

## Effects of Globalization on Working Women in the Private Sector of Bangladesh: A Study of the Garment Industry

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### Abstract

The huge demand of frozen foods, garments and knitting accessories across the world opened the opportunity for Bangladesh to enter the global market particularly for private sector that emerges in 1980s. The high rate of unemployment creates availability of cheap labor and attracts foreign buyers. The total employee increased from 0.2 million in 1985 to 4 million in last three decades. Private sector, garment industry in particular employs more than 80 percent women for various reasons. There has been a significant increase in the women labor force who transformed from informal sector to formal sector. The globalization brought socio-economic benefits for them as well as negative aspects. This paper has an attempt to examine the impact of globalization on working women in garment sectors in Bangladesh. In order to maintain the sustainable economic and social development of Bangladesh, government should play the important role as a controlled mechanism.

**Keywords:** globalization, garment industry, working women

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## ผลกระทบของโลกาภิวัตน์ต่อแรงงานหญิงในภาคเอกชนของประเทศไทย บังคลาเทศ: กรณีศึกษาในอุตสาหกรรมเครื่องนุ่งห่ม

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### บทคัดย่อ

ความต้องการแรงงานจำนวนมากในอุตสาหกรรมอาหารและเครื่องนุ่งห่ม และการถักหอเครื่องประดับทั่วโลกได้เปิดโอกาสให้ชาวบังคลาเทศเข้าสู่ตลาดแรงงานโลก โดยเฉพาะอย่างยิ่งในภาคเอกชนตั้งแต่ทศวรรษที่ 80 เป็นต้นมา อัตราการว่างงานที่สูงทำให้ผู้ประกอบการสามารถจ้างแรงงานได้ในราคาถูกและดึงดูดใจนายจ้างต่างประเทศเป็นอย่างมาก ปริมาณการจ้างงานรวมจึงเพิ่มจาก 2 แสนคน ในปี 1985 เป็น 4 ล้านคนในช่วงสามทศวรรษที่ผ่านมา สำหรับภาคเอกชน โดยเฉพาะอย่างยิ่งในอุตสาหกรรมเครื่องนุ่งห่มนั้น การจ้างงานส่วนใหญ่มากกว่าร้อยละ 80 เป็นแรงงานหญิงอันเนื่องมาจากการเหตุผลหลายประการ แรงงานหญิงจึงเพิ่มขึ้นอย่างมีนัยสำคัญจากภาคแรงงานที่ไม่เป็นทางการไปสู่ภาคแรงงานที่เป็นทางการ โลกาภิวัตน์ก่อให้เกิดประโยชน์เชิงสังคมเศรษฐกิจรวมทั้งผลลัพธ์ด้วยเช่นกัน บทความนี้มีเป้าหมายในการทดสอบผลกระทบของโลกาภิวัตน์ต่อแรงงานหญิงในอุตสาหกรรมเครื่องนุ่งห่มในประเทศไทย บังคลาเทศ เพื่อรักษาความยั่งยืนทางเศรษฐกิจและการพัฒนาสังคมของประเทศไทยบังคลาเทศ รัฐบาลควรมีบทบาทสำคัญในฐานะกลไกการควบคุมดูแล

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## Introduction

Sociological writings often claim that the modernization of the traditional structures of developing countries, i.e. the openness to globalization, would aid economic growth and thus foster the prosperity of individuals (Hardiman and Midgley, 1982:1). As a developing country, Bangladesh is much exposed to globalization. Too much dependency on the world economy, the country's economy is highly affected by the ups and downs of other countries (Buracom, 2011). Globalization has a significant impact on the labor market of Bangladesh. The Bangladesh government is somehow bound to rely on another country's economy. The contribution of export to GDP is 17.86 percent mainly from the garment manufacturing industries. The industrial policy 2010 envisages increasing this to 40 percent by 2021 with the proportion of the work force employed in this sector rising to 25 percent of the country's total labor force (BBS, 2010). With the persuasion of an export driven policy as a means of integrating the country into the global economy, Bangladesh began to enter the global market at the early stages of the emergence of Bangladesh as an independent nation state, in 1971 (Rock, 2001). The private sector came forward and soon developed with significant progress and contribution to the national economy. The private sector has emerged with the creation of a wide labor market in the country. External and internal pressures helped to expand the market. Due to the effects of globalization on the gendered division of labor, global market strategies, use of information technology and changing work organization, working conditions have changed along different formats and there has been an increase of female participation in employment (Gardiner and Martinez Lucio, 2006; Pyle, 2002). This change has become more significant especially through the involvement of females at the workplace also holding greater responsibility at home for family activities as well as their performance in economic activity (Rahman, 2010).

