



**From inclusion to exclusion? The case of ex-workers of  
garment industry in Bangladesh**

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## Table of Contents

List of Tables	v
List of Appendices	v
List of Acronyms	v
Abstract	vi
<b>Chapter one: Introduction</b>	<b>1</b>
Background	1
Statement of the problem: justification and relevance	3
Research objective	4
Research question	4
Structure of this paper	5
<b>Chapter two: Conceptual and analytical framework and methodology</b>	<b>6</b>
Conceptual and analytical framework	6
Methodology	12
Reflexivity and ethical considerations	14
Scope and limitations	15
<b>Chapter three: Workers' entry-departure dynamics in garment industry</b>	<b>16</b>
Profile of respondents	16
Motivation behind entry in garment industry	17
Experience at workplace: labour standard, work environment, health and labour control	19
Labour turnover: intra-industry factory change and permanent departure	22
<b>Chapter four: Post-factory life experiences of ex-workers</b>	<b>27</b>
Post-factory livelihood choices	27
Income poverty, loss of economic power and dependency	28
(Constrained) mobility and participation in outside activities	29
Social networks and relationships	30
Exercising choices in household and intra-household bargaining	31
Social status and recognition: from higher to lower?	34
Overall reflections on working in garment industry	35
<b>Chapter five: Conclusion</b>	<b>38</b>
References	41

## **List of Tables**

2.1 Arenas and elements of social exclusion.....	6
2.2 Sample frame .....	13
2.3 Coordination matrix between research questions and methodology .....	14
3.1 Respondents age during study, at entry and departure, and job-length.....	16
3.2 Civic status, education level and prior occupation of respondents .....	17

## **List of Appendices**

Appendix 1 Interview guide .....	45
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## **List of Acronyms**

BGMEA	Bangladesh Garment Manufacturers and Exporters Association
FGD	Focus Group Discussion
ILO	International Labour Organization
KI	Key Informant
KII	Key Informant Interview
PM	Production Manager
RMG	Readymade Garment

## Abstract

This research is about a *'forgotten class'*—those garment workers of Bangladesh who have left this industry. Although this industry has employed several million women and included them in formal labour market, it is highly criticized due to its failure to provide them with a sustainable and decent livelihood choice. Consequently, women workers leave the job within a very short span after starting. This trend raises a broad question—what happens to the lives of these *'once included workers'* after their departure. This has remained an unexplored area.

Under purview of this broad question, I have tried to find answer of three specific questions—why do women workers depart from garment industry and what are their post-factory livelihood options? what are ex-workers' experience and perception of working in garment? and, what changes ex-workers experience in post-factory life in terms of their living condition and status? I have followed a qualitative approach and employed case-study method. Findings reveal that throughout the work life in garment, although very short, workers become *'floating'*, move from one factory to another in search of better condition due to some specific forms of labour market insecurities, and the end of this *'floating phase'* is departure. Both workplace related factors (excessive work pressure, labour control practice and behaviour of managerial staffs, breach of contract) as well as non-workplace related factors (patriarchal dominance, marriage, concerns for social reproduction and care economy) are responsible for departure. Whatever the reason, exclusion from formal labour market has pushed some ex-workers to informal sector work and has made some others jobless. The immediate impact of exclusion is income poverty and dependency, which has significant implications for other social and non-economic arenas of life especially in self-worth, self-esteem, status and recognition, mobility, and stigmatization. As a whole, exclusion shows a clear downward mobility, which is not a simple process and involves many factors.

## Relevance to Development Studies

This study is relevant to development studies because of its focus on social exclusion which has its close link with poverty, a very broad area in development discourse. Findings highlight the multidimensional aspects of exclusion and poverty of a particular *class* who remained out of attention. Hence this study fills a gap in areas of knowledge in development studies filed. Besides the study has explored some issues that would be of great concern in policy arena, especially for gender policy, employment and social protection policy.

## Keywords

Readymade garment (RMG), Social exclusion, Labour turnover, Empowerment

## Chapter one: Introduction

This research is about a *'forgotten class'*—those garment workers of Bangladesh who have left this industry. Restructuring of world economy and emphasis on export-oriented industrialization in 1980s created millions of low-skilled employment opportunity in many countries of the world and Bangladesh was not out of that web. Export-oriented garment industry started booming and attracted poor women workforce, mostly a socially excluded section of society, and integrated them in the formal labour market. However, evidence shows that workers have a short span of working life, and with very few exceptions, their involvement with this industry follows a common pattern—they enter when they are generally young, work for few years with frequent change of factories, and finally leave when they remain young. Despite this, empirical studies about status and condition of these ex-workers are absent. This study is an endeavour to investigate the life experiences of ex-workers in post-factory situation.

### Background

Readymade garment (RMG) industry of Bangladesh regularly attracts attention of world community and media, mainly from two perspectives—miracle growth; and associated problems. However the centre of attention changes frequently for the second perspective. Massive scale job loss—400,000 workers became jobless in 2001 due to a US policy shift (Siddiqui 2009); labour unrest, 2006 and 2010; inhuman wage amount, and Pope's comment on it as 'slave labour'; very poor representational rights, and murder of a trade union activist all these attracted world's attention heavily in different point of time. Recently the occupational safety and health became a centre of attention bypassing all other concerns. Two fatal accidents—Tazreen Factory Fire (24 November 2012) and Rana Plaza Collapse (24 April 2013), the worst industrial disaster in garment industry (Chhachhi 2014)—within a gap of just five months that took lives of 1250 workers have portrayed this industry as a death trap. Therefore this industry has a dual image—strong base of economy, and source of image crisis.

RMG industry has been playing a significant role in economy of Bangladesh by earning lion's share of export income and creating jobs for millions of people. RMG started to get bigger primarily as an export-oriented industry during the late 1970s and early 1980s, and has boomed over last four decades. From just fifty factories and few thousand workers in 1980 the industry currently has jumped to more than four thousand factories with four million workers (BGMEA 2015). The industry earns about seventy-eight percent of total export and contributes seventeen percent of the country's gross domestic product (CCC and SOMO 2013). Export volume has mounted from US \$ 31.57 million in 1983-84 to US \$ 25.49 billion in 2014-15 (BGMEA 2015). The global economic restructuring and trade liberalization, neoliberal policies, Multi-Fibre Agreement (MFA), government policies etc. have been the driving

force for this rapid expansion (Ahmed 2004; Feldman 2009; Kabeer 1991; Kabeer and Mahmud 2004a, 2004b; Zaman 2001).

This industry is mostly praised for creation of employment for women: about eighty percent workers are women coming from poor families of the rural areas. Similar to the employers of export-oriented industries in different countries, employers in Bangladesh also prefer to recruit women, considering the comparative advantages, for their low wage, willingness for overtime work and less capacity to protest and be united. Besides, special preference is given to unmarried and single women (Kabeer 1991). Referring to an employer's view Kabeer (1991) explains that these women have the ability to give 'undivided attention' to their work without being worried about the family members (husband, children, in-laws) and thus are also have greater interest to do overtime work when necessary. This pattern of recruitment and use of women in the production process is, according to Ahmed (2004), an 'ingenious innovation'.

Numerous micro-level studies have been conducted on women garment workers with special focus on the consequences in their lives due to their incorporation in this industry. Interestingly these studies have revealed mixed, complex and contradictory findings—emancipatory and exploitative simultaneously (Feldman 2009, Khosla 2009). A group of studies shows that the employment in garment industry is empowering for women since this has created the scope of income-earning opportunity; opportunity to participate in household decision-making; and has extended their freedom. According to Kabeer and Mahmud (2004a), this has created greater sense of self-reliance; lessened burden on families; increased ability to stand on own feet. At a personal level these studies also highlight how employment led to increased age at marriage, marriage according to own choice, savings for dowry (or reduced amount for dowry) (Kabeer 1997, Feldman 2009). Besides, it is also argued this employment has created 'distinctive form of activism and political consciousness' among women (Zaman 2001).

Another group of studies on the other hand shows that the employment in this industry has created new avenues of exploitation especially in terms of long working hours and low wage rate, labour rights violation, and poor working condition, specifically occupational health and safety conditions. Workers suffer from various hazards and occupational diseases and cannot continue to work for longer period in life. According to this view, women's employment in these export-led garments industries intensifies and reinforces their secondary position and marginalizes them in the society (Zaman 2001). The thesis of exploitation is also very critical about the labour control process in garment factories. Garment workers' position is at the bottom of the production chain and on the production floor they work under close and very intensive supervision of the management staffs, more particularly the supervisors and line-chiefs. Besides, as part of the extreme control strategy that is very inhuman also, factory gates are kept locked (Hossain 2011, Siddiqui 2000), even the gates of the production floor, which poses serious threat to their safety condition. In all of the major fire incidents that took tolls of workers' lives it was observed that the gates were closed. After Tazreen Factory fire, that alone took lives of 112



workers, survivors informed that management staffs did not allow them to go out and locked doors of several floors of the factory (CCC and SOMO 2013).

Beyond the empowerment-exploitation debate, one of the key features of this industry is labour turnover. Workers have very short span of working life and leave the job at early stage of life.

## **Statement of the problem: justification and relevance**

Although RMG industry is about four decades old in the country, the composition of the workforce is still of young women workers in the age group of 20-35 years of age. They are primarily migrant from rural areas where employment opportunity outside agriculture is limited. They work mainly in seasonal agricultural jobs or in home-based, informal tasks which are perceived as less valuable in terms of economic contribution to the households. Employment in garment work, in contrast, has a greater economic value to both women themselves and their household members.

Women enter this industry for several reasons. Kabeer (1997) has shown that household's economic condition, life cycle and marital status, and personal circumstances determine women's entry. She has specifically categorized the reasons into five groups – sudden adversity, basic daily survival, part of broader household strategy, improving household's standard of living, and personal accumulation and expenditure (Kabeer 1997). Kibria (1998) also identifies that women's motivations for entering garments work are diverse — family survival, enabling investment in the future, and enabling them to look after themselves to relieve families of the burdens of looking after adult daughters. Whatever the reason, this employment has been conceived as an opportunity and a means of empowerment of the poor and vulnerable women in a highly patriarchal society.

Therefore, employment in garment industry is presented as a clear trend/picture of inclusion and upward mobility of this section of women. This inclusion and upward mobility are manifested not merely in terms of their integration in labour market, but also in its consequences through enabling geographical mobility, capacity, choice, consciousness, control over their own life and freedom (Kabeer 1997, Kibria 1998, Zaman 2001). However the irony is that workers work for very short period and then leave the job. Jobs in this sector are still not considered secure and durable. Studies point out that women worker themselves do not consider their employment in garment industry as 'a humanly sustainable livelihood option' in the long run (Kabeer and Mahmud 2004b). Besides, the nature of the job also prevents them from working for a longer period. Kabeer and Mahmud (2004b) have argued that long working hours affect the health condition severely and it becomes difficult for workers to continue such work for an extended period of time, average job-length of the women workers of garment industry is five years. Hossain (2012) also has shown that only few women workers of this industry stay more than five years in their job. She also argues that garment career of women workers is generally interspersed between their pre and early marriage lives. A study by Paul-

Majumder (1996) also showed that women stayed in this job for four years, on an average.

