



SPINNING THE CHAIN; LOST IN THE QUEUE

INTERNATIONAL RESTRUCTURING AND BANGLADESH WOMEN GARMENT WORKERS

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In 1908, women, mainly from the garment industry, came together in New York City's Rutgers Square to demand a strong union in the needle trades and the right to vote. More than 20 000 were involved and women maintained pickets outside factories in Lower Manhattan throughout these freezing winter months. More than 700 were arrested and others were clubbed or verbally abused.

Born at the dawn of the last century, in the age of great industrial development, but also of great turbulences, crises and radical ideologies, the International women's day of March 8 has, as it has shown, carried in itself the roots of protest and political activism that would become the unavoidable forms of social life. How long would the women have to fight for equal rights, equal pay for comparable work, quality and affordable child care, affirmative action and full reproductive rights? The women's liberation movement achieves its objectives through the full participation and leadership of working-class women.

I. THE BACKDROP

1.1 Introduction

The international restructuring of the garment industry is a product of the international division of labour, which in recent time is subsumed under the broader term of globalisation.¹ The rising cost of labour in advanced industrialised countries drove their production processes to relocate to low-cost labour locations in the South. Like other labour-intensive products the ready-made garment (RMG) industry moved to East Asia in the 1960s, under an environment of active government support for export-oriented manufacturing. The systematic crisis of the prevailing system led to desperation between the search for ever-cheaper sources of labour and the rising level of import penetration in the markets of developed country. The corporatist sway over policy-making led to the adoption of the Multi-fibre Arrangement (MFA)² in 1974. The MFA was designed to regulate exports of textiles and clothing from the developing world in the interest of 'orderly trade', through restraining the rate of export growth along with an 'anti-surge' provision safe-guarding sudden increases by a particular country to a specific market. Notwithstanding, the imposition of quantitative restrictions (commonly termed as quotas) on exports gave rise to 'quota hoping' – producers and buyers in the newly industrialised countries (NICs), who set off in search of further low-wage sites which were still 'quota-free' – the analogy of flying geese is often touted with it.

At this time, the government declared a New Industrial Policy (NIP), which represented a pronounced ideological shift towards neo-liberal orthodoxy underwritten by the structural adjustment reforms (SAR)³ at the behest of IMF and World Bank in the Reagan/Thatcher era. The new global trade regime included in the new political economy led to "flexible" production

¹ Globalisation is a complex economic, political, cultural, and geographic process, and much has been written on the subject from various disciplinary perspectives. The capitalist system has always been globalising and there have been various waves of globalisation (e.g., the 1870-1914 period, which is well documented). Globalisation, at present, refers to the neo-liberal programme of global system of exchange with a reduced role for the State and an increasing one for non-State actors together with an increased role for the World Bank and the IMF, as well as the more recently WTO.

² The MFA, a classical example of managed trade, initially negotiated for a period of four years, yet dominated the global trade in Textile & Clothing for about two decades (1974-94) till its incorporation into the World Trade Organisation (WTO) Agreement on Textiles and Clothing in 1995. Trade in T&C had mostly been negotiated bilaterally but governed by rules articulated in the MFA. The MFA involves the annual negotiation of quotas between importing and exporting countries and specifies the exact quantity of each item that can be traded. The exporting country then allocates licenses to firms to export a certain proportion of each quota.

³ The SARs are aimed at balancing budgets and increasing competitiveness through trade and price liberalization, including reduction of the public-sector wage bill and growth of the private sector, privatisation of social services, encouragement of foreign investment, and the production of goods and services for export ("tradables") through "flexible" labour processes (For an understanding on Bangladesh see Bhtacharya and Titumir, 1999a, 1999b and 2000). The feminist literature on development has been especially critical, charging structural adjustment with carrying out its objectives on the backs of the poor and especially poor women (Symposium on Gender and Structural Adjustment in *World Development*. Vol. 23 (11), 1995).

systems in which stable, organised, and a mostly male labour force became increasingly “flexible” and “feminised”. The international restructuring of the garment industry, founded on the premise of low cost labour, encouraged the growth of demand for female labour, while declining household budgets led to an increase in the supply of job-seeking women in Bangladesh.

1.2 Global Trade Regime and Feminisation of Labour

In the current global environment of open economies, new trade regimes, and competitive export industries, global accumulation relies heavily on the work of women, both waged and unwaged. The rising share for women in the labour force is sometimes referred to as the '*feminisation of labour*.' Although women are entering the labour market in increasing numbers, their employment is concentrated in a relatively small number of 'female' areas and occupations which tend to attract lower rewards and wages (ILO, 1995). Guy Standing (1989) has hypothesized that the increasing globalisation of production and the pursuit of flexible forms of labour to retain or increase competitiveness, as well as changing job structures in industrial enterprises, favour the “feminisation of employment” in the dual sense of an increase in the numbers of women in the labour force and a deterioration of work conditions (labour standards, income, and employment status).

A great deal of critical feminist scholarship says that the ‘comparative advantage of women’s disadvantage’ (Arizpe and Aranda, 1981) explains why women are preferred in labour-intensive industries like RMG. The disadvantageous cultural construction of the female labour force in terms of nature and inheritance works to the advantage of the manufacturers. They say that the “nimble fingers” (Elson and Pearson, 1981) of young women workers and their capacity for hard work facilitated the recruitment of women for unskilled and semi-skilled work in labour-intensive industries at wages lower than men would accept, and in conditions that unions would not permit.