Globalization brings copious benefits to employers, employees and buyers, as well as countries, contributing to socio-economic development. These benefits include the rights of workers, the rights of women, economic

progress, the development of trade unions, labor market stability and so on. However, globalization also comes with burdens for the society, working people and employers by creating pressure to compete with continuous changes of technology, new values and external economic threats such as deficit financing, inflation, recession and the discrepancy between skilled and unskilled labor (Unni, 2004). The Bangladesh economy, the private sector in particular, is heavily swayed by the various factors of globalization, especially where there is a major portion of female workers. Their lives, social status and economic empowerment are influenced by these all factors. This paper aims to examine the positive and negative aspects of globalization and the possible impacts on working women in the private sector organizations, particularly within the garment industry in Bangladesh.

### **Methodology**

The information in this article is based on secondary data collected from journals, books, reports, national and international daily newspapers and the annual publications of different ministries of the Bangladesh government. It utilizes a qualitative approach in order to discern the real issues regarding the benefits and burdens of globalization on working women in the private sector, particularly in Bangladesh's garment industry. The issues are collected from the literature and correlated with the issue of globalization and working women in Bangladesh. This process discusses how globalization brings benefits for them and creates burdens for all. The article has been refined through the use of case studies.

### **Scope and Limitations**

This research deals with the private sector organization in Bangladesh. The working conditions related to working women have been discussed. The scope of the study is limited to working women who come from the lowest income group, working in export led organizations because this is the sector that comes under most influence from globalization issues. The main focus is on the garment manufacturing industry where the number of working women is more

than 80 percent of the employment numbers. Specifically, the study covers women employees working only in the garment industries situated in Dhaka city.

### **Concepts of Globalization: Locating the Position of Working Women in Bangladesh**

The private sector, particularly the garment industries in Bangladesh, has emerged due to the rise in global demand, industrialization, and availability of cheap labor. Since this sector is fully export-oriented, the various issues and factors of globalization affect the socio-economic issues of working women. Globalization can be defined as the worldwide movement towards economic, financial and social integration, as well as that of trade and communication. It implies the opening of a local and nationalistic perspective to a wider aspect of an interconnected and interdependent world with the free transfer of capital, goods and services, accompanied by the norms of culture, customs and values (Stieglitz, 2002). Two distinct but interrelated dimensions are included. However, globalization strongly emphasizes the economic dimension, ignoring the social dimension. The economic dimension of globalization is often referred to as economic globalization which is a movement toward neoliberal economic policy reforms (e.g., deregulation and privatization) and an increase in the worldwide movement of capital, goods, services, and labor (Richards and Gelleny, 2007). The social dimension of globalization refers to the impact of globalization on the life and work of people, on their families and their societies. Particular issues of globalization, such as those of export-import, world politics, UN agenda, free market economy, create a pressure to shape human life across the country. In this era of globalization, no single country can survive without the help of others.

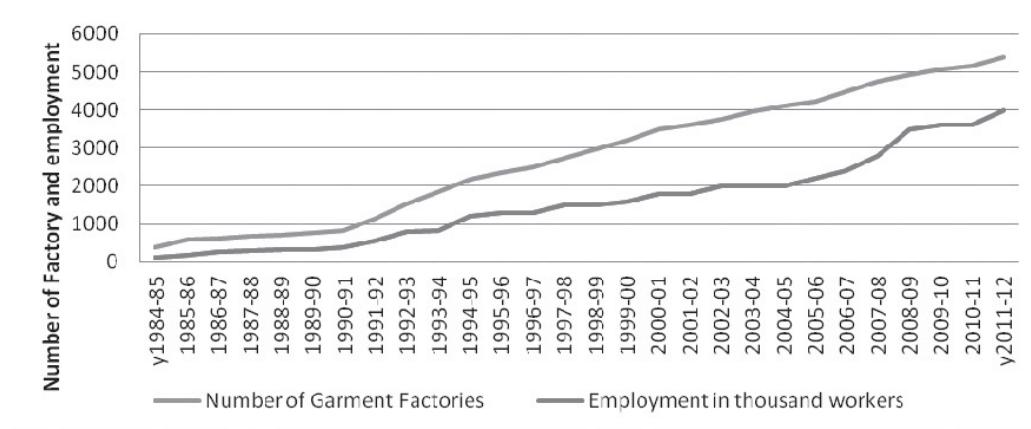
As a developing country, Bangladesh is connected with the world through its exports and imports for which, since the late 1980s, a huge employment opportunity has been created, particularly in the private sector. The world market has become more competitive and cost-effective products are demanded. Since it is not yet industrially developed and has a huge cheap labor force, Bangladesh can benefit much in this current climate. Developed countries, like the USA,

