members have to be employed by the company. Therefore, if the employer terminates an employee that is a union member, the member has no right to remain in the labor union. In this way, the garment company can control how many union members their company have. The workers can feel pressured to avoid membership in a labor union, with the risk of being criticized by the employee, or even terminated (International Trade Union Confederation 2012). The fear of being terminated keep some women reluctant to join a labor union, since their wage often not only supports themselves but as well their children.

7.5 Political interests interfering in the labor unions

“The trade union movement is marked by direct interference by the government and the ruling party in its internal affairs’ (Rahman 2008: 90).

While the Bangladeshi government decides the levels of the minimum salary in the garment industry, some Bangladeshi politicians have personal interests in the industry. 300 members of the Bangladeshi parliament members themselves own garment factories, as well as industries from other sectors (Monem 2002: 7-11). In 2009 29 members of the central organization for garment factories were elected into the Bangladeshi government, where they can influence the level of the minimum salary in the garment industry (Chi & Hagström 2010). For the central organization of garment factories, and for the owners of the garment industry, it is of importance that they wages are kept low, in order to maximize their own profit by ensuring that orders from multinational garment retailing companies will remain intact (Chi & Hagström 2010). An example of direct governmental interference in the labor unions, comes from reports from the export processing zones (EPZs) where it is stated that members of government have harassed labor unions that have been working for the implementation of labor regulations protecting workers in the EPZs (International Trade Union Conference 2008). The activity of labor unions in the EPZs was earlier completely forbidden. But in 2004 the ‘EPZ Trade Union and Industrial Relations Bill’ was passed and led to the emergence of

labor unions in late 2008. The bill however does not completely follow the conventions of ILO which highlights collective bargaining and freedom of association, since the bill only allows the existence of certain types of restricted labor unions in the EPZs the so called ‘welfare committees’. As well the bill gives the administrators of the EPZs the right to deregister labor unions at any given moment (Rodgers & Berik 2010). The strength of the union movements was reduced when the unions were ‘politicized’, i.e. when they connected to different political parties. This is the case in twenty of the largest labor unions. This has caused a fragmentation of the interests of the movements, and have impeded on the build-up of understanding between different labor unions. The reason to politicization of labor union is that in 1977 the Bangladeshi government made an obligation for each political party to create a labor union (Nurullah 1993). A majority of the labor members are members in a union connected with one of the three largest political parties. The political strings are dividing the labor organization, affecting the way they are able to organize themselves. The labor unions’ political ties have partly been beneficial, but to a larger extent been a burden for the unions, since the political strings have hindered the workers’ mobilization and representation of the own members interests. Instead have the interest of the political parties, or members of the government, been prioritized (Rahman 2008). “In this situation, union fortunes are often closely tied to the fortunes of the political parties to which they are allied” (Rahman 2008: 104).

8 Theoretical Framework

8.1 Workers organizing

“[...] the participation in trade union activities makes the workers more conscious and demanding about their job related rights, and raises their level of job expectations” (Khaleque 1993: 282).

The likeliness of worker’s organizing is dependent on many factors. According to Marx, class consciousness of workers develops under material experiences, e.g. the experience of exploitative working conditions – which can be found in the Bangladesh garment industry.

The approaches of post-modernity emphasis the workers identity as important an important underlying factor behind workers’ organizing into labor unions. The notion of identity is in a

way similar of Marx notion of consciousness. The postmodernists define the notions of identity as inconstant and changeable; it is not a given concept unable to change (Bradley 1997: 71; Palmer 1990: 101). Harriet Bradley defines three stages of the construction of workers' identity; the passive, the active, and the politicized. According to Bradley, a politicized identity has developed when the individual is more conscious about his/her identity. This consciousness could evolve through e.g. political action. The identity could work as the foundation for organizing collectively, such as in labor unions, in an affirmative or defensive manner (Bradley 1996: 26).

