

91 | do Bangladeshi factory workers need saving? Sisterhood in the post-sweatshop era¹

¹ I take my title from Lila Abu-Lughod's (2002) insightful and much-cited essay, 'Do Muslim Women Really Need Saving? Anthropological Reflections on Cultural Relativism and Its Others'.

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abstract

This article revisits the figure of the 'third world sweatshop worker', long iconic of the excesses of the global expansion of flexible accumulation in late twentieth-century capitalism. I am interested in how feminist activists concerned with the uneven impact of neo-liberal policies can engage in progressive political interventions without participating in the 'culture of global moralism' that continues to surround conventional representations of third world workers. I situate my analysis in the national space of Bangladesh, where the economy is heavily dependent on the labour of women factory workers in the garment industry and where local feminist understandings of the 'sweatshop economy' have not always converged with global feminist/left concerns about the exploitation inherent in the (now not so new) New International Division of Labor. The tensions or disjunctures between 'global' and 'local' feminist viewpoints animate the concerns of this article. I argue that de-contextualized critiques derived from abstract notions of individual rights, and corresponding calls for change from above – calls on the conscience of the feminist and the consumer, for instance – can entail troubling analytical simplifications. They highlight some relations of power while erasing others, thereby enacting a different kind of violence and at times undermining mobilizations on the ground. I draw attention to the multiple fields of power through which much of the activism across borders continues to be produced and reproduced discursively. This kind of framing fits all too easily into existing cultural scripts about gender and race elsewhere, and produces ethical obligations to 'save' women workers.

keywords

Bangladesh; globalization; garment industry; sweatshops; transnational feminism

introduction

2 This is a revised version of the keynote address delivered at a symposium on *Neo-liberalism in South Asia: Gender, Labor and Culture* organized by the Center for South Asian Studies at the University of Hawaii at Manoa in 2004. I would like to thank the organizers and the audience for their comments on my presentation.

In a recent essay on feminist solidarity, Chandra Mohanty locates the politics and economics of capitalism as the most urgent loci of struggle for contemporary transnational feminist practice, and calls on feminist scholars and teachers to respond to the phenomenon of globalization, which she characterizes as a site for the recolonization of peoples (Mohanty, 2003).² Mohanty does not disavow the main argument of her highly influential 1986 essay, 'Under Western Eyes', in which she highlights the urgent need to unmask the discursive colonization of marginalized groups. Rather, she appears to be calling for a shift in registers or interpretive focus because, in the years since she wrote 'Under Western Eyes', 'global economic and political processes have become more brutal, exacerbating economic, racial and gender inequalities, and thus they need to be de-mystified, reexamined and theorized' (*ibid*: 509).

This article responds to the spirit of Mohanty's call for a transnational feminist practice that demystifies global economic and political processes, although it assumes the latter processes are complex and contradictory, rather than uniform in their effects. To that end I revisit the figure of the 'third world sweatshop worker', for long iconic of the excesses of the global expansion of flexible accumulation in late twentieth-century capitalism. I am interested in how feminist activists concerned with the uneven impact of neo-liberal policies can engage in progressive political interventions without 'collaps[ing] difference through binary analytics and naturalized moralities' and without participating in the 'culture of global moralism' that surrounds conventional representations of third world workers (Ramamurthy, 2004: 738). That is, in this case, without 'saving' factory workers from the depredations of global capitalism.

I situate my analysis in the national space of Bangladesh, where the economy is heavily dependent on the labour of women factory workers in the garment industry and where local feminist understandings of the 'sweatshop economy' have not always converged with global feminist/left concerns about the exploitation inherent in the (now not so new) New International Division of Labor. The tensions or disjunctures between 'global' and 'local' feminist viewpoints animate the concerns in this article.

Against this backdrop, I map a set of concrete practices produced through the operation of transnational capital in a particular site and within a specific population. I examine the articulation of one aspect of the global trade regime with the bodies, sexualities and livelihoods of female industrial workers in urban Bangladesh. Throughout I draw on research on the garment industry I have carried out over the last fifteen years in and around the capital city, Dhaka.³

3 See Siddiqi (1991), Siddiqi (1996), Siddiqi (2000) and Siddiqi (2004).

a brief genealogy of the sweatshop worker

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 structures of patriarchy and transnational capitalism, it is the urban, subproletarian female who is the paradigmatic subject of the current configuration of the International Division of Labour (Spivak, 1988: 29).

The passage from Spivak above invokes the subproletarian female only incidentally, almost as an aside. It is telling, however, that Spivak chose the female industrial worker as a contemporary analogue to the peasant insurgent of the past.

The emergence of factory work as a pre-eminent index of gender-based capitalist exploitation cannot be justified in terms of numbers, because as a percentage this constitutes a fairly small proportion of work performed by poor women in most countries. Indeed, over half of all Southern women continue to work in the agricultural sector, and at the turn of the twenty-first century, foreign direct investment in export oriented production accounted for only 2 per cent of women's total employment in poor economies (Ramamurthy, 2003: 527). Nevertheless, it is through the gendered bodies of industrial workers that the script of global capitalism has been read most visibly and forcefully.

By the mid-1980s, the plight of the sweatshop worker carried considerable intellectual currency among feminist and left-wing critics internationally. Detailed documentation of the physically and economically coercive conditions of industrial work through converging human rights and feminist discourses made this possible (see, for instance, Ehrenreich and Fuentes, 1983; Mitter, 1986). Globalization discourse gave a certain amount of celebrity to the industrial worker not available to the agricultural labourer or others; the latter's work is less visible or concrete while the products of 'sweatshops' – shoes, clothing, toys and the like – were everyday items to which consumers could relate more readily (Kabeer, 2004). Moreover, the very visibility of industrial workers themselves, whether they were in the bounded off free-trade zones of Sri Lanka, the Kampung of Malaysia or the semi-residential production zones of Bangladesh, became a significant factor in the symbolic representation of factory work.