the UK, and other European countries, are subject to a quota benefit especially in the garment sector. Although this sector has developed with no particular gender bias, it has gradually attracted the Bangladesh female labor force. It has opened up a new arena of formal employment for women. The unemployment rate (5 percent) is high, with unemployed women in rural areas (1.7 percent) at a higher rate than any other group (BBS, 2010). This group has been (and is) subjected to a lower employment wage. However, whatever they do receive is still greater than anything they earned before through informal work. This is formal work that can offer them some dignity, freedom of choice, and freedom in decision making (Kabeer, 2004). In short, women have entered the economy and become empowered. This employment upgrades their social status as well as that of their family members. On the other hand, since they are illiterate or less educated, they are unaware of their economic rights. This ignorance is capitalized on by the factory owners who offer lower pay, even discriminating in payment. For example, the minimum salary paid to the workers was 3000 (37 US dollars) Bangladeshi taka (Rahman, 2010). Women receive 15-20 percent less than that of men, in the labor market across the world (Karim and Khan, 2012; Neumayer and De Soysa, 2007). About 40 percent of the women workers who receive the minimal salary live below the poverty line as they get less than 1.25 dollars (Rahman, 2010). In her research, Kabeer (2004) finds that women are employed on a comparative advantage over male employees since males are not as easy to manage, are well aware of their rights and can leave a job at any time which would never happen amongst women. On the other hand, about five percent of women, compared with male entrepreneurs, have utilized the benefits of globalization and emerged as entrepreneurs in the society which has given them social and economic positioning (Ahmed, 2012).

### **Globalization and Role of the Private Sector in the Bangladesh Economy**

Economic globalization has entered the Bangladesh in two principal ways. First, foreign investors, including multinational corporations (MNCs) and foreign financial investors, ensure their presence in worldwide economies through

portfolio investment which is associated with short-term financial commitments (Richard and Gelleny, 2007). This allows free movement of international capital as a key to economic growth creating new jobs and raising wages. Secondly, international capital comes through direct foreign investment. However, in Bangladesh the first category of economic globalization happens by the encouragement of the private sector to evolve. This started in the 1980s with the rise of huge employment opportunities. Since then, labor force participation, including that of women has been increasing over the same period (Figure 1).



**Figure 1.** Garment factory employment in Bangladesh 1984-2011

Source: "[http://www.ide.go.jp/Japanese/Publish/Download/Report/2011/pdf/410\\_ch6.pdf](http://www.ide.go.jp/Japanese/Publish/Download/Report/2011/pdf/410_ch6.pdf)"

This increase began in the 1980s when Bangladesh entered into the global market, mainly through garment manufacturing products. Table 1 explains the significant progress of female participation in the paid work. It has been found that approximately 4300 factories are registered, and it is assumed that between 0.8 and 1.2 million female workers are employed in these garment factories, which means females comprise some 80 percent of the work force in this sector (Nahar et al., 2010). Bangladesh is now the sixth largest supplier of T-shirts, blouses, trousers, and shirts to the USA, and the fifth largest to European Union markets.

**Table 1.** Labour force participation rate of Bangladeshi population aged 10 and

Year	over, National 1984-2000		Rural areas (as a percentage)		Urban areas	
	Women	Men	Women	Men	Women	Men
<i>Using the usual definition</i>						
1983-84	8.2	78.2	7.7	78.8	12.1	74.3
1984-85	9.9	81.4	9.1	82.0	15.6	78.1
1990-91	14.1	79.6	14.4	80.6	12.7	76.2
1995-96	18.1	77.0	17.4	78.8	20.5	71.1
1999-2000	22.8	73.5	22.0	73.5	25.6	73.5
<i>Using the extended definition</i>						
1989	63.4	85.3	59.6	87.4	29.4	76.4
1990-91	58.2	79.6	65.1	80.6	30.1	76.2
1995-96	50.6	78.3	57.3	80.4	28.6	71.6
1999-2000	51.8	78.7	57.2	79.8	33.7	74.8

Source: Buseau of Bangladesh Statistics, 2010

The private sector also plays an important role in the Bangladesh economy by earning significant foreign exchange and minimizing the unemployment rate through the utilization of the labor force in various formal activities such as ready garments, frozen foods, jute and jute products. Bangladesh earns a significant amount of money by employing about 4 million employees (Appendices 1,2). The amount of exports has increased dramatically over the past 30 years. In 1985, exports were worth less than \$1bn, however by 2012 the figure had risen to nearly \$20bn. This sector has captured the world market, particularly the USA and European markets. Furthermore, the earnings of several business sectors, such as the ready garment, frozen foods and leather, come from about 5 million people including 4 million in the garments sector, where more than 3.2 million of these workers are women. Bangladesh earned about 15 billion dollars in 2010 by

utilizing female human capital. Women represent a major share of the garment sector's export earnings (Appendices 3, 4). In a true sense, the private sector which fosters the Bangladesh economy is backed by women. This group also encourages other backward linkage and formal business, their own consumption of the sectors' produce notwithstanding.