9 Analysis

Marx emphasized the influence the 'capital' has over the formation of new ideas in the society. The author argued that the capitalist, i.e. the factory and company owners, were decisive in the formation of the new ideas in the society (Mercer 1990: 50). The 'capital' exerts a certain level of influence over the unionization patterns in Bangladesh, e.g. when some factory owners forbid labor unions in their factory, despite that there exists support for such activities in the Bangladeshi legislation. The factory owners' involvement in union activities is an occurrence critiqued by local and international labor organizations. Criticized are also the Bangladeshi politicians' double roles of spokespersons for the common good with influence over the legislation of workers' rights, and their simultaneous roles as factory owners with an economic motive of keeping unions and factory wages down (Sveriges Radio 2013). As well the behavior of multinational companies is lopsided; one the one hand they assert their will to improve the labor conditions for garment workers, they at the same time attempts to bargain down the amount of money given to the garment factories for producing the garments (Sveriges Radio 2013). In relation to Harriet Bradley's concept of workers' identities, she argues that a person with an 'activity' identity often views her/himself as part of a specific group. That could be e.g. a labor union in the garment industry. "Active identities are those which individuals are conscious of and which provide a base for their actions" (Bradley 1997: 25). For an identity to evolve from passive to active, the person could have experienced discrimination, such as for example in the garment industry where the workers are underpaid and experiences bad working conditions. Bradley writes that the identities are not solely influenced by ideologies, but by the experiences in everyday life. The author writes that consciousness could develop e.g. through political action, such as labor unionism. If following Bradley's notions, I assume that the garment workers with time could shape a more

active identity (Bradley 1996: 25). Several scholars argue that it is the experience of the workers that shape their political identity/consciousness. Marx argued that the evolution of the class consciousness of a worker can occur through material experiences, e.g. exploitative working conditions. However, the female workers often remain only temporary in the garment factories, a majority of them not staying less than five years. If these workers join a labor union, their union membership will therefore often only be temporary (Pepper 2012). Thompson suggests that a worker can experience alienation when the worker is a temporary guest in the labor unions. The typical female garment worker is firstly only temporary in the labor unions, if she joins the labor unions in the first place. Female workers constitute only one per cent of the total memberships in garment unions. The male workers that are in majority, will probably dominate the discussions and influence the ideologies in the labor union (Thompson 1993). According to the view of post-modernists, political identities are changeable and fluid. In connection to this I argue that the garment workers' have several identities which could be obscure and conflicting, such as the simultaneous roles of labor activist, factory worker, wife and mother. The identities might not be compatible with e.g. the social norms of *pardah* or with the employers' expectations on a worker to be obedient and refrain from participating in strikes. With this in mind I argue that the presence of labor unions in the garment industry is therefore not sufficient to completely reshape the identities of the workers. The support for workers' rights is not present in the Bangladeshi society yet. Even though the liberties of workers are protected in the legal framework they are not properly entrenched in Bangladeshi society. The workers can never be certain that the most basic working rights will be protected by the Bangladeshi judicial system. Therefore, organizing into labor unions in Bangladesh always implies a certain risk for workers for losing their employment. With their own employment at stake, and due to all the flaws of labor union, will the garment workers in the future believe it is worthwhile pursuing union activism? The few occasions where the garment workers have managed to reach considerable improvements in their working conditions, it has most often not occurred through peaceful negotiations between labor union and factory owners and/or multinational companies. Instead it is through violent strikes workers have been able to improve their working conditions. At a few occurrences violent strikes, resulting in police-intervention and the temporary closure of factories, have pressured the Bangladeshi government to raise the minimum salary for workers, and the multinational companies to act for improved labor conditions for the garment workers (BBC 2013). However, the demands of the labor unions in the Bangladeshi garment industry have very seldom been met. Due to the failings of the male-dominated labor

unions, the interests of the female workers have not been protected (Broadbent and Ford 2008: 1). Khaleque writes that “[t]he workers often become disillusioned with the unions when their representatives fail to bargain effectively with the management to bring the expected benefits to them” (Khaleque 1993: 282). Due to this current trend in unionization patterns in the garment sector, one could argue that the garment workers have very little faith in the labor unions, and what improvements they could accomplish for the workers. This low belief could in that case be one explanation to the very low number of garment workers that are members in the labor unions.