Much of this early scholarship – path breaking for its time – located the new global order literally in the body and labour of the woman worker (see for instance Elson and Pearson, 1981a,b; Chapkis and Enloe, 1983; Nash and Fernandez-Kelly, 1983). The effect was to reduce the woman worker to the emblem rather than the subject of multinational exploitation. Reduced at times to archetypal victim of capital and male domination working in collusion, the woman worker's body was multiply appropriated: for global feminists, she stood for the universal subordination of women; for critics of imperialism and capitalism, she was the embodiment of exploitation by (western) predatory capital; and for human rights activists, she represented the violations of the dignity of labour that occur in the absence of regulation and accountability. In the US context, films such as the Emmy Award winning *The Global Assembly*

Line – very popular in Women's Studies classes around this time – reinforced such notions.

Theories of the universal woman and the global worker informed these feminist and neo-Marxist critiques. The structuralist models underlying such analyses admitted little historical specificity or discursive analysis of categories. The tendency was to present women workers as homogeneous, faceless and voiceless creatures, attributing more personality and action to capital and patriarchy than to the subjects of exploitation (Ong, 1988).

Particularities of place, people and the specificity of localized power structures disappeared in such globalizing frameworks, which could not adequately theorize the experience of work across space. But the labour market does not exist in the abstract, it is embedded in social relations, including of course modern patriarchal relations. Capitalism as an operational system is embedded in, and constituted through, culturally and historically specific practices that are inscribed in the material.

The scholarship on women in the industrial labour force has become considerably more sophisticated over the years. In the field of anthropology – the discipline with which I am the most familiar – the pioneering work of Aihwa Ong shifted the register of analysis and pointed to new directions for research (and presumably for activism) (Ong, 1987). Richly detailed ethnographies have extended the terms of the debate considerably, moving beyond whether women are better or worse off to a consideration of the paradoxes and contradictions generated by industrial work; a closer examination of the multiple contexts in which gender and sexuality are constructed and contested; and a greater emphasis on the lived experiences, cultural practices and modes of consent and resistance in the workplace and outside (Ong, 1991; Mills, 2003).

These studies indicated that multinational production (or variations thereof) had inconsistent and often contradictory effects on the lives of women workers and their families. Contradictory because they demonstrated that women could acquire a degree of autonomy in some areas, such as control over cash resources, and yet be subjected to greater surveillance in other domains. They also revealed a striking similarity in the deployment and reification of certain patriarchal modes with entry to industrial labour. Specific tropes – sexuality, respectability, modesty and self-discipline – tended to be invoked repeatedly in differing locales. The effect was greater social and self-regulation of workers' lives, inside and outside the shop floor. At the same time, it is clear that encounters with capitalist discipline also open potential spaces for resistance and contestation. My early work on women in garment factories in urban Bangladesh and Caitrin Lynch's research on garment workers in Sri Lanka's Free Trade Zones resonate closely with these themes (Siddiqi, 1991, 1996, 2000; Lynch, 1999).

This literature appears to have had minimal impact on international debates over the merits of sweatshop labour, which have by no means been resolved. Third world factory workers continue to occupy centre stage with respect to activism and the clamour to universalize labour standards.

the politics and perils of 'saving' Bangladeshi workers

Anti-sweatshop movements often deploy a language of horror, of sensationalized narratives generalized from individual stories that may or may not be representative, as a means of capturing the attention of ethically conscious consumers in the North. I reproduce below the introductory paragraph of an essay on Bangladeshi garment workers written by an 'investigative journalist' employed by a US trade union. The article was published in a volume of essays on sweatshop labour.

There's a saying among girls in the slums of Bangladesh: *If you're lucky, you'll be a prostitute – if you're unlucky, you'll be a garment worker.* Pinky was both lucky and unlucky. She was sold into a brothel when she was 11. At thirteen, she was living at a shelter for victimized women and girls in the capital city of Dhaka and working at Expo World Wide Garments. Undernourished since birth, then fed according to the nutritional standards of a pimp, the bird-boned girl stood on her feet for up to fourteen hours a day, six to seven days a week, for the equivalent of \$12.50 a month. The foreman came on to her all the time. No doubt he could sniff out her background. But that wouldn't have made a difference. No, not for a pretty one like that in a garment factory. Just threaten to fire them and they're yours. A girl in the labor force means she's unprotected. Either her family has abandoned her, or the family men are too poor and desperate to make trouble. (Spielberg, 1997: 113)

For the record, I have never come across the saying about prostitution being preferable to factory work in my nearly two-decade-long research on the garment industry. Presumably, the writer's objective was to unmask the sexual harassment that accompanies the 'inhuman' conditions of work in garment factories. There is indeed a strong association between job insecurity and vulnerability to harassment and exploitation, sexual and otherwise. Nevertheless, one cannot help but be troubled by the rhetorical strategy employed by the writer. The association of sex work with factory work, and the invocation of prostitution to indicate the horrors of garment work, provides the main shock value of the passage. The reader encounters predictable gendered and racialized tropes – the passive, helpless third world woman, always already sexualized and victimized, and preyed on by lustful and exploitative 'native' males, therefore urgently in need of rescue. Needless to say, the reader/consumer/activist can also feel smugly superior about his or her place in the world.

4 Trying to present a more complex picture is an uphill battle. In 1999, I was invited to speak at a workshop at the University of Pennsylvania organized by the local chapter of United Students against Sweatshops. My refusal to recount the horrors of Bangladeshi factories and insistence on critically assessing the collusion between rights discourse and neocolonial relations of domination were met with a studied silence from an audience eager to 'set things right'.

5 'Memorandum of Understanding between BGMEA, UNICEF and ILO Bangladesh regarding the placement of child workers in school programmes and the elimination of child labor'. 4 July 1995.