### **Globalization: What Does It Bring to Bangladesh's Working Women?**

The demand for certain goods in the world market serves as the push factor to set up private organizations and create employment opportunities particularly for women. The minimum salary for unskilled laborers who come from the poorest income group are mainly from rural areas, is 3000 taka with 10 days sick leave, earned leave (one day in each 22 days), no life insurance, and medical facilities (GoB, 2010; Rahman, 2010). Although they are paid less and provided with less benefits, poverty pushes them to join structured jobs instead of joining the informal sector. Ali et al. (2008) found that 59 percent of garment workers involved in this sector due live in extreme poverty. In contrast, researchers find that there are many benefits brought to working women that include the minimum wage system, family friendly policies, workplace safety, social status, opportunity to utilize human capital, acquisition of skills and knowledge, association with trade unions, health awareness, economic empowerment, freedom of choices, etc. However, globalization also brings threats and burdens for these workers that include fear of losing jobs, degradation of social status, environmental and workplace hazards, threats to social culture and norms by developing individualism and violence at the workplace. Some benefits of globalization for working women will now be discussed.

#### **Economic Empowerment of Working Women**

Globalization has pushed women into the labour market of semi-industrialized economies that emphasize export manufacturing (Seguino, and Grown, 2006). There has been a significant rise, from 20.5 percent in 1996 to about 27.2 percent in 2007, in the female share of employment particularly in the garment sector (BBS, 2010; Rahman, 2010; Nahar, et al., 2010:1). Jobs in

which women are working to provide financial support can be said to offer better quality of life than the workers had when they were unemployed and could not earn cash support. These workers have mainly migrated from rural Bangladesh or the slum areas of Dhaka's cities (Karim and Hasan, 2011). A majority of that group are unskilled or semi-skilled workers meaning that they receive less than what the statistics show. This group comprises mostly of women. However, these women workers used to live in rural areas with only informal or seasonal jobs and would receive quite insignificant money on which to survive. The private sector that has emerged with the demand of globalization provides the opportunity to work in the formal sector. They earn and can spend according to their choice (Kabeer, 2004). This spending nature gives them decision making power in the family since they are earning and valued members. In the survey of Ali et al. (2008:454) it is found that 45.6 percent female workers have decision making ability when buying and selling, which has increased and includes ready-made garment factory workers, while 71.1 percent in the case of food selection workers, 54.4 percent in case of those involved in children's education, and lastly, 68.9 percent of those involved in treatment has improved.

Details are shown in the table below:

Aspects	Increased (%)
Buying and selling	45.6
Food selection	71.1
Children education	54.4
Treatment	68.9
Deposit	12.2
Nursing	67.8
Family planning	46.7
Choice of work	67.8
Visit to relatives	45.6
Social and religious function	46.7

Source: Ali et al. (2008:454)

### Labor Migration and Women

One of the most important positive aspects of globalization is an open, worldwide labor market. There are two dimensions here. Firstly, there is labor

migration between two countries, and secondly, labor migration within a country from rural to urban or rarely urban to rural areas. But the most significant issue is that fewer women workers than male laborers migrate from place to place (Sinn, 2005). Regarding global migration, males from developing countries have the opportunity to go to rich countries which can bring economic solvency to their families. This is an opportunity for the family, society and country. On the other hand, it creates social problems since women are left behind with huge familial responsibilities. Migration literature proves that women are left as dependents to males (Pettman, 1998). In the case of Bangladesh, about 8 million people (most of them men) are doing jobs outside the country. This male group is young and has left behind wives with young children; a good number of workers go outside even leaving behind their newly married wives. This creates social problems such as extra-marital relations, and the singular burdens of child caring, female loneliness, as well as separation (Absar, 2009; Zohir, 2001). The second type of labor migration within the country, created by the labor demands in the urban areas to accelerate urban growth. This creates equal opportunity for all. However, the most important sector of Bangladesh, i.e. the garment industry, is biased towards females and female migration increases within the country.

### **Human Capital Utilization**

Bangladesh is a populous country with a small labor market in the public sectors where only 1.3 million people are employed (Kamal, 2013). The human capital of the young group is not properly utilized where the majority is women. Evidence suggests that there is a significant number of women entering the job market for different positions, from highly skilled jobs to lower level soft skilled or manual jobs. This spreads the arena of utilization of human capital (Alkadry & Tower, 2006). The private sector, particularly that of the readymade garment and knitting industries, provides the opportunity for the women to gain experience with skills that lead to gain within the hierarchical structure, as well as financial benefit. This is a practical field for acquiring skills with new technology.

### **Family-friendly Policies**

Because of pressure from international organizations, MNCs have compelled private sector organizations to adopt family-friendly policies which are defined as the provision of traditional benefits, such as health insurance and paid vacation, and may even assert that the most important elements of family-friendliness are a secure job and adequate pay (Kingston, 1990). These policies encompass many issues such as maternity leave, paternity leave, dependent care benefits, medical leave benefits, time-off and flexible work schedule benefits. Dependent care benefits are those that help employees with responsibilities for their children and dependent relatives, like older parents (Ali et al., 2008; GoB, 2006; GoB, 2010). These include child care resources and referral, elder care resources and referral, on-site or near-site child care, vouchers for child care, and dependent care assistance plans (Karim and Hasan, 2011).

