

# Feminization of Employment and Gender Inequality of Bangladesh Labor Market: The Case of Garment Industries

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## ABSTRACT

The recent breakthrough in the feminization of employment that took place in the Ready-made Garment (RMG) industries of Bangladesh has been accompanied by vigorous debate among scholars, policymakers and stakeholders about its effect on women in terms of gender in/equality. Because although women's labor force participation tends to increase with economic development, this relationship is often not straightforward or consistent with the elimination of gender discrimination. Based on an analysis of this debate on gender inequality of labor market, this paper explores how garment female workers view and experience gender inequality in their everyday lives in respect to family-market-state relations. Applying a range of qualitative method and revisiting dual-systems theory, the analysis draws on in-depth interviews with twelve female garment workers and on interviews with thirty female garment workers at three garment industries located in different areas of Dhaka city. Empirical findings demonstrate that the new feminization of employment in the ready-made garment industries has portrayed the coexistence and intersections of multiple gender disparities within male-dominated power structures both at family and workplace. It is also evident that capitalist interests along with patriarchal norms and values influence the use of women as a cheap, flexible and docile labor to earn the maximum profits at the minimum possible cost. Findings further reveal that the role of the state is also insufficient to ensure gender equality in the ready-made garment industries. The paper concludes that the increasing rate of feminization of employment in Bangladesh ready-made garment industries does not coincide with the elimination of gender disparities to any larger extent.

**KEY WORDS:** Gender Inequality; Bangladesh Labor Market; Ready-made Garment Industries; Feminization of Employment; Capitalism; Patriarchy; Female Labor

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Equality between man and woman is not merely a demand but also a fundamental right in every aspect of our lives. Gender equality in the labor market is one of the major factors that can contribute to eliminating marginalization, exploitation, and disparity between sexes (Cotter et al., 1998:1673-1676). However, equality cannot be achieved only through increased or equal participation in the labor market but also through the receipt of equal rights and benefits for woman, as a significant outcome of the labor market (Perrons, 2010:34-38; Meyer, 2003:351-352; Budig, 2002:258-259; Acker, 1990:139 and Ridgeway, 1997:218). Over the past twenty-five years, the global gap between men's and women's labor force participation has fallen from 32 to 26 percentage points leading to an overall increase in women joining the labor market (Blankfein, 2013:4). But, although women's labor force participation tends to increase with economic development, this relationship is often not straightforward or consistent with the elimination of gender discrimination (Ball, 2008:54; Perrons, 2004:1, 14, 89 and Meyer, 2003:351-352). Although this problem has many dimensions, some earlier studies reveal that gender-based discrimination works at the root of this inconsistency, found more or less in every labor market irrespective of developed, developing and least developed societies (Hutchings et al., 2011; Neumayer and Soysa, 2011; Ahmed and Maitra, 2010; Ball, 2008 and Mills, 2003). Underdeveloped countries, and even developing ones, like Bangladesh, where traditional gendered norms work very vibrantly, widely face the most barriers to achieving the goal of gender equality from the increasing rate of feminization of the labor market (Banks, 2013; Kabeer, 2011, Chowdhury, 2010 and Wright, 2000).

However, the recent breakthrough in the feminization of employment that took place in the Ready-made Garment (RMG) industries of Bangladesh has been accompanied by vigorous debate among scholars, policymakers and stakeholders about its effect on women in terms of gender in/equality (Calcea, 2014; Banks, 2013 and Kabeer, 2011). This paper explores this issue through an in-depth analysis of how Bangladeshi women garment workers view and experience gender inequality in respect to family-market-state relations. By exploring the connection between feminization of employment, gender in/equality of labor market, economic transformations, the reorganization of female paid labor and revisiting the dual-systems theory, this article analyzes the gender dynamics influencing female's labor market participation and outcomes. More specifically, I intend to critically evaluate the ways and to what extent female workers' roles are sources of entitlement to the

provision of Bangladesh's labor market participation, their status in the labor market, their limits, possibilities, and abilities to negotiate changes in these roles in terms of gender identity.