Wildly generalized or sensationalized images of exploitation are undoubtedly more effective in garnering public support for actions such as boycotts, or sanctions through international trade bodies, than more complicated expositions of transnational relations of domination and subordination. The former framing fits seamlessly into pre-existing cultural scripts about gender relations and general conditions in the 'third world', and a corresponding obligation to save women workers 'over there'. Northern labour activists have little incentive to discard such effective culturalized narratives with their language of salvation in favour of unwieldy accounts that attempt to capture complex and 'messy' realities on the ground.⁴ Paradoxically, although they may be successful, such strategies end up working against the interests of the very workers they are designed to 'save'.

Conditions in Bangladeshi factories are by no means ideal. Regardless, strategies to 'save' workers, based on abstract notions of individual workers' rights, and imposed unilaterally from the outside are beset by a host of problems. For instance, efforts to boycott Bangladeshi goods in the past because of the presence of child labour in Bangladeshi factories had less than salubrious effects on the workers they were meant to help. In 1993, fearing the imminent passage of the Harkins Bill (Child Labor Deterrence Bill), factory owners dismissed an estimated 50,000 children, many of whom helped support their families, forcing them into a completely unregulated informal sector, in lower-paying and much less secure occupations such as brick-breaking, domestic service and rickshaw pulling (Paul-Majumder, 2004). It was only after the intervention of local human rights organizations such as Ain o Salish Kendra (ASK), which already had an innovative and award-winning programme for working children (and which is also working toward the elimination of child labour) that steps were taken to mitigate the negative effects of the Harkins Bill in its original form. Eventually, local labour rights activists helped broker a tripartite Memorandum of Agreement (MOA) among the Government of Bangladesh, UNICEF and the Bangladesh Garments Manufacturers and Employers Association (BGMEA) which was to pay for schooling for former child workers and preferably provide a factory job for an adult family member.⁵ Implementation of the MOA has been imperfect but the model is one that is now being replicated elsewhere.

In Bangladesh, questions over whether industrial work is good or bad for women do not much preoccupy the public sphere anymore, although the struggle for garment workers' rights continues in full force – usually independent of international actions and policies. Nazma Akter (one time garment worker and now the General Secretary of the Awaj Foundation), who has had many dealings with international labour rights organizations, has this to say: 'Northern labour rights and consumer groups often want overnight solutions that they can feel good about. They also think they can tackle all problems at the same time, and can be unwilling to see the complexity and interrelationship of these matters'.

However, she is not against international intervention for, as she also notes, the garment industry is part of the international economy, so it can be influenced by lobbying at the international level.⁶

6 Interview, Dhaka, 11 August 2008.

The numerous community-based and nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) working with garment workers are also not averse to links with external actors. In an interview, the advocacy director of the NGO INCIDIN told me that international pressure could be effective and was sometimes necessary. In its current form, however, buyers or brands put pressure on factory owners to increase wages, without increasing the amount they pay for finished goods. When only national producers are held accountable, the real costs of compliance are passed on to workers themselves, who are forced to work harder and longer for higher wages, in essence cancelling out any benefits.⁷ In the current dispensation, ethical trade and social compliance rules end up benefiting big name brands rather than workers.

7 Interview with Nasimul Ahsan, Advocacy Chief, INCIDIN Bangladesh, 21 August 2008.

from aid to trade dependency: globalization in Bangladesh⁸

A serendipitous convergence of external factors helped to establish Bangladesh as a major apparel-exporting nation by the mid-1980s. The provisions for export quotas in the Multi-Fibre Arrangement (MFA), a global recession and subsequent relocation of manufacturing industries from Taiwan and South Korea, and even the civil war in Sri Lanka, made the nation an attractive place for subcontracting out the manufacture of ready-made garments. Most critically, the state put in place one of the most liberal investment policies in South Asia, with full legal protection to foreign capital against expropriation and nationalization, along with generous tax incentives and other facilities. The country experienced a dramatic growth in garment exports in the 1980s and 1990s; over 2 million workers, about 75 per cent of whom are women, are employed in over 3,000 garment factories, exports from which provide the largest share of foreign income for the country. Today, the export economy is still concentrated in a few commodities – with ready-made garments accounting for about 76 per cent of total exports. There continues to be a high degree of market concentration, with the US and the EU providing the bulk of the market for clothing.

Most scholars, policy makers and the social elite in Bangladesh welcomed the advent of export-oriented garment work as a positive development for the nation as a whole and for its women in particular. The mainstream response can be understood in relation to the more or less uncritical acceptance of capitalist development paradigms, shaped by the pronounced presence of a Bank/Fund agenda in national policy and knowledge-making processes. Naturalization of the development regime has muted or marginalized critiques of the disciplinary aspects of neo-liberal economic policy on women's lives. 'Empowerment' –

8 By globalization, I refer primarily to the flows of capital, labour, commodities and information *that are situated within the structured inequalities among nation states and their relationship to international financial institutions*. I will not rehearse the extremely polarized debates around the effects of globalization here, except to clarify that I take globalization to be a set of highly uneven processes, with continuities and ruptures with the past, and distributed unequally across nations and communities. The differential effects of these processes on the lives of individual men and women are mediated by class, ethnicity, race, gender and quite critically, by nationality and citizenship. This point often gets lost

in the rhetoric about a new postnational world. For globalization policies promote and even, I would say, naturalize the increased policing both of national borders and of individual mobility. Indeed, the economic and political integration espoused by proponents of globalization — such as the World Trade Organization — are frequently premised on explicit exclusions and elisions that rely on received understandings of citizenship and national belonging.

9 For critical analyses of micro-credit policies, see Fernando (1997) and Karim (2008).

10 See for example Amin *et al.* (1998), Begum and Paul-Majumder (2006), Hossain *et al.* (1990), Kabeer (2002), Kibria (1998). The literature on the garment industry is vast, and this is by no means an exhaustive list.