9.1 The different types of labor unions

In the Bangladeshi garment industry there are two main types of labor organizations; the regular labor union that is the most similar to the type in Sweden, as well as a newer type called ‘welfare committee’ which provides lesser organizing liberties than the regular union type. The welfare committees were established due to its nature which better suited the needs of factory owners, and due to advantages in productivity that was given by FEMS to factories which abandoned the regular type of labor unions (Peetz 1998). Regular labor unions are forbidden in the legal free-zones in the EPZs where only welfare committees are allowed. Certain factories outside the EPZs have also bypassed the Bangladeshi law and replaced those with the more docile welfare committees (Rahman 2008). Although each garment factory according to the Bangladeshi law are allowed to establish a regular labor union, the factory owners can without retribution from the judicial system decide to restrict the organizational liberties in the factory (Peetz 1998). The regular type of a labor union is most often connected with a political party, with male union leaders often working for the party, with probably no previous work experience of factory work or insights of workers’ real needs (Rock 2001). The structure of welfare committees differs compared to the regular labor unions. The members in the welfare committees are chosen by the factory management that therefore can ignore selecting e.g. the most critical workers for participating in the committee (Rahman 2008). According to the research by Paul-Majunder (2002), the regular labor unions in comparison to the welfare committees, have a better record of informing their members of their legal and organizational rights and providing legal assistance, compared to the welfare committees. The fact that the regular labor unions to a larger extent inform the workers of their labor rights, one could argue, that the forum of a regular labor union is more beneficial for the development of what Karl Marx named a workers ‘consciousness’ and that Bradley called an political ‘identity’. Seen from this perspective, due to the inherited trait of the welfare

committees; to not enlighten the members of the committee about their labor rights, the welfare committee should have less success in consciousness-raising, and in the long-run to empower the workers. If the workers are unaware of their rights, how can they develop their consciousness?

In the welfare committee, the employer (or what Marx referred to as ‘capital’) has more influence over the formation of ideas, since they can choose which members that will join the welfare committee and they can choose to not inform the workers of their labor rights. In the regular labor unions, the structure is completely different due to that the union is often supported by a foreign NGO, and is therefore run by outsiders that receives a salary not from the garment employer but by an outsider that is not dependent on economic interests of the factory owner. Pratica Paul-Majunder (2002) points out one potential positive aspect with the structure of the welfare committee; that some female workers might prefer this forum in front of the labor union due to firstly, that the female workers in the regular labor unions are not comfortable to interact with male union leaders that often are outsiders, and secondly, due to the possible hierarchical gap between workers and the union leaders. The female workers often lack the chance to develop skills to be able to handle industrial relations with the factory managers or other males in the regular unions. The female workers are used to be in an underdog position in the garment factories, far from assuming leadership positions in the labor unions (Siddiqi 2009). Pratica Paul-Majunder (2002) suggests that the female workers could feel more comfortable to be in a smaller organization such as a welfare committee where they could learn the skills previously mentioned, and develop the courage to found their own regular labor union, since these are known to be more effectively pursue the issues of worker’s rights. My critique to Paul-Majunders’ contention is that the selection of welfare committee members is done by factory management, with the freedom to select members sympathizing with their own ideas rather than those of the employees. The environment for building worker’s identity-building is certainly highly contextualized. In general the regular labor unions seem like a better option, since they more actively inform workers about their rights. However a welfare committee would in a company that is very much concerned for the welfare of the workers probably benefit the development of these workers’ identities, to a larger extent than a regular labor union would within an enterprise ignoring the welfare of the workers, and the opposite.

In relation to Marx's findings on workers' consciousness, and Bradley's notion of workers' identities, the link is relatively weak due to that the time the workers spend in the garment industry and in the labor unions are so short, and stretches only often a period of maximum five years (Pepper 2012). To what extent could actually the workers consciousness or political identities evolve during such as short period when their organizational rights in many aspects are severely restricted?