Despite some change in recent years, women still are seen leaving job at early stage of life. However, there is dearth of empirical information and official estimates about the trend of job leaving and number of the job leavers. There is also a gap in the existing literature about turnover of young workers despite having a debate in general discussion about the reasons. Worker rights activists and trade union leaders generally blame the poor working condition and nature of job as the responsible factors. Employers, on the other hand, commonly do not admit this claim and consider that women workers leave because of various personal reasons. Studies on garment workers of Bangladesh have not focused on this area. Though many ethnographic studies are available, they are mostly engaged with analysis of change in status and achieved empowerment due to inclusion, working condition of factories, and labour right issues; and are based on responses of the workers who were in employment during study period. No study exists which investigates and analyses the reasons why women workers leave this industry. Moreover, what happens to these '*once included workers*' after leaving the job is also unknown. Although a downward mobility of these workers is often claimed, efforts to explore and analyse this mobility empirically are not available—experience of ex-workers is still an unexplored area. This study is an attempt to bridge this gap. Specifically this study aims at analysing gender aspects of status and mobility of ex-workers of garment industry; changes in post-factory life, in terms of their status mobility; experiences and views about garment job; and whether inclusion and empowerment achieved through the garment job sustains in the long-run.

## **Research objective**

Broad objective of this study is to bridge the gap in knowledge about ex-workers of garment industry and contribute towards policies that can address their current situation.

## **Research question**

### ***Main question***

How far are the 'empowerment-effects' of inclusion in the garment industry sustained in the status and lives of ex-workers of garment industry?

### ***Sub-questions***

1. Why do women workers leave garment industry and what they do after leaving?
2. How do ex-workers perceive the contribution/effects of working in garment industry in their lives?
3. What are the changes in their status and living conditions after leaving the job?

## **Structure of this paper**

This paper is organized into five chapters including this introduction. The following chapter (chapter 2) has dealt with the conceptual and analytical framework of this study as well the methodology. In following two chapters (3 and 4) I have analysed and presented my findings. In chapter three, I have tried to analyse three aspects– ex-workers motivation to join garment industry, experiences at factory, and turnover behaviour. In Chapter four, I have analysed the changes in status and living condition of ex-workers in arenas of livelihood options, income, mobility, social relations, choice exercise, status and recognition. Finally, Chapter five draws the conclusion of my study.

## Chapter two: Conceptual and analytical framework and methodology

### Conceptual and analytical framework

This study has used the framework of social exclusion and linked it with the concept of empowerment in relation to society/community and within the household.

#### *Social exclusion*

Concept of social exclusion emerged in mid-1970s in France. European Foundation (1995) has defined social exclusion as “the process through which individuals or groups are wholly or partially excluded from full participation in the society in which they live”. Though this definition consider social exclusion as process, many others have tried explain social exclusion as multiple deprivations, manifestation of which is seen through low income, insecure job, poor housing, family stress, and social alienation (Paugam 1995). Both as process and state of deprivation social exclusion results in, according to de Hann and Maxwell (1998), “an income markedly lower than that customary in the society, failure or inability to participate in social and political activities, or otherwise a life on the margins”.

Table 2.1: Arenas and elements of social exclusion

Key Arena	Elements
Rights	Human Legal/civic Democratic
Resources	Human and social capital Labour markets Product market State provisions Common property resources
Relationships	Family networks Wider support networks Voluntary organizations

Source: de Hann and Maxwell, 1998

Silver (2007) argues—“social exclusion precludes full participation in the normatively prescribed activities of a given society and denies access to information, resources, sociability, recognition, and identity, eroding self-respect and reducing capabilities to achieve personal goals”.

Social exclusion is a multidimensional concept (Chakravarty and D’Ambrosio 2006, de Hann 1998, de Hann and Maxwell 1998, Levitas 2006:127, Nolan and Whelan 2010, Silver 2007). People are excluded from various spheres of life—livelihoods, employment, earnings, property, housing, minimum consumption, education, the welfare state, citizenship, personal contacts or respect, etc. (Silver 1994, CESIS 1997). Hence social exclusion, as a

whole, has social, economic, and political dimensions. Silver (2007) argues that along with monetary poverty and insufficient income economic dimension of social exclusion also refers to land, credit, and other assets, food and other consumption goods, and the labour market. On the other hand, status, recognition and even humiliation are also entailed by social exclusion. Considering all these aspects, Silver argues that social exclusion approach has dominant attention to those social characteristics that reflect the distribution of honour, respect, and social distance (Silver 2007).

However, there is still lack of a common and widely accepted set of indicators of social exclusion. Indicators developed by Barnes (2005) have included seven dimensions—financial situation, ownership of durable goods, the quality of housing, neighbourhood perception, personal social relationships (operationalized as social support), physical health and psychological well-being. On the other hand, a research, sponsored by the Rowntree Foundation, has investigated poverty and social exclusion based on four broad themes— income poverty and material deprivation; exclusion from the labour market; exclusion from public services; and exclusion from social relations (Silver 2007).

‘Social exclusion’ concept is central in this study. It provides a useful framework for analysing the present situation of ex-workers compared with what they achieved due to inclusion in formal labour market through garments industry. I have selected some of the indicators, considering my specific research questions, from the exclusion criteria developed by de Hann and Maxwell (1998) and indicators prepared by Rowntree Foundation. Links between specific research questions and these indicators have been shown in methodology section in this chapter (Table 2.3).

### ***Gendered employment and labour turnover regime***

Since the focus is on inclusion/exclusion from labour market an additional conceptual area relevant to my study is the nature of employment and labour regimes. Economic restructuring, neo-liberal policies and the flow of capital from north to south contributed to the proliferation of manufacturing industries in developing countries and created large-scale employment opportunities. This employment opportunity entailed a specific character—women were attracted to the export-oriented industries—and led to a new employment regime. On the one hand women were employed at huge scale in some particular industries (e.g. electronic, garments), and on the other hand, due to labour market flexibility and exploitative labour conditions of the factories, workers turnover was high. Women workers were preferred in these industries because of some natural reasons. ‘Nimble fingers’, dexterity, better concentration, ability to do fiddly, detailed work, etc. had made them valuable to their employers (Elson and Pearson, 1981). Chhachhi argued that women workers were considered the ideal ‘flexible’ work force, with in built advantages of high labour turnover, docility, and low wages and reduced social costs of reproduction (Chhachhi 1999).

Turnover literature explains two forms – voluntary and involuntary. Voluntary turnover is concerned with the employee perspective where they take decision to end/terminate employment relation with employer; on the other

hand, employers' take decision to terminate this relation in the case of involuntary turnover (Dess and Shaw 2001). Most studies on voluntary turnover tend to explain the causes of turnover from the point of view of employee's attitude. According to this perspective job satisfaction and organization commitment are two important models to understand voluntary turnover (Mitchell et al. 2001). However, Mitchell et al. (2001) finds a relationship between employee attitude and job alternatives and argues that combination of these two is the direct antecedent to turnover. Hossain and Bary (2014) have shown that turnover researches have mostly focused on individual-level analysis. Individual level analysis primarily takes into account the attitudinal factors that include job satisfaction, pay satisfaction, organizational commitment, and perceived support to measure intention to quit or actual turnover rates (Hossain and Bary 2014). Besides attitude, there are non-work factors and organization related factors that also affects voluntary turnover. However, Hossain and Bary (2014) argue that attention on organization level analysis, in explaining the causes of turnover, is not frequently seen.

Goldín (2011) explains turnover 'as a form of resistance to industrial exploitation'. Goldín considers turnover as weapon or strategy. Marginalized workers who are unable to appeal to standards of law and organized demand often apply this weapon. Turnover in Goldín's (2011) view represents 'far more than being manipulated by capital for capital's purposes', rather it is the exercise of agency through which marginalized worker establishes control over their life. Goldín (2011) has also referred to different views, expressed by different authors, on worker turnover in export-oriented industries—a response to the demands of harsh work (Cravey 1998); a result of lateral moves from factory to factory (Ngai 2005); temporary worker image (Tiano 1984); a way to satisfy capital's need for replacement of tired, less productive workers (Harvey 1989, Salzinger 2003, Ward 1990, Wright 2006).

Involuntary turnover, on the other hand, is closely related to management/managerial strategies. It takes place because of the need to cut costs, and restructure and downsize the organization (Morrell et al. 2001). In this form of turnover, employers exercise their unilateral authority to end employment relation and terminate worker from employment (Dwomoh et al. 2013).

However, conceptualization of turnover as 'voluntary' or 'involuntary' is not enough always in order to understand the interacting dynamics behind employees' turnover behaviour. Often employees leave job not because of direct dismissal, but due to a situation, created by employers, that forces employees to take ultimate decision to leave. In this form (known as 'constructive dismissal'), although it apparently seems that employees leave voluntarily, the constructed situation is responsible for turnover. In the constructed situation employers usually adopt the technique to follow deliberately some form of behaviour or conduct so that employees themselves resign (Poulston 2005).

Like many other countries, employment in export-oriented garment industries in Bangladesh is highly gendered. The place of women workers is at the bottom of garments production chain where the nature of work is inhuman. They work for long hours sitting in one place and do the same repetitive tasks under the 'watchful eye of supervisors' (Kabeer and Mahmud 2004b). The

work in this industry is exhaustive and depleting. Kabeer and Mahmud (2004a) argues that—

...garment employers regard their female workforce as dispensable labour to be exploited ruthlessly for a period of time and then replaced by the apparently unlimited supply of young women flowing in from the countryside in search of such work.

Therefore gendered employment and labour turnover regime concept is relevant since the nature of inclusion via the labour market is precarious in the garment industry, part of a management strategy, and the worker turnover is also high. The concept has been helpful to explain both the role of employment condition and of women workers' agency, in the factory as well as in post-factory condition.

### ***Empowerment and agency***

According to Kabeer (2005), "...empowerment refers to the processes by which those who have been denied the ability to make choices acquire such an ability". Here empowerment refers to the change. There is close link to power, choices, and empowerment. While talking about power and choices Kabeer (2005) argues in the case of a 'real choice' there must be alternatives and again these alternatives must not only exist, they must also be seen to exist. Kabeer also pointed some 'strategic life choices' which are vital to frame other choices. These strategic life choices are—*where to live, whether and whom to marry, whether to have children, how many children to have, who has custody over children, freedom of movement and association, and so on* (Kabeer 2005). All these life choices are related to power relations.

