

Endless Misery of Nimble Fingers: The Rana Plaza Disaster

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Abstract

In search of better luck and lives, poor women from rural Bangladesh come to urban areas of the country to work in the garments industry from which the country is earning the majority of its foreign income. The country's fate is changing due to the industry; so is the fate of its owners, but the question is how much has the fate of the poor women who work in it changed? How empowered are these women as a result of their employment in the factories? Investigation has shown that women are victimized as a result of obvious gender discrimination. They become victims of any kind of disaster, including both human-made and natural. The disgraceful work environment has always pressured them into forced labor, often under threat and sometimes sexual harassment. The collapse of the eight-story Rana Plaza garment factory on April 24, 2013 has consequently caused another hidden disaster in women's lives, the uncertainty of life in the future and post traumatic disorder. Economic access provided economic emancipation to some extent to these garment worker women. Paradoxically, the endless misery of women's lives because of this human-made disaster is questioning the meaning of "women's economic empowerment."

Keywords

Economic empowerment; human-made disaster; hidden disaster; post traumatic disorder; gender discrimination

Introduction

Prior to the boom of the readymade garments industry, there were not many places where poor rural women could find employment in Bangladesh. Most of them who were able to find work were in the agricultural and the informal sector. The readymade garments industry opened up a new avenue of employment for rural women. At a superficial level, it may seem that the readymade garments industry has changed the fate of rural women in Bangladesh drastically because it pays more and is also more secure compared to the work they did back home in their villages. By comparing the women garment workers' situation before and after they started to work in this sector, this essay aims to demonstrate that the miserable state of the women garment workers has actually not changed much. In fact, in some cases things have gotten even more difficult. The harsh realities of the women garment workers of Rana Plaza, victims of one of the worst human-made disaster in recent times, are also a sign of a hidden disaster that they will face for the rest of their lives. This implies that these women workers face an uncertain future and have to deal with trauma for the rest of their lives.

Background of the Women Garment Worker in Bangladesh

Bangladesh is one of the largest hubs for the manufacture of readymade garments. After the 1980s, garment factories have grown dramatically because of structural economic reforms in the country. During this time, Bangladesh opened up its economy to foreign in-

vestments through deregulation of markets and privatization. The first garment factory was opened in 1976 (War on Want, www.waronwant.org/attachments/Stitched%20Up.pdf). Now, over 3.5 million people are working in more than 5,000 garment factories across the country. Almost 80 percent of the workers in these factories are women, especially young ones, who are the driving force of these factories (Kakuchi, 2013). Although Bangladesh is earning the majority of its foreign income through this industry and the country is one of the largest exporters of garments in the world, the workers in this industry actually struggle to make ends meet. According to the Institute for Global Labor and Human Rights (www.globallabourrights.org/campaigns?id=0003), “Bangladesh’s garment workers are among the hardest working women and men in the world, but also the most exploited, earning the lowest minimum wage in the world.” It is not only in terms of wages that these women are exploited, they are deprived of several other rights that they are entitled to such as non-issuance of appointment letters and identity cards and limited space for unionism and collective bargaining. They often face mental harassment due to being verbally abused. In addition, none of the factories provide maternity leave for the four months that they are entitled to by law and most factories give maternity leave only without pay (Hossain et al., 2010).

Feminization of Labor in Bangladesh

Young women, who have migrated from rural areas, are often unmarried and between the ages of 15-30 years. They are in great demand by garment factory owners, because of their high productivity, in order to meet the unrealistic targets that they set everyday. There is a major argument that seeks to identify reasons why there are so many women employed in garment factory work. Some scholars note that globalization has opened up a new door for women to gain access into a formally paid labor market. In the case of Bangladesh,

a World Bank report explains that access to the labor market inspires girls to be educated because work in garment factories requires basic education. Increasing access to basic education for girl children reduces early marriage and also reduces fertility and pregnancy rates (World Bank, 2012). Additionally, garment industries have created financially independent and successful women in Bangladeshi society. This work is instantly empowering women by making them financially independent, many for the first time in their lives (Hossain, 2013). On the other hand, some feminist scholars have argued that women's entry into the paid labor market has done little to change other aspects of their lives, such as the structure of patriarchy within the family or the community (Kabeer, 2000).

Factors Forcing Women to Work under Dangerous Situations

In the case of Bangladeshi women garment workers, the lack of collective bargaining power has made them voiceless. While men garment workers can seek to increase their salaries and avail of opportunities in other factories, women face discrimination in job placement, increments and promotions. Research has also revealed that there is a gendered wage segregation in the garment factories, with a few men at the top who have more control and higher wages than women. The women are reluctant to seek more for fear of sexual harassment, and they do not have a voice in the factory (Ahmed, 2004). Apart from the workplace, working in garment factories has degraded the poor migrant women's sexual reputation, making them less eligible for marriage, because of which they lose confidence and worry about their future (Ahmed, 2004). Sexual harassment is common in garment factories and women are threatened with dismissal if they speak out. A study conducted by Action Aid, Bangladesh, a British NGO, estimates that at least 20 percent of women workers were engaged in sex at the workplace (Islam, 2013). Unfortunately, married women workers' incomes are controlled by the males of

their households. Research has therefore revealed that in a collective sense these women of the garment factories are more vulnerable and insecure for economic and social reasons compared to their rural sisters. In addition, most of them never go back to their families for social reasons (Kabeer, 2000).

