

## **Female Workers in Garment Industry in Bangladesh: Does Economic Independence Transform into ‘Empowerment’?**

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### **Introduction**

Garments industry of Bangladesh can be distinguished as the most crucial source of inclusive economic growth as this sector engages the largest number of poor women in the formal sector of the economy. Even though these employment opportunities have given positive benefits to the low skilled women workers through better standard of living, a puzzle that still remains unanswered is that to what extent their economic freedom is translating into power of exercising their choices in lives? The existing literatures of garment workers of Bangladesh can be grouped in two. One group argues female garment workers are being empowered and their living standard are being improved even though there is unfriendly environment at work place. The other group of the literature argues, garment workers are being severely exploited in their workplace. Only limited number of studies is available on the issue of their empowerment dynamics that specifically opt for inquiring to what extent female garment workers are empowered after being economically independent. This is an important issue to look into since the future of these women workers is going to be an important sign of future economic development of Bangladesh via indirect route<sup>1</sup> of growth (Kabeer and Natali, 2013). Therefore, this research will try to dig into the empowerment dynamics of the female garment workers of

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<sup>1</sup> The direct route is via the market and the expanded pool of talent that results from increasing numbers of women with higher levels of education. It means that economies are maximizing their human resource potential. The indirect route is via the family and reflects the positive effect of women's education and employment on the next generation of workers, parents and citizens.

Bangladesh to understand to what extent these women labor are empowered.

### **Objectives**

This research intends to identify that to what extent economic independence is translating into *empowerment* for the female garment workers of Bangladesh. Also, it will identify and analyze the underlying dynamics that promote or restrain female workers from being empowered. Nevertheless, to measure the empowerment of the female labor, an index has been constructed to have a concrete understanding of the empowerment of the female garment workers in Bangladesh.

### **Methodology**

A primary survey was conducted in the Mirpur area of Dhaka, Bangladesh. Through random sampling method, a sample of forty-eight garments workers have chosen and interviewed based on a questionnaire. From the assumption of getting an unbiased sample, Mirpur, Dhaka was chosen as survey site as it is one of the densely populated areas where the highest numbers of garments workers live. The sample was chosen largely under three main categories; *Unmarried*, *Married*, and *Married and having children*. When calculating Women Empowerment Index (E), the unmarried workers were not taken into consideration from the presumption that, their power of making choices does not get restricted as they are not married. Though it is also evident that, in the typical Bangladeshi society unmarried women's power of making choices are also restricted by their family and marriage is not the only force which put forth patriarchal domination on a woman's life. Hence, those specific scenarios have not been taken into consideration in this research as most of the unmarried respondents are staying with their single mother or alone. Women Empowerment Index (E) has been constructed based on three main indicators; they are Economic Decision Making Power

(E<sub>1</sub>), Household Decision Making Power (E<sub>2</sub>) and Decision over Family Planning and Children (E<sub>3</sub>). Each of these indicators has sub-indicators within them. A total eight sub-indicators are chosen under three main indicators which are based on some specific questions which reflect to what extent these women are empowered. The indicators and sub-indicators of empowerment have chosen based on the empowerment literature.

The sub indicators have been ranked as *Highly Empowered*, *Moderately Empowered* and *Least Empowered* based on how answers reflect the level of empowerment for these women. The next step is to calculate the Women Empowerment Index as follows

*Women Empowerment Index, E = 1/3 (E<sub>1</sub>) + 1/3 (E<sub>2</sub>) + 1/3 (E<sub>3</sub>)*

## **Results and Discussion**

The result of the research shows, Women Empowerment Index, E is positively related with age and income of the respondents. However, moderately empowered women have higher bargaining power when it comes to household decision-making. Nevertheless, this research did not find any significant relationship between the level of employment of women and their empowerment index. Higher number of women falls into the category of moderately empowered and least empowered. Qualitative analysis provides a boarder and intense understanding of how the elements of empowerment are cohesive and how they are interrelated. Social institutions like family, marriage and religion that plays significant role in empowerment. This finding resembles that even though existing literature widely talks about the success stories of the female garment workers of Bangladesh, most of the workers are not fully empowered in the household arena. Therefore, this research challenges the existing literatures that mostly reflect light on the positive sides of the stories without looking into the negatives.

## Conclusion

The main findings of this research challenge the existing literature that mostly talks about the success stories of the female garments workers of Bangladesh. Therefore, more in-depth research needs to be done to understand the actual empowerment dynamics of these workers. Proper education is the primary element that can help women to develop insights about the role played by different social agents that result in suppression and gender biased decisions by the family or by the society. Therefore, when the social institutions do not liberate a woman to get educated, then that introduces the problem and continues as an unbreakable cycle. Hence, education can bring a positive change in the empowerment dynamics of the female garment workers of Bangladesh.

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