Kabeer (2000a, 2000b, 2005) explains the concept of empowerment through three closely interrelated dimensions: *agency, resources, and achievements*. Among these interrelated dimensions of empowerment 'agency' is considered as the central concept representing the processes by which choices are not only made but also put into effect. Kabeer argues that agency in relation to empowerment implies not only actively exercising choice, but also doing this in ways that challenge power relations. Focusing on the sense of agency, she points that the process of empowerment often begins from within and encompasses both decision-making and other observable actions as well as the meaning, motivation, and purpose that individuals bring to their actions. Empowerment in this view is thus rooted in how people see themselves – their sense of self-worth (Kabeer 2005). The medium of exercising the agency is resources. Society's institutions and various forms of relationships distribute these resources. Kabeer argues that the way of resource distribution depends on the ability to define priorities and enforce claims. She further argues that a woman's capacity for making strategic choices becomes limited when her access to resources is determined as a dependent member of family (Kabeer 2005). The third dimension is the achievement that actually indicates the outcomes of agency. In Kabeer's view, both resources and agency determine capabilities of the people and the potentials for their desired living. She explains – "... 'achievements' refers to the extent to which this potential is realised or fails to be realised; that is, to the outcomes of people's efforts. In relation to empowerment, achievements have

been considered in terms of both the agency exercised and its consequences.” (Kabeer 2005)

Batliwala (2007) and Rowlands (1995) have also explained empowerment from the point of view of power. Reviewing the various initiatives to explain and define empowerment Batliwala concludes that all efforts to explain and conceptualize the term ‘empowerment’ have explicitly considered it as a socio-political process. In this process, power is considered as the critical operating concept, and empowerment, in this view, is about shifts in political, social, and economic power between and across both individuals and social groups (Batliwala 2007).

Rowlands (1995) argues that empowerment must be about bringing people into the decision-making process. Empowerment in Rowlands’ view emphasizes on ensuring people’s access in various socio-economic domains of life (e.g. political structure, economic activity, market, income). It is the process that enables individuals to utilize the available opportunities at maximum level. Rowlands further argues that access to intangible decision-making process is also part empowerment from the perspective of generative interpretation of power (Rowlands 1995). The process of empowerment makes individuals aware of their own interests as well as the relation of these interests with those of others. It helps to participate in the decision making process from a position of greater strength (Rowlands 1995). According to Rowlands, the wider picture of empowerment includes three dimensions—

*Personal:* where empowerment is about developing a sense of self and individual confidence and capacity, and undoing the effects of internalized oppression;

*Close relationships:* where empowerment is about developing the ability to negotiate and influence the nature of the relationship and decisions made within it; and

*Collective:* where individuals work together to achieve a more extensive impact than each could have had alone. This includes involvement in political structures, but might also cover collective action based on cooperation rather than competition. (Rowlands 1995)

With view to analysing the situation of ex-workers in their post-factory life, I have applied the concept of choice in relation to Kabeer’s three dimensions (agency, resources, and achievements) of empowerment.

### ***Household and intra-household bargaining***

To delve further into the personal aspect of empowerment it is important to look at the conceptualization of the household. Women’s employment has immense implications for households. Agarwal (1997) views household and family interchangeably. Households, according to Agarwal, are “recognizably constituted of multiple actors, with varying (often conflicting) preferences and interests, and differential abilities to pursue and realize those interests. Households are the arenas of consumption, production and investment, within which both labour and resource allocation decisions are made”. She also argues that



persistent gender inequalities in the distribution of household resources and tasks are evident in many regions (Agarwal 1997).

Various models are applied to explain household dynamics. The unitary model, provided by Gray Becker, considers household as a single entity in relation to both consumption and production. This model assumes that “all household resources and incomes are pooled, and that resources are allocated by an altruistic household head who represents the household’s tastes and preferences and seeks to maximize household utility” (Agarwal 1997). However, Kabeer (1997) argues—“within this model women’s increased income might increase their share in household resources ...but not in their decision-making capacity”. She also has pointed out that in this model “inequalities in the intra-household distribution of resources are attributed to considerations of productivity rather than reflections of power” (Kabeer 1997).

Sen (1990) has viewed the household as a unit of ‘cooperative-conflict’. He has moved away from a formalized approach to household bargaining in order to incorporate questions of ideology and perceptions into this model (Kabeer 2000a). Both intra-household and extra-environmental features that influence household bargaining power and allocation outcomes within it have attracted Sen’s attention (Kabeer 1997). The main features of the Sen’s model are – perceived contribution; relative level of well-being (fall-back/break down position); and perceived interest response (Sen 1990). Sen argues that a woman’s employment into ‘gainful’ work outside is one of the crucial variables affecting the extended exchange entitlement mapping. Sen has pointed out two specific benefits/contributions of a woman’s outside employment—i) it enhances the *overall* command of the household, that is, the family entitlement; and ii) for a given family entitlement, increase of a woman’s *relative* share. Sen further argues that outside earnings can give the woman in question (1) a better breakdown position, (2) possibly a clearer perception of her individuality and well-being, and (3) a higher “perceived contribution” to the family’s economic position (Sen 1990).

Feminists have criticized both Becker’s ‘unitary model’ and Sen’s ‘cooperative-conflict’ due to these models’ overemphasis on economic contribution of women in the bargaining process. Feminists have argued that these are ‘narrow’ because although bargaining models define bargaining power in terms of fall-back position, these models do not consider wide range of factors that impinge on these positions (Agarwal 1997). Focus beyond income factor is limited and effort to explore qualitative aspects of power is few. Moreover, relative importance of factors that determine fall-back positions, role of social norms in bargaining, link between intra-household bargaining and bargaining outside the household are also absent in the bargaining models (Agarwal 1997). Feminist thus have tried to extend the ‘model of bargaining’ incorporating these areas and emphasized inclusion of the role of market, community and state and their interaction in the bargaining process.

I have applied the Sen and feminist model of intra-household bargaining to understand ex-workers fallback position and bargaining in terms of not only income /economic factor but also socio-cultural norms and their involvement

in outside activities. However, I must admit that it is difficult to pinpoint on any particular factor alone due to their interconnectedness.

In analysing ex-workers present situation, my analytical framework is based on the interdependence of social exclusion, empowerment and household bargaining. Analysis, made above, of these three concepts shows their interrelatedness where issue of 'resource' is at centre—it is the 'glue' holding these concepts together. Resource, from Kabeer's (2000b) empowerment point of view, is the means of exercising choice and use of agency. Bargaining power at the household level also depends on access to and control over as well as link to resources both in intra-household and extra-household arenas. Please note, resources have many faces—economic, material, social, and human. Labour market, social relations, networks, connections, voluntary organizations etc. all fall under the purview of resources, as well as are the areas and indicators of social exclusion.

## Methodology

My intention is to explore life experiences in post-factory condition of ex-workers. I also aim at identifying and understanding the factors and its meaning to their post-factory life with particularly focusing on empowerment status that relates to their agency. Therefore my position falls under the 'interpretive' paradigm, that is mainly concerned about and emphasizes 'subjectivity', 'understanding' and 'agency' as well as 'the way people construct their social world' (Grix 2004:83). This approach has helped me to decide about method of this study. I have followed a qualitative approach and employed case-study method, and collected data from the primary sources.

*Primary data:* Primary data, collected directly from the ex-workers and key informants (KI), have been used in this study. Noteworthy, there is dearth of secondary data due to the lack of prior-research in this field.

*Study site:* This study has been conducted in both urban and rural areas. In the case of urban area, the study is based in Dhaka, since it is the most highly garment factory-concentrated city in Bangladesh. Many workers continue to live in here after leaving their job. On the other hand, since many of the migrant garment workers return to their villages after leaving or losing the employment this study has selected respondents from rural areas also, based on the nature and availability of these respondents, from two areas—Gazipur and Kishoreganj.

*Selection of respondents:* This study has employed 'multiple case study' technique. Each of the cases is the unit of analysis. Since qualitative study deals with small number of sample, in order to increase the validity, it is recommended to incorporate as much variation as possible in the sample size. Considering this issue, in the process of case selection I have applied 'diverse case selection technique'. The sample of respondents is purposive and they have been selected by applying snowball-sampling technique.

A total of 20 respondents have been selected—sixteen women and four men. Although the garment industry is women worker dominated, inclusion of men ex-workers in the sample has been valuable to understand the comparative gender dynamics. While selecting these samples following intersectional criteria has been taken into consideration, such as—present residing place (rural/urban), total length of job in factory (at least 4-5 years), and length of post-factory life (at least 3 years).

Table 2.2: Sample frame

Study site		Number of cases		Total
		Female	Male	
Rural	Gazipur	3	2	5
	Kishoreganj	5	-	5
Urban	Dhaka City	8	2	10
Total		16	4	20

*Methods of data collection:* Semi-structured in depth interview technique has been applied to collect data. Before interview, an interview guide—including both thematic and dynamic questions—was developed. All the questions included in the interview guide were open-ended. Besides I have also conducted one FGD in Dhaka (six ex-workers participated) and interviews with five key informants—three trade union leaders, one activist, and one academician.

*Analytical technique, presentation:* My research is multiple case-study based, aiming at exploring and understanding various factors that have been responsible for different situations and experiences in life of ex-workers. Therefore, I have applied ‘explanation building’ as the analytical technique. Regarding reporting and presentation, I have applied the ‘theme-wise’ format because of its potential to give a better comparative understanding of the factors responsible in this regard.

Following table (Table 2.3) presents the information set, in relation to specific research questions, based on which information has been collected during the fieldwork. It is important to mention that feasibility of implementing an information set developed prior the interview was tested based on initial two interviews, and required changes were made accordingly.

Table 2.3: Coordination matrix between research questions and methodology

Research questions	Information set	Data gathering methods
Why do women workers leave the garments industry and what they do after leaving?	Age of entry in the factory Reason for choosing garment job Total length of job Initial expectation from job Working environment Labour standards Reasons for leaving the job Present occupation Comparison between present and previous job	In-depth interview with ex-workers, FGD, and KII
How do ex-workers perceive the contribution/effects of garments job in their life?	Marriage Health Problems faced Family relationship Social relation Psychological	In-depth interview with ex-workers, FGD, and KII
What are the changes in their status and living conditions after leaving?	Decision making Strategic choices Use of agency Intra-household bargaining Access and control over resources Honour, respect, and recognition Mobility Participation in activities outside household Social networks	In-depth interview with ex-workers, FGD, KII

## Reflexivity and ethical considerations

At the very beginning of my plan to study the ex-workers, I was confronted with some practical questions and challenges—where I would find them, since they are now ‘ex’? how I would get access once I could find and locate them? and how I, being a man, would study women worker? I tried to overcome the first two challenges by using my social networks and relations. My friends, relatives and colleagues helped me a lot to find and locate places of ex-workers and ensured my access to them as well. In one of the two rural areas my friend, who was living in that village, arranged my access, and for another village one of my colleagues helped me. In the case of Dhaka, I discovered a women ex-worker who had been working as a live-out domestic worker in one of my relative’s house. She was my channel to get access to other ex-workers living in slums.