11 Not all the news is dismal. In the intervening years, there have been improvements in key social indicators. In fact, Bangladesh has outperformed its neighbours in key social sectors, especially in primary and secondary education for girls. However, these statistics tell only a partial story. For details, see 'Whispers to Voices: Gender and Social Transformation in Bangladesh'. *Development Series*,

understood within an individualist neo-Liberal framework of the 'self-enterprising citizen-subject' — is a buzzword that has received relatively little scrutiny (Ong, 2006: 14). Thus, the Nobel prize winning Grameen Bank's micro-credit ventures for women in the countryside and the garment industry's employment opportunities for females in urban areas constitute the socially sanctioned faces of women's emancipation in Bangladesh.⁹ Not surprisingly, most observers hailed the garment industry as an unproblematic stepping stone to female empowerment, although a minority of voices maintained a left-wing critique, casting garment workers primarily as the victims of capitalist exploitation (Siddiqi, 2000).

Notably, feminist critiques of the garment industry — on working conditions, safety regulations and the like — have been tempered by a highly contextualized understanding of the opportunities and limitations of the availability of industrial wage labour for women in Bangladesh.¹⁰ The title of one of the earliest studies, 'No Better Option?' captures the reality of the situation facing many girls and women who enter the industry (Hossain *et al.*, 1990). Naila Kabeer's study of Bangladeshi garment workers, best known internationally, makes the point that despite exploitative conditions, individual women are able to exercise a degree of autonomy and 'agency' in their lives (Kabeer, 2002). The arguments of Kabeer and others should not be read as a wholesale celebration of globalization. However, many progressive feminists see the export-oriented garment industry, which is well into its third decade, not only to have revolutionized working-class women's lives but also opened up hitherto unavailable social spaces for middle-class women (see for example Azim, 2005).

During these three decades, Dhaka has also been transformed into a city of slums.¹¹ Almost a third of the population inhabits slums which, filled with garment workers and others, provide a sombre reminder of the intense distress in the Bangladeshi countryside.¹² According to one estimate, 1,000 girls migrate daily from rural to urban areas to find work (Ward *et al.*, 2004). For most young women, garment factories remain the locus of desire. The seduction of garment factory work is a point worth pondering.

For women and girls employed in the apparel sector, the structure of the international trade regime is such that job insecurity and vulnerability to fluctuations in global markets are built into their lives. An unexpected crisis in 2001 provided a vivid illustration. At the beginning of that year, Bangladesh's roughly 3,000 garment factories employed around 2 million people, who supported an estimated 10 million dependants (Ward *et al.*, 2004: 4). By August, over half of these factories had no international orders and many factories were forced to close down. The downturn in production resulted from an economic recession and a shift in US foreign policy signalled by the passage of the US Trade Development Act of 2000. The Act gave duty free access and trade preference to African and Caribbean nations, diverting garment orders from Bangladesh. The

decline in orders accelerated sharply after 11 September 2001. By December 2001, almost 1,300 factories had shut down, leaving 400,000 jobless. Virtually overnight, retrenched workers and their families found themselves cut off from sources of credit and social support.¹³

Political Economist Rehman Sobhan contends that economic liberalization and structural adjustment policies in Bangladesh have produced a shift from one kind of international dependency to another: from a regime of aid-dependence to trade-dependence (Sobhan, 2003). The anxiety generated at the prospect of the dismantling of the MFA – under which Bangladesh was guaranteed an export market in the US and Europe – in 2004 underlined the extent and starkness of this trade dependence. Anticipation of the end of quotas produced something close to national panic. Many commentators predicted that once the quota system was phased out the garment industry would collapse. The International Monetary Fund warned that a quarter of Bangladesh's exports and 2.3 million jobs could evaporate as a result, shaking the entire economy (Bradsher, 2004). That would indeed have been a national disaster.

In response, the government and garment trade groups lobbied hard for duty free access to US markets for Bangladeshi goods, a move that would have eased pressure on the industry quite significantly, given that the \$1.7 billion a year in apparel exports from Bangladesh to the United States in 2004 faced an average levy of 16 per cent. This came to around \$300 million a year, substantially more than the \$70 million a year that the United States gave Bangladesh in foreign aid (Bradsher, 2004). Earlier the United States had provided Pakistan with much sought-after trade concessions in the area of garment exports, directly affecting Bangladesh's own quotas. Many observers felt that Pakistan's strategic importance geo-politically rather than economic considerations determined US trade policy in this instance.

At this juncture, as the apparel industry faced a precarious future, the subject of trade unions in Bangladeshi EPZs surfaced. As part of a liberalization policy, and in an effort to draw in foreign capital, EPZs, in which many garment factories were located, had been exempt from the purview of national labour legislation. In the early 1990s, at the urging of the American Federation of Labor and Congress of Industrial Organizations (AFL-CIO), the United States demanded that Bangladesh rescind the ban. Pressure had been building up since then on successive governments, which have waffled and at times prevaricated on the issue. In 2004, the US Ambassador at the time advised Bangladeshi officials that the country would no longer be eligible for tariff concessions under the generalized system of preferences (GSP) if it did not comply with US demands.¹⁴ GSP facilities do not provide great financial benefits as yet but the government and factory owners were concerned about potential damage to reputation should they be cancelled. US officials warned that non-compliance would endanger the future case for duty-free entry into US markets. Simultaneously, South Korean

Paper No. 22. Dhaka: The World Bank, 2008.

12 Mike Davis (2004) argues that today's slums represent urbanization without growth and are the legacy of a global political and economic conjuncture.

13 Arguably, garment workers in Bangladesh have a fundamentally solid grasp of the exigencies and fluctuations of the global trade regime. Their social location – directly affected by global restructuring – gives them first hand experience of the workings of systemic power. They possess potential for what Chandra Mohanty calls epistemic privilege (see Mohanty, 2003: 515).

14 The timing of the pressure on Bangladesh raises some questions, however. One is tempted to speculate that

something other than protecting the constituency represented by the AFL-CIO was at stake, since protectionist discourse in the US seemed to be focused on outsourcing jobs to India at that time. It could be a situation of competition between an established hegemonic power and emerging and potential challengers.