## **2. FEMINIZATION OF EMPLOYMENT IN THE READY-MADE GARMENT (RMG) INDUSTRIES OF BANGLADESH**

Within the last twenty-five years, many garments industries originating from industrialized regions have relocated parts of their production operations to so-called "developing" and eastern European countries (Celcea, 2014:278; Ahmed et al., 2014:259 and Musiolek, 2002:123). Bangladesh is one of these developing countries that made a noticeable achievement in the growth of Ready-made Garment industries. This achievement indicates that from modest beginnings in the late 1970s, the export garment sector had overtaken jute as the major export sector by the mid-1980s and, by the early 1990s had become the only billion dollar manufacturing export industry (Ahmed et al., 2014:259, Banks, 2013:96; Kabeer and Mahmud, 2004:136-141 and Rock, 2003:392). Today Bangladesh is the second-largest garment manufacturer in the world, lagging behind only China, with garment exports of over \$ 21.5 billion annually (USG<sup>1</sup> report 2013:7) and Bangladesh is cited as the next biggest sourcing hot-spot in the coming years due to increasing wage bills and labor shortages in China (Heath and Mobarak, 2015:7). The RMG sector is the rapid growth sector that maintains a growth rate of an average of 25% per year since inception, now accounts for around 80% of Bangladesh's annual export earnings (Ahmed et al., 2014:259), and a 15 percent share of its GDP (Calcea, 2014:289). This sector has provided employment to over 4 million impoverished Bangladeshis and more than eighty (80%) of them are women (Heath and Mubarak, 2015:2 and Ahmed et al., 2014:259). RMG sector was the first to provide employment opportunities to women in large-scale in a country where women traditionally have not worked outside the home (Rock, 2003:391-92). RMG industries' preference for female labor made visible transformation in the gender composition of the country's labor force, both in terms of female rates of participation in paid work and its diversification into the industrial sector (Kabeer and Mahmud, 2004:147). A noticeable number of females, particularly the young, are coming out into the public sphere more vigilantly than ever seen in the newly expanded labor market, mainly in the RMG industries (Banks, 2013: 99; Chowdhury, 2010: 302-307; Feldman, 2001: 1097-1100 and Kabeer, 1997:267). Employment in the RMG industries has led to an increase in the employment of women in the formal workforce and an improvement in women's bargaining position within the home (Ahmed et al., 2014:259 and Schuler, 2013). Prior to the growth of RMG industries, the participation of women in paid work was extremely low and confined to marginal informal activities which did not appear in the national statistics (Kabeer and Mahmud, 2004:147). However, the proliferation of RMG industries in Bangladesh not only made visible transformation in the gender composition of country's labor force but also set the context of changes in the rethinking of gender relations.

## **3. LITERATURE REVIEW**

Women are increasingly becoming visible in the productive labor force in Bangladesh in general (Uddin, 2008:92) and in the RMG sector in particular (Heath and Mobarak, 2015:1-3). Although the massive growth of RMG industries has utterly transformed the economic and social landscape of the country (Sobhan, 2012:1) at the cost of women's labor (Ahmed et al., 2014; Chowdhury, 2010; Kabeer and Mahmud, 2004; Rock, 2003 and Wright, 2000), its contribution to the transformation of positive gender relations is still dubious (Banks, 2013; Chowdhury, 2010; Kabeer, 2004; Salway et al., 2003 and Feldman, 2001). Because, this rapid increase in women's employment in the RMG sector is often interpreted as a response to employer preferences for nimble-fingered, docile women, on the one hand (Paul-Majumder and Begum, 2000:3), and as a response to increased economic stress among a majority of the country's poverty-ridden households, on the other hand (Feldman, 2001:1098). Earlier studies show that although feminization of employment could contribute to women's emergence into public space as economic agent (Chowdhury, 2010:302), it does not mean that patriarchal ideologies have become diluted, rather their persistence results in significant divergence between male and female perceptions of female employment (Banks, 2013:97). On the other hand, the capitalist venture consists of national and international investors created the opportunity for these impoverished and unskilled female labors in the pursuit of maximum profits at the minimum possible cost (Kabeer and Mahmud, 2004:145). In fact, patriarchal interests are often conflates capitalist interests as both employers and male partners are seen to benefit, the former from the lower wages they can pay female labors, the latter because of the greater control that it gives them over their female partners (Hartmann, 1979 cited in Walby, 1990:41).

Although labor is an important factor of production, it is not homogeneous; gender and skill differences constitute important aspects of the heterogeneity of labor in most cases (Rahman and Islam, 2013:1). In

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<sup>1</sup> USG-United States Government

Bangladesh gender identities still works as a big challenge in escalating the multiple gender disparities within patriarchal power structure (Feldman, 2001). Kabeer (2004:14) states that Bangladesh is one of the world's more patriarchal societies. In her another study Kabeer (2012) argues that women's participation in the labor market is often not her own decision. Because of the wide prevalence of patriarchal domination in Bangladesh society, male members of the family usually dictate or guide such a decision. Society's attitude and established norms also set constraints on such decisions (Rahman and Islam, 2013:4). Although women of Bangladesh do not face any legal provision against participation in the labor market (Business and Law Report-2016, WB), long-standing and widespread beliefs and attitudes about differences between the sexes, grounded in Bengali sociocultural values, tend to perpetuate the status quo by the persistence of multiple gender discriminations (Rozario, 2006, Kabeer, 2011 and Cain et al., 1979:434). Moreover, women remain under significant pressure to maintain conformity with their own religious, cultural, and social values, which are also identity markers that affect unequal gender participation and representation in the Bangladesh labor market (Cain et al., 1979 and Chowdhury, 2010). Gender identity also negatively affects the national policies that marginalize women's equal participation and equal rights in the labor market. One study conducted by ADB and ILO (2011) highlighted that gender inequalities are rooted not only in social and cultural norms but are also deeply entrenched in the policy focus and institutional environment (Cited in Rahman and Islam, 2013:6).