To overcome the third challenge, I relied on my sensitivity to gender issues. Besides, I tried to know, through my networks and connections, about social and gender norms of my study sites prior to my visit, and recruited a woman interviewer who attended all interviews conducted with women respondents. Before deploying her in fieldwork, I arranged an orientation session

where I explained the whole context of this research so that she could be more engaging with the whole process.

During fieldwork I realized that my identity was perceived in different ways— ‘a man coming from a NGO’, ‘a man from government’ and ‘a man from trade union’. They were also curious to know my purpose; some even wanted to know whether they would get benefit from it. I introduced myself to them not as ‘researcher’ but a ‘student’ and explained that purpose of my work was fully educational. At the beginning of each interview, I briefed my respondents in this way and then proceeded, with their consent for recoding the interview. I assured them of maintaining confidentiality of the information and not using it for any other purpose without their consent. Moreover, I also informed them that at any stage they could choose whether they would answer to a particular question, and withdraw. Besides, I took their consent where it seemed necessary to use name of respondents, hence I have used the actual name of my respondents with their verbal consent.

A researcher faces many difficulties during fieldwork in an unfamiliar cultural context where he is an ‘alien’ to the respondents. But my case was different; I conducted the study in my own country, Bangladesh—very homogeneous in terms of ethnic composition, culture and language. I belong to the same culture of my respondents, so it was not difficult to communicate with them and understand their norms and values. I also think that I could establish an effective rapport with my respondents and they shared their views freely. When I thanked them at the end of each interview, they also wished me success with my study. However, I must admit, ‘third-party-effect’ troubled me a lot during the interviews.

## **Scope and limitations**

I have tried to focus on empowerment status of ex-workers in relation to inclusion/exclusion. Kabeer (2000b) explains empowerment at three levels—deeper levels, intermediate levels, and immediate levels. However, this study is mainly concentrated on immediate levels, although some issues of two other levels have come out in some cases. Besides, due to multidimensional and comprehensive nature of exclusion it has not been possible to include all indicators. Moreover, this study did not include analysis of the condition of the ex-workers of EPZs, due to time constraint.

## Chapter three: Workers' entry-departure dynamics in garment industry

This chapter's key focus is on workers' entry, experiences and turnover behaviour and its gender dynamics in garment industry, based on findings of interviews with ex-workers. In the first section, profile respondents and their motivations to join this industry are provided. Next section presents their experiences in arenas of labour standards, health implication and labour control. The subsequent section elaborates the patterns of turnover, as well as the reasons why garment workers frequently change factories in very short span of their garment life, and what factors play role behind the decision to leave the industry permanently.

### Profile of respondents

Average age of the respondents is 32.7 years, and majority is in between 25-35 years. Most of them entered in this industry under the age of eighteen (approved age of entering in formal sector employment), 17.6 years on an average, and continued life as garment worker for about eight years (average). Male ex-workers worked for more years than their female counterparts. Besides, average age at departure is 26.05 years, where most of the respondents left below the age of twenty-five (Table 3.1).

Table 3.1: Respondents age during study, at entry and departure, and job-length

Respondents	Age during study					Age at entry					Age at departure					Job length (years)			
	20-25	25-30	30-35	35-40	40-45	below 15	15-18	18-25	25-30	above 30	15-18	18-25	25-30	30-35	35+	4-5	5-8	8-10	10+
Female	1	4	5	3	3	8	1	4	2	1	1	5	6	2	2	3	6	6	1
Male	-	-	3	1	-	1	3	-	-	-	-	1	3	-	-	-	1	2	1
Total	1	4	8	4	3	9	4	4	2	1	1	6	9	2	2	3	7	8	2

At the time of entry in garment all male respondents were unmarried, whereas civic status varied among the female respondents (unmarried, married, widow, separated). Their education-level was very low, only three of them could go above primary level (Class I-V), and many had no formal schooling. Previous occupational background shows that garment job was first income earning opportunity for most of them (15, 13 female and 2 male) (Table 3.2).

Table 3.2: Civic status, education level and prior occupation of respondents

Respondents	Civic status			Education level			Prior-occupation				
	Unmarried	Married	Widowed/ Separated	No schooling	Class I-V	Class VI-VIII	No work	Student	Child labour	Household work	Cook
Female	9	3	4	6	7	3	3	4	2	6	1
Male	4	-	-	-	4	-	1	1	2	-	-
Total	13	3	4	6	11	3	4	5	4	6	1

## Motivation behind entry in garment industry

Reasons and motivations to enter in garments have been explained in different studies. Micro-level studies of Kabeer (1997), Kibria (1998) and Zaman (2001) have explored sudden adversity, survival need of family, desire to improve living condition, personal accumulation desire, reducing family burden etc. as the prime reasons. Besides, some others join as part of their broader household strategy (Kabeer, 1997). The reasons why ex-workers under my study joined garment factory are also identical in this regard. However, I must mention that it is very difficult to draw a clear-cut line between the reasons because of their interconnectedness with the economic need and poverty situation. Among the several reasons, poverty situation of the family was the most dominant one. Since the family/parents were unable to take care and responsibility many of them decided to work and in this regard garment was the first option since there were no other alternative available for them.

Our family lost everything due to river erosion. My father was only income earner and our family was big, eight members. It was not possible for my father alone to manage the family. ... I came to Dhaka to take some responsibility for the family. I started working in my aunty's scrap-shop. I worked there just in exchange of food and accommodation. They did not give me any money. Then different people (including relatives) advised me to join garment factory. They told me that since I have education only up to class five, I would not get any good job in other sector, better join garments. I was informed that I would get better money, my physical condition would be good, and will get chance for time-to-time sleep, rest, and eating. Then I compared the job of the scrap-shop with garments, and decided to join there. (Mizanur, 30 years)

Broader household strategy was the reason to join garment for some other ex-workers. They joined this industry because they wanted to improve the condition of their family and for better future of the children. Those who joined with this view of household strategy were the victims of sudden adversity such as death of husband, separation, death of other income earners of the

family. Importantly, these reasons were more common among those who started their garment career at a comparatively older age.

After death of father-in-law my husband was only income earner. Mother in-law was also sick and we needed much money for her treatment. It became difficult to maintain the family with income of my husband only. I had two daughters. After two/three months of father-in-law's death I started job in garment. (Laili, 30 years)

Some even joined because of aspirations and dreams. Doing job in garment was fascinating to them.

I was very much attracted by seeing many girls and boys in groups and in long queue going to the factories. I saw that they were gossiping among themselves and doing lot of fun. I was very much eager to enter in that life. (Rina, 37 years)

Rather than a formal recruitment system, they joined the factory because they had some connections/social network available for them. Friends/relatives/neighbour or even close family members have helped them to join in this industry. Especially, in the cases of workers who migrated from rural to urban areas (Dhaka) all had this type of social networks.

I went to Dhaka with my sister. She had been working in a factory for several years. Besides, I knew a person of our village who had been working as supervisor in the same factory. My sister and that person helped me a lot get my job in garment. (Salma, 28 years)

Use of agency in joining factories has been evident. Kabeer has deconstructed the decisions to join garments, from agency point of view, into five groups—reluctant agency, uncontested decision making; active agency, uncontested decision making; active agency consensual decision making; active agency negotiated decision making; and active agency, conflictual decision making (Kabeer 2000a: 99-117). With little exception, most respondents claimed that they joined this industry according to their own will, although few of them faced conflictual situation in family. The case of Kamala (40 years old) is illustrative here. Due to economic need and lack of income earning scope in her village, she decided, at the age of fourteen, to migrate to Dhaka and join garment. Her parents opposed the decision and did not want to let her go, despite poverty of the family. On the other hand, Kamala was determined about her plan and finally went to Dhaka with a village neighbour who helped her to find job.

Although motivations behind job were diverse and the active use of agency was present, job in this industry was seen as means of fulfilling the immediate need only. Most of them had no long-term vision when they entered in garment job.



## **Experience at workplace: labour standard, work environment, health and labour control**

### ***Labour standard and work environment***

Low level of labour standard implementation in garment industry is one of the reasons of image crisis of Bangladesh. While talking about working and labour standard condition at factories, ex-workers have mainly brought out three areas—working hour, weekly holiday and night duty (work). International labour standards, specifically ILO conventions, restricts a worker's maximum (including overtime work) daily and weekly working hours to ten hours and fifty-six hours respectively (ILO Convention 1, Article 2,4); entitle workers to weekly-holiday, and instead, a compensatory leave (ILO Convention 14, Article 2,5); restrict night duty of women (ILO Convention 89, Article 3). Labour law of Bangladesh also complies with these standards. However, ex-workers experienced gross violation of these standards in their respective factories. Along with the normal working hour (8 hours daily) overtime work was almost mandatory for all. Work up to 9/10 pm was very common, that means they had experience of working even 12/14 hours daily. Except one respondent (male), others informed that they had one day-off (Friday) weekly. However, they further clarified that during peak-season, heavy work pressure and before urgent shipment they were required to work on Friday, without getting a compensatory holiday.

In case of night duty, except for one respondent (female), all have the experience of working often until 3-4 am. They were also required to start work from 8 am in the morning. This created a lot of stress.

Few respondents have also talked about physical condition (environment) of workplace. Especially they were concerned about temperature which was high due to the use of machine running by electricity. The workplace was also crowded which further increased the heat. They also claimed that level of sound was high at their workplace.