### **Working Culture**

There are several changes to which organisations have adapted. These changes have shaped the nature and types of work. Demand from customers and organisational necessity have brought attention to exercise various types of flexible arrangements, shifting duties, weekend working etc. Some emergency services like medical and security are needed to be provided 24/7. Flexible working hours are scheduled for the benefit of all. However, everyone has family and wants to enjoy flexible time. So time is a motivating factor for a company to reschedule. This is especially difficult in the 24/7 office culture. Since Bangladesh is also affected by globalization and organisations are established to provide services to the citizen, working culture has also got to change within various dimensions, like time-off, home working, shift times, etc. (Karim and Khan, 2012). For example, some industries maintain two shifts i.e. morning and evening where workers can choose their convenient timing prior to informing the manager one month in advance. During pregnancy, female workers can enjoy a time-off system as well. As there are more than 4300 garment industries in Bangladesh, the workers can switch to jobs with better payment in a better environment (Karim and Hasan, 2011; Nahar et al. 2010).

### **Women Friendly Working Environment**

National and international organizations, including the MNC, repeatedly speak about workplace safety, a women-friendly environment, opportunities for pregnant mothers and young children (GoB, 2010; Kabeer, 2004). In order to help the factory owners, many national NGOs have set up child care facilities, dormitories for working women and training arrangements. Foreign buyers also set the workplace standard, particularly for women. This continuous pressure from different corners has helped develop a working environment which is better compared to that of the early 1980s which emerged as an unstructured condition.

### **National and International Laws**

National laws play a significant role in promoting globalization in line with international laws and actions taken by international institutions (like the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank). As the feminist movement grows across the world, there are many organizations working for women. In this regard, the Bangladesh government has been forced to amend the labor laws with some recommendation giving benefit to workers, including women for whom maternity leave and benefits are vital. Minimum Wage Board Laws have been enacted to ensure the minimum wage needed for making a livelihood (GoB, 2006; GoB, 2010). Recently, the minimum wage of garment workers increased from 3000 taka to 5300 taka, due to pressure from the government and international agencies, as well as demand from the workers (Mridha, 2013). International labor organizations are also working for the development of working conditions and labor life. As far as globalization is concerned, a comparative advantage is also an issue which is not always a matter of profit, the rights of the human being respected as well (Carr and Chen, 2004).

### **Liberty in Decision Making and Freedom of Choice**

The emergence of private sector agencies as a big labor market opens an opportunity to address the vast unemployment of the country. The involvement

of women workers in this sector is quite evident as it comprises approximately 80 percent (Nahar, et al., 2010). Whatever the reason, the number of employees in these organizations includes mainly women who were outside of the formal economic activities or engaged in the low paid informal economic sectors such as housemaid or part time seasonal worker. It is quite obvious that a good number of women are employed in the formal sector with a structured salary. They can get a salary, spend by their own decision, and save for the future. This economic power provides them with the strength to survive, eat what they want to eat, wear what they wish (Ali, et al. 2008; Kabeer and Mahmud, 2004). Previously, this type of freedom was available only to male breadwinners.

### **Social Acceptability**

As a poor country, Bangladesh is encircled with extreme poverty, some religious and social superstitions that hinder the development of women, and poor fathers who have to pay a dowry for their young daughters' marriages. The important criteria for women to get married are a fair complexion and the wealth of their fathers, particularly in rural areas. However, education and women's jobs now supersede these criteria and social acceptability has significantly increased. Now, these criteria are not only for marital purposes, parents now emphasize the importance of jobs for their daughters, where before they were not treated as important as were the sons in the family. The private sectors emergence creates opportunity for women to utilize their human capital and widen their income earning capacity which provides them with the power to be socially accepted.

### **Social Development**

As women are earning members of society, they are then capable of spending, they are aware of their wellbeing regarding food, health and education. They try to monitor their calorie intake; try to go to doctors in case of need. Health awareness comes through the association with other colleagues and non-government organizations. There a good number of women who bear the expenses of education for their siblings. Ali et al. (2008) found that 54.4 women increased their spending for children's education where about 40 percent spend their

income on their siblings. From their savings they buy new clothes for themselves and their family members, even mobile phones for communication with family members back in the village. While there still may be some problems, they are happier than before. A job gives women mobility whereas before they were kept in the house. Researchers find that export-led growth and development have resulted in the increased inclusion of workers in the global economy by creating an Export Processing Zone (Carr and Chen, 2004).

### **Globalization and Working Women: Threats and Burdens**

There is no doubt, globalization brings benefits to working women. However, the ups and downs of the global market, changing technology, the high rate of unemployment, and changing national and international laws have brought numerous threats and burdens for them as well.