15 As Rehman Sobhan (2003) puts it: 'How much is Bangladesh willing to pay to get access to US markets and what kind of rent will the US extract to allow duty free access?'

16 *Daily Star*, Friday 26 March 2004.

17 In 2007, the AFL-CIO filed a petition with the US government seeking cancellation of GSP facilities because of alleged violations of national and international labour laws. *The Daily Star* 18 September 2007, 1

18 Interview with six leaders of garments workers' federations, representing 36 unions, at the office of the NGO Incidin, 21 August 2008. Names withheld for confidentiality.

and Japanese firms, which had large investments in the EPZs, threatened to pull out if union activities were allowed.

The government of Bangladesh found itself captive to the operations of an unequal trade regime as well as to United States domestic and foreign policy.¹⁵ Notably, many trade union leaders, labour rights activists and prominent members of civil society were openly supportive of the US pressure on the Bangladeshi government. They were not unaware of the large geopolitical situation but felt compelled to 'capitalize' on the situation. Several deadlines came and went; at the very end of the year, a new law was framed in consultation with the WB and the US Embassy;¹⁶ members sitting in on review committees included a few major South Korean investors, officials of the EPZ and representatives of the AFL-CIO. The outcome was the Bangladesh Export Processing Zone (EPZ) Workers' Association and Industrial Relations Act of 2004, which provided for the formation of Workers' Associations in three stages between 2005 and 2008. These associations, formed on the basis of worker referendums, do not possess the same organizational rights as conventional trade unions. After that point, international pressure eased off temporarily.¹⁷

However, any victory for labour rights was short lived. In 2008, amendments to the EPZ Authority Act 1980 strictly prohibited the association of EPZ workers with any trade union or labour organization outside the EPZ. Workers in EPZ factories are also forbidden from filing complaints with human rights organizations or with the media. Some non-EPZ union organizers charge that leaders of workers' associations are groomed or threatened into working for the interests of factory owners.¹⁸

In the interim, the government has consolidated labour laws in general. New legislation in 2006 placed greater limitations on workers' rights to organize and to go on strike than in the past (Parvez, 2008). Among other things, the law bans trade unions in any new establishment for three years. The law has also increased the workday from eight to ten hours for garment workers – without a corresponding increase in wages.

It is a paradox that the majority of garment factories are located outside the EPZ. Non-EPZ workers have the right to organize although very few are unionized. In fact, Bangladesh is one of the most under-unionized countries in Asia. In part, this is due to the tremendous state suppression of worker militancy, and the deployment of state agencies to protect the interests of factory owners rather than workers. Moreover, most well-established unions are linked closely to the major political parties and therefore have little credibility.

Perhaps the greatest irony is that recently, garment factory workers have been able to force the state and factory owners to raise wages, but they have done so without visible help or pressure from outside. It was wildcat strikes in May and June 2006 that led to the signing of a tripartite agreement that set a new

minimum wage for the industry.¹⁹ The strikes were originally instigated by worker demands for payment of wage arrears in one factory. Protests spread quickly and turned violent. The government ordered its paramilitary force, the Bangladesh Rifles, to calm the situation. Following prolonged negotiations, an agreement raising the minimum wage was reached. Although the level of the wage is the subject of discontent, and there are many conspiracy theories about who instigated workers to riot, the fact remains that they were able to achieve a concrete goal.

19 See *The New Age*, 24 May 2006.

Shifting national discourse on the golden girls of Bengal

'We are the new golden girls of Bengal'.

Nazma Akter²⁰ (former child factory worker, Dhaka, May 2003).

In the national imagination, garment workers' bodies oscillate from being national assets to threats to the moral order of things. Official discourse has always been couched in terms of benefits to the nation and its underprivileged female citizens – specifically as contributions to national income and individual family incomes. State discourses have shifted in emphasis over time but point to the increased visibility of its predominantly female labour force as a sign of women's emancipation from the strictures of traditional patriarchal structures. In 1993, the then President of Bangladesh, Abdur Rahman Biswas, declared at the Annual Apparel and Textile Exposition:

The garment industry is one of the major foreign exchange earning sectors of Bangladesh. [...It] has come as a blessing to our teeming millions who could not for so long find any sources of employment. It has especially made the womenfolk self-reliant by creating large-scale employment opportunities for them. (BGMEA, 1993)

Industrialists invoked garment workers to extol their own (by implication almost revolutionary) roles in national development. The vision of progress and change they advanced effectively sidelined questions of labour rights. The Bangladesh Garment Manufacturers and Employers Association stated in one of its brochures, also in 1993:

As a consequence [of the industry], a socio-economic development process has been introduced in the country, the most significant one is the employment of a huge [number of] women workers who would otherwise be unemployed and remain victims of social discrimination. For the first time in the history of Bangladesh this industry has created the highest employment opportunity for the country's underprivileged womenfolk in an organized industrial sector. Most of these female workers were able to improve their quality of living by working in the ready made garment industry. (*ibid*)

20 Akter is a former child worker whose fiery personality and organizational skills drew the attention of the Asian-American Free Labor Institute (funded by the United States Agency for International Development), whose task it was to organize workers in the garment sector in Bangladesh in the 1980s. She quickly became president of Bangladesh Independent Garment Workers' Union (BIGUF), an organization formed with the financial support of the AFL-CIO. Other trade unions in the industry initially dismissed BIGUF as a front for advancing US trade interests, although its political legitimacy has increased somewhat over the years. Akter resigned from BIGUF several years ago, citing disenchantment with the lack of autonomy in her post. Her accounts suggest that BIGUF's activities within Bangladesh were dictated as much by

political considerations in the US as actual conditions in Bangladeshi factories. Akter went on to found the Awaj (Voice) Foundation, a place with functions similar to those of BIGUF. I have heard Akter make this comment several times in public fora, most notably during a consultation on the future of the garment industry organized by a local think tank, the Centre for Policy Dialogue in 2003.