### ***Labour process and control***

Labour process and control in garments factory is linked with organization of production. Kalpagam provides a detailed description of garment production process:

The production process is organized on either the piece system, the band system or the assembly/group system. In the factory sector the band and the assembly/group system is prevalent ... On the band system every worker stitches one part but the consecutive parts are stitches serially such that it is possible to see the garment taking shape along the production line. This is not so on the assembly/ group system where groups of workers stitch a particular part and these are attached finally such that it is not possible to see the garment taking shape along the production line. (Kalpagam 1980)

Workers' productivity measurement and level of autonomy is closely linked with these forms of production process (Kalpagam 1981). Siddiqui (2000) provides an anatomy of production process in Bangladesh that includes three main tasks— cutting, sewing and finishing. She further analyses the hierarchy of management and control mechanism:

A production manager (PM), almost always male, is in charge of the entire production process from cutting to shipment, and reports only to the managing director. ...The floor-in-charge of sewing is preferably a woman, "so that the workers will feel comfortable bringing their problems to her". Almost three quarters of the line supervisors in the sewing section are men. Each supervisor is responsible for a certain number of machines, usually between 10 and 12. Every line or row will be given a fixed quota for the day. Each worker is assigned a specific task, e.g. sewing on a collar, shirt sleeve or buttonhole. (Siddiqui 2000)

Control and management mechanism has high implications in lives of the workers. Ex-workers talked about another position, line-chief, in between 'floor-in-charge' and 'supervisor'. Apart from very few cases, experiences of all ex-workers were same and they primarily raised two concerns—excessive work-load and high pressure of target fulfilment and harsh behaviour of management staffs. Concerning workload, Pakhi Begum (30 years old) claimed that she could not rest even after finishing her own target. If she finished her target earlier, supervisors would have given her new tasks. In her opinion—

Garment factory is a place where you cannot rest even for a single minute. (Pakhi Begum)

Respondents were highly critical of supervisors and line-chief due to their rude behaviour and verbal abuse. For every small fault workers were severely castigated, which they considered as humiliation and reason of psychological stress at workplace. The issue of verbal abuse and indecent behaviour have come out more strongly in interviews with all the key informants.

Behaviour of the supervisors is a very big problem in this industry. They use very bad and abusive words and often their body language is so bad that it is more than physical punishment. Sometimes workers tell me that they would have been happy to receive a slap, had the supervisor hot scolded her by such abusive language. It is more than rape. This type of behaviour is seen in every situation. No remarkable change has taken place in their behaviour pattern over the period. (Nazma Akter, key informant)

Few respondents did not face rough behaviour from their supervisors, but they admitted that they saw supervisors misbehaving with others. Please note, in these two cases supervisors were village neighbour of those respondents.

Few other ex-workers also raised the issue of availability of safe drinking water and toilet facility. They alleged that often they even were not allowed to go to toilet time to time; they had to take permission from supervisors. Discus-

sion with participants of the FGD and interviews with KIs also reveal similar information.

Many factories lack the required arrangement of enough safe drinking water. In many factories despite having the arrangement workers are not always allowed to use the facility, workers' access to this facility is subject to the buyers visit. In some factories even there is restriction that how many times a worker can go to the toilet or washroom. (Amirul Haque Amin, key informant)

### ***Experience and perception of health implications of garment work***

Health issue of the garment workers is an area of interest of many studies. Paul-Majumder and Begum (2000) showed high prevalence of illness among female garment workers; Jahan et al. (2015) found high complain of musculo-skeletal disorders among garment workers; and Khatun et al. (2013) also revealed high prevalence of anemia among these workers. Respondents, FGD participants and key informants have also provided identical information. They talked about different health consequences— both short-term and long-term in nature—of work in garment factory. According to their explanation, those who work for several years suffer from eye problem, headache and waist-pain. Since they work for longer hours (10-12/14 hours) every day while sitting in the same position, scope of leaving the sit is most unusual, it develops pain in different organs. On the other hand another type of work creates pain in leg and knee since it keeps workers keep standing for longer hours. Two respondents have informed that they suffered from waist-pain and swelling of leg while working in garments. Sufia, 35 year-old ex-worker, has highlighted that besides these problems common health concerns are *kosha* (constipation), and weakness. She perceives that since workers are required to work in hot environment and, while in work, are not even allowed to drink more water it affects their body severely.

Ex-workers also perceive that this is a common fate of workers of this industry. No matter whether the factory is good or bad, big or small—in all types of factories workers must suffer these physical problems. Some of the ex-workers have been carrying some physical problems that started after joining the garment factory. The case of Nazma (42 years old), who worked nine years in three factories, is illustrative. During her work, she frequently suffered from eye problem and headache that she did not feel before garment work. She has left the garments job five years ago. Still she has the headache problem, though frequency has reduced, and still carrying the problem of her eyes. While taking about physical problems of other workers, Nazma informed that along with headache and eye problem, backbone problem and enlargement of waist-bone were also the common problem she had heard about from workers who had been operating sewing machine for several years.

Ex-workers perceive the poor labour standard condition, exploitative work-environment and labour control, and health consequences as very natural and obvious phenomenon of their job. They further feel that if anyone wants

to be a garment worker s/he must have the mentality to accept these conditions, otherwise s/he is not fit for this industry.

## **Labour turnover: intra-industry factory change and permanent departure**

Wright (2006:73) has described turnover in very simple term as ‘coming and going of workers into and out of jobs’. This ‘coming and going’ movement is very high among workers of Bangladesh’s garment industry. I have specifically revealed two trends among the ex-workers with regard to their turnover behaviour — i) they do not continue to work in same factory for longer period, i.e. they frequently change the factory and ii) they leave the permanently.

### ***Intra-industry factory change***

The trend of change of factory within the garment industry was very frequent among both male and female ex-workers. Work in two or three factories was very common among those who even had 4-5 year-long garment life. Out of twenty respondents, one even changed four factories in her five-year long working life.

Interviews have revealed that due to absence of three types of securities— job security, skill reproduction security, and income security (Rodgers and Rodgers 1989, Standing 2011)—workers frequently change factories in short span of working life. The most general reason is to improve their position and wage. At the entry level, workers join as ‘helper’. However, there is no formal system to train these workers, and develop and improve their skills required for the upper position, sewing machine ‘operator’. Due to desire and need, helpers try to know/learn how to operate a sewing machine and join different parts of the cloths from other operators when they get time, especially during lunch break. Processes of learning this skill by own initiative is however not so easy/smooth. They had to learn by stealth- avoiding the eyes of the supervisors and line-chief. Grim reality is, despite improving their skills chance of getting promotion from the post of ‘helper’ to ‘operator’ in same factory is very minimal. The option that remains open before them is to change the factory. In this way, a ‘helper’ graduates himself/herself into the next job category of an ‘operator’. All respondents but one adopted this strategy. The exceptional one worked total five years, without changing factory, in same entry position.

Lack of income security is the second most dominant reason. Although sectoral minimum wage exists for garment workers, its capacity to ensure a decent life is highly questionable and there is no system of inflation adjustment. Besides, on one hand, there are instances of non-implementation of minimum wage in many factories and, on the other hand, variations in wage amount for same category workers are also evident (FGD, KIIs). Since one of the main reasons to join garment industry was economic need, the low wage level and lack of standardization of wage practice led ex-workers, particularly operators, to change factory with a view to increasing their wage amount.

I had been working in a factory for more than five years. But the authority did not increase my wage. Several times I asked them to increase the wage but they did not listen to me. Finally I decided to change the factory. I went for an interview to another garment factory, they took my test, and I joined there. I became able to increase my wage significantly, almost double, by this change. (Sentu Howlader, 30 years)

Apart from these insecurities, workers also change factory with desire of having a decent workplace. This concern has been found more among women ex-workers. They consider the workload/production pressure, working hours (especially night duty), and behaviour of staffs in the process of searching new factory (workers experiences in these areas have been explained in earlier section of this chapter).

Along with workplace related reasons, sometimes non-workplace reasons also play role in factory change decision. I found one respondent who changed factory because of marriage and change of residence.

I started my life as a garment worker when I was 16 or 17 years old. The factory was not so far from our house. After two years I got married and it was not possible for me continue my job in the same factory since I had to move to my husband's place that was 50-60 kilometre far from our house. There were many garment factories in that place and I started working in one of those factories. (Zamina, 31 years).

Feldman (2009) considers frequent change of factory as strategic use of labour market that reflects their long-term expectations and self-sufficiency. However, in previous section I mentioned that most ex-workers did not have long-term vision at the time of entry in garment. Besides, ex-workers also have mentioned insecurities, work pressure, and behaviour of management staffs as reasons behind factory change for themselves and their colleagues. Thus, I would argue that factory change is the mark of protest against the exploitative nature of this industry. Moreover, factory change is the example of using workers' agency at the workplace. This change is an important strategy not for long-term expectations and self-sufficiency, rather for their immediate survival and desire for a working condition that is less exploitative.

### ***Permanent exit from the garment industry***

Second trend revealed a turnover trend apparently voluntary. In this trend marriage is an important factor. Generally export industry is primarily drawing on young unmarried women workers or else married women without children (Kabeer and Mahmud 2004a), and it is equally true for Bangladesh's garment industry. It is thus obvious that opposite status is disadvantageous. Many women ex-workers joined garment industry at their very young age. After few years when they returned to village and got married they could not return because of decision of husband's family. Thus, decision to leave the factory was determined by the patriarchal dominance.

I migrated to Dhaka with my mother when I was about 11 years old. After four years of work in garment I went to my village. My mother arranged my marriage with a local man when my age was 15 years. But after marriage both my husband and father-in-law did not allow me to return to Dhaka and to continue my work. (Jharna, 29 years)

Marriage and household activities are closely linked. Chhachhi and Pittin (1996) have expressed this relationship as ‘the default setting’. Referring to work of different researchers an EC (2004) study mentions that taking prime responsibility of household activities by women is an implicit element of marriage contract, taken for granted. Considering the Asian context Chandra (2012) explains that in most cases women even when they are in fulltime job and is co-bread earners they exclusively carryout the household duties. Consequently, they very often face work-family/family-work conflict. This type of conflict is a predictor of turnover intention (Haar 2004), and some of my respondents left this industry because they were facing difficulties in bringing balance between their activities in the household and in factory.

Concern and responsibility for ‘social reproduction’ and ‘care economy’ has been evident in some cases of departure decision. Maternity prevented them (three respondents) to carry on, and they left permanently. As per the claim of the ex-workers, nature of work and workplace facility is not favourable for women workers to continue the job during their pregnancy. And it is not possible to do job even after the birth of the child. Although sixteen-week maternity leave is ensured in labour law, there is widespread allegation of violation of this provision.

From perspective of work-life balance Chardra (2012) points two strategies—outsourcing of domestic work and taking assistance from parents and in-laws. None of my respondents talked about the first strategy. Two respondents, who had children, adopted the second strategy. But they left when they found no one to take care of their children. According to the labour law provision of the country a factory, having a specified number of women workers, must have a children room (day care) where they can keep their children and can visit them time to time. But garment factories rarely provide this facility. Although many garments have made this arrangement recently, the facility is not available for workers all the time and mostly the room is kept under lock and key. Only when buyers visit the factory then authority open the room to show them, and a prior notice is given to the women workers so that they bring their children during that specified day. (FGD)

Workers also leave garments and return to village because of their inability to afford the cost of living in Dhaka. Ex-workers who have returned to their villages have focused on this reason more than those who have not returned. However, both of these two groups have same opinion that maintaining a family with the income of one person working in a garment factory is not possible in any way. Besides, three respondents (all female) left garments because of illness.