There are studies which claim most women garment workers evaluate their factory jobs in largely positive terms, including increased job satisfaction, new social networks, a greater voice in household decision-making, greater freedom from physical and verbal abuse, an enhanced sense of self-worth and self-reliance as well as greater personal freedom (Newby, 1998; Amin et al., 1997; Zohir and Paul-Majumder, 1996; Kibria, 1995; Dannecker, 1998 – all quoted in Kabeer, 2001).

Still other studies explain the transfer of these women workers in terms of their submission to patriarchal authority from family patriarch to the capitalist patriarch (Safa, 1990; Salaff, 1981).

Another middle ground stream sees such employment as an expression of a new, if problematic, inclusion and explains that these jobs moved their position from the margins of the labour market to a more central, better paid and more visible place in the economy. Contrarily, the garment industry historically makes profits through the exploitation of the labour of the excluded sections of society (Kabeer, 2001).

The women in RMG sector in Bangladesh have been incorporated into the global economy as a source of relatively cheap labour while declining household budgets have led to an increase in the supply of job-seeking women in Bangladesh.

1.3 Manufacturers without Factories

The garments sector is a major source of female employment: women hold above 85 percent of jobs in the industry and yet they are the lowest paid and retain the lowest status in society. Production is highly globalised and characterised by continual waves of relocation, a trend that shows no signs of abating. Internationalisation initially involved Northern manufacturers setting up similar factories in the South. There has since been a shift towards outsourcing to

independently owned factories. The extent of this shift is demonstrated by the emergence of "manufacturers without factories."

Subcontracting has been, in part, a response to changes in the organization of production, through a combination of lower labour costs, increased flexibility, and minimized investment risks (Dangler, 1994). This option is mainly used to cut production costs through reduced fixed labour costs as a result of a shift from direct to indirect forms of employment. (Beneria, 1987; Dangler, 1994; Palpacuer, 1997; Park 1994; UNIDO, 1994). This flexibility of labour tends to put downward pressure on wages, while reducing employment security and increasing substandard or hazardous working conditions (Hale, 1996).

1.4 The Perspective of the Paper: Right to Work in Just and Favourable Conditions

The present paper analyses recent developments, departing from a narrow economic focus to include the workers' perspective. It is essential because in the context of a crisis, the standard sermon favours increasing labour market flexibility - the subtle subtext being to lower wages and lay off 'unneeded' workers. Moreover rights and wages, often the fruits of hard fought bargaining, are perceived to be part of the problem in the current thinking.

In mainstream analysis all too often workers are asked to bear the brunt of the costs of adjustment, in terms of soaring unemployment and plummeting wages, even when the labour market is not the core of the problem facing the country. Issues of workers' rights and entitlements, including the rights to participate in decision-making that affects their lives, are rarely raised. Nevertheless, the workers are asked to "bear pain".

This paper is, therefore, built on the basic democratic principle that not only should workers' voices be heard, but also they should have a seat at the decision-making table.

The paper argues for strategic interventions which are compatible with justice and rights. Employment is a function of social and labour rights or social equity and collective well-being instead of individual productivity and competitiveness. The paper contends that any intervention must relate to men's and women's abilities to utilize their capabilities to realize their self potential while recognizing that men's and women's abilities to utilize their capabilities depend on access to resources, entitlements, accountability and equality of opportunities. Thus any programmatic intervention should entail *right to just and favourable conditions of work* underwritten by at least three dimensions⁴: commutative justice, distributive justice⁵ and social rights. Fundamentally this premise is concerned with just and equitable distribution of economic goods and services. It is both process and outcome oriented (as opposed to positive economics which is focused primarily on outcome) and stresses the importance of an egalitarian outcome. Economic justice argues in favour of a just economy which provides equal access to primary goods and services versus an efficient economy constructed on unfair tax burdens, and inequality of income. Within this framework government intervention is not only desirable but also necessary. It also captures elements of sustainable livelihoods, which is based normatively on ideas of capability, equity and sustainability⁶.

⁴ Commutative justice: fairness in all agreements and exchanges; distributive: allocation of income, wealth and power; and social justice: obligations to be active/productive participants in society.

⁵ This is contrary to the conservative economic thinking (neo-liberal economics) about the libertarian conception of distributive justice. In this framework the state plays a night watchman role of simply protecting a narrowly defined set of (mostly property) and corporate rights. Other conservatives within this tradition may appeal to a utilitarian notion of distributive justice that relies totally on the free market to maximize utility, allocate resources and distributes rewards.

⁶ Capability refers to ability to perform certain basic functioning such as coping with stress and shock, making use of livelihood opportunities, and responding to adverse changes in conditions. Equity is usually measured in terms of income distribution, but it also implies an equal distribution of assets, capabilities and opportunities. Social sustainability implies an ability to maintain and improve livelihoods while maintaining and enhancing local and global assets and capabilities on which livelihoods depend (Chambers and Conway, 1992).

II. DYNAMICS OF THE BANGLADESH'S RMG SECTOR

2.1 The Growth of the Export-Oriented Ready-made Garments Sector

Bangladesh has at present turned into a major exporter of apparels in the global market, beginning its journey in late 1970s as a small non-traditional sector of export. Over the past decade alone, the sector registered a phenomenal growth rate of about 22 per cent (Table -2).

Table 2: Growth Rate of Apparel Export

| Year | Total Apparel Export | Growth Rate (%) | Average Growth Rate (%) |
|------|----------------------|-----------------|-------------------------|
| 1991 | 976.96 | | 22.29 |
| 1992 | 1385.60 | 41.83 | |
| 1993 | 1501.42 | 8.36 | |
| 1994 | 1886.42 | 25.64 | |
| 1995 | 2488.58 | 31.92 | |
| 1996 | 2628.64 | 5.63 | |
| 1997 | 3431.82 | 30.55 | |
| 1998 | 3847.35 | 12.11 | |

Source: Bhattacharya, D and M. Rahman (2001).