Human-made Disaster and Women Garments Workers

The worst human-made disaster in Bangladesh's history occurred on 24 April 2013 when Rana Plaza, an eight-story commercial building in Savar, the greater capital city of Dhaka in Bangladesh, collapsed (Stefanicki, 2013). Six readymade garment factories were situated in the building including a commercial bank and shops. According to the media, about 6,000 people used to work inside this building. The day before the building collapsed, cracks were discovered in it by the government authority, and they issued a warning to the building authorities to avoid using it. Although the bank and shops in the Rana Plaza were closed, the garment workers were ordered to return to work as per their scheduled work hours. The garment workers were in a state of panic following news of the cracks found in the building walls and they refused to go inside. A representative of the garment factory owners forced them to start work and threatened to otherwise cut their salaries. It was the last week of the month; most of the workers felt that if they were to lose their salaries they would be unable to manage their living expenses in the coming month. Most men refused to go inside and waited, but a majority of the women went in to work because they feared the threat.

The following cases provide insight into the experience of two women workers who were severely injured in the Rana Plaza incident. Their stories (told through the interviews conducted on 18-20 June, 2013 at NITOR, Dhaka) demonstrate how their situation became worse after they joined the garment factory.

Case 1: Feelings of Hopelessness

On the morning of April 24, 2013, Rabeya's husband asked her not to go to work. She herself was hesitating. Her mother, who was also employed at one of Rana Plaza's readymade garment factories, acknowledged their hesitation as the building was feared to be unsafe, but the family's financial reality forced them to go to work. As Rabeya's mother said: "We needed to pay our housing rent and other expenses. If we did not go, then we would not receive our salaries. How would we survive the rest of the month?"

As they approached their workplace, many people, particularly the men, protested outside. A day before, officials investigated the building structure and identified signs of structural failure, which were potentially dangerous. Not long after 9 a.m., 18-year-old Rabeya felt the first 'jerk' beneath her feet as the building shook. The earthquake-like tremors led to its collapse, which turned her life upside down. "When I opened my eyes, I found one of my co-workers on top of my legs and a building column on top of both of us. My co-worker died right away, and I felt severe pain. I started screaming but realized no one could help me," she recounted: "I survived under the column for two days. During those two days I called my mother's name, but she never replied. If I could only find her body I would be at rest. After I was rescued, I have cried a lot," she admitted.

Out of nine family members, Rabeya lost seven that day. She lost both her legs and could not help but question her future. Feelings of hopelessness overwhelmed her. Without taking a breath between her sentences, Rabeya openly described her fears for her very uncertain future and resentment for losing her legs: "Whenever I look at my legs I feel like I am in the dark, there is no light that can show me a way to walk further."

She asked herself, "Look at my body, how can I expect that my husband will carry his disabled wife for the rest of his life? After all, I will not be able to earn money to contribute to the family. I have lost all other close relatives who could support me." "Why did

I not die that day?” she continued in grief. One and a half months later, Rabeya was still recovering in the hospital. Her recovery was overshadowed with depression. As she openly recounted her situation, she searched for answers that were momentarily unclear, but then said: “I have to survive, that is what I know.” Evidently, she was trying to cope with the situation and had not given up. For Rabeya, talking about her feelings was a very constructive way to cope with the tragedy.

Case 2: Dealing with Social Stigmas

The day Rana Plaza collapsed, Shirin’s husband called her brother to tell him that his sister was seriously injured. This was the first news Shirin’s brother had received of his sister in nearly two years after she had eloped with a man from a nearby village, whom her parents would not allow her to marry. On that night, her mother and brother rushed to Dhaka to see her in the hospital, where they remain today while she recovers.

On the following day, Shirin’s husband left her after receiving news that she may not fully recover from her injuries. Internal bleeding had led to near failure of her kidneys, and after several surgeries, her legs will not be able to function normally again. Without fully functioning legs, she will no longer be able to be a primary income generator for her family. “I left my family to marry, bringing dishonor upon our household,” Shirin said. She was studying for her bachelor’s degree when she decided to elope, consequently abandoning her studies and seeking employment at Rana Plaza.

“My husband rejected me after the accident. I received some money from a donor to cope with the expense of being in the hospital without an income, but he took half and left. If I go back now, how will our neighbors treat us? My dreams have turned into nightmares.” Shirin discussed her current situation, laughing loudly at times, while at others she broke down in tears.