All key informants and some of the respondents have raised the issue of ‘diminishing productivity’ of the workers. Referring to the production process

they claim that comparatively old workers, even workers of 35-40 years, cannot work because fulfilling the target is not possible for them. They further add, sometimes authority intentionally set a higher target for an older worker—a harsh management strategy—so that she herself takes decision to leave. Nazma Akter, President of Awaj Foundation and a key informant, informs:

The sector demands young workers because its link to productivity. Employers want to use the energy of the young workers as resource. Since most of the workers are young, workers who are comparatively old cannot work in the same speed as young workers do. There is difference in the level of energy; thus, the productivity of the older workers is less than that of younger workers. They cannot fulfil the production target imposed on them.

### ***Labour turnover of male workers***

The reasons why male ex-workers left were quite different from those of their women counterpart. Along with inadequacy of income to maintain family, they have talked about the issues of their freedom, monotonous nature of work, and overall working condition.

I left garment according to my own will. I worked for about ten years. I did not get any pleasure from the work. Doing the same work repeatedly for years after years is really monotonous. I used to start my work at 8am and there was no fixed time to end, I used to work until 10-12pm. Sometimes my body could not bear the workload. Even there was no weekly holiday for me, I had to work seven days a week. It was like a prison. (Bipul, 31 years)

Male ex-workers also mentioned their involvement in demanding labour rights as one reason. The demands were mainly related to the wage and breach of promise on the part of management.

PM (production manager) promised that by 10<sup>th</sup> of the next month due wages and overtime allowances would be given to all workers. Nevertheless, he did not keep his promise. On 13<sup>th</sup> workers started agitation, and at one moment PM was beaten up by some agitated workers. Factory authority called the police and police handled the situation. On 16<sup>th</sup> wage was given, but the authority dismissed nine senior operators of the factory. (Mizanur)

I left garment because authority did not give us the amount of wage they promised. We forty workers of different other factories joined a new factory with the hope to increase our wage level. Factory authority did not give us any appointment letter. They promised to give Tk. 10000 monthly. But at the end of the month they gave each worker Tk.7000 only. We all protested it collectively. Agitated workers, including me, vandalized the factory, and authority shut it down. (Sentu Howlader).

Three types of insecurities—job, skill reproduction, and income—along with desire for escaping the exploitative working condition, in terms work pressure and supervisors' behaviour, are main considering factors for intra-industry factory change. Concerns for insecurities are common among both men and women workers, whereas women are more concerned about work environment. The reasons for permanent leaving can broadly be categorized into – i) life cycle perspective, that includes marriage maternity and household responsibilities where role of patriarchy was dominant; ii) disillusionment where garment work could not provide decent life; iii) physical illness; and iv) work nature. Gender variation is remarkable here, where women's departure is mostly linked with concerns for social reproduction; men's with for freedom, autonomy, along with reaction to oppressive behaviour.



## Chapter four: Post-factory life experiences of ex-workers

This chapter is about the consequences of departure, and the changes that ex-workers of garment industry are experiencing in economic and social arenas of their post-factory life, and how they perceive their present condition. Specifically, chapter's focus is concentrated on both economic and non-economic factors of social exclusion and empowerment status in post-factory phase.

### Post-factory livelihood choices

Social exclusion from the point of view of 'social integration discourse' explains exclusion mainly from the perspective of labour market or absence of paid work (Levitas 2006). Literature on social exclusion also focuses on access to labour market as an important measure/indicator. However the issue is not simply of access to the labour market but also the kind of work. My study shows that departure from garments factory has pushed many ex-workers into informal sector work – a shift from formal sector and has made some others jobless.

With regard to informal sector involvement, domestic work is the most common occupation that women ex-workers have adopted. This is more frequent among those who are living in Dhaka. They have been involved in domestic work due to its availability, lack of skill for other jobs, chance of having free-time and income opportunity. They perceive that in this occupation they now enjoy more freedom (please note they work as live-out worker) and get more time/chance to take care of the family members. Since many women ex-workers have left due to the birth of their children (see chapter three), spending time for children and family is highly important to them.

After leaving garment I started working as domestic worker. Now I start my work at 8/9 am and finish it by 3/4pm. I get sufficient time in the afternoon. I can take care of my children. Even I can take rest if I wish. (Akhi, 26 years)

Home-based work (e.g. sewing, embroidery, *bidi-rolling*) is another informal sector option of both the women ex-workers of Dhaka and those who have returned to villages. However, income opportunity from home-based work is very low; differ with spatial variation where ex-workers of rural area earn less than those living in Dhaka. Besides, there is uncertainty of regular work in both areas. A women ex-worker (Salma) who returned to the village and now is engaged in *bidi-rolling* earns only about 200-300tk a month, whereas her last monthly income was about 4000tk in garment when she left job five years ago. Moreover, the work of *bidi-rolling* is also highly laborious and hazardous for the health.

Flexible condition of work is an important aspect that women ex-workers considered to choose occupation after departure. The case of Rokeya, who

now works in a food-processing factory on daily basis with flexible condition, is illustrative here.

No problem if I do not go to my workplace for one or two, or even for couple of days. The only thing that I will lose is income for those days. But there is no such flexibility in garments. If any one does not go to factory for two/four days, even if for illness, s/he will lose job. (Rokeya, 44 years)

Many women ex-workers are now completely out of any income earning activities. This trend/pattern is more frequent among those who have returned to villages. Along with lack of opportunities in rural areas, expectations of family members are also responsible in this regard.

Gender variation has been evident in post-factory employment. Unlike women, no male ex-worker remains completely jobless. They also have got involved in informal sector work. Out of four respondents one has become construction worker, and another transport worker. Two others have started their own small business and tried to become self-dependent. None of women ex-worker has been seen in self-employment, similar to the findings of Chhachhi's (2009) study where she found that after losing job from an electronic company no women worker could start self-employment activity but a good number of men did. Importantly, no matter whatever occupation the male ex-workers have chosen, all of them have considered the issue of flexibility and freedom.

## **Income poverty, loss of economic power and dependency**

Inclusion in garment job provided life's first chance of income for majority respondents. Therefore, departure had its immediate impact on their income level. Almost all respondents have talked about their financial dependency after leaving the garment job. This has become more significant among those whose income is now less compared to earnings in the garment factory. Dependency is very severe among those who have no work at all.

Respondents spoke of how when they had income they could spend money according to their choice.

When I had income, I could spend money for my family. I could help my daughter, husband and mother-in-law. I used to bring fruits for my daughter. But I cannot do these things and contribute to my family now. Rather I am completely dependent on my husband's income. I am empty handed now. Always I need to ask my husband to give me money. Sometimes he gives me fewer amounts than that I want and sometimes I even get no money from him. I do not feel good now. I have now become dependent on others. Often my sister buys rice, vegetables and other groceries for my family. Even I often borrow money

from my sister and her husband. Now in this way we are living our lives. (Laili, 30 years)

The condition of Rina is not an exception.

Since I stay at home and do not do any work, I have no income. My husband also does not give any money in my hand. He has asked me to tell him whatever I need; he will bring it for me. (Rina)

It is important to note that many of both male and female workers used to give their total income to the father/family head keeping aside a small part for their own expenditure. However, they had independence to some extent and could get money from house-heads whenever necessary. But now many women ex-workers have completely lost their economic independence.

I started working in garments when I was 11 years old. Keeping a very small part for my own, I used to give my whole income to my mother for maintaining the cost of family. I feel that I could enjoy freedom at least to some extent. I left garment after marriage. Later on, I worked as domestic worker. At that time although I had income I could not enjoy freedom. I had to handover all of my income to my husband. He even always asked to give the account of money that I earned. He used to quarrel with me if I had not given all the money in his hand with proper account. I didn't want to engage in quarrel with him. Now I have no work, no income. Thus, you now imagine how much economic freedom/independence I can enjoy right now? (Jharna)

Spatial and gender based variation in level of financial dependency has been evident prominently. Commonly those who have returned to villages are more vulnerable than those have not returned. Limited scope of income earning activities in rural areas has made them highly dependent economically. On the other hand, male ex-workers are less vulnerable than the female ex-workers. In fact, the income of the male workers is more now than the amount they earned from garments. Moreover, since all of the male ex-workers are now prime income earner, they do not have dependency on other members of their family.

### **(Constrained) mobility and participation in outside activities**

Garment job not only provided women with income opportunity but also expanded their mobility. However, departure shows an opposite trend. Mobility has reduced and been restricted to some extent for the female, although it is not an issue for the male. The trend of change in participation in activities outside household is also same. The issue of mobility differs from the perspective of whether ex-workers are currently earning or not. Those who are still engaged in income earning activities have greater mobility than those who are not

involved. They even think that leaving garments job has no influence in this regard.

On the other hand, mobility differs according to ex-workers' present residing area. Those who are still living in Dhaka generally perceive no change, whereas returnees to villages have experienced remarkable change.

During job in garments, I had a daily routine. Every day I used to go to my factory by walking or by *tempoo* (a three-wheeler vehicle). My factory was three kilometre far from my house. But now I usually do not go to outsides of my house. Actually, I do not have the need to go outside. In last one month, I have not gone anywhere. (Sufia Begum, 35 years)

Because of the job I had to go outside of my house every day and there was no question seeking permission from father or husband. Now usually I tell my husband if I want go outside. Generally he allows me but asks several questions. Sometimes even, he does not allow to go to my father's house. (Zamina)

When I was in garments I used to roam around with my friends. We used to go to cinema at least once a month. I enjoyed those days a lot. However, those days are gone by. (Jharna)

Male ex-workers of urban area (Dhaka) perceive that leaving garment has no impact on their mobility. Rather they are more mobile now because of their new occupation.

## **Social networks and relationships**

Social network and relations are important areas of social inclusion (de Hann and Maxwell 1998, Silver 2007). Levitas (2006) argues that labour market activity provides individuals with spaces of social contact and interaction. As ex-workers informed, inclusion of women in garment job linked them with a wider network of relationship both at their workplaces and at their new places of residence. All women respondents have claimed that at their respective workplaces they had good interaction with their co-workers. Many of them have termed this relationship as more than 'friendship only', but like brotherhood/sisterhood. Along with this horizontal aspect of interaction at workplace, some of the ex-workers also have talked about their vertical relationships/interaction with supervisors, and line-chiefs. Besides workplace, they had interaction and personal ties with many people, including roommates, migrated from different areas of the country, and neighbours living in very close vicinity in slums. These relationships at both workplace and residence were source of mutual support among them. Please note none of female respondents not even any male talked about their interaction/involvement with trade union activities.