### **International and Organizational Pressures**

The garment sectors are established as profit making institutions and governed by their own organizational rules and regulations. Therefore, they have to maintain a standard. Since the products of these industries are exported to rich and developed countries, the buyers impose conditions which must be followed. For example, these conditions can include the development of a positive working environment, a separate room for suckling mothers, separate bathrooms for women, no child labor, the formation of a trade union, and the timely payment of wage and salary. Pressure from the international organizations has created a positive effect on organizations and made environments worker-friendly, particularly women-friendly. However, these pressures are capitalized by the factory owners who find mechanisms for hiring and firing, making late payments, imposing longer working hours, etc. that result in negative effect on the health of the working women. Practically, it was found that some workers were working 19 hours a day (Bilton, 2013). Nahar et al. (2010:2) found that garment workers suffered from various diseases due to long hours of work and the low quality of the food they took. Their research work tells the truth that is

shown below:

Type of Disease	Response (Percentage)
Headache	95.56
<b>Table 3: Patterns of diseases and illness</b>	68.89
Musculoskeletal pain	78.89
Eye Strain	72.22
Less appetite	54.44
Chest pain	44.44
Fainting	63.33
Diarrheal diseases	63.33
Hepatitis (Jaundice)	33.33
Food poisoning	47.78
Asthma	54.44
Fungal infection	60.00
Helminthiasis	58.89
Dermatitis	52.22

Source: Nahar, et al. (2010:2)

### Responsibility Increases

A job brings social status and purchasing power for women in Bangladesh. Besides, it increases responsibility that sometimes can become a burden. Traditionally, women are bound to do household work, such as child caring, looking after young and ageing family members, cooking for all (Karim and Khan, 2012; Zafarullah, 2000). The private sector jobs entail longer working hours that create a burden for them. Hence, it becomes difficult for them to maintain both lives - work and family responsibilities. The result can be that they often quit their jobs. As the woman is the main income earning member in the family, everybody seeks financial help from her.

### Fear of Losing Jobs

The private sector flourished in the 1980s in Bangladesh and has been enjoying some advantages from developed countries such as a quota system, a generalized system of preference (GSP), free trade, tax free export, etc. However, over the same period, many competitors entered the market, so those benefits

were squeezed, economic recession occurred, technological development took place and many private sector businesses were shut down (Carr and Chen, 2004). Workers lost their jobs and/or were constantly afraid of losing their jobs. But losing a job is not merely its being lost, it also opens the chance of starving or facing a difficult future. In her 2001 research in Kabeer, Barry Bearak, (2004:3) found the fear of losing jobs and an uncertain tomorrow as stated in the case study below:

*My name is Fatema Akhter. I am a garment worker. . . . As garment workers, we live and work under difficult conditions but at least we are managing to earn a living. Now we have heard rumours that in the next two to four years, the garment industry may close down. What will happen to us? You are perhaps all aware of the situation of women in Bangladesh – women have very few opportunities for employment. We are, however, slowly making some progress. Because of jobs in the garment industry, many Fatemas like me are able to work honourably. ‘Garments’ is the only option for us. We beg you not to take away these jobs and our right to work with dignity.*

### **Vulnerability Increased**

Bangladesh society is very conservative and restrictive of women's mobility. Most working women live off their family members back in rural villages. This creates insecurity for them either by living in a place surrounded by males and many people in offices as well. The main vulnerability is that the males around her know that she cannot quit her job due to its necessity. Evidence suggests that women in the workplace face violence including rape. There is a possibility (that too often becomes real) of being raped and even killed. Rahman (2010) found that 87 % of women experienced verbal abuse from a supervisor or colleagues. As well, since their family members do not live with them, they cannot be taken care of at home. The high rate of unemployment leads men into anti-social activities. Women, particularly garments workers, face lot of problems at night.

The long working hours is another significant cause of troubling circumstances.

## Two Case Studies

These case studies have been developed and analyzed to provide an in-depth analysis of working women from the perspectives of the employee and her working environment.

### 1. Woman Worker: A True Designer of Export-led Economy of Bangladesh

Saleha came to Dhaka 5 years back with her neighbor to get a job. She has three brothers and two sisters and she is the eldest. Her father cannot afford food everyday with the money he makes as a day laborer. Just to be rid of the poverty she went to Dhaka to do any job. With the help of her neighbor she got a job in a garment factory. Saleha was 14 when she came and initially the factory owner refused to appoint her because of her age. But finally she was lucky. She recalled her first days when many a time she hid under tables, was locked up in the toilet or been sent to the roof in the scorching sun for two or three hours. This happened whenever foreign buyers entered the factory. She knew she was under-age, and yet she needed the job to survive. In the beginning, her salary was low but now it has increased. She can save money after paying for the house rent and food, and she has to send the remaining money to her family members. She did not have any money when she came. She used to live with others by sharing a single bed. As she gets more wages, she can hire a room and can maintain her own private life. The money she gets she spends according to her choice. However, she has to send money to her mother and younger siblings. Moreover, she is now 19 and wants to get married as well. But she is so responsible for her family members that this wish might be hampered. She is pretty and is disturbed by the factory supervisor and loved by someone who works with her. She believes it is very difficult to live alone in this Dhaka city, particularly as a young girl. On the other hand, she has to think of her family members and how they will survive. This puts her in a fix as what to do. However, she thinks that her life has changed for the better compared to those

days in her village. She can wear good clothes, buy a mobile phone, eat good food and go out if she wishes. She did not enjoy such freedom at home but was encircled with poverty and social restriction. In the family and society she now gets honor since she earns and has a structured job.