The growing importance of the apparels sector in the Bangladesh economy is quite obvious from the fact that the share of non-traditional, process-based manufactured exports have shown an upward trend in recent years compared to traditional resource based exports such as jute. Apparels sector's contribution to the country's incremental export growth is conspicuous, from 67.2 per cent in FY 1985 to 156.9 percent in FY 1999. The growth has augmented the aggregate export growth rate as well as offset the shortfall in the export earnings of some of the other traditionally key sectors such as jute, tea and leather (Table 2).

Table 2: Annual Incremental Contribution of RMG Exports

(As % of Total Incremental Exports)

| Year | Incremental Contribution |
|---------|--------------------------|
| 1984/85 | 67.2 |
| 1989/90 | 59.5 |
| 1994/95 | 57.8 |
| 1998/99 | 92.8 |
| 1999/00 | 75.59 |
| 2000/01 | 71.01 |
| 2001/02 | 57.46 |

Source: CPD (2002)

The export-oriented RMG sector has made a crucial contribution to the transformation of the Bangladesh economy, substantially contributing to Bangladesh's graduation from a predominantly aid-receiving nation to a trading nation. About two-fifths of the economy is now connected with the global economy through exports, imports, factor and commodity markets. The RMG sector accounts for about a third of the industrial workforce and contributes about a quarter of gross value added in the manufacturing sector.

2.2 Women Workers' Participation in the RMG Sector

Women's participation in the formal economy of Bangladesh has traditionally been low compared to that of men. The structure of gender participation has undergone a major shift with the emergence of the export oriented RMG sector in the late 1980s and its continued expansion in the 1990s. The female labour force currently accounts for about 90 percent⁷ of the total employment in this sector. In fact success of the country's flagship export-oriented industry – the RMG industry – is built to a large extent, on the supply of cheap and flexible female labour in the country (Table – 3).

Table 3: Number of Employees in RMG Sector

| Year | Male | Female | Total |
|------|--------|---------|---------|
| 1992 | 103950 | 589050 | 693000 |
| 1993 | 122325 | 693175 | 815500 |
| 1994 | 152025 | 861475 | 1013500 |
| 1995 | 121750 | 1095750 | 1217500 |
| 1996 | 130000 | 1170000 | 1300000 |
| 1997 | 140400 | 1263600 | 1404000 |
| 1998 | 147000 | 1323000 | 1470000 |
| 1999 | 150000 | 1350000 | 1500000 |
| 2000 | 180000 | 1620000 | 1800000 |
| 2001 | 200000 | 1800000 | 2000000 |

Source: BGMEA

2.3 Value Chain in Bangladesh RMG: Women Constitute Majority of the Work

The export oriented RMG industry of Bangladesh is part of the buyer driven value chain⁸. As mentioned in the introductory section, the sector gradually emerged as the East Asian Newly Industrialised Economies (NIEs) successfully moved up the buyer- driven chains, from the mere assembly of imported inputs (traditionally associated with export processing zones) to a more domestically integrated and higher value added form of exporting known as full package supply or OEM (original equipment manufacturing) production, and beyond that to original brand name manufacturing (OBM). In the RMG industry's ever-increasing search for cheap labour, the

⁷ There is no national figure. According to CPD workforce is 1.6 million, of which more than 66 percent are women (CPD, 2001).

⁸ An important supplement to the concept of value chain is the idea that many chains are characterised by a dominant party (or sometimes parties) who become responsible for upgrading activities within individual links and coordinating interactions between the links (Kaplinsky 1998). Here distinction is made between two types of governance: those cases where the coordination is undertaken by buyers (buyer driven value chain) and those in which producers play the key role (producer driven value chain). *Producer driven chains* are those in which large, usually transnational manufacturers play the central role in coordinating production networks (including their backward and forward linkages). This is the characteristic of capital and technology intensive industries such as automobiles, computer, etc. *Buyer driven chains* refer to those industries in which large retailers, brand marketers, and brand manufacturers play the pivotal role in setting up decentralised production networks in a variety of exporting countries, typically located in Third World countries. This pattern of trade related industrialisation has become common in labour-intensive consumer goods industries such as garments, footwear, etc. Production is generally carried out by tiered networks of Third World contractors that make finished goods to the specifications of foreign buyers.

labour-intensive part of the RMG industry were relocated at the lower end of the chain, like Bangladesh.

Bangladesh is in the middle of the world value chain for a non-cotton producing country, as it has a very weak textile base. The nodal points in the value chain are only few, reflecting Bangladesh's domestic income of only 25%. Only in recent years has there been some movement along the value chain through the establishment of a few backward linkage activities. In all the important nodal points, which are mainly production related, it is the women workers who constitute the majority of the work force. This is true for workers both at the factory level and also at the subcontracting level (at sweatshops and in the case of home-based workers).

The RMG sector of Bangladesh lacks design and marketing skills undercutting the opportunities for higher income by the workers. Many of the RMG factories subcontract a major part of their work to small factories. Subcontracting requires the services of middlemen. Middlemen and quota sellers also co-ordinate between the buying houses and the RMG producers. A big quota market has developed in Bangladesh which has grown in volume and importance in recent years.