Moreover, feminization of employment has brought some contradictory changes in the improvement of gender relations, because some changes meant to liberate women have become reactive but not reflective. As a result the consequences of female employment are reconstructing gender inequality to some extents. For instance, the economic autonomy of employed women also not welcomed by their male partners as this type of autonomy encounters traditional norms and values that tend to reduce male's subordination and domination over female (Kabeer, 2011:501 and Kibria, 1995:293). Thus feminization of employment that has taken place in the RMG sectors of Bangladesh over the decades could not gain any noticeable improvement in the transformation of positive gender relations (Kabeer, 2011:501-502).

#### 4. CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

I will base my research primarily on feminist theories. In particular the study will examine the '*dual-systems theory*' developed mainly by postcolonial and postmodern feminists, who consider the articulation of patriarchy and capitalism in a range of ways to understand the gender inequality of the labor market (Walby, 1990:5). *Dual-systems theory* is a combination of Marxist and radical feminist theories. The basic argument of *dual-systems theory* is that both patriarchy and capitalism are present and important in the structuring of contemporary gender relations (ibid, p. 5). Although feminists vary in analytical ways, (for instance Zillah (1981) argues that patriarchy and capitalism fused into one system of 'capitalist patriarchy', while Hartmann (1979) and Mitchell (1975) argue that analytically patriarchy and capitalism is different but empirically these are a interacting system), they maintain the same opinion that dual-systems work at the root of gender inequality of the labor market. On the one hand, patriarchal ideology censor women's rights through the sociocultural traditions and gender stereotypes-the non-material basis of differences (i.e. religious barriers curve the rights of women's labor market participation), on the other hand, capitalism includes the material basis of differences between male and female labors (i.e. sex-segregation of labor of labor, wage gap etc.).

In an analysis of dual-systems theory, Mitchell (1975) argues that the material basis of gender inequality are maintained by the capitalist through unequal economic relations between male and female, while the patriarchal ideology works through the concept of unconscious that maintain the difference between sexes. Mitchell (1975) maintains that although capitalism has material basis to distinguish male and female, but patriarchal is an ideological perpetuation, which would ostensibly appear to have no material basis in contemporary society (Mitchell, 1975 cited in Walby, 1990:6). Hartmann's conception of the relation of capitalism and patriarchy is similar to that of Mitchell, but she is different in that she wishes to see patriarchal relation is not an ideological or unconscious level but a level of the expropriation of women's labor by men (ibid, p. 6). Hartman (1979) argues that the male both at workplace and at home exploits women, which has material basis. Man takes advantage over woman by imposing the sex segregation of labor, while at home women do more labor than men, even if they also have paid employment (Hartmann, 1981a). These two forms of expropriation also act to reinforce each other, as a result women weak position in the market make them vulnerable to enter into marital life, while marital life make them vulnerable not to get equal position in the labor market (Walby, 1990:6). Even if capitalism changes the nature of employment to some extent, patriarchy pre-dates capitalism, and that this expropriation of women's labor is not new and distinctive to capitalist societies and hence cannot be reduced to it (ibid, p. 6). Thus both patriarchy and capitalism affects women equal participation in the labor market and as well as to receive equal rights from their labor market participation (Cockburn, 1983, 1985; Hartmann, 1979 and Walby, 1986, 1990).

## 5. METHODS AND MATERIALS

This is a qualitative study and based on the findings consist of both primary and secondary sources of data. The study was conducted from December 23, 2014 to January 17, 2015 using semi-structured and open-ended interviews with forty-two female workers from three RMG factories located in different areas of Dhaka city, Bangladesh. I was allowed in two of the factories by the manager to select workers randomly and ask for interviews. Management selected the interviewees for another one. Majority of the interviews took place at production site and a few were done at home of the interviewees. Respondents are predominantly from Muslim religion (91%) and the percentage of married, unmarried and divorced respondents is (39%), (58%) and (3%) respectively. Respondent age ranged from 17 to 47 with a majority in the group of 21-31 (53.2%). Regarding education, (9%) respondents have completed Secondary School Certificate (SSC); (56%) have completed primary education and (35%) have just attended the primary school but did not complete. The interviews were transcribed and translated from Bengali into English. The empirical data is complemented by evidence from thirty interviews and twelve in-depth interviews with the selected respondents. However, this article seeks to explain the disjuncture and shifts in norms and meanings of gender relations among working-class women in a particular context in three garment industries of Bangladesh; one that has witnessed high level of gender inequality between male and female workers in terms of family-market-state relations and may not claim to generalize these insights for the whole of Bangladesh labor market.