21 Siddiqi, fieldnotes, 1992.

This sounds strikingly similar to the sentiments of some male trade unionists who could be extremely critical of working conditions but sympathetic to the cause of women workers: 'The industry has been good for women, it has come as an *aashirbad* (blessing) for women workers will never be able to reenter the home in the same way again. It is a way to come out of backwardness'.²¹

Initially, discursive representations of the industry focused on its transformative potential in turning 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. The passage from the private sphere of the home to the public sphere of wage work is a critical trope here. Significantly, the language of self-reliance and progress has been subtly modified in the present decade. As we will see, the re-imagining of the nation as 'Muslim' rather than simply poor and third world was achieved in part through the resignification of women's labour in the garment industry.

As mentioned earlier, in anticipation of the dismantling of the MFA, the government and garment trade groups lobbied for duty-free access to US markets for Bangladeshi goods. Taking a cue from unfolding US foreign policy elsewhere, Bangladesh tried to project itself as a reliable ally in the 'War on Terror' and so worthy of trade concessions. It was not an unreasonable direction in which to proceed given that earlier the US had provided its closest ally in south Asia, Pakistan, with considerable concessions in the area of garment exports, directly affecting Bangladesh's quotas.

As the United States remained unconvinced of Bangladesh's strategic importance, the Bangladesh government produced another potential trump card, also derived from the contingencies of the so-called War on Terror. It tried to capitalize on its image as a Muslim *but* moderate country, the second largest Muslim democracy, and a trailblazer in the emancipation of Muslim women's rights. The emerging rhetoric invoked the image of oppressed Muslim women coming out of seclusion and into the liberated world of wage labour. Officials based requests for US concessions on warnings of threats to women workers' new-found empowerment (thereby resonating with both the neo-liberal and anti-terror agendas). In December 2004, Morshed Khan, then Foreign Minister, was quoted in a story on the MFA in the New York Times:

It is a silent revolution that has taken place in our country. For the first time in a Muslim country, hundreds of thousands of women in their late teens and early 20's are wearing cosmetics, carrying handbags and walking to work every day. [...] There is no way in Bangladesh that this government or any other government can send them back to the kitchen. (Bradsher, 2004)

The New York Times feature, which labels Bangladesh as 'one of the few Muslim democracies in the world' ends with a quote from Khan: 'If we try to take the

women workers back to the home, back to the kitchen, that will be a bigger bombshell than any terrorist attack' (ibid).

Several features of the Minister's comments are noteworthy, even if the discursive strategy of asking to protect the country's economy in order to protect its women's march toward modernity has yet to yield benefits. Garment workers become signs of the nation's modernity through their bodies rather than through their labour. It is their visibility, mobility and comportment (cosmetics and handbags) that are indicative of a 'silent revolution'. The underlying construction of Muslim women who must be brought out of seclusion and into the public sphere converges with Liberal feminist discourses and market-based notions of empowerment.

At the same time, the Minister's ending comments betray a fear of the female garment worker shared by other Bangladeshis. The memory of large-scale labour retrenchment in 2001, and the prospect of several hundred thousand more unemployed young women, brought to the surface an undercurrent of discomfort that had always existed in middle-class society. Glossed as concern for workers, much of the public discourse at this time exhibited acute social anxiety, inflected by class prejudice. The fear was that these unemployed working-class women would corrupt the moral order of society through their presumed undisciplined and exaggerated sexuality. The excess of fear recalled descriptions by Ong of reactions to Malay women's entry into the modern economy, complete with 'feverish visions of unregulated female sexuality freed from the ethical order maintained by fathers, brothers and husbands' (Ong, 2006: 35).

The prevailing discourse of social contamination demonstrated once again how social and political anxieties generated from a lopsided development regime are displaced on to public fears of working women's autonomy and sexuality. Ironically, factory owners legitimated their calls for state assistance to the industry by exploiting such fears. In an appeal for help in the post-MFA period, the Bangladesh Garment Manufacturers and Employers Association (BGMEA) proclaimed:

This [retrenchment] will bring about socio-economic havoc to Bangladesh, the incidence of which might be felt outside. Because the retrenched women workers will find it difficult to go back to the village home of which they have the bitter socio-economic experiences on the one hand and have adapted to the urban lifestyle on the other. The retrenched male will not have any possible alternative of employment elsewhere, but to add to the social evils and anarchy, which will go beyond any boundary measures of the government. That means a total socio-economic imbalance might emerge in the country (quoted in Ward *et al.*, 2004: 4–5).

The same New York Times story on the MFA reported – without citing any sources or statistics – that a 'slump in orders during the American economic slowdown in 2001 produced a surge in prostitution and a surge in illegal trafficking of women

to overseas brothels. Bangladesh officials fear what could happen if their country cannot stay competitive' (Bradsher, 2004). Predictions of the 'fall' of desperate young women into prostitution circulated in the media immediately following the extensive retrenchment in the garment sector in 2001. These accounts, conjectural for the most part yet presented with great authority on television and the print media, feed into predominant bourgeois suspicions of the 'truth' about working-class morality. Not surprisingly, the narratives contain more than an air of prurience and voyeuristic pleasure.

Garment workers live their own brand of moral struggle against this middle-class discourse. For instance, when Nazma Akter the labour leader claims the identity of a 'golden girl', using the English words, she weaves together multiple allusions to past and present to lay claims to a very specific identity. First, in literal terms, she references garment workers as producers of wealth and as productive citizens of the nation. Second, she draws on cultural images of a prosperous golden Bengal of the past, most strongly associated with the national anthem (which begins with the line, O, My Golden Bengal). She also makes an allusion to jute, known as the golden fibre, which until the 1970s was the principal export of the region that is now Bangladesh. One could read Akter's subjectivity as interpellated by the nation and its economic imperatives. Certainly, she taps into discourses that valorize garment workers as heroines of the nation. I suggest, however, that through her claims to a place in the national community, she also insists on the social respectability otherwise unavailable to working-class women.

bodies, sexualities, livelihoods

In Bangladesh, as elsewhere, international capital draws on existing gender ideologies to recruit, discipline and reproduce the workforce (see Mills, 2003). Women are policed and regulated through a distinct moral regime, separating the 'good' girls from the 'immoral' ones.²² Disciplinary strategies inside factories invoke women workers as primarily sexualized bodies; distinctions are often made on the basis of workers' deportment and therefore alleged sexual availability. A highly sexualized regime of verbal discipline, as well as more overt forms of sexual harassment, also serves to keep women in their place. In this universe, the good woman is the good worker – those who are morally disciplined; that is, those who do not protest or draw too much attention to themselves – are deserving of managerial protection (Siddiqi, 1996). Those who challenge such norms are much more vulnerable to managerial sexual advances (*ibid*).