#### **Analysis of the Case:**

The emergence of the private sector and the availability of job positions in the factory make Ms Saleha's life happier. She has achieved economic empowerment leading to decision making power and capacity. This job gives her and her family the ability to survive. It helps reduce her poverty and to live with at least some degree of satisfaction. Although child labour is legally prohibited, it gives her the opportunity to live otherwise. Without her job life would be difficult for Saleha. However, child labour did not snatch her childhood, rather it provided a happy life. The factory owner received benefit from this child labor since they need to pay less and need not make a formal appointment.

#### **Contributing Factors:**

The main contributing factor is poverty that pushed her to leave her family and childhood. Networking was also a significant contributing factor that helped her to get a job and find a room to live in Dhaka city. The sympathy of a neighbor who helped her serves as a form of societal coherence. In short, relaxing the conditions regarding child labor helped contribute to Saleha getting a new life.

#### **2. Working environment in PSO: A Death Spot**

The working environment is safe for the employees of the private sector. The life of working people, both inside and outside the workplace, is encircled by numerous problems. Since unemployment is high in Bangladesh, company owners exploit workers by paying them a low salary, even paying them less than 1.25 dollars a day. Many workers in the formal sector get 3000 Bangladeshi Taka per month. They are forced to work approximately 12 hours a day. Employees do not receive their salary regularly; for example, 1 or 2 months later and their

work-time bill always comes on an irregular basis. Most companies are situated in the capital city where the living standard is high, making it difficult to survive on this money. The low salary compels the workers to live in inhuman conditions. There are many government bodies to supervise the working conditions but there are also many invisible hands which are too strong for the government bodies to bring about much good for the workers. Often, the physical conditions of the workplace are unsafe. Buildings that are used for factory purposes were not built for such and even built with low quality raw materials. In addition, not only the unhealthy conditions but also the fear associated with a threat of the buildings' collapse create a circular problems - low cost employment, the greed of factory owners and the greed of MNCs all create an unhealthy environment in the workplace. Many accidents have happened in the factories causing, since 2001, some 5974 deaths due to fire, building collapse and dysfunctional old machines (Table-4).

Serial No.	Year	Number of Death cases
1	2001	301
2	2002	168
3	2003	251
4	2004	188
5	2005	480
6	2006	974
7	2007	465
8	2008	547
9	2009	378
10	2010	703
11	2011	-
12	2012	1126
13	2013	610

Source: <http://bangla.bdnews24.com/bangladesh/article617650.bdnews>

For example, In a building collapse on April 24, 2013, as many as 1131 workers died most of whom were women. These workers had produced the shirts and trousers of famous companies of the USA, Canada and the European Union such as Joe Fresh, Wal-Mart, Prime Mark, GAP, etc. The number of deaths is not merely a number; it tells the sad story of the families of the deceased and

the big threat to livelihood, as well as the national economy.

### ***Analysis of the Case***

*The demand for various products, particularly garment accessories, is huge on the world market. Foreign companies come to Bangladesh due to its cheap labour costs which helps the companies make more profit, even though they do not attend to the work environment and employment standards. In most cases, foreign buyers overlook such conditions in their hunt for profit. Since the market is also huge, many employers set up factories without thinking of the condition they are in. As well, government control and supervision mechanisms are not working very satisfactorily. Workplace accidents are not rare in Bangladesh, but there is no action taken to prevent a repetition. Most factory owners are political persons, even law makers in the parliament or people who provide money to the political parties. The greed for profit on the part of both buyers and employers is focused only on making money not on the development of the working environment. On the other hand, many foreign buyers have announced that they would not buy any products from Bangladesh, Pakistan, Ecuador, and Venezuela, thinking of the workplace safety of the working people. However, the ultimate sufferers of these decisions are the women employees who are currently working there. In contrast, media coverage like that of the BBC, Aljazeera, and the Bangladeshi media play a vital role, especially after the Savar Rana Plaza accident.*

### ***Contributing Factors***

*There are many contributing factors to the unhealthy working conditions; namely, greed for high profit, neglect of safety, availability of cheap labour (particularly illiterate and unskilled), lack of trade unions or welfare associations, long working hours, weak government mechanisms, corruption of government officials, political affiliations, overlooking of foreign buyers, and the ready conversion of resident buildings into factories.*

### ***Conclusion***

The government, employers and national and international pressure groups should work together for the betterment of the socio-economic conditions of working women, the working environment, the economic status of both the employers as well as the country. National and international pressure groups which are a part of the globalization dynamic often present sustainable suggestions, for instance to request and require employers to implement safety changes, should be considered by the government. The following suggestions should be enacted.