The impact of RMG on society in general, and on women in particular, has attracted a great deal of attention from researchers in Bangladesh.⁹ These studies demonstrate the positive impact of RMG employment on women. Concerns have, however, been expressed over the low wages women receive, sex discrimination in terms of wage levels, long working hours and unfriendly working conditions in factories, lack of enforcement of minimum wage standards, unsafe workplace conditions, lack of appointment letters for employees, no provision for housing facilities, no weekly holidays, poor transportation facilities, no right to form trade unions, no enforcement of maternity leave and benefit provisions, lack of childcare facilities on the premises, and no protection against physical and mental abuse by employers.

III. BANGLADESH RMG AND GLOBAL THE TRADE REGIME

The export oriented RMG sector of Bangladesh is plagued with a number of critical weaknesses including: (i) low value addition, (ii) dependence on imported intermediate inputs; and (iii) high regional concentration of markets. In view of these weaknesses, the issue of whether Bangladesh will be able to maintain or improve its competitive position in apparels after the abolition of MFA, and emergence of certain policy restrictions such as more stringent rules of origin requirements, the issue of global recession and terrorist attack on US needs to be carefully analysed. Furthermore, enactment of Trade and Development Act (TDA 2000) in USA on preferential access of ready-made garments accorded to some African and Caribbean developing countries has posed potential danger of the country's RMG products in the US market. Bangladesh now has to take cognisance of an open trading regime where China and India, Bangladesh's principal competitors in the RMG market, will no longer be restrained by quotas. Since the phenomenal growth of the export-oriented RMG sector has led to a high degree of formal manufacturing employment of Bangladesh, the consequent changes in the RMG sector will have major implications on how women will fare in the new post-MFA regime.

3.1 Integration of MFA into WTO-ATC

The global trade regime is regulated by the Multi-fibre Arrangement (MFA), which has become part of the Agreement on Textiles and Clothing (ATC) of the World Trade Organisation (WTO). Under the MFA and its predecessors, the exporting countries restrained their exports to collect the benefit of higher prices, due to the economic rents created by quantitative restrictions. As such, dismantling of the MFA became a common demand of many developing countries during

⁹ e.g. Absar 2001, Hewett and Amin 2001, Paul-Majumder 2001, Zohir and Paul-Majumder 1996

the Uruguay Round of trade talks. Developed countries also realized that the MFA, put in place as a temporary measure and a deviation from the GATT principles, was not sustainable from a long-term perspective. Nevertheless, not all developing countries stand to gain from the phase-out of the protective quota system under the ATC.

Bangladesh faced restricted market access in apparels in two of the four quota enforcing countries, the United States and Canada. As far as Bangladesh is concerned, market access is restrained on 21 categories in the U.S. market and nine categories in the Canadian market. Consequently, 70 per cent of exports to these two markets from Bangladesh were carried out under quota. Average quota utilization in the USA and Canada had been on an average 85 per cent and 65 per cent respectively. However, in some of the categories which are of high export importance to Bangladesh, the fill rates in recent years had been near saturation, ranging between 90 per cent and 100 per cent.

Based on the analysis of the market share it is found that the share of Bangladesh in the US apparel market had indeed gone up between 1993 and 1999. The share of woven apparel in the US market went up from 3.04% to 4.04% and this was complemented by a sharp rise in the share of knit- RMG from 0.39 to 1.53%, on the other hand the growing presence of Bangladesh in the EU market was more visible: Bangladesh's share went up from 0.80% to 4.36% of total EU imports over the corresponding period (Bhattacharya, D and Rahman, 2000).

The impact of the ATC on Bangladesh is far from clear, for example. Some analysts believe that Bangladesh will gain from the liberalization of the textile and clothing trade. Majmudar (1996) argues that Bangladesh's low labour costs are enough to ensure that it will gain from the ATC. Further, GATT economists predict

...a 60 percent increase in trade in clothing with the phasing-out of the MFA. Most of that gain will accrue to relative newcomer countries, such as Pakistan, Bangladesh, China and India, which would sooner rather than later have hit restraints under the MFA, where they had not already done so (Atkinson cited in Joekes, 1996:10).

Other analysts are not as optimistic, however, believing that the least developed countries—including Bangladesh—stand to lose. For example, Page and Davenport (1994) argue that Bangladesh can expect to lose 18.9 percent of its exports (from 1992 levels) (Page and Davenport cited in Weston, 1996:86). The principal reason for this potential loss is the enormous amount of competition Bangladesh will face from other low-cost garment-exporting countries, which will also experience an increase in their quotas, such as Taiwan, Hong Kong, and South Korea (Econolynx International, 1992). This raises the question of the economic development prospects of the poorer among the developing countries. If they can not competitively export textiles and clothing, the most labour-intensive products, what can they expect to export and how can the international community best assist them? (Murray, 1995).

The share of total RMG exports of Bangladesh has increased in the EU market at the margin and the observation remained valid for both woven and knit RMG. This was indicative of, on the one hand, saturation of quota regime in the US market, and on the other hand, competitive strength of Bangladesh RMG in the non-quota market.

Implications for workers

Whatever the specific outcome of the MFA phase-out there will be major shifts in the location of garment production over the next decade. The initial impact will be highly disruptive to employment, particularly towards the end of the phase out period. Jobs will be lost. If countries like Bangladesh are no longer be unable to compete in an open market then factories will be closed overnight. Thousands of jobs are at stake, particularly for women who make up the majority of garment workers. Most workers have migrated from rural areas and it will be very difficult for them to maintain their survival. There are also likely to be negative implications for workers rights.