While making a comparison most women ex-workers perceive limited extent of their network and social relations after leaving job. This perception is common in both groups of workers who have returned to villages and who are

still living in Dhaka. However, a new trend has been observed among the returnees to villages, many are now involved with two types of networks/relations—NGO and village patrons. Some of women returnees have received microcredit from NGOs. However, control over credit is not an issue to them. On women's control over microcredit Karim's (2014) and Goetz and Gupta's (1996) study show that in most cases women transfer the loan to male members of household, even to male relatives. The cases of women ex-workers are not different; they used the loan for family purposes (e.g. children's education, health, income activities of husband or son) and none of them controlled the credit. Some others have talked about their connections with rich and well-off families having influential position in rural power structure of their village from whom they often get both financial and in-kind support in exchange of their labour.

Among male ex-workers, perception about change in social network differs on grounds of living place. Both of the respondents who now live in rural areas think that they had connection with more people when they worked in garment. In contrary, male ex-workers living in Dhaka do not perceive change/reduced social relations due to their present occupational pattern (construction work and driving).

## **Exercising choices in household and intra-household bargaining**

Choice is important in overall discourse of empowerment that relates to the concept of agency (Kabeer, 2000b). Applying agency in strategic life choices depends on resources, which is not only economic or material but also human and social having linked with relations, network, and connection (Kabeer 2000b). Findings and analysis presented in earlier sections of this chapter show women ex-workers' link to resources (access to labour market, income, network of relations both at work and living places) due to job in garment factory. However, implication of these links in making choices and applying agency was not same for all. Some ex-workers have talked about the improvement in this regard. Others observed no change in their condition and scope to participate in decisions for strategic choices.

Although they had income, 'control over income' varied significantly, while they were in job, due to role of patriarchy and household power relations. Those who joined garment factory because of widowhood and separation became the head of the family and controlled their income. In contrast, many of those who were living with family member used to give their income to family heads, most cases to father. Out of thirteen unmarried respondents—at the time of entry in garment—ten (three boys and seven girls) spoke of this type of practice. Married women also used to give their income either to husband or to father-in-law who were family heads. Importantly, as an alternative strategy, some of the respondents (both unmarried boys and girls, and married women) mentioned that before handing over the income they used to keep aside a small part for their own purposes.

Some women ex-workers lacked control, when they were in job, not only on income but also on marriage decision. The cases of Jharna and Moyna are examples here. Despite having work and income, they could not apply agency in a key strategic choice, marriage—in terms of not only spouse selection but also time/age when to marry. Despite their unwillingness finally their family arranged the marriage ignoring their wishes.

Findings on participation in strategic choices in post-factory life have a similar pattern. Some women respondents, from both rural and urban areas, have claimed that they participate in decision making process, whereas some others do not. Zamina, respondent from rural area, speaks:

I will send my daughter to *madrassa* (a religious education institution), first for religious education. It is my dream. After completion of her *madrassa* education if I get chance then will send her to the school. I have discussed it with my husband and he has agreed. (Zamina)

In contrast, women ex-workers spoke of facing situations where their agency has been constrained by others. Sufia (living in village) wants to work again in garment. She likes the work especially in comparison with her present situation (involved only in household activities). She thinks that it is not good to stay in home without any work. But she is unable to join garment because of her son who does not want to let her work. Her son is main income earner of family, and their economic condition is better now. This is why he does not want to see his mother working. However Sufia has now the realization that economic condition of family must not be considered as prime indicator used to be engaged in income earning activities outside home, it is the will that is important. Sufia also realizes the importance of work and this is the reason despite having a better economic situation of the family she wants to engage in work. But fulfilment of her desire is highly dependent on the decision of her son.

Male ex-workers, on the other hand, have claimed active participation in every aspect of their family/household activities in post-factory life. And it is obvious that they will participate in the decision making process and apply their agency in a society like Bangladesh that is highly patriarchal. However striking change is that participation and use of agency in decision-making and strategic life-choices have increased for them. Change of status from dependent member to independent member of the family has been instrumental for this increased participation. Since male ex-workers started job when they were very young (at their teen-ages) they rarely had chance to participate in decision making process. But now all of them are married, have formed own family, have become family head, and the prime breadwinner. Consequently, their role in strategic decisions has increased significantly. However, these male ex-workers have claimed that they also discuss the important things with their wife whenever they feel it necessary.

I have also found that exercise of choice is not equal in every sphere of lives, at both factory phase and post-factory phase. Zamina although mentioned her participation in decisions of children's education (mentioned earlier in this section), her movement and mobility sometimes depended on husband's

decision. The decision of 'where to live' was taken by husband and father-in-law in case of Bilkis, even she did not have opinion on 'when to take children', but informed that she had participation in decision of her children's education.

***Fall-back position: same or weakened for female, strengthened for male***

Perception of ex-workers whether their bargaining power increased, when they were in job, due to contribution to the family is mixed and a contested issue. Some of the ex-workers feel that bargaining power increased because they had income; in contrary, some others think that it did not bring any significant change in their position in family. This later group has brought the issue of 'control over income' in this regard.

Bargaining power in family is determined by 'fall-back position' and in post-factory situation, many ex-workers, especially women, have reported a negative change. This has happened due to the change in 'perceived contribution' among other members of the family and their weakened 'fall-back position'.

Is there any value of domestic activities that do not produce income?  
No one gives value to the activities that we perform daily for our families. If you cannot earn money no one will give you importance. I am not earning money now, so my importance has reduced to all, even to my close ones. (Bilkis, 24 years)

Agarwal (1997) has listed eight factors—ownership of land and control over assets especially land; access to employment and other income earning means; access to communal resources; access to traditional support system; support from NGOs, support from state, social perception about needs, contributions, and other determinants of deservedness; and social norms—that determine a person's bargaining strengths in rural areas. She further argued that these factors are complement or substitute for one another. Interviews have revealed that many of these determinants have been valuable in bargaining and household decision-making process. Many have claimed that their position has remained same because although they have left garments they still are important source of importing money for their family. Some of them are receiving microcredit from the NGOs and spending it for family purpose (mentioned in earlier section of this chapter). Although they do not control the credit, they are valued in the family, which could be explained in line with the argument that even transferring loan control increases women's status in family since they are acknowledged as important source of revenue (Goetz and Gupta 1996)

In some other cases, although women ex-workers earn some in-kind support in exchange of their occasional labour supply to the patrons' houses, it has no significant impact in their bargaining power and strengthening their fall-back position.

The role of 'doxa' also has been significant in some cases. Many women have left garments in response to the need to maintain household responsibility, especially taking care of the children. It is believed in this society that it is

the women's responsibility to take care of the children and do household chores. Consequently, those ex-workers lost their income earning opportunity that in turn weakened their fall-back position.

I have also found Remarkable gender variation with regard to bargaining and fall-back position. Male-workers are now enjoying more bargaining power. The role of economic power as well as patriarchy is important here—all male respondents are now head of their families as well as main breadwinner.

## **Social status and recognition: from higher to lower?**

Social status and recognition of present work are the most talked about areas, by ex-workers, where changes have taken place profoundly in their post-factory life. Social exclusion includes not only economic factors, but also non-economic factors where low level of self-esteem and stigmatization is important (Chhachhi and Truong 2009). In view of Levitas (2006) labour market activity of individual is promoted as basis of self-esteem and social recognition. Self-esteem is closely linked with empowerment perspective since empowerment is rooted, according to Kabeer (2005), in the sense of self-worth. From these perspectives, women ex-workers feel a lower level of self-esteem and self-worth and feel that their social status has degraded. This perception is very common irrespective of their present means of livelihood and places of living.

Those who are not in employment consider that their position and importance is now lower in comparison to the situation when they were earning money for the family.

Since I don't work now I have no position to my relatives and, to be honest, my status is now lower even in my family. Now I am not close to my mother-in-law; even husband may think that had I worked, we would have no hardship in our family. If I had the work, I would have not seen the grim faces of my relatives/family members. (Laili)

On the other hand, women ex-workers who are now engaged in domestic work and home-based work also perceive that they enjoyed higher social status and prestige when they were working as garment workers, as well as their importance was more to others. The main reason behind this perception is society's differential attitude to different types of work. The role of stigmatization is also important in this regard.

The work of a domestic worker is not valued in our society. People do not give any status to the domestic workers. They do not consider it as 'job', whereas work in garments is considered as 'job'.... I have recently changed my residence. In my new living place, I have told my neighbours that I still work in garment. I have not disclosed to them that every day I work in several houses. If I tell them that I am working as domestic worker they will not give me value, my status will be lower. (Akhi)



## Overall reflections on working in garment industry

Women ex-workers have expressed their concerns for three interrelated areas—bringing balance between job and household responsibilities, time poverty, and care economy. Making a better adjustment between their household activities and job requirements was challenging for them. They have talked about the problems they faced as well as the strategies adopted to combat the situation. Problems and strategies varied according to their marital status. Married women were living in both single and joint family. The main household responsibilities for this group of ex-workers included cooking and preparing food for the whole family, washing clothes, cleaning houses, taking care of children and older members (e.g. father-in-law in joint family living). Most commonly adopted strategies in carrying out these responsibilities were—cooking in very early morning; cooking late in the night; and using the weekly holiday for washing clothes and cleaning the house. They shared the responsibility of taking care of children with other family members, relatives and even with neighbours.

Two patterns of living have been reported by ex-workers who remained unmarried for the whole period of their garment life—living with family and living with co-workers. Those who lived with the co-workers adopted strategies similar to those adopted by married workers for cooking food, washing clothes, and cleaning houses. On the other hand, unmarried women workers living with family were not required to cook, their mother usually cooked for them. However, they have claimed that after returning from factory in the night, and in the holidays, they helped their mother in household work.

In view of ex-workers, work life balance becomes very hard and unbearable during peak season and shipment time due to work intensification when they are required to do night duty and are denied to enjoy the weekly day-off. The case of Rokeya is illustrative. Rokeya started her work in the garments when she was 35 years old. Before entering in garments, she had been working as cook in a workers' mess for about five years. Rokeya had three children. She took the work as cook to overcome the economic adversity of the family due to death of her husband. She was required to go and work every day and there was no weekly holiday for her. And it was far from her living place also. Then she wanted to enter in garments. She found that many girls and women of her village were working in garments. She also started going with them (neighbors). Her desire was to improve the condition of family and to bear the cost of education of her children. However, in garments Rokeya were to work for longer hours than the hours she used to work as cook. The factory was about two kilometres from her house. She used to start her work at 8am and there was no fixed time of ending (8pm/9/10pm). She used to wake up very early in the morning and cook for the family. After returning from work, she used to cook again. Things became worse when she had to work in the night also. She had no one to manage household tasks for her. She used to leave her children to their aunty who was living nearby. Rokeya was passing very hard time to balance between her job and household responsibilities. Since sometimes it become very difficult finally, she decided to leave.