Although it is a less visible form of exploitation, sexual harassment *can* pose a serious problem for women workers. Indeed, in some respects, it cannot be disentangled from the general conditions of exploitation or labour practices

22 The highly visible presence of hundreds of thousands of working-class women in spaces coded male, in a global industrial landscape that has marginalized male labour and destabilized gender hierarchies, also restructures the experience of masculinity, especially of subaltern masculinity.

that exist in the industry (Siddiqi, 2004). In this section, I examine the sexual violence enacted on workers' bodies as a result of specific structures of production and the particular relationship of the individual firm to international circuits of capital. I draw primarily on a study of sexual harassment in which I compared the experiences of women in garment factories located within and outside EPZs, with those employed in the nascent electronics sector.

The study revealed substantial differences in the frequency and forms of harassment between the garment and electronics industries, between factories located in the EPZ and those outside the so-called Free Trade Zones, and between smaller and larger establishments. In all cases, the smaller factories producing garments (often referred to as the *bangla* factories) tended to have the most dangerous conditions.

Verbal abuse and coercion on the assembly line is a widely accepted mode of labour discipline. This corresponds to the most common form of harassment identified by all three groups – the widespread use of *gali* or expletives to which women are subjected during work hours. At first glance, this may not appear to be a significant or threatening form of sexual harassment. However, the highly sexualized vocabulary and body language that supervisors, line chiefs, production managers and others use to discipline female workers creates a hostile, intimidating and sexually charged environment. A common grievance concerned insults hurled at parents and families (*Baba ma tulay gali deya*):

When we would make mistakes, the linemen and supervisors would scream at us: 'Daughter of a whore, so you've come with lipstick on. Go home and show your bhatar (family head/breadwinner), don't show it off here' (Siddiqi, 2004: 34)

The risk of physical harassment in the workplace varied considerably between the apparel and electronics industries. The *bangla* factories clearly have many more incidents of physical harassment than the others. These are also the factories where workers are forced to work late into the night. Not a single electronics worker reported being physically harassed inside the workplace. Women in smaller, non-EPZ garment factories also reported high rates of sexual coercion and intimidation. Night work was associated with high risks of sexual assault or rape, with those working in the non-EPZ factories being the most vulnerable.

Factories located in EPZs appear to provide more safety to women workers than those on the outside. At first glance, this is a rather disturbing finding, given that enterprises in the EPZ operate completely outside the purview of national labour legislation. Workers attributed the feeling of safety inside the EPZ to the lack of men in the workforce. 'Men in the EPZ are like sheep', one worker said. 'They've been silenced, the ones who remain are terrified of losing their jobs' (Siddiqi, 2004: 37). In this context, workers recounted an incident some years ago, when hundreds of male workers were ousted during a strike and replaced with apparently less militant women workers. Through this highly publicized measure,

Arguably, women's bodies in public and at work are testimonials to male failure or inadequacy. The policing of (poor) women's bodies on the streets is carried out not by religious extremists – as prevailing stereotypes of national politics would indicate – but by those men who have been excluded from the economic circuit, from the promises of globalization.

EPZ enterprises appear to have ensured the docility of those who want to remain in the workforce. The highly regimented EPZ environment provides a degree of protection to its women workers.

What explains these divergences? The study showed that worker vulnerability to sexual harassment depends, among other things, on contingencies such as factory size and the nature of the product under manufacture. For the garment industry as a whole, the financial stability of enterprises and the distance from the operational control of international capital (that is, the degree of internal operational autonomy, accountability and surveillance) appear to be two fundamental features that determine management practices and the general work environment. In addition, differences result from the structure of the production process and the nature of the end product.

Indeed, the pace and structure of production in garment factories – more specifically, the ‘lead-time’ – critically inflect disciplinary practices on the shop floor. Sexualized disciplinary regimes – including the intensity of *awkottho gali* (unspeakable verbal abuse) – in the *bangla* factories obtain directly from the frenzied pace of production that comes with extremely tight delivery schedules. The imperative of meeting production targets with shortened lead-time translates into the incessant verbal coercion of workers to meet their individual production quotas.

With respect to deadlines, size and financial stability make a considerable difference. Smaller factories are often fly-by-night operations, working with the least margin of profits, and under the greatest time and financial pressures. Many of these factories take on subcontracting work from bigger enterprises. As such they have the tightest delivery schedules and are the most vulnerable financially. Slim margins of time and profit correspond to what respondents said over and over to the research team – that no extenuating circumstances could override the demand to meet individual quotas. The machines are never turned off and they do not remain idle for one minute.

Factories located in the EPZ tend to be large and fairly stable financially. Further, many are owned by foreigners or at least under more regular and thorough surveillance by foreign buyers. This does not imply the absence of exploitation in the EPZ or that foreign capitalists are more benign or benevolent than their Bangladeshi counterparts. It is clear that EPZ workers are subject to a distinctively ‘modern’ kind of regulatory regime – their bodies and their movements are minutely regulated and their freedom is minimal.²³ And, as we have seen, EPZ garment factories have purged potentially ‘troublesome’ or even vocal workers from their workforce.