This will impact all households through a reduction in labour demand in the textile industries and a reduction in output for other sectors, as well as a depreciation of the real exchange rate, raising the costs for imported goods. Poor households, for which female labour is an important source of income, suffer relatively greater declines in real incomes. Simulation exercises show that a 26 per cent decline in RMG export earnings (excluding knitwear) would lead to a 14 per cent decrease in total real wages for unskilled female labour in non-agricultural sectors and a 1.6 to 2.6 per cent decline in real incomes of urban poor households. Furthermore China's entry into WTO, coupled with infrastructural facilities associated with the handover of Hong Kong's administration to China pose a serious challenge to Bangladesh's RMG exports. For example, when Canada removed cotton T-shirts from quota restrictions in 1997, about 95 per cent of Canadian orders were switched from Bangladesh to China.

3.2 China's Accession to the WTO

Many developing countries are concerned about the potential impact of China's accession to the WTO. In terms of market access of RMG products, China's accession to the WTO is considered as serious threat to Bangladesh. China is the world's largest consumer of cotton products and it ranks among the world's largest producer of most textile products. China's clothing exports is 16.2 percent of the total world exports, while Bangladesh's share is meagre 2.1 percent. Spinanger (2000) suggests that there are factual indications that when quotas are eliminated countries like Bangladesh may be neglected, and production shifted to locations like China.

Without looking into China's accession conditions and existing restrictions on Chinese textile exports, many studies have projected that Chinese textile industry will achieve particularly large gains from WTO accession.¹⁰ Some, including Chinese experts, even project that exports could grow by 130 per cent or more within a short period of time. In textile -importing countries, however, so much is the worry about such imports that some people seem to believe that everyone will shortly be wearing shirts made in China.

Bangladesh has similar export structure with China in some clothing items and competes with China mainly in outer garments, undergarments and textile yarns. In all these products, except for textile yarn and non-knit men's outerwear, Bangladesh has shown significant, rather very significant, improvement in its RCA indicator. In the case of men's outerwear (SITC 842), although initially it had been significant, RCA indicator for Bangladesh had deteriorated (Shafaeddin, 2002).

Revealed competitive advantages and its changes for Bangladesh over 1992-98

| Rank ^a | SITC | | R ^b | CR ^c |
|-------------------|------|---------------------------------|----------------|-----------------|
| 3 | 845 | Outer garments knit non-elastic | + ^d | I**e |
| 4 | 843 | Women's outerwear non-knit | + | I*f |
| 6 | 842 | Men's outerwear non-knit | + | D |
| 8 | 846 | Undergarments knitted | + | I** |
| 22 | 844 | Undergarments non-knit | + | I |
| 23 | 651 | Textile yarn | + | D |

Source: Shafaeddin (2002) compiled from UN/DESA, *Commodity Trade Statistics* database.

Notes: ^a Ranked according to the importance of the items in China's exports.

^b R refers to the indicator of revealed comparative advantage in 1997/98,

^c CR to its changes over 1992/93-1997/98 (the ratio of CR in 1997/98 to that in 1992/93).

^d + sign implies that R is greater than one.

I, D and = refer to improvement, deterioration or no change in R, respectively.

I means CR is greater than one and D implies CR less than one.

^e I**denotes CR = greater than 5 (improved very significantly).

^f I*denotes CR = 2-5 (improved significantly).

¹⁰ Li, Yufen (2002), China's Accession to WTO: Exaggerated Fears?, UNCTAD Discussion Paper No. 165, November 2002.

However, the legal reality is that China's accession conditions would not permit China to benefit from the Agreement on Textiles and Clothing (ATC) to the same extent as other WTO Members.¹¹ First of all, the transitional special safeguard measures introduced by ATC will be binding for China until 31 December 2008, i.e. four years after its removal for other WTO Members. Secondly, the base for quota expansion for China is much smaller and slower than other WTO Members. For instance, the bilateral textile agreement between the United States and China permits an annual average growth rate of less than 1 per cent, one of the lowest among importing countries.

Under the application of ATC to China, the coverage of its products by quotas is wider and the extent of quota increase will be less than for other WTO members. Under the ATC "growth on growth" provisions, until end-2004, the incremental increase for existing quantitative restrictions maintained by WTO Members on Chinese exports will be no more than 16 per cent, while in the same period other Members will, in principle, enjoy an expansion of a further 25 per cent following the first two stages of implementation of the ATC. These conditions constitute an iron ceiling for Chinese exports and will make the expansion of quotas insignificant for China in some products. In addition, the Chinese utilization of existing quotas is often 100 per cent or close to 100 per cent, while that of countries such as Indonesia, Thailand and Bangladesh has been hovering around 80 per cent. This too limits the potential export expansion for China.

Moreover other WTO Members will be able to expand their exports without the restriction of quotas starting from 1 January 2005 when the ATC is supposed to come to an end, and their trade in textiles and clothing should be fully integrated into WTO's trade liberalization. For China, however, a special transitional safeguard will continue to prohibit China from benefiting from the post-ATC free trading regime in textiles and clothing. The special safeguards will permit importing countries to impose import restraints if market disruption is deemed to be caused by an import surge. Moreover some other countries such as Mexico, Turkey, and some Asian countries will also benefit from the preferential provisions of their respective regional trade agreements.

Restrictions on the expansion of China's textile exports also will come from conditions accepted not connected to ATC. For instance, a number of WTO Members have succeeded in maintaining their prohibitions, quantitative restrictions or other measures inconsistent with the WTO Agreements against textile and clothing imports from China. For example, Argentina, the European Community, Hungary, Poland, Slovakia and Turkey all have signed agreements with China to keep their restrictions till 2005. Anti-dumping practices inconsistent with WTO rules will be maintained by Mexico against China's exports until 2007.