10 Conclusion

This thesis has focused on the situation of female factory workers in the ready-made garment industry in Bangladesh. It discussed the positive and negative aspects of the employment opportunities in the industry. The thesis has also shed light on the organizational difficulties the workers face in labor unions. Since late 1970s, the foreign-owned export-oriented sector (FEMS) has outsourced their production to developing countries such as Bangladesh. Due to cheap production costs explained by low levels of labor conditions, workers' salaries, environmental protection and taxation; Bangladesh has become a favorable destination for the investments of garment retailing companies. Bangladesh is today the second largest producer of ready-made garments. The labor-intensive industry stands for 80 per cent of the country's foreign export, and employs 4 million workers out of which 80 per cent are women. These women are coming from rural areas entrenched in poverty and patriarchal traditions, migrating to the cities and joining the garment industries, women are escaping one kind of deprived environment to join another. The situation for the workers is harsh with long working hours, unsafe working environment and salaries not even sufficient to cover even the basic needs for the women and their families. In a race to the bottom, the FEMS have driven down salaries to levels barely accepted by women with very few other options for a waged work. The difficulty for workers and employers to reach consensus about working conditions in the garment industry has during the last few years spurred protests, and in cases led to violent riots. Even though the conditions for women in the garment industry are appalling, the visibility of women in the labor market since the 1980s has had as well had positive socio-economic effects on women's lives, and for other individuals that are financially supported with the garment salaries. However, the effects of the expansive Bangladeshi garment industry has not been as positive as for the trans-national garment retailing companies, such as e.g. H&M, that annually can collect billions of US dollars in profit from the garment production in Bangladesh. In the struggle for improving their labor conditions, Bangladeshi

women have during the last years entered the male-dominated labor unions. The rampant increase of women in the labor force in Bangladesh garment industry has however not corresponded with increases in participation in labor unions. Today only about one per cent of the female garment workers are members in labor unions. The reasons to the low number of members are many. In Bangladesh the regulations of unionization are very strict, which make it difficult for workers to actively take part in labor unions since they risk dismissal and even imprisonment by doing so. On paper there exist Bangladeshi legislation that is intended to protect workers' rights to organize, but the legislation is not being fully implemented by the government. Many of the Bangladeshi parliament members have economic motives in the garment industry. Around 300 of the parliament members own their own garment factory. The double roles of these policy-makers lead to a loss in objectivity when they shall decide the regulations for labor union rights and workers' rights. The level of influence that the unions can have on the political decisions is diminished by the personal economic involvement by politicians. A majority of the labor unions are connected to a political party, a fact that is dividing the cause of the labor unions. The opinions and interests of the political parties are often prioritized in front of that of garment workers. The hardships of Bangladeshi labor unions have not facilitated women's entrance into the labor unions. In the complex organizational situation workers' are faced with, it is especially the female workers that loose out. Unaccustomed to speaking up for their rights in the patriarchal society of Bangladesh, the pattern of male domination present on the factory floor is transmitted to the forum of labor unions. Additionally, the women in the garment industry often stay only a few years in the industry and in the labor union, and are therefore often unable to significantly influence the working conditions for the female workers in the garment industry.

Due to the failings of the male-dominated labor unions, the interests of the female workers have not been protected. A male-led hierarchy with very few female heads representing the cause of women has squeezed the women's interests in between the issues of male workers. But it is not only the responsibility of labor unions to provide the garment workers' with a decent salary for their hard work. The main liability should be on the Bangladeshi state and the trans-national companies. In order to accomplish a change for the garment workers, the Bangladeshi government, factory owners, the trans-national companies, and the Western consumer of garments need to take a collective responsibility for the rights of garment workers. At present, this is not the case. Several factors need to correspond before any major improvements in workers' right can be seen in Bangladesh. Until then, the women in the

garment industry in Bangladesh continue to work 12-14 hours a day for one of the lowest salaries in the world.

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