A mixed realization/perception about garment work has come out in opinion of some respondents. In Bilkis's view "Garment job is good. However, I did not get benefits from my work in garment factory. I just managed to live hand to mouth. Even after leaving the job I am still living under want and poverty. If my husband earns money then we can eat. We were comparatively good when I worked in garment. There was no loan. But now sometimes we need to take loan from our relatives and even from neighbour to arrange food/costs of the family, and our family loan is increasing day by day". Bilkis is now living in extended (joint) family where the decisions are mainly taken by father-in-law and (to some extent) mother-in-law. She returned to village because father-in-law asked them to come back when her husband got sick.

Some women ex-workers also think that work in garment is suitable for unmarried workers. In Laili's view—"those who are not married or single, they can continue work in garment for longer period; can save money and send it back to family". Jharna also has similar opinion and thinks that work in garment industry is suitable for women as long as they remain unmarried or do not have children. Opinion of these workers reflect what type of workers garment sector demand, which has come out in various studies.

Male ex-workers have pointed some specific concerns while expressing their views. Mizanur in his reflection has taken into account both the reality of economic need of family and the issue of workload for working women:

On the one hand, garment job for the women is useful; on the other hand, it is not. Useful because it gives a supporting income for the family; otherwise it is not possible to maintain the family with the income of a single person. But it is painful for the women because of the behaviour of management. Besides, they need to do household activities also; after returning from factory in night they start cooking. Job in daytime, cooking and household activities in night—it is really painful for the women. (Mizanur)

Situ, 38 years old ex-worker, perceives that garments job is actually the last option for the women. Women take this job when no alternatives remain left for them—incidences like death of husband, having 3-4 children, no income in family etc. generally force women to take job. Situ is sure that had there any better option none of the women would have joined garment. With regard to the prospect from the job he further mentions, "I have not seen anyone who has been able to save 1-2 lac taka from garment job".

Views of male ex-workers clearly reflect that why garment work is not a preferred and sustainable livelihood option. They consider it as secondary source of income for family and last option for women, and do not find prospect in it. However, they are sensitive to the issue of nature of gendered employment that has created double-burden for working women.

In response to a question whether they would like to return to garment again, all male ex-workers replied negatively. They considered their freedom, autonomy and flexibility that they are experiencing now.

Garment factory is like a prisons. You do not have any freedom there. It is not matter whether you are sick; or no matter it is very cold, rain or hot; you must attend the factory. Work of a construction worker is not so easy, it is also laborious. But now I have freedom, if I work I will get money and vice versa. No one can scold me, threat me. (Mizanur)

In contrary, to the same question women ex-workers provided mixed responses. Most of the women ex-workers currently living in rural areas have the desire to return. Family's present economic condition, self-esteem, level of freedom, income opportunity in rural areas etc. have been instrumental factor behind this desire despite the fact that they recognize the hardship, problems, and exploitations they faced in garment life. On the other hand, this desire is less frequent among those who are living in Dhaka.

Analysis of post-factory condition presents a general downward trend in arenas of both economic and social spheres. Besides, gender variations have been evident in reflections that highlight pros and cons of garment job in their life, and shows, simultaneously, women ex-workers more vulnerability in comparison to the male.

## Chapter five: Conclusion

In this study, I have tried to answer three specific questions—why do women workers depart from garment industry and what are their post-factory livelihood options? what are ex-workers' experience and perception of working in garment? and, what changes ex-workers experience in post-factory life in terms of their living condition and status? While analysing my findings I have used social exclusion framework, linking it with the concept of empowerment. The key finding is that departing from garment industry or, in other words, exclusion from formal labour market, whatever the reason, has pushed some ex-workers to informal sector work and has made some others completely jobless. Hence the answer from findings to the main research question is that there is downward mobility from inclusion to exclusion. However this is not a simple process and involves many factors.

Garment workers enter this industry mostly due to a number of interconnected factors/reasons related to economic need and poverty situation. Although they apply agency, mostly active agency, they lack long-term vision and take this job as means to meet immediate needs. However, experiences in garments are not pleasant. They face severe exploitative situation in arenas of labour standards, labour control practice as well as in their health implication. Throughout the work life in garment, although very short, they become '*floating worker*', move from one factory to another in search of better condition that they are generally deprived of and due to some specific forms of labour market insecurity that they face. This intra-industry factory change can be explained from two perspectives—strategy of survival and protest in an exploitative working condition. However, since factories lack a formal system of training as well as upgradation/promotion and the industry, by nature, is established, has expanded, has been booming by capitalizing workers' vulnerability, this strategy cannot be emancipatory. By adopting this type of labour market strategy they may able to reduce their level of income insecurity relatively, but not completely since the industry lacks standardization of wage practice, despite the existence of sectoral minimum wage that is highly criticized because of its inability to ensure a decent life.

The end of '*floating phase*' of garment life is departure from this industry. Life-cycle stage and work-life conflict, connected also with concern and responsibility for social reproduction and care economy, have come out ordinarily as reasons of turnover that apparently seems linked with the voluntary nature. However, it is just the 'tip of the ice-berg' and there is big elephant in the room. In trends of turnover (intra-industry factory change and permanent departure), workers' explanations, statement, experience, the stories of other that they shared during interviews lead to think in a different way. Excessive work pressure (imposed intentionally), labour control practice and behaviour of managerial staff, breach of contract—all these are enough to think about the role of 'constructive dismissal' behind turnover.

Apart from workplace related factors, departure from garment is also linked with the patriarchal dominance, especially in case of women workers'

marriage, that prevents them to establish their control over life and apply their agency in strategic life choices. Although many studies have highlighted that garment job gives control over the marriage decision, from the story of some ex-workers who left permanently due to marriage arranged beyond their decision, it could be argued that, it is not true all the time.

Post-factory conditions or exclusion experiences of the ex-workers vary based on present occupational status, residing areas, and gender. However, the general trend is that they have been more vulnerable, apart from very little exception, in terms of their economic and social aspects of life. Many have chosen (due to lack of alternative) occupations that are more precarious—just a change in form/face of precariousness in their life. Although in urban area ‘domestic work’ is the mostly chosen livelihood choice and all who have adopted this occupation talked about freedom and flexibility (since they work as live-out worker), it is one of the most unregulated sector and they are not protected at all legally. The national labour law specifically excludes this section from its coverage. Some other occupations, e.g. construction, *bidi-rolling* are also highly risky due its poor occupational safety and health condition. On the other hand, livelihood option in rural area is limited for women ex-workers and most of them are out of employment.

The immediate impact/experience of exclusion from formal labour market is income poverty and change of status from ‘income earner’ to ‘dependent member’. It has produced a mixed perception about choice exercise and agency application. Please note, while in job not all women ex-workers had chance to exercise choice in all strategic domains. Many of them perceive that the scope is now same as it was during their garment job. The explanatory reason is that although departure from garment de-linked them from formal labour market, their new occupation has re-linked them with some other resources and they can contribute for family. Especially, in rural areas women ex-workers have involvement with NGO, as microcredit recipient, and patron relations. However there is a wide and severe criticism of patron-client relation, as exploitative instead of supportive, as well as the ‘microcredit model’ that puts women into a ‘vicious circle’. Although women lack control over credit, they need to carry the burden of repayment, where credit becomes capital for men, women are just ‘means to accessing assets’ (Karim 2014).

The non-economic indicators/areas of exclusion such as self-worth, self-esteem, status recognition are the most badly affected areas in life of the women ex-workers. All these are related to their present occupation and their perceived contribution to family. Many women ex-workers highlight flexibility issue in preference of their current occupation, however due to lower social status attached ‘flexibility vs. status stigmatization’ dilemma actively present in their life.

A response of the ex-workers to a particular question, concerning their desire to returning to garment, reflects their present vulnerability as well as its gender dimensions. None of the male ex-workers wants to return, whereas the desire among most of the women ex-workers is opposite, in spite of being aware of the exploitation of this industry and having its experience at one stage in their life. Among these ex-workers having desire to return spatial variation is

significant, women ex-workers of rural are more interest. Comparative picture of income, freedom, mobility, autonomy etc. between these two groups of ex-workers are the determining factors behind this desire.

Reality is that ex-workers of garment industry is a *'forgotten class'*—came into labour market, worked very hard for some years, during the most valuable and energetic phase of their life, helped to boost the economy and then left. No one is taking any responsibility for them. They are not 'visible' anywhere—government programmes, policy documents; NGO and civil society activities. Although garment industry is now passing through some transformation due to joint efforts of Government, Alliances of the international buyers, ILO, trade unions, employers after two tragic accidents of Tazreen Factory Fire and Rana Plaza collapse, no one is coming out to address the condition of this *'forgotten class'*.

A very recent World Bank report shows that RMG industry could create another 5.4 million jobs in Bangladesh if it can capture 20% of China's export share; China is now shifting its manufacturing base (*The Daily Star* 2015). This may be a very good opportunity to satisfy the purpose of capital. However findings of my study do not encourage to be optimistic about future of these potential workers. Rather make us sceptical as, we can envisage that *'another 5.4 million worker would be excluded at one point after their short work life and live in vulnerability'* unless the overall situation of this industry changes. Pragmatic and sensitive policies are needed in this connection.

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## Appendix 1

### Interview Guide

#### **Study Title:** From inclusion to exclusion? The case of ex-workers of garment industry in Bangladesh

##### **Thematic question 1:**

*Why do women workers leave the garment industry and what they do after leaving the factory?*

##### **Dynamic questions:**

- At what age did you start working in garment factory?
- What was your prior occupation (if any)?
- Why did you join garment factory?
- What did you expect from the garment job?
- To what extent did the garment job fulfill your expectations?
- How was the working environment?
- How long did you continue job in garment factory?
- Why did you leave the job?
- What is your present occupation (if any)?
- How would you compare your present occupation/work with job in garment factory?

##### **Thematic question 2:**

*How do ex-workers perceive the contribution/ effects of garments job in their life?*

##### **Dynamic questions:**

- How did garment job affect your life?
- How did garment job impact education and marriage?
- How did garment job affect your physical health condition?
- How did garment job affect your psychological/mental health condition?
- How did garment job affect your family relationship?
- How did you balance between job and household responsibilities?
- How did garment job impact social relationship?
- What was society's attitude towards when you were in garment job?

##### **Thematic question 3**

*What are the changes in status and living conditions of ex-workers after leaving the job?*

##### **Dynamic questions:**

- What changes are you experiencing in areas of decision-making, strategic choices, and use of agency?
- What changes do you perceive in household bargaining?
- What changes do you perceive in areas of honour, respect, and recognition within and outside household?
- How has leaving garment job affected your access and control over resources?
- How has leaving garment job affected your mobility?
- Have you experienced change in rights enjoyment after leaving the job?

Has the pattern of participating activities outside household changed after leaving the job?

What changes have taken place in your social network after leaving garment job?