Arguably, the primary condition of employment in the EPZ is a legally binding, non-negotiable ‘docility’. Paradoxically, the absolute lack of labour rights as we know them may work to protect workers in other ways. Internationally owned

23 The disciplinary regimes in these factories resemble the practices of modernity, self-regulation and internalization described by Michel Foucault in his

factories operate under a different set of constraints and are accountable to a different constituency than are local factories. It is increasingly in the interests of the former to take account of the preferences of Northern consumers and labour rights groups. This – and perhaps a greater awareness of the relationship between productivity and harassment – presumably accounts for the greater surveillance and physical safety of workers in EPZ factories.

By the same token, smaller local factories, especially if they are dependent on subcontracted work, tend to have more informal networks of surveillance, much less accountability and a pervasive culture of 'non-modern' hyper-exploitation, including widespread physical coercion (see Siddiqi, 1996, chapters 5 and 6). Sexual coercion and verbal abuse as a disciplinary mechanism draw on ideologies of the lazy and morally lax woman worker. They are also part of the general spectrum of coercive and corporal methods of labour discipline found in Bangladesh.

In contrast to garment factories, production regimes in electronics factories are much less frenetic, partly because the nature and market structure of the end product are quite different. Indeed, producing electronic goods requires a degree of concentration and a quiet environment impossible to imagine in a garment factory. Unlike their counterparts in the garment industry, electronics workers labour under deadlines that are regular and not subject to frequent market fluctuations.

In the absence of any mechanism to correct an abusive situation, workers frequently resort to actions such as intentionally slowing down their output per hour or faking illness. For many women, this kind of oblique resistance may be the only means of expressing their anger or helplessness. Some women have the option of leaving but many others have no choice but to continue to work. They are undoubtedly in the worst of all positions. As a woman in the EPZ said of her counterparts in the *bangla* factories, 'Whether its cursing or sexual harassment, those who must, continue to work. If they talk back, they might lose their jobs. *Tai koshto holeyo, kajer khoti holeyo, buke pathor bedhe kamrey dhore kaj kore.* (That's why even if they are suffering intensely, even if their work suffers, they grit their teeth, turn their hearts into stone and keep on working)'. '*Lojjar matha kheyey ora abar kaje ashey.* (Swallowing their shame, or literally, eating the head of their shame, they come back to work)'.

In relation to sexual harassment in Bangladeshi factories, Petra Dannecker cautions against assuming sexual passivity on the part of women factory workers themselves (Kabeer, 2004: 17). She points to the numerous romantic alliances that arise on the shop floor and to the many marriages among garment workers. I would argue that the exercise of sexual agency to get a raise or a promotion reflects a generally sexualized environment rather than marking the absence or not of sexual harassment. In any case, drawing lines between coercion

History of Sexuality. For details, see Siddiqi (1996), Chapter Five. I am grateful to Shima Das Shimu of UBINIG's Sram Bikash Kendro for reminding me that workers in the *bangla* factories have much more flexibility with regard to their bodies and to their general mobility compared to those in the EPZ.

and consent in situations of such unequal power relations is extremely difficult. Nevertheless, Dannecker's observation about the sexual agency of workers is salient. The larger point however, is that not all factories are sweatshops and not all workers are subject to the same kinds of exploitation, sexual or otherwise.

some concluding remarks

A series of conversations with workers and union leaders in the summer of 2008 revealed that, in the post-MFA world, the 2006 wage increase had produced several unintended consequences. Confronted with higher minimum wage payments and falling prices for Bangladeshi products globally, factory owners increased individual production targets for workers, in an effort to maintain existing profit margins. No matter how unrealistic such targets, all workers are expected to complete them before being allowed to leave factory premises. Refusal to comply comes with the usual risks. Supervisors are also under incredible pressure from upper level management to meet targets on deadline. Opportunities for harassment and sexual coercion have simultaneously increased.

Given such complex and contradictory effects of transnational capitalist production, what kind of solidarity and strategies for resistance should feminist activists pursue? While there are no definitive answers, I have tried to emphasize the need to be cognizant of locational contingencies and particularities, while avoiding a top-down approach that erases specificities of space and place. De-contextualized critiques derived from abstract notions of individual rights, and corresponding calls for change from above – calls on the conscience of the feminist and the consumer, for instance – can entail troubling analytical simplifications and a disturbing loss of detail. This latter approach flattens out critical differences, ignores workers' own experiences and desires, and results in an inability to understand the experiential contradictions generated by globalization processes; it also highlights some relations of power while erasing others, enacting its own kind of violence against workers and at times even undermining mobilizations on the ground.

I have also tried to draw attention to the multiple fields of power through which much of the activism across borders continues to be produced and reproduced discursively. This kind of framing fits all too easily into existing cultural scripts about gender and race elsewhere, and produces ethical obligations to 'save' women workers.²⁴

Suffice it to say, I am not advocating a locational politics that takes global/local or centre/periphery as self-contained spatial and social binaries. This is not a call for a return to cultural relativist understandings of labour. Nor am I suggesting that there exist pure zones of 'indigenous' or authentic knowledge waiting to be retrieved. The voice of someone like Nazma Akter does not speak

24 In relation to Muslim women, Lila Abu-Lughod has argued that rather than seeking to 'save' others (with the superiority it implies and the violence it would

unmediated truth to power; her experience is 'always already transnational'.²⁵ Nevertheless, revisiting the lived realities and priorities of workers themselves, and recognizing the lines of tension between an approach based on social justice within global power relations, and one based on a formalistic, and occasionally opportunistic discourse of human rights, provides a point of departure. Attention to the discursive structures that inform global activism at least points to potential pitfalls to be avoided.

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entail) we might better think in terms of working with them in situations that we recognize as always subject to historical transformation and considering our own larger responsibilities to address the forms of global injustice that are powerful shapers of the worlds in which they find themselves (Abu-Lughod, 2002: 783).

²⁵ In her analysis of consumption practices in South India, Priti Ramamurthy argues that personal consumption experiences are always already transnational and contradictory, and that feminists need to interrogate the question of the subject in transnationality (Ramamurthy, 2003: 525).

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