Shirin's mother and brother resented her decision to marry a man without family consent, and believed that dealing with social stigmas in their community was ultimately her responsibility and fault.

Many people who go through traumatic events have difficulty adjusting and coping for a while. But with time and support, such traumatic reactions usually improve. In some cases, however, the symptoms can become worse and can last for months or even years. Sometimes they may completely shake life up. In such cases, victims may develop post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) if their symptoms go untreated, as this can happen at any age. This includes war veterans and survivors of physical and sexual assault, abuse, accidents, disasters, and many other serious events.

In the case of the Rana Plaza victims, it is not only the event that has traumatized the survivors, but after the injuries heal, survivors have to confront social stigmas that are as worrisome as their physical injuries. The trauma, the fear of social exclusion, being a family burden, and financial uncertainty, may lead to a higher risk of mental health complications in the future and make the victims even more socially vulnerable, which can be called another hidden disaster in their lives.

Conclusion

The rise of readymade garment factories in Bangladesh provided economic opportunities to rural and less skilled women. Their incomes helped them to contribute to their family members. Through such contributions and via their access to productive work, the women achieved economic emancipation in their lives and were unable to go beyond their village boundaries and the traditional society where their roles were circumscribed as housewives and unpaid agricultural workers within the home compound. As garment workers in Bangladesh, they started earning low wages compared to similar workers in other countries. These large numbers of women in Bang-

ladesh are being exploited in the garments factories because of their naive, docile and traditional roles. They do not have any bargaining power; they work in unhealthy environments seven days a week, twelve hours a day, without any social protection and access to maternity leave and face sexual exploitation on a regular basis. When human-made disasters, such as the one at Rana Plaza, occur, they destroy the little hope they have for their futures and they face the prospect of severe post traumatic disorder. With feelings of fear about an uncertain future, lack of social acceptance and isolation, fears of social stigma and being burdens on their families, our women of the nimble fingers have become terrible victims of such a disaster.

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Abstract in Bengali

একটি স্বাবলম্বী সুন্দর জীবনের প্রত্যাশায় গ্রাম থেকে বাংলাদেশের দরিদ্র নারী ছুটে আসে শহরাঞ্চলে এবং যোগ দেয় গার্মেন্টস কারখানায়। দেশের অর্থনৈতিক পট পরিবর্তনে বৈদেশিক মুদ্রার পরে যাদের অবদান অনস্বীকার্য তা হল এই পোশাক-শিল্প কারখানার শ্রমিকদের অর্থনৈতিক অবদান। এই শিল্প কারখানারগুলোর বদৌলতে দেশের যেমন পরিবর্তন হচ্ছে সেই সাথে পরিবর্তন হচ্ছে শিল্প কারখানার মালিকদের ভাগ্য। কিন্তু প্রশ্ন হল এই হতদরীদ্র নারী পোশাক শ্রমিকদের ভাগ্যের আসলে কতটুকু পরিবর্তন হচ্ছে? এই পোশাক কারখানায় কাজ করে নারীদের কি পরিমাণ ক্ষমতায়ন হচ্ছে? বিভিন্ন জরিপে সুস্পষ্ট দেখা গিয়েছে যে, লিঙ্গ বৈষম্যের কারণে নারীরা বিভিন্ন বৈষম্যের শিকার হয়। যেকোনো ধরণের দুর্যোগে সেটা প্রাকৃতিক বা মানুষ সৃষ্ট যেটাই হোক না কেন নারীরাই অবশেষে সবথেকে ক্ষতির সম্মুখীন হয়। মর্যাদাহীন কর্ম পরিবেশের ফলে তাদের জোরপূর্বক শ্রমে বাধ্য করা হয়, প্রায়ই হুমকির মাধ্যমে আবার কখনো কখনো যৌন হয়রানির মাধ্যমে। দুর্যোগ থেকে সৃষ্ট দুর্ভোগ এই নারীদের জীবনে বয়ে এনেছে অদৃশ্য আরেক দুর্যোগ যা হচ্ছে তাদের ভবিষ্যত জীবনের অনিশ্চয়তা এবং দুর্যোগ পরবর্তি মানসিক চাপ। আর্থিক উপার্জন পোশাক শ্রমিক নারীদেরকে কোন কোন ক্ষেত্রে অর্থনৈতিক স্বাধীনতার স্বাক্ষর দিয়েছে। কিন্তু অন্যদিক বিবেচনায় মানুষ সৃষ্ট দুর্যোগে নারীদের সীমাহীন দুর্ভোগ তাদের অর্থনৈতিক স্বাধীনতাকে প্রশ্নবিদ্ধ করে তুলছে প্রতিনীয়ত।

Keywords

মহিলা শাসক্তিকরণ কেন্দ্র, উত্থানধাল সমুদায়, বিপদ্ জাঙ্খিম ন্যূনিকরণ, স্তানপানী লথা সরসফাই প্রব্দন