At present the United States is the major destination of China's exports. The United States International Trade Commission¹² did a comparison of existing quotas with import levels implied by permissible growth rates under the ATC on men's woven shirts from China (a major export item) with those for imports from South Asia, Hong Kong (China) and the Republic of Korea, WTO members designated as small suppliers, and all other affected WTO suppliers. According to these calculations, between 1998 to 2004, permissible Chinese imports would increase by 6 per cent, but those of South Asia (India, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka and Pakistan) would increase by 78 per cent, those of small suppliers like Egypt, Guatemala, Costa Rica, Kenya etc, by 73 per cent; and those of all other suppliers such as Turkey, Indonesia, Malaysia, Philippines, Singapore and Thailand, by 47 per cent.

¹¹ This argument was developed in Yufen (2002).

¹² United States International Trade commission, August 1999, *Assessment of the Economic Effects on the United States of China's Accession to the WTO*.

3.3 Emerging Standards and NTBs

The RMG sector has been confronting the burden of newer and more stringent obligations from the developed countries in the form of labour standards, environmental regulations, quality and safety requirements as well as relating to compliance with particular provisions defining competition policies. Whilst many of these issues, *per se*, reflect genuine concerns, there is a growing fear in the LDCs that protectionist lobbies are, at the end, going to benefit, undermining the competitive edge and market access of RMG products of LDCs such as Bangladesh.

3.4 EU's Everything but Arms Initiative

Since July 1971 Bangladesh has been enjoying preferential market access for her exports under the EC-GSP scheme. Textiles/apparels was included under the scheme in the early - 1980s. The inclusion of T & C was a critical for the nascent apparel industry of Bangladesh since in the EU. Even after the commitments made in the UR, the tariff rates for apparel, averaging about 12.5%, continue to be one of the highest. Preferential treatment under the EU GSP scheme allows EU importers to claim duty drawback (equivalent to the full tariff equivalent of 12.5%) on imports of apparel from Bangladesh. This has allowed Bangladesh to have a firm foothold in the EU market which now account for 35 per cent of her total global apparel exports. Bangladesh has been able to increase her share in the EU market from 1.50 to 3.44, most notably from 0.80 to 4.36 in the export of knit-RMG.

Availability of GSP, however, hinges in stringent Rules of Origin (ROO) criteria. Since Bangladesh did not have strong backward linkage, her capacity to avail to the GSP facility was limited.

4.5 US Trade and Development Act 2000

The WTO-compatible-discretionary-safeguard-clauses enabled the US TDA 2000 to provide duty and quota free access to US markets for sub-Saharan African and Caribbean countries. There are similar agreements with Israel and Jordan. These agreements are obviously discriminatory towards other Middle East countries as also to Bangladesh.

The TDA 2000 have particular consequences for apparel exporting countries such as Bangladesh. USA accounted, in the fiscal year 2000-2001, 33.9 percent of Bangladesh's total apparel exports while share of US apparel market in Bangladesh's total exports stood at 45.6 percent (Bhattacharya and Rahman, 2001).

The BGMEA says a zero-tariff (implying in many cases more than 20 percent tariff preference) and quota-free access for the apparel products of the CBI (and SSA) have started to pose a formidable export challenge. Some of the effects of the TDA 2000 may be felt in the short run in terms of trade diversion in favour of the CBI countries. In the medium run such competitive pressure may also emanate from SSA countries (Hasan, 2002).

4.6 Downturn in RMG Exports and Impact at the Workers Level

The NUK carried out a small survey on female garment workers in Dhaka, Narayanganj and Chittagong city to understand the magnitude of the problem. The objective of the study was to examine the socio –economic conditions of the female garments workers who lost their jobs due to the present crisis.

Findings of the study are summarized below:

- A majority of the workers joined garment factories, motivated by poverty - poverty resulting from the absence of a wage earning male member in the household, or withdrawal of financial support by a male wage earner.
- Family and social disequilibria (torture, desertion, household violence etc.) also contributed to women's migration to the cities to seek employment in the garment

factories, as well as escape from dominant patriarchal attitudes of society towards independent women.

- The job loss has impacted negatively on the household relationships; out of 225 respondents 44 percent reported that relationships had already deteriorated while many are anxious that relationships will be aggravated if they fail to find an alternative employment.
- In some cases, the respondents face physical abuse by household members due to their lost wages. Unmarried girls bear the brunt of this abuse, and married women are often threatened by desertion from their husbands if they fail to provide the economic support to the household.
- Women who have lost their jobs in the garment factories experience heightened insecurity inside and outside the home.
- Kinship relationships remain the primary source of financial insurance. Women borrow money from their relatives, who are often themselves poor and secure lines of credit from small local grocers to feed their families – money to be paid back at high interest rates in the future
- The majority of the respondents face an uncertain future. The female workers believe they do not have the skills to secure a better job. They want to return to factory work and see no alternative. Most want to remain in the formal labour force, if possible, and hence are not interested in micro-credit schemes.

IV. REORDERING THE QUEUE: A STRATEGIC RESPONSE FRAMEWORK

4.1 An Analytical Interpretation

The capitalist world-economy functions by means of deployment of labour that is waged and non-waged, formal and informal, male and female. In recent decades, the involvement of women in various kinds of labour arrangements has been striking. Capitalist accumulation is achieved through the surplus-extraction of labour, and this includes the paid and unpaid economic activities of women, whether in male-headed or female-headed households. The various forms of the deployment of female labour reflect asymmetrical gender relations and patriarchal gender ideologies (Moghadam, 1999).

Global accumulation, as the driving force of the world-system, not only hinges on class and regional differences across economic zones, it is a gendered process as well, predicated upon gender differences in the spheres of production and reproduction. In an era of economic globalisation, the pressure for greater competitiveness through lower labour and production costs encourages the demand for and supply of female labour.

However, in a reflection of the contradictions inherent in capitalism and exploitation, the involvement of women in the global economy and in national labour forces has also served to integrate and modify gender relations and ideologies.

Given the magnitude of foreseeable future, the women workers will bear the brunt of the negative adjustment including joblessness. Joblessness results in economic hardship as well as a sense of powerlessness, voicelessness and humiliation. Households will plunge into ever-deeper poverty and the gender relations will be under greater threat.

4.2 Two-pronged Goal-oriented Approach

The analysis and observations presented in the forgoing sections point to a two-pronged strategic-approach for Bangladesh to managing the recent developments in the RMG Sector. The features of the approaches are as follows:

- *Active participation in global trade negotiations to reorient the world trade system towards putting development first:* Bangladesh should continue to press for the reorientation of the WTO to focus on raising living standards the world over rather than limiting itself to merely maximizing trade per se. There is an urgency for dynamic engagement at the bilateral

level for enhanced market access for Bangladesh's RMG exports with a view to making the partner countries understand that the decline and collapse of the RMG sector may not only bring disaster on the economic front, but also potentially trigger socio-economic events which will affect the peace and security of the region and the world, in addition to adversely impacting on the democratic and developmental prospects of Bangladesh.

- *Articulation of a home grown comprehensive development strategy for unleashing the productive capacity of the economy, guaranteeing the right to just and favourable conditions of work:* This calls for a comprehensive economic framework to infuse productive capacity as well as to address structural injustices originating from the unequal command over economic and political resources, which perpetuate poverty and inequality. With regards to the apparel sector, a symbiotic relationship has to be established comprising all stakeholders- government, businesspersons and workers - to: (i) considerably improve the infrastructure, technology and logistic support including backward-forward linkages to increase competitiveness, particularly in relating to product quality, response times and delivery capabilities; and (ii) adopt and implement labour standards to address the deprivation of the garment workers and develop their skills.

Reorienting the World Trade System that Puts Development First

Trade has become the lens through which development is perceived, rather than the other way around. The world trade system has not been able to maximize development potential, particularly for the poorest nations in the world, through advocating for changes that enshrine development at the top of the WTO agenda, and thereby provide poor countries with a better mix of enhanced market access and room to pursue appropriate development strategies. The regime needs to evolve, to accept institutional diversity and the right of countries to 'protect' their institutional arrangements (Rodrik, 2001).

Changing the Unequal Bargain: A Legitimate Claim

Trade liberalisation has been an unequal bargain, with the greatest gains from WTO agreements accruing to industrialised countries. The costs of Northern protectionism for developing countries are huge, amounting to a loss of US\$700bn in annual export earnings, or 12 per cent of their combined GDP (Oxfam, 2001). Developing countries have opened up their economies far more rapidly than industrialised countries, often under World Bank and IMF programmes, but this unilateral trade liberalisation has not been taken into account in multilateral agreements.

An acid test of the commitment of industrialised countries to promote a more equitable distribution of the benefits of world trade is the proposal that they provide free access to their markets for products exported from the 49 least-developed countries (LDCs).

Special Treatment for Bangladesh RMG Sector

Implementation of the WTO-ATC is well advised, but it must be stressed that developed countries should provide supportive measures to offset the human costs that are likely to manifest in certain poor countries, such as Bangladesh. Large numbers of redundancies among female workers from the garment industry in Bangladesh, or downward pressure on wage levels as the industry seeks to reduce costs, will create hardships that will need to be addressed through social and economic assistance programmes.

Articulation of a Home-grown Comprehensive Strategy

Addressing the Technological, Infrastructural and Incentive Issues

Bangladesh will need to design appropriate strategies to address the technological and infrastructural issues with a view to remaining competitive in the future. The following, among others, may form part of a strategic response:

- Re-strategize and further upgrade the manufacturing facilities to meet the new challenges, including setting up of backward linkages;
- Take initiative to build an investment fund in association with IFC and other financing institutions for financing business activities, upgrading technology and infrastructure, and providing grants and soft lending to companies that comply with international labour and safety standards;
- Take steps to improve the infrastructure and logistic support required for the industry to be able to improve its competitiveness, particularly in its response and delivery capabilities;
- Since in all likelihood investment will have to be made by the private sector, a conducive policy environment will have to be created to facilitate, encourage, promote and realise investment through capital flows, both domestic and FDI, in these activities.
- Take initiatives to establish a comprehensive data bank for sharing of information regarding new technologies, markets, best practices and trade/investment opportunities;
- The market for apparels is a hugely diversified market, and there will be a need to identify the niches where Bangladesh will get a maximum return.
- Initiatives must be on to provide adequate support to existing, and create new fashion and design institutions, and training facilities for workers to service the export-oriented industries such as RMG and leather.
- The government will need to pay priority attention to the issue of stimulating transfer of technology to the export-oriented industries in the country and support skill development and upgrading.

4.3 Towards a Rights Based Framework

Building on the egalitarian view of economic justice¹³ it is imperative to begin to construct a comprehensive framework for economic justice and economic and social rights. Key to this is the inclusion of all of the aspects of justice (commutative, distributive and social justice) centred in gender analysis, which examines gender inequality, gender bias and rigorous attention to unpaid work. It must also explicitly examine class and racial dynamics.

Attainment of fundamental rights may be seen as one of the central goals society and governments should strive to meet while it is designing its social and political structures.¹⁴ And capabilities, like human rights, supply a moral and humanly rich set of goals for development, in place of "the wealth and poverty of the economists," as Marx so nicely put it (Marx 1844). In his view, societal goals should include the fulfilment of people's rights to capabilities. If we adopt this perspective in the present context, then the right to food, healthcare, education, etc. are to be viewed as proxies for more fundamental rights to the capabilities that derive from access to food, healthcare and education - viz., the capabilities of being free from hunger, of being well-nourished and being able to avoid morbidity and premature mortality, of being able to participate actively in the society, and so on. An outline of rights-based framework is presented below from the perspective of women's right to work.

¹³ Economic justice is commutative justice which provides for human dignity, fair exchange and the participation of everyone who wants to participate. Thus everyone can participate in the economy on a term according to her /his talents and the economy provides adequately for everyone's integrity as moral agents.

¹⁴ Amartya Sen (1982, 1985) has proposed a system, called the goal rights system.

Women's Right To Work: A Framework

| The Rights | Assessment | Objectives | Output indicators |
|---|--|---|--|
| 1. The Right to Work | Discrimination in access to employment and during employment, based on gender considerations/ class considerations/ minorities/ migrant / refugee considerations | To ensure that access to employment opportunities are fair and equal without discrimination and that workers know their rights under the law | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Reform of domestic laws that are obstacles to realizing the Right to Work, • Women's organizations strengthened, • carry out legal, awareness, and education campaigns, • training programs and rights advocacy |
| 1.1. Right to just and favourable conditions of work | Unhealthy, and unsafe working conditions precludes working even if discrimination was not applied | To work with local / national businesses to promote just and favourable conditions of work, to ensure sanitary, healthy and safe working conditions for all workers | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Reform of labour laws, Active advocacy through trade unions, • Establishment and enforcement of regulatory systems, • Access to health facilities on site, enforcement of punitive laws for violators |
| 1.2 Right of everyone to an adequate standard of living | That the right to work is impacted by a lack of standardized wages or discriminatory practices in hiring; a lack of equal pay for work of equal value; no effective system for delivery of social security | To ensure that non-discrimination is taking place in terms of hiring and of wages, to enable job creation as needed with equal access to employment; to develop a social security delivery system | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Reform of labour laws concerning hiring practices, equal pay, minimum wages etc. • Re-training schemes, available to re-skill workers • National policies that support labor intensive industrial development, • social safety nets available for the most vulnerable |

The Immediate Steps

The workers are the backbone of the RMG sector, at least in case of Bangladesh. They keep the chain rotating, but their welfare is often lost in the queue. They have no voice in policy-making. A comprehensive strategy demands economic justice for workers, providing for human dignity, fair exchange and the participation of everyone. It is essential that employers change the mindset towards corporate responsibility that ensures decent work as upheld in ILO charters.

The immediate steps suggested below are doable.

- *Insurance for Workers:* The workers' contributions to the economy in recent times has kept the country afloat in terms of the highest contribution to the balance of payments. The RMG sector comprises 80 per cent of the export basket for Bangladesh (USD 5.1 billion) while remittances constitute nearly 2.5 billion US dollars. Foreign aid brought in only of USD 1.25 billion in FY02. A one per cent exports tax totals 50 million US Dollar, which could comprise the paid up capital of a Workers Insurance Fund.

- *Enforcement and Monitoring of Labour Standards:* There is no denying that many good labour-friendly laws are written in the statute books. What is conspicuously missing is enforcement mechanism and the political will or capacity of the government to enforce and monitor labour standards. An independent Labour Standards Commission should be set up which will not only ensure workers' rights, but will also serve to boost exports in the wake of consumers' awareness for ethical buying. This kind of commission could replace the codes of conducts being touted by the large-scale multinational buying houses.
- *Letter of Appointment and Minimum Wages:* Employers should immediately institute regulations mandating that all factories must give contracts or appointment letters to their employees and these appointment letters and contracts should clearly spell out provisions and conditions of work and terms of service, in a manner compatible with human rights and ILO conventions. BGMEA should remain firm to ensure compliance with this provision. The employers should forthwith implement the Minimum Wage Ordinance, 1994. Studies have shown that higher wages may actually reduce the cost of production through improvement of the working environment, providing greater incentives to workers, thereby increasing productivity. It is imperative that compliance with the Factory Act, 1965 is ensured.
- *Low-cost Housing:* A prime insecurity and disincentives faced by migrated workers is finding a safe and secure place to live. A housing scheme involving owner-bank-government-NGO is feasible if the government comes forward with land.
- *Training for Skill Development:* There is a need for a concerted effort to scale up the skills of the existing workers as well as helping them find alternative forms of employment. This may require building of new institutions, especially for those who have been retrenched.
- *Security:* Security appears to be real cause of concern for the garment workers, especially those that must work in the evenings. Travel to and from the factories is dangerous: women are often sexually harassed and sometimes raped. Since the garment factories, even without planned settlements, have clustered in a few areas of the city, and workers also tend to live near the factories, a special contingent of police should be deployed in these areas to protect the workers while they commute from home to the factory and back.
- *Transport:* Women workers are often verbally and sexually harassed and sometimes raped, when travelling to and from the factories. They are further constrained by their low-wages which prohibits them from taking public transport to work. Long commutes to work effects their health and hence their productivity. The owners may arrange contractual bus service for workers, as has been the practice in the government and for other private sector businesses.
- *Spread of Ownership:* A rights-based incentive structure demands an incentive system based on shared ownership. This will not only unleash productive capacity through active engagement in the workplace but also act as a dividend for the investment of their labour which rotates the cycle of value chain forward.

Note

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