## 6. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

### 6.1. SEX-SEGREGATION OF LABOR AND WAGE GAP IN RMG INDUSTRIES

One of the major obstacles faced by women in RMG sector is the sex-segregation of labor. Secondary sources of data collected from three garments show that the total number of employee is 544, 589 and 786 for garment-A, B and C respectively. Employees are predominantly females, accounting 79%, 81%, and 75% for the garment-A, B and C respectively. However, although RMG industries are dominated by female labors, male takes advantages over female in terms of division of labor and wage disparities. The organogram of these industries show that higher the position is lesser the number of women. An explorative question was asked to all respondents: What are the most common determinates associated with the division of labor in the RMG sector? One of the respondents states:

*Sima, age 29, married: I joined this garment industry before twenty-eight months along with other five girls and two boys in the same day. All of us were unskilled and this was our first time job. We joined as a helper and after five months all of us become sewing operators. But after one-year between the boys one becomes supervisor, another boy becomes line chief, but we all the girls are still working as the sewing operator. Although we all work in the same section (i.e. sewing), as the boys hold superior position in this section so their status, remuneration and freedom is more than us. I think because of our gender identities this discrimination took place, although we belong to same skill and experience.*

Other respondents whom I have interviewed in this study have given more or less similar explanation of sex-segregation of labor. Such empirical evidences of female labors also clearly reflect the secondary sources of data, which shows that men occupy the entire top positions in the hierarchy. All of the three RMG industries' hierarchal positions indicate that in the top-ranking positions female employees are either missing or less in numbers as these position are attached with more status in terms of decision making power, leadership, wages and status. For example, in the top positions from one to ten i.e. managing director, director, general manager, assistant general manager, merchandiser manager, merchandiser, chief account officer, account officer, commercial officer, assistant commercial officer-all of them are men, and women are absent in these positions. On the other hand, although very few women hold some mid-level positions i.e. supervisor, quality controller, line chief, cutting master, their frequency is found in the sewing section as the sewing operators and assistant sewing operators. Respondents were asked-"why most of the female employees are engaged in the sewing sections?" One of the respondents states:

*Moni, age 26, married: Authority of the garment thinks that women are better at sewing than men as sewing activities are associated with femininity in our culture. Moreover, they think for other job e.g. (iron and cutting sections) more physical labor is required. Since women are not perfect for that activities. On the other hand, in the management (i.e. manager, supervisor, line chief etc.) educational qualification is needed, but most of the women those who work with us either illiterate or have at best primary education, since they are not qualified. Moreover, our cultural practice is like this that men are better at management than women, and men should have the control and domination over women and it should not be other way around.*

Moni's experience does not differ much from other respondents' experience of this study. In fact, sex differences arise from gender roles, gender stereotypes, and gendered social structures that influence self-concept and self-presentation (Konrad, et al., 2000 cited in Chang, 2004:2). Holter (1970:213-214) argues that the role allocation by sex provides clear basis for distributing tasks, which might otherwise be difficult to allocate. Given their deep rooting in socially entrenched gender roles and social norms, sexual division of labor persists widely in the RMG industries of Bangladesh. Women are traditionally assigned as sewing operators and helpers as the authority thinks that women lack the qualities to hold administrative positions (e.g. supervising, managing etc.). Moreover, the RMG industries need to deliver the shipment timely. The management's view is that men are better than women to control, to regulate and to enforce workers to get the product ready on-time. Empirical evidence of this study further reveals that the owners of the RMG industries in Bangladesh prioritized female labor because of their availability in adequate number with low-skills and with cheap hiring costs and who can work for long hours under the control of male domination. As another respondent state:

*Ruma, age 19, unmarried: In fact, operating the sewing machine for long time needs patience. Women are better than men as they do not pose as many problems as men do. Women are not arrogant like men. The men might leave their machine and go to smoke a cigarette or drink tea. While women do not smoke, usually do not drink tea and just takes water. Moreover, some time there is much workload to meet the deadline of buyers to supply the product. Men as a supervisor can easily enforce us to work on overtime, to stay over night. Same pressure they cannot give to their male colleagues. As we are women we are bound to be dominated by the men.*

Above stated empirical evidence blends with gendered dynamics of social control promoted by both patriarchal and capitalist interests. Here the logic of surveillance, of both female and male workers, is marked by the regulation of morality, sexuality, domination, and profitability with the aim of increasing productivity and efficiency. Thus the capitalists' management and profitability considerations shape the gendered division of labor in the RMG industries, on the one hand, the maintenance of a social order that serves company objectives is a dominant concern stemming from a patriarchal system, on the other hand.

Marxist feminists assert that capitalist prime concern is to maximize the benefit irrespective of equality between man and woman. While, radical feminists argue that sexuality works as a major factor of male domination over women, through which men impose their notion of femininity on women (Walby, 1990:3). To address the gender relations of labor market Marxist feminist Braverman (1974) argues that there is a progressively deskilling of jobs in the contemporary monopoly capitalism and that woman take most of these new less-skilled jobs. Capitalist encourage deskilling to reduce cost by decreasing the need for expensive labor and making it possible to employ cheaper labor on less-skilled tasks and this cheaper labor is female (Kabeer and Mahmud, 2004:134 and Braverman 1974, cited in Walby, 1990:34). In the RMG factories in Bangladesh it is also evident that there is a negative co-relation between the high skilled job and women's employment. As one respondent asserts:

*Lily, age 20, unmarried: Although majority of the workers in RMG sectors is women, most of them are engaged basically in non-technological or less technological tasks. When it is more technological-related tasks, women are thought not to be fit for that task. Even in the swing sections if it is knitwear more men works then that of female workers. But for the woven wear in the swing section mostly it is women, because it is less technological. I think the sex-difference causes this division of labor.*

Lily's experience demonstrates that women's increased participation does not coincide with the women's better position in the labor market. Some earlier studies also document same division of labor in the RMG sector of Bangladesh. For example Paul-Majumder and Begum (2000:4) in a working paper on gender imbalance of RMG industries in Bangladesh revealed that when job becomes technologically skilled women are not given preference. They further documented that in the manufacturing of knitwear only 40% women work in sewing section compare to 70% women in the manufacturing of woven wear's swing section. While Kabeer and Mahmud (2004:145) argues that capitalists hire female workers with little or no education, provide them with minimum on-the-job-training, do not issue them with a contract as required by the law and keep them on temporary status. This strategy helps capitalists to maximize returns from the key factors of productions under their control at the minimum possible cost.

Sexual division of labor is also more frequent in RMG sector as the capitalist use women as *the reserve army of labor*. Braverman used the *reserve army theory of labor*, through which she states that capitalists use women as a long long-term reserve of labor with the development and expansion of capitalism. While Beechey (1977, 1978) argues that women constitute a flexible labor reserve, which can be brought into paid work, when boom conditions increase the need for labor, and let go return to the home in times of economic recession (cited in Walby, 1990:36). Similar evidences were also found in the RMG sector of Bangladesh. With the growth of

RMG industries the demand of unskilled female labor has increased, as they are cheap and flexible. While, Hartman (1979) in supporting the *dual-systems theory* argues that within the field of paid work occupational segregation is used by organized men to keep access to the best paid jobs for themselves at the expense of women (cited in Walby, 1990:6). This study also finds similar evidence. Although sewing section is the main line of production in RMG industries, which is dominated by female workers, but their salary is very low in compare to other positions, which are mostly occupied by male. Thus the concentration of women and men in different tasks has led to a high degree of gender segregation in the labor market (Reskin and Hartmen, 1986:1). However, empirical findings further clarify that even if capitalist changes the nature of employment to some extent, patriarchy pre-dates capitalism, since can not be reduced to it, rather takes new form of expropriation of women's labor under capitalism and patriarchy.

## 6.2. WAGE DISPARITIES

In general, garment production has for long been recognized as a labor-intensive, low-wage activity (Musiolek, 2002:123-124). In particular, wages in Bangladesh for RMG manufacturing are among the lowest in the world (Ahmed et al., 2014:266). Minimum wage for garment workers started BDT 627 (US\$08) in 1985; after several revisions, it came to the level of BDT 3,000 (US\$38) in 2010 (Salam and Mclean, 2014:4). Because of high living cost it is almost impossible to commensurate with daily expenses for the garment workers. Although a new wage structure (which proposed monthly minimum wage BDT 5,300 (US\$67) was put into effect legally on January 1, 2014, concerns remain, however, in regards to the implementation of the new wage structure in Bangladesh's RMG industries (Workers' Voice Project, 2014:3)<sup>1</sup>. As more than 80% employee is women in this sector, they are the most sufferers. Moreover, women's average wages is also less than that of their male colleagues' average wages. Field data of this study demonstrates that male worker's monthly average salary outscored female's monthly average salary by 42%, 41% and 39 % in the RMG industries-A, B, C respectively. However, wage disparities between sexes can be induced for many reasons. Although classical theory '*meritocracy*' suggests that higher pay is given to those people who are better workers (Reskin and Padavic, 1994:112-13), proponents of the dual-systems theory (Marxists and Radical Feminists) claim that the gender-biased traditions for pay discrimination take place within in the realm of both capitalist and patriarchal interests (Hartmann, 1979, Walby, 1990). Schur (1983:35-440) argues that men who assign value to human activities (as pay setters for example) tend to take male activities as standard and see other activities as inferior-regardless of the importance of these activities for the need and survival of a society. The effects of this traditional gender ideology also were revealed from the respondents' empirical experiences in this study. As one of the respondents states:

*Rahima, age 31, married: It is very rare in our garment that female worker out earn male worker. Although we are more in number, most of us have no mobility in our positions. We just joined as helper and by the course of time we can be at best a swing operator. Sewing sections needs more workers, as it is the main production line. But this task is devalued as mostly female does it. Since our salary is also less compare to our male colleagues.*

Rahima's experience demonstrates that both the capitalist and patriarchal interests cause wage disparities between sexes. On the one hand, capitalists save money by recruiting majority of the female in the sections where more employees are needed, as they are cheap, flexible, and docile (Paul-Majumder and Begum, 2000:3). On the other hand, patriarchal ideology devalues female's tasks, although their tasks are associated with main production line in the garment industries. Hartman (1979) argues that, it is by excluding women from the better kinds of paid work that men are able to keep women at a disadvantage (cited in Walby, 1990:39). She further argues that historically men are better organizer than that of female and draws on examples of men organized trade unions, which excluded women. Many earlier researches also reveal that traditional views of a woman's role in society have the effect of reducing the number of women employed in the formal labor market and also increasing the wage gap between men and women (IFC, 2013:2). According to ILO report (2015:45) gender wage gap occurs mainly for the undervaluation of women's work; sex segregation channeling women into low value added; the view of women as economic dependents; and the likelihood that women are in unorganized sectors or not represented in unions. Some earlier research (Kabeer and Mahmud, 2004 and Ahmed et al.2014) also have proved this evidence that most of the garment industries do not allow trade unions for the employees, which serves capitalist interests; some of them has but organized mostly by men and women are excluded. As result women could not be a strong agent to gain their interests, although their contribution to robust this sector is more than that of their male partners.

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<sup>1</sup> *Workers' Voice Project*, a collaborative effort of AWAJ Foundation and Consulting Service International Ltd. Dhaka, July 16, 2014

### 6.3. HOUSEHOLD PRODUCTION/RESPONSIBILITIES, EMPLOYMENT, AND BLANCHING THE TRADE-OFF

Family is considered to be central to women's lives and to the determination of gender inequality (Walby, 1990:61). Bangladesh society is highly a gendered society and the significance of the family, as conventionally defined as composed of husband-breadwinner, wife-homemaker and children and old people are dependent mostly on the take care by the female members. As a result women those who enter into the labor market has to burden double responsibilities. As one respondent states:

*Rozi, age 34, married: We are a family of five members: husband, mother-in-law, one daughter and one son. I have to get very early in the morning to prepare food for all family members, and to do other household chores. Every day I work for minimum 8 hours and sometimes 12 to 14 hours. When I reach to home from work again I need to work in the family up to mid night. But on the other hand, my husband works weekly 3 to 4 days as construction worker. But he never shares any work in the household activities.*

In fact, the definitions of femininity are embedded within the discourse of domesticity in Bangladesh. Rozi's experience is just a typical example of such gender-stereotypes which are deeply embedded in cultural practices of Bangladesh. Although more women are joining the labor market, more men are not sharing the household activities. As a result still household remained as one of the major areas of exploitation for the women who are entering into the labor market. Delphy (1984) argues that exploitation of women's labor in the home is the cornerstone of their oppression by men. Following the Marxist concept of mode of production, Delphy identified two classes: the producing class-housewives-and the expropriating class-husbands. She conceptualizes this as patriarchal exploitation, since men, not capital, is seen to be beneficiaries (cited in Walby, 1990:74). While, Hartman (1981a) through dual-systems theory argues that women are caught between the patriarchal exploitation of husbands in the home and that of capitalist employers in the labor market. Husband is the beneficiary group of women labor given at home, while capitalist is beneficiary group of women labor given at workplace. Empirical evidence of this study fully supports Hartman's theoretical assumption. Finding of this study shows that female garment worker of RMG industries is the most vulnerable group of patriarchal and capitalist exploitation. They are the most marginalized group among formal workers who spend long time at workplace but earn less money. Empirical evidence further demonstrate that although female workers of RMG industries play a very significant role in terms of economic contribution in the family, women's role in the decision making in family is very minimal. As one respondent states:

*Sima, 25, married: I earn almost equal to my husband. I spend all the money to maintain the family. But I can't play any significant role in the decision making. I wanted to continue the study of my eldest son, but my husband has sent him to work in an automobile garage.*

Sima's experience demonstrates that female garment workers neither enjoy the degree of economic freedom nor decision making power in the family. Moreover, as women's responsibilities varied according to their class position (Jackson, 1992:155), women working in the RMG sector also face intersectional disparities. For example, women those who are educated and do better job, have the opportunity to employ housemaid to share the burden of household chores, but garment workers are not able to make such opportunity as their income is marginal.

### 6.4. STATE, GENDER POLITICS AND LABOR MARKET (IN) EQUALITY: WHO IS THE GAINER?

Does the state play any significant role to contributing gender disparities with the increasing rate of feminization of employment? This section will be dealt with the answer to this question. What does state see first? Gender equality or capitalist interests! Feminist scholars who support dual-systems theory claim that women are exploited both by the patriarchy and capitalism (Walby, 1990, 1986; Hartman, 1979 and). Capitalism needs patriarchal relations in order to survive, and vice versa (Eisenstein, 1984). Walby (1990:154) argues that gender inequality is seen as derived from capitalism, and the actions of the state as stemming from the needs of capital. She conceptualizes the state as both capitalist and patriarchal. While Eisenstein (1984:92) argues that patriarchal interests are represented via male capitalists. For example, the prime reason behind the incorporation of vast majority of women in the RMG factories in Bangladesh was not to make women liberal, rather to use this as a great chance to utilize the availability of cheap, abundant female labor (Calcea, 2014:279). From the supply side, many women still take up low paid employment has been attributed to some extent to their lack of other means of survival (Rahman and Islam, 2013:42). Empirical evidences of this study demonstrate that although female labor plays a significant role in flourishing as well as in sustaining the development of this sector, the government/state has done nothing remarkable to ensure women's right. As one respondent states:

*Halima, age 33, married: I am working in this sector for seven years. We get very low salary in compare to our male colleague as well as to employees of other sector. It is so difficult to meet the daily expenditure of the family with this low income. In fact, I do not have any other alternatives but to do this job with such a low income. Moreover, we do not get the salary timely. Every month we are supposed to get the salary within 10<sup>th</sup> of the following month, but most of the time we get within 15<sup>th</sup> of the month. I do not see any rules and regulation of the state to regulate and control the garment industries. Government seems very reluctant to see our interests.*

Halima's experience is a very common experience for most of the female workers involved in this sector. As female employees dominate this sector, it remained neglected through the decades although the government earns handsome revenues from this sector, factory owners making huge profit from this business, and buyers (international retailers) get the most, 55-65% benefit on the garments produced in Bangladesh (CPD<sup>1</sup> report, 2013, cited in Salam and McLean, 2014:3). Although women are the main driver of these sweatshops, they are deprived from every aspects of life and they lead a very substandard life. The state is important both because women have entered the labor market often as employee of the state, and also because the extension of the services has been necessary for their movement from household to market work (Hernes, 1984 cited in Walby, 1990:160). However, it is true that feminization of employment has reduced husband's domination upon their wives to some extents. Nevertheless, it has not led to women's liberation as they become dependent upon the state instead of their husbands and the structure of the state is corporatist. Hernes (1984) further argues that these corporatists consist of groups, organizations and professions which have political clout are themselves gendered; they are dominated by men. Women are, then, client and employees, policy takers rather than policy makers (cited in Walby, 1990:160).

Some earlier research documented that although capitalists used the availability of cheap labor to retain competitive advantage, the RMG sector remains relatively unprotected by governmental regulation or organization (Calcea, 2014:279). Safety and security of the employees in this sector is neglected by the RMG industries as well as by the state over the decades (Sobhan, 2012). Since 2005, over 1,800 workers have died (majority of them are women) in Bangladesh's RMG industry due to preventable building collapses and factory fires (Calcea, 2014:290). In this respect one respondent states:

*Rupali, age 22, unmarried: Everyday we go to work with fear. Our Garments have not given us any training about how to get out quickly if fire breaks out. Moreover, the building is very old and there is no alternatives stair to get out quickly. The building seems overloaded as all the floors are used and there is no proper ventilation system. Our owner is a political leader and we do not say anything against the interest of the factory as we have the chance to loose the job in that case.*

Although Rupali's experience represents one RMG industry's situation, most of the RMG industries' situation is more or less same. A report published by US government (2013:3-4) states that Bangladesh government has neither the capacity nor the political will to ensure the safety and security of the employees involved in this sector. The report further states that major factor behind the lack of political will is the enormous political clout wielded by RMG factory owners in Bangladesh. Nearly every Member of Parliament has close ties to factory owners, many of them are direct owners, many of the factory owners are members of the elite, controlling significant media interests and exerting political influence (USG Report, 2013:4-5).

Moreover, rights of women in terms of economic benefit and social status have been politicized both by the political and public discourses. Political discourse has been developed in this way that, development of capitalism has led to the increase in women's paid employment in garment industries, since this sector should keep free from any movement including the formation of labor union by the employees. As a result the development of labor union has been denied by the capitalist as well as by the state for last three decades. Coercive intervention exerted both by the government agency and factory management not to form the trade union, which was strongly criticized by different human rights' bodies and organizations at home and abroad. Although most recently the government permitted the rights to form labor union in this sector, involvement of women in this newly formed labor union remained ineffective and minimal. As one respondent states:

*Bina, age 27, divorced: Our garment has trade union but our participation is very minimal. Neither the management like trade union, nor we have strong support from the government to form trade union. Some of the employees lost their job last year, as they wanted to form trade union. We the female employee does not participate frequently in the activities of trade unions because our manager said if they find us active in trade union, we would be fired from the job. Moreover, our male colleagues do not give us space in the leadership.*

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<sup>1</sup> CPD-Center for Policy Dialogue (a non-government research and consultancy center in Bangladesh)

*Male colleagues dominate us and they think we women should not lead men. Sometime they pressure us only to participate in the demonstrations/protests.*

Although lack of labor unions affects men and women workers, women are the most sufferers as around 80% of the employees are women in this sector. From Bina's empirical experience it is clear that women are exploited both by their male colleagues as well as by the capitalist. Wide prevalence of patriarchal norms embedded in Bangladeshi society has developed public discourse in this way that men are superior to women in leading, in dominating and in organizing. Moreover, women those who works in garment industries are marginalized as a poor class (Kabeer, 2004:14 and Salway, 2003:882), bad women who works with men, who stays long time outside of home, who stays outside of home at night etc. (Rao, 2011:34). More clearly female garment worker has no social recognition although they are contributing much in the economic development both for the state and family.

## 7. CONCLUSION

This paper focused on changing male and female perceptions of new feminization of employment in the garment industries in a context of gender identity, and its practical implications on working women's lives. It is evident that regarding inequalities in the sex-division of labor, wages or access to the labor market, the case of three garment industries show that female workers are confronted with gender discriminatory practices both at home and workplace. Findings demonstrate that, although the *feminization of employment* has increased sharply during the last few decades in Bangladesh especially in the garment industries, reduction of gender disparities has not occurred to that extent. On the one hand, feminization of employment and economic transformation has led to some material changes and to the increase of female labors, but on the other hand, marginalization of women has led to the reinforcement of the traditional gender roles both at home and workplace. For example, though more females are now working outside the household, at the same time the number of males is not increasing in sharing the domestic works. Findings reveal that female employment in the garment industries is not so much a choice but, rather, a lack of choice in the context of abject poverty and other income source availabilities. It is also evident that although male recognize the necessity of their female partner's (or household member) labor to household stability, they are not ready to accept the additional challenges this brings to their authority and dominance (Banks, 2013:108). Study further finds that, although few women said that skills, efficiency and educational background play an important role in receiving equal salary, better position and status, many other disagreed with them and said that even women with equal qualification do not avail equal opportunities as their male colleagues avail.

This study finds that the role of the *state* to ensure gender-equal rights for female workers engaged in the garment industries is also politicized to some extents. Findings demonstrate that most of the garment industries have the political link which works as the setback in regulating ready-made garment industries strictly as well as in enforcing the labor legislation to ensure women's equal rights. Study finds that Bangladesh labor legislation is not only irrelevant to the vast majority of the country's workers, it is also obsolete (Kabeer and Mahmud, 2004:156). Kabeer and Mahmud (2004:156) further argues that although experience of women workers in the RMG sector has informed many of the new provisions in the labor code but the weakness of the enforcement system remains the main barrier to implementation. It is also evident that different state agencies works against the trade unions, which could have played a constructive role in this process but their adversarial tactics, politicized character and male dominance suggests that they will have to undergo considerable reform before they are able to do so.

This paper examined *dual-systems theory* which was supported by findings showing significant gender inequality in the RMG sector of Bangladesh. The capitalist interests along with patriarchal norms and values influence the use of women as a source of cheap, flexible and docile labor for the continuity and sustainability of the garments industries. In addition, the reproduction of gender inequality, encouraged by decision-making based on profitability, proves to be a key factor of the capitalists for engaging huge amount of female labors in the garment industries. Thus female labor engaged in garment industries are the subject of abject discrimination by men as well as capitalism as a totalizing project. Findings finally demonstrate that feminization of employment in the RMG industries of Bangladesh remained at such a level in terms of gender equality that it does not signal any major breakthrough in the improvement of positive gender relations. Last but not least, this paper provided deeper theoretical insight to examine the empirical evidence into the relationship between feminization of employment and elimination of gender inequality of Bangladesh labor market. However, this relationship needs further investigation engaging larger number of respondents and both from male and female to make findings more understandable and generalizable.

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