Research findings show that women are entering the labour market at a much faster pace than before and the rate of female labour is increasing faster than that of males. This happens as the government encourages the private sector organizations and global demand is created. The private sector labour market is predominantly occupied by female workers. As the issue of the relationship between globalization and working women is in the centre of this article's discussion, who gains from globalization and the expansion of the female labour force should be explained. Moreover, a significant economic benefit for both the employer and the country is to be gained which can easily be calculated by taking into account the huge amount of foreign earnings to be made even by the lowest income group of the country. By engaging this huge female labour force, Bangladesh reduces the high unemployment rate. But this women's group is both a productive and a reproductive group which is eligible to provide care-giving. It is posited that the negative effect of reducing care for the development of the human resources and human capabilities of this group will result in a greater loss for the community as a whole. Women have gained access to economic production. However, it is difficult to assess whether this has been to their advantage or disadvantage. The country's economic production increases the complexity and degree of responsibility. Women are appointed to lower skilled positions which have a limited scope of vertical development in wage and salary. This situation is brought about because women have no bargaining power within trade unions or have only a limited scope to join or

work with the welfare associations. On the other hand, women's involvement in the workplace is changing norms in the societies so that they can now live alone, as well as decide about getting married. Furthermore, economic activities contribute to gender relationship development and assist in reducing gender inequality. These changes are linked to women's empowerment, changes in decision making roles in the family, mobility in the public domain and ongoing efforts to bring about other working women's benefits in the workplace.

Of equal importance, feminist researchers stress the value found in working women enjoying greater self-esteem and social prestige, being recognized as valued members of the family and enjoying feelings of independence (Kabeer, 1995 in Amin et al, 1997). Working against these benefits, however, is the relentless profit making tendency of foreign buyers and employers which often push women to endure poor working conditions. Therefore, women's economic empowerment must be considered as an inevitable part of the development discourse. It is simply impossible for Bangladesh to achieve sustainable development if women are excluded from mainstream development programs and institutionalization. Bangladeshi people's long lasting determination for a participatory democracy and social well-being also requires sustainable economic and social growth. Therefore, government intervention is necessary to ensure high workplace standards and the full implementation of labour laws.

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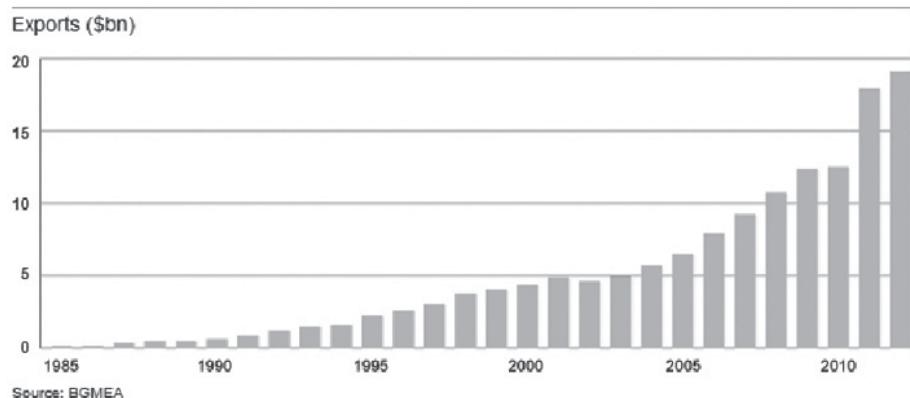
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Sl. No.	Exported goods	2007-2008	2008-2009	2009-2010
<b>Appendices</b>	Woven Garments	36.62%	38.02%	37.11%
	Knitwear	39.21%	41.34%	40.01%
Appendix-1: Itemwise Export in Bangladesh (2007-2008, 2008-2009, 2009-2010)	Frozen Food	3.78%	2.92%	2.73%
	Jute Goods	2.26%	1.73%	4.86%
	Leather	2.02%	1.13%	1.40%
	Raw Jute	1.17%	0.95%	1.50%
	Chemical Products	1.53%	1.80%	1.92%
	Tea		0.08%	1.26%
	Other	13.30%	12.04%	9.21%

Items	2011-12R July-Feb	(In million US\$)	
		2012-13P July-Jan	2012-13P July-Feb
1	2	3	4
1. Raw jute & Jute goods	580.72	536.65	609.81
2. Readymade garments	10511.85	8911.58	10225.68
3. Frozen food	391.02	228.8	259.52
4. Leather	198.14	185.8	210.3
5. Others	1367.52	1280.61	1432.04
Total (excluding EPZ)3	13049.25	11143.44	12737.35
6. Export by EPZ enterprises	2250.77	2123.17	2413.24
Grand Total (including EPZ)	15300.02	13266.61	15150.59

### Growth in Bangladesh's garment exports



Source:

