

# Miracle Worker or Womanmachine? Tracking (Trans)national Realities in Bangladeshi Factories

*Bangladesh's successful entry into the world apparel market has been predicated on the deployment of a predominantly female industrial labour force. Bangladesh can be seen as a quintessentially global site – where the language of public discourse is dominated by a developmentalist vocabulary of civil society – human rights, women's development, citizenship. This essay points out that reducing the lives of Bangladeshi garment workers to a local variation on either the universally subordinated woman or the global worker exploited by capital obscures the implications of work for these women. Shifting the frame of analysis to a more experiential level allows us to overcome the more exclusionary aspects of an ostensibly culture neutral human rights discourse and offers a more complex lens with which to examine the conditions and contours of resistance.*

DINA M SIDDIQI

These are revolutionary times in the global economy. The embrace of market-based development by many developing and formerly centrally planned economies, the opening of international markets, and great advances in the ease with which goods, capital and ideas flow around the world are bringing new opportunities to workers in all countries. Good government policies could help Bangladesh seize those opportunities. [The World Bank 1996:v].

Today you are labour  
headless, extensions of claws, woman-  
machine  
you are turned into sewing machines and  
electric needles  
today you are export-oriented profits  
you are sweat from head to toe  
and machines made to toil  
labour and labour's goods  
fleshless bloodless drudgery  
inhuman labour

[Farhad Mazhar 1985; my translation]

These are revolutionary times indeed, not least for the unabashed celebration of the arrival of the free market on the global stage. However, it is by no means clear if, and for whom, the promise of prosperity offered by current flows of 'unfettered' capital will necessarily come to transpire. For, if capital, goods and ideas flow with greater ease today, they do so on highly unequal terms. What is clear is that in a post-socialist and unipolar world, participation in the global economy is not one of choice. Current forms of transnational capitalism continue the restructuring and flexible accumulation

process that began in the 1980s. Notably, the shift to more flexible forms of production at this time corresponded to the changing direction of structural and institutional reforms advocated by international lending institutions [Feldman 1992:113]. Indeed, the flexibility of production that is the core of restructuring dovetails rather neatly with developmental prescriptions of export-oriented industrialisation for poor nations. In turn, for much of the South, export potential and global competitiveness are contingent upon making available 'cheap, female' labour.

The case of Bangladesh is typical in this respect. Globalisation, in its current phase, is the product of structural adjustment policies as well as of new modes of flexible accumulation. As in many other instances, the nation's successful entry into the world apparel market has been predicated on the deployment of a predominantly female industrial labour force. Women in this workforce are alternatively described as miracle workers for the economy or as helpless victims of global capitalist exploitation. The realities of workers' worlds are barely captured by such reductive images, whatever the theoretical orientation of the writer. Nevertheless, Bangladesh can be seen as a quintessentially global site – a highly aid-dependent post-colonial state where the language of public discourse is dominated by a developmentalist vocabulary of civil society – human rights, women's development, citizenship. These are all normalised categories deployed

uncritically for the most part by people of all political persuasions. Moreover, local gender politics is at any moment mediated by global imperatives [Siddiqi 1998].

This essay provides a critical perspective on women in the garment industry in Bangladesh. It draws on fieldwork carried out initially for 14 months between 1991 and 1993 for my doctoral dissertation, and on shorter research trips in 1995 and 1996. The fieldwork focused on five factories, the smallest of which employed 200 workers and the largest, 800. The factories were all located in Dhaka, the capital of Bangladesh. Here I examine women workers' experiences of the production process itself. It is at the moment of production that capital and labour, organised within different frameworks in different social spaces, intersect in a locally distinctive manner. I note how workers' relations to machines encode their perceptions and place in the larger context of factory work and, conversely, how the association with the export industry inflects workers' realities outside the factory. I frame the analysis in terms of the global and national conditions under which women workers, as women, enter the local labour market, conditions that mediate the latter's understanding of their place in the production process and their relationship to the international and national division of labour.

By the late 1980s, feminist scholars had produced a prolific literature on the biologisation and racialisation of women's skills in factory environments globally.

Today, the myth of the docile, nimble-fingered and patient woman worker, preferably Asian or Mexican, continues to justify the low wages and appalling working conditions of factory work [Elson and Pearson 1981; Nash and Fernandez-Kelly 1983; Fuentes and Ehrenreich 1983; Mitter 1986]. In Bangladesh too, women are hired because of a presumed biological compatibility with the production process. Yet discursively, they are essentially matter out of place, to use Mary Douglas's term [Douglas 1966]. Because export industrialisation leaves untouched rural dispossession and inequality as well as severe male unemployment, while promoting women workers as heroes (or pawns) of the national economy, the consequences of industrial work are especially contradictory for factory workers. This contradiction frames the everyday lives of workers, regardless of differences in their backgrounds and their individual reasons for taking up paid employment. To put it another way, transnational practices have specific national effects. Any use of the transnational framework must be grounded in national realities, not in some unspecified space of the local.

## I Of Machines and Men

It was in the context of global recession, military rule and extreme aid-dependency that the groundwork for the garment industry was laid. High levels of aid-dependency and a severe balance of payments deficit forced Bangladesh to adopt a structural adjustment programme in the early 1980s, thereby opening up the economy for foreign investment and export-oriented production. The need to focus manufacturing from domestic to export markets was a key objective of the New Industrial Policy (NIP) created with support from the World Bank and initiated by the president, General Ershad, in 1982. Subsequently, aspiring entrepreneurs benefited from the generous investment incentives and privileges guaranteed by the state. These include preferential tariffs for imported machinery, bonded warehouse facilities for duty free imports, the provision of back-to-back letters of credit and a generous supply of commercial credit, all of which have been critical to the industry's growth. A whole generation of young, well-educated entrepreneurs were encouraged to enter the garment business because it appeared potentially lucrative but required relatively low levels of capital and technology investment.

Nevertheless, the rapid expansion of the garment industry is surprising given the overall stagnation of the economy, which remains one of the poorest in the world, with an annual Gross National Product under \$300. From a negligible base in 1977, the average annual growth rate for the apparel industry was an astounding 106 per cent between 1980-81 and 1986-87 [Rhee 1990:334]. By the late 1980s, it had replaced the more traditional export of jute as the main source of hard currency in Bangladesh. In 1994-95, the share of garments and knitwear exports compared to other exports was 64 per cent, up from 0.5 per cent in 1980-81 (ibid:335). The value of garment exports was an estimated 3.5 billion dollars in 1996 [Export Promotion Bureau 1997: 3]. In 1981, there were only 21 garment factories but as of June 1995 this figure has shot up to 2174 units (ibid.). Producing for the most part low cost items such as shirts and tee shirts, Bangladeshi firms now export to a total of 67 countries, although the bulk is consumed in the US and some members of the European Union. The machinery used is readily available, inexpensive and portable; the only infrastructural facilities that are essential are access to electricity and adequate road systems. In fact, no long-term access to land or buildings is required. These factors partially explain the proliferation of small to moderate size units developed in low overhead, rented premises in the capital Dhaka and the main port city of Chittagong.

In the final analysis, for a small and resource poor economy like Bangladesh, one of the lowest labour costs in the world ensures its competitive edge in the apparel industry. As advertisements for the state-owned Board of Investment declare, "Whatever you make, it costs less to make it in Bangladesh." There are an estimated 1.4 million workers, of whom 80 to 90 per cent are women and young girls, mostly between the ages of 14 and 25. The serendipitous elastic supply of female labour that economists and industrialists constantly celebrate has been produced from intensified rural dispossession and disenfranchisement – hence the swelling ranks of the urban poor who make up the bulk of garment workers [Saleheen and Jahan:86]. An economic strategy that corresponds so closely to the contours of the international division of labour cannot necessarily meet the needs of the domestic labour market. For the shift from rural peasant labour to urban industrial labour entailed the marginalisation of male labour, since transnational labour markets tend to

validate women's labour at the expense of men's. Nationally, industrial production has been visibly feminised. Thus the creation and deployment of a highly visible female industrial labour force, which has not made a dent in high levels of male unemployment, has the potential of profoundly disrupting the social order.

Unlike most other countries, there is no specific export processing zone in Bangladesh where garment factories are located. Factories initially came up in an irregular and unregulated manner, scattered throughout residential and commercial spaces. This is one reason why garment production, and workers themselves, have such high visibility. Garment factories themselves tend to have entrances that are unimpressive and inconspicuous, hardly reflecting their actual significance to the national economy. What they lack in grandeur, factories make up in boundary demarcation. The tell-tale sign of a 'garments'<sup>1</sup> is the metal collapsible gate at the end of an invariably dank and dirty stairway. Gates are always locked and guarded by a watchman. Beyond the gate, dark musty stairs give way to the harsh glare of florescent tubelights on the shop floor. Getting beyond this threshold, however, requires special permission for non-employees, whose identities are carefully noted down by the guard. Workers, of course, are subjected to regular security checks as they log in and out. This ritual of entering the factory sets the tone of policing within.

The factory floor is divided into three sections. Inside, strip lights and ceiling fans hang from the high ceilings. Newer buildings generally have one wall lined with windows. Despite the ceiling fans and open windows, the air is musty with the dust of fabric. The office of the manager is at the very end or off to the side, not immediately visible or accessible. The first and central space the visitor enters is generally occupied by the sewing section, with the cutting over to the side against one wall, the ironing on another side. In the sewing section, young women sit behind rows of gleaming machines (usually the South Korean brand Juki), large spools of cotton thread towering over them, small piles of unfinished clothing next each machine. Spatial arrangements on the factory floor can reflect the lack of regulation with which some factory units have been established. Very often the finishing – folding and cartoning – is carried out in any available space, that is, various nooks and crannies. The supervisors pace up and

down while the helpers, usually the youngest workers, scurrying around wherever they are needed, trailing thread, fabric and half-sewn garments behind them. Other helpers crouch on the ground, unstitching garments in which mistakes have been made in sewing. The helper is a catchall category, always at the bottom of the hierarchy. Helpers are usually the youngest, least experienced and lowest paid workers. Most women workers who enter the industry join as helpers. Their primary task is to provide any and all kinds of assistance to operators, cutters and ironmen. They are on call to replenish supplies, undo mistakes in stitching, and deliver messages, among other things. Swathes of fabric lie unattended here and there. Human voices try and break through the high pitched drone of the machines.

The gendered division of labour inside the factory reveals a profound cultural irony; it renders visible the fact that professional tailors in Bangladesh always have been and still are without exception men, yet it is women who are the preferred workforce in garment manufacturing for export. On the whole, males occupy most managerial and supervisory positions as well as those requiring the operation of 'heavy' machinery while women and girls are hired predominantly as sewing machine operators. Production is divided into three main tasks – cutting, sewing and finishing. 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 cutting section is supervised by a male master cutter (cutting master) under whom other cutters and helpers, all male, work. The responsibility of overseeing the entire sewing section is in the hands of the floor-in-charge, as he or she is called. 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 button-hole. The sewing machine operators and helpers are predominantly female, around 80 per cent. In the finishing section, the floor-in-charge is always male, as are line supervisors and those who do the ironing. Folding is done by men and women. Male

workers do the packaging and cartoning.

The reversal in labour practices is a microcosm of the predicament of woman factory workers in general. However, any possible disjuncture within the factory is displaced by the 'domestication' or feminisation of the sewing machine in relation to other equipment in use. In the discursive universe of management and most workers, sewing machines represent light and safe technology, while the larger, more cumbersome cutting and ironing machines are routinely defined as heavy, risky and therefore more suited to men. The specific masculinity invoked in these discourses naturalises women's inappropriateness for certain kinds of labour, reaffirming male aptitude for the same tasks. "The cutting machines and irons are heavy, dangerous and require strength and steady hands for proper control" is a standard refrain. In the gendered language of mastery that is invoked, the ability to control so-called heavy and more dangerous machinery (which by implication requires high levels of skill) constitutes a distinctly masculine attribute. The conflation of masculinity and high skills then confers the tasks men do with high status, thereby restoring the dominant (im)balance in acceptable labour practices for men and women. Since high skill is associated with physical strength and technological prowess – with masculinity – the position of sewing operators is by definition low skill and low status, no matter how 'dexterous', 'nimble' and productive individual operators may be. Needless to say, prestige and pay are directly correlated in this instance. The average pay in the cutting section is Tk 1624, compared to that of the sewing section, Tk 1025 [Choudhuri and Paul-Majumdar:1991:47].

In the instances that men do operate sewing machines, the effect is to reinforce rather than undermine their masculinity. The discursive practices of management and male workers construct male operators as ultimately unsuitable to the task, with respect to both mentality and physiology. Managers were unanimous in voicing their belief that men were naturally much harder to discipline/supervise than women. But what men lacked in patience and dexterity, they made up for in speed of production. Yet it was precisely the perception of hyper-productivity, of male excess in strength and speed, that figure in explanations of the lack of fit of men for such jobs. Again, the effect is to 'domesticate' the sewing machine as it is drawn into industrial production. The suggestion that male opera-

tors worked too fast and so wore out the sewing machines, has been commonly used to justify the division of labour. Choudhuri and Paul-Majumdar (1991:47), for instance, were told by some firms that male operators "were very fast and used to burn 2/3 belts each day. These men are now working as supervisors." Such exaggerations of male prowess draw on assumptions of complete mastery and domination of machines by the strong male body, in stark contrast to the weak and even nurturing bodies of women workers. These recordings of the appropriate spheres of masculinity and femininity allow for tailoring to continue as a male profession while the industrial production of clothing becomes a female-labour intensive enterprise.

The unstated but obvious reason for the demarcation of these gendered boundaries of work lies in the nature of the production process itself. Garment production is not only labour-intensive but the bulk of the labour – around 70 per cent – is concentrated in the sewing section. Thus, it is imperative to keep wages low in this section and, predictably, over 80 per cent of sewing operators are female [Choudhuri and Paul-Majumdar 1991:49]. Moreover, wage differentials exist not only between men and women in general but also between male and female operators. On average, a female worker gets 65 per cent of the pay of the male worker. Female operators receive about 86 per cent of the wages of male operators (ibid: 52). Choudhuri and Paul-Majumdar suggest that the overall gender differential in wages is the result of a higher proportion of females in the position of 'helper' as well as a higher proportion of males who are in skilled and highly skilled positions. This is a somewhat tautological argument. Clearly, the more female workers each factory has, the lower the costs of production. By that same logic, of course, garment factories should be moving toward hiring an exclusively female population. However, as we have seen, levels of skill are entangled in and mediated by definitions of masculinity and femininity. The logic by which high skill is coded male precludes, on the whole, the hiring of women for tasks other than that of operator and helper.

## II Embodying Labour

Labor does not only produce commodities; it produces itself and the worker as a *commodity* and it does so to the same extent as it produces commodities in gen-

eral. [...] For on this premise, it is clear that *the more the worker exhausts himself, the more powerful the alien world of objects*. Alienation manifests itself not only in the result, but in the *act of production*, in the *producing activity* itself [Marx 1844, *Manuscripts*: 133, 136, Emphases added].

By the late 20th century, our time, a mythic time, we are all chimeras, theorised and fabricated hybrids of machine and organism; in short, we are cyborgs. [...] Intense pleasure in skill, machine skill, ceases to be a sin, but an aspect of embodiment. *The machine is not an it to be animated, worshipped and dominated. The machine is us, our processes, an aspect of our embodiment. We can be responsible for boundaries, we are they. We can be responsible for machines; they do not dominate or threaten us* [Haraway 1991: 425, 451, emphasis added].

Allusions to the imagery and vocabulary of machines, of how the production process 'disassembles and reassembles' workers' identities and their worlds are frequent in the literature on women assembly line workers [see Ong 1987b:618]. The nature of contemporary assembly line production, the manufacture of electronics goods in particular, seems to lend itself to such metaphors. In her classic study of Malaysian electronics workers, Aihwa Ong describes the shop floor in the Malaysian electronics industry as resembling a scene from NASA. She observes that dominant images of electronics workers, nicknamed Minah letrik, reflect their association with a high-tech production process [Ong 1987a]. Ong documents Malaysian workers' resistance, in the form of spirit possession as well as attacks on equipment, to intensive surveillance, disciplining and 'undignified' treatment. Donna Haraway cites the same Malaysian workers as one example of real-life cyborgs who are actively rewriting the texts of their bodies within the circuit of transnational capital [Haraway 1994: 449]. Haraway's cyborg is a hybrid of human and machine, one who can transcend or destroy boundaries. Referring to the 'border war' in the relationship between organism and machine, Haraway argues for "pleasure in the confusion of boundaries" and "responsibility in their construction" (ibid: 425). However, she does not elaborate the conditions of possibility under which sweatshop workers in Malaysia or elsewhere, toiling under the exhausting deadlines of quota work, can make claims to pleasures or stake out responsibilities. Nor is it clear what the nature of such hybrid pleasures and

responsibilities would be (other than subversive), given the circumstances of work. Investing assembly line workers with agency is commendable but collapsing pleasure into resistance, as is the implication, is surely premature. The argument for the radical potential of the cyborg rests on the claim that the "social relations of science and technology," rather than any form of biopolitics structure the late 20th century world (see her note 4). Yet it is only by universalising from her own world that Haraway can declare that in 'advanced capitalism' dominations no longer work by medicalisation and normalisation in the manner of Foucault but by networking, communications redesign, stress management instead. Haraway theorises from an abstract but generalised social location, her own, to validate the potential for resistance among women whose connections to transnational circuits are radically different from hers. Only by decimating all context can Haraway speak on behalf of the electronics worker in south-east Asia. Such generalisations deny the specificity of experience, of the multiplicity of modernities, privileging instead an inescapable, technologically fixated late twentieth century American world. Most sweatshop workers, whether in the US or in Asia, don't inhabit the same 'postmodern' spaces of imagination or circuitry as Haraway, although their realities are coeval with hers. I hasten to add I am not arguing for a generic non-western form of difference. However, the erasure of specificity obscures inequalities of location and access. For, the circumstances under which the body can take pleasure in technology are surely limited. In a recent essay on Filipina transnational workers, Roland Tolentino observes that Haraway's myth basically addresses a 'First World' audience able to realise, in some individualising form, the body's pleasure in technology [Tolentino 1996:53]. (As he points out, this does not hold for all of the 'First World' either). Which brings us face to face with the profound difficulties of translating experience across geographical and cultural boundaries. In the context of south Asia, some scholars even argue for a completely different phenomenology of labour where "labour, the activity of producing, is seldom a completely secular activity" [Chakrabarty 1997:35]. In the end, Haraway's utopian Cyborg Manifesto provides inadequate grounds for theorising the experiences of (Bangladeshi) factory workers.

An exploration of the situation in Bangladeshi garment factories reveals the

multiplicity of late 20th century realities, forms of domination and understandings of labour. While I do not subscribe completely to Chakrabarty's provocative distinction between secular and non-secular phenomenologies of labour, his work serves as a reminder that other temporalities and other forms of worlding do exist. His analysis forces us to prise open the concept of labour as abstraction; as a category that is constituted outside of social relations, that is, outside the cultural realm. The abstract quality of labour is reinforced in popular representations of garment workers in Bangladesh, where the young female worker is invariably pictured hard at work, stooped over an industrial size sewing machine, her body melting into the frame of the machine. Such a posture can depict either industrious modernity or exploitative drudgery. The worker herself remains anonymous and interchangeable. Even as the 'miracle worker' of the national economy, she remains the 'woman-machine' of the poem quoted at the beginning of this essay.<sup>2</sup>

In contrast to the situation in Malaysia, there is nothing futuristic about the shop floor or the products in Bangladeshi garment factories. High-tech, futuristic metaphors might be more appropriate for some industries more than others, a reflection of the nature of the technology in use as well as the finished product. Despite the rows of florescent tube lights and fans on the ceilings, and the neatly lined sewing machines, the overwhelming sense is of a highly policed, mechanised domesticity rather than of post-fordist technological abundance. The sight of women in bright if faded clothing, surrounded by fabric and sitting dutifully behind sewing machines evokes images of domesticity and traditional work spaces. The nature of the commodities produced-clothes-adds a humanising touch to the environment. At the same time, worker's relationship to the production process is also quite distinct. Rather than assembling machines, women have to work on them, therefore have 'one to one' relations with them.

Nevertheless, it is the metaphor of the machine – one that controls and entraps – that constantly emerges in this 'domestic' space.<sup>3</sup> It is the factory bell, and the electric lights overhead-not the call of the 'muezzin' (the call to prayers) or the movement of the sun – that shape the rhythms of the workday. Being inside the shop floor at the start and end of shifts is like being trapped in a huge machine. The atmo-

sphere is surreal as the lights and machines, perfectly coordinated are shut off or turned on by one master switch. When the assembly line is in operation, all human sounds are drowned out by the deafening sound of the machines. In order to minimise costs, all electric supplies are switched off when production stops, in tandem with the lunch hour bell. Thus the lunch break abruptly and dramatically transforms the shop floor. The contrast is jarring – the harsh lights and shrill, incessant drone of machines replaced immediately by momentary silence and darkness. The surface orderliness, framed by the technologies in use, seems to collapse into chaos – a medley of human voices and shadowy sunlight replacing the predictable and regular whirring of sewing machines and the glare of powerful artificial lights.

The relationship of worker to machine is complex and ambivalent; it is articulated in a partial and discontinuous manner, frequently in the idiom of the supernatural. As operators, women are expected to possess total control over their electric sewing machines. Yet most confess to feelings of subordination or subjection to those machines. At one level, this relation is conditioned by the larger features of the immediate work environment, in which factory doors are locked, entrances strictly policed, production quotas fixed and workers kept under close supervision. The most important factor mediating this relationship is the assembly line conditions of work in which continuous motion and speed is critical. Workers are not allowed to leave until the day's quota has been fulfilled, no matter how long it takes. Attaining the daily quota depends upon maintaining a regular pace. Speed is of the essence because of production deadlines. The entire production process is structured around impending deadlines and time-limits over which the management constantly reiterate they have no control (and on which the fate of the factory and its workers presumably depend). The imperative to maintain the chain of operations means that individual workers cannot slacken their pace without disrupting the entire production process. They must continually keep pressure on the foot pedal, for any indication of slacking brings down the wrath of ever vigilant supervisors.

In this mechanical, repetitive and relentless chain of production, machines come to represent fetishised extensions of workers bodies and their bodily substances. Workers are alienated from their machines

at the same time as they are locked onto them, as a part of the machine. The relationship to the machine itself is not so much one of unmediated fear as it is of an awareness of the potential power the machine possesses – at 220 volts, fear of electrocution is certainly justified. But individual workers articulate a more complex sense of the electric machines relentlessly feeding on their energies. “The [electric] ‘pull’ of the machine holds the body back, preventing us from leaving the workstation.” “The machine doesn’t want to let go, it just pulls you down.” Workers struggle to keep the power of electricity at bay for, “The machines suck in all of your energies, they want to pull you into a vortex, they take stuff out of the self.” “We’re pulled from both directions, from below and above, by the electricity,” workers told me. The physical depletion produced from bending over a sewing machine for 10 to 12 hours a day repeating the same basic tasks, and with extremely limited opportunities for breaks, is here translated into an idiom that attributes a certain supernatural life to the machine itself. The intensity and feverish imperative for constant outputs are embodied and understood through such fetishisations of electricity and electric machines. At another level, the asymmetrical relationship between worker and machine, the “emptying [sucking dry] of the self” that occurs by the end of each day of labour comes to stand for the larger context of exploitation and powerlessness within which workers operate. Survival requires constant vigilance on the part of the worker. More over, this particular relation to production is sharply gendered. Men wear out the machines, whereas the machines wear out women.<sup>4</sup>

Although in general most workers mentioned the need to replenish their ‘spent selves’ by the consumption of such (protein rich) foods such as eggs and milk (all hot, life sustaining foods), when asked specifically about the effects of electricity, many noted that in order to “fight against the life-draining powers of machines, you have to eat certain foods like tamarind”. Tamarind is generally associated with femininity and fertility in Bangladesh, a ‘female and effeminate’ food that menstruating as well as pregnant women supposedly crave [Blanchet 1984; Maloney et al 1981]. It is believed that the female body in these liminal and depleting conditions requires not only the usual milk, meat and eggs but benefits from the properties of sustenance found in ‘sour’ foods like

tamarind. The transference of such practices to the industrial domain should be understood in the context of discourses around the female body and the exhausting pace of industrial labour, rather than a collision of traditional superstitious beliefs with modernity. Just as the female body is drained of life-giving substances through the loss of blood during menstruation, and through having to supply nourishment to the fetus during pregnancy, the imbalance created by the depletion of bodily substances in the factory must be restored with contextually specific food items. The critical difference is that factory work is not productive in the same way that pregnancy is. It takes away life without giving anything in return – in the sense that workers are alienated from the products they ‘give birth’ to. Moreover, if factory work is a liminal condition as such, it represents a condition into which women workers are locked for the greater part of their day, indefinitely.

It is noteworthy that the ‘hathiyar puja’ or tool worship mentioned in texts on Indian labour is, to my knowledge, conspicuously absent in Bangladeshi garment factories.<sup>5</sup> Nor is this a wholesale rejection and reappropriation of the capitalist mode of production, as the actions of Bolivian tin miners have been interpreted by Michael Taussig, where “The Indians have enter the mines but they remain as *foreign bodies* within the capitalist framework” [Taussig, 1980:226, emphasis added]. Rather than relying on a somewhat questionable opposition between science and religion, or pre-capitalist and capitalist, I would suggest that Bangladeshi workers rework existing cultural idioms into the fabric of capitalist production in ways that are mediated directly by the nature of the production process – the incredible time pressures and pace of the work, the poor working conditions and the lack of adequate compensation. These are obviously deeply subjective experiences, but they are not based on a clash of capitalist culture with an indigenous worldview.

In the anthropological literature, fainting and spirit possession are phenomena frequently associated with women’s resistance to conditions of subjugation and silencing. While fainting is a common enough phenomenon in Bangladeshi factories, especially during the hottest months of June and July and while female possession does occur in rural Bangladesh [see Gardner 1995], I didn’t come across the language of sorcery or possession within

factories themselves. In my experience, fainting was most frequently associated with being 'trapped' in enclosed spaces and the inability to breathe properly, its cause articulated in terms of being locked in, with no control and no access to the outside world. "We could not breathe anymore." "We were being choked to death, they locked all the windows." The metaphor of slow death, of basic deprivation, pervades descriptions of fainting. Fainting, then, is one way to escape a ruthless work regime that is life-depleting.

Both economically, and in literal terms, workers feel trapped by their machines – the operators of machines experience the machine operating them at multiple levels. Worker perceptions of the relationship to machines is a condensed version of their perception of their lives inside and outside the factory. In the eyes of many workers, they are part of a machine that men are in control of. The factory itself can seem like a huge machine, someone else's machine, with women as cogs inside. It is men who throw on the switches to turn the giant on, men who guard its products, and of course, men who own it.

Moreover, the promise of empowerment through paid labour is belied by the knowledge of workers' entrapment in the labour market. It is not only that women are perceived as inhabiting the space of men – certainly the factory is an archetypically masculine site. Of critical import here, however, is the specific conditions under which women come to 'displace' male labour. Since women's access to the factory occurs in the context of inequality and severe male unemployment, female garment workers have come to represent a socially disruptive labour force. It is in this sense that women are matter out of place. This makes garment workers highly visible symbols of cultural transgression. As in most of south Asia, the aesthetic of family claims on daughters, sisters and wives is articulated in a moral rather than material idiom. 'Work', that is public paid labour, can be a violation of cultural expectations rather than a reinforcement of women's identities. Status considerations are violated every time a woman is forced to seek work to support herself and/or her family, for it renders visible her male head of household's inability to provide her with appropriate maintenance. As it becomes impossible to sustain an ideology of male family members as the primary or exclusive economic providers in a household, and as the modern, capitalist state draws women into the public arena by tapping

into women's labour, a certain 'feminisation' of the male seems to occur [Fatima Mernissi sees this as a predicament of the post-colonial state, in her case Morocco. Cited in Rai 1996:30]. Moreover, going 'out' to work carries with it the danger of sexual vulnerability – honour embodied in woman's reputation is at risk when a woman enters the public space of work.

Symbols of an inverted moral order, women workers signify through their bodies male inadequacy and national failure. The irony is that for individual families, the workers may be the only income earner. For the nation, returns from the garment industry constitute the largest portion of annual foreign exchange income. Representing both danger and savior, the woman worker is always already sexualised, in the eyes of factory management and the general public. Combined with the conditions of work, which require late nights, travelling unescorted and often living alone, the slippage between woman as worker and woman as prostitute is omnipresent in the public imagination. This collapsing of worker identity into a purely sexual identity not only denies subjectivity but also allows for a whole host of abuses.

Almost all women workers are subjected to the experience of sexual harassment (mostly verbal) on the streets, for their status as 'garment girls' inevitably places their respectability into question. In some ways, such harassment is an extension of the more generalised phenomenon of 'eve-teasing' common in parts of south Asia. I would argue, however, that there are other, more complex factors at work here. In the first place, there is the long-standing disrepute attached to garment work. The stories of workers being wooed from the countryside under false pretenses, only to be thrown into prostitution circulate endlessly. Male workers in other industries have been known to call garment factories whore houses and baby producing centres. Partly, it is the middle class belief in the moral laxity of the "chotolok", the lower orders. This distancing of class and sexual morality, which helps in the consolidation of a bourgeois identity, converges with classic Muslim notions of *parda* and the 'public' woman as necessarily immoral or sexually permissive.

The conflation of 'garments' and worker is worth investigating for, to my knowledge, in no other industry are workers labelled or identified so explicitly by the commodity they produce. The men who are employed in jute or textile mills are simply workers, unmarked as a category.

Then again, in no other industry have the workers themselves functioned as such overt symbols of an inverted social order. These women call themselves into question not merely because they are working women; nor is it exclusively because of the conditions of their employment. But the significance of their conditions of work are constructed in permanently ambiguous ways. The conditions of possibility for industrial work for women on a mass scale in this context are very different from, for instance, those of women in Great Britain during the second world war. In the latter case, women acted as a reserve army of labour, taking the place of men who had been conscripted for the war effort. Women's labour in the factories was complementary to men's labour on the war front. The deployment of working class women's labour was constructed as an indispensable part of a national cause. The individual woman's movement from domesticity to factory life was cast as a desirable sacrifice for the good of the nation as a collective. At the same time, these women were expected to retreat into the home as soon as the men returned.

In contrast, the presence of women workers in the factories (and so on the streets) of urban Bangladesh is made possible by or at least an indicator of the absence of male workers within the factory. In the garment industry, the role of factory labour has shifted definitively to a feminised role, one that is not available to men. The fact of this unavailability is critical to understanding social constructions of the garment worker. For no other situation illustrates so dramatically and so visibly the failure of the male. In this respect, garment workers are different from other women in the public domain. Symbolically, they stand for more than a rupture of demarcated male and female spaces. Consequently, comments about the garment worker as 'bewareish' (without a male guardian/immodest) are not only allusions to potentially sexually transgressive behaviour. The virulence of the disapproval, anxiety and fear that underlie the various forms of harassment to which garment workers are subjected must be read in the context of an overall disruption of the social order. The identification of garments as industry and garments as worker, of product and producer, is hardly incidental then. Multiple meanings and relations are embedded in the term garments. The body of the worker, the site of production and the body of the product

all collapse into a sign of male inadequacy. Moreover, the word invokes the global production system in which a female (industrial) labour force is produced and appropriated at the expense of an already existing male labour force. That Bangladeshi shirts are sold in American stores at huge profits is fairly common knowledge. Thus, the product itself comes to represent, through the worker, the system of profit from which most men and women in Bangladesh are disenfranchised. In the process, the actual exploitation of the labour of garment workers themselves is glossed over.

It is another irony that, faced with attacks on their respectability and modesty, garment workers routinely appropriate the conditions of entrapment to secure their reputations. As I show elsewhere, fear of being stigmatised produces heightened self-regulation among workers, who cite the disciplinary conditions of worklocked doors, constant supervision, etc as proof of their continued virtue and respectability [Siddiqi 1996].

### III Conclusion

Transnationalism conjures up images of travel, of flows of capital, commodities, labour and information across borders. But it is not only those who travel across borders and form new diasporas whose lives are affected by transnational practices [Spivak 1996]. Globalisation, whose other face in Bangladesh is structural adjustment, is intimately experienced through the local and specific conditions of the nation, not only beyond its borders. Reducing the lives of Bangladeshi garment workers to a local variation on either the universally subordinated woman or the global worker exploited by capital obscures the implications of work for these women. I would like to suggest that analyses derived exclusively from the framework of a global human rights discourse, although critical in the struggle to establish legal rights, gives us only a partial glimpse into the perceptions and experiences of exploitation of the garment workers themselves. Shifting the frame of analysis to a more experiential level allows us to overcome the more exclusionary aspects of an ostensibly 'culture-neutral' human rights discourse. Theorising from the experiences of these women provides us with a different angle on the meanings of 'exploitation', its articulation with culturally embedded notions of fairness, justice and social dignity. This then provides us with a more complex

lens with which to examine the conditions and contours of resistance. **EWJ**

### Notes

- 1 In everyday parlance, the English word 'garments' stands interchangeably for an individual factory, the industry as well as the workers themselves.
- 2 I found this poem on a bookmark printed and circulated at an outlet for Ubinig, a Dhaka based NGO. The poem is accompanied by the sketch of a teenage girl, hair tied back neatly, stooped over a Juki machine, to which she seems physically attached. Through the picture and the text, the writer recalls Marx's assertion that workers in the industrial capitalism are in danger of becoming mere appendages of the machines they work on. Marx's insight, however, requires some refinement to capture the complexity of workers' relation to the production process. It is not simply the activity of producing under 'objective' circumstances that is critical here but also workers' perceptions of why they are there.
- 3 The recoding of factory space as domestic space – a tactic invoked by worker and manager alike in many instances, challenges us to rethink the gendered public/private dichotomy theorised by Partha Chatterjee and others.
- 4 The symbolic control electricity has over workers has changed over time. In the last few years, there have several factory fires, lead to the death of workers trapped inside the locked factory premises. The very flexibility of setting up shop has encouraged the disregard for workers' safety that leads to situations of fire. The statistics are appalling. On December 27, 1990, 25 workers, including 16 women died in a fire at Saraka Garments. On February 11, 1995, five female workers died in a fire at Prostor Garments; nine workers died in a fire at Lusaka Fashion Garments on August 5, 1995. June 20th, 1997, a fire in Mirpur spread to two factories – 11 more garment workers died at Trimode France and Suntex Fashion. All of the these fires were caused by 'short circuiting' of electrical wires – the death might have been avoided if factory premises had not been locked for security purposes and had adequate fire fighting machinery and fire escape routes existed. The relationship between electricity and danger these episodes had inscribed into worker consciousness was tragically foregrounded when in August of this year, the rumour of an electrical malfunction caused a panic and a stampede in another factory in Mirpur, leading to the death of several workers.
- 5 See Chakrabarty 1989 and Fernandes 1997 for different interpretations of the significance of hathiyar puja.

### References

Blanchet, Therese (1984): *Meanings and Rituals of Birth in Rural Bangladesh*, University Press, Dhaka.

Chakrabarty, Dipesh (1997): 'The Time of History and the Times of Gods' in L Lowe and D Lloyd (eds), *The Politics of Culture in the Shadow of Capital*, Duke University Press, Durham.

Clarence, Maloney et al (1981): *Beliefs and Fertility in Bangladesh*, International Centre for Diarrhoeal Disease Research, Dhaka.

– (1989): *Rethinking Working Class History: Bengal 189-1940*, Princeton University Press, Princeton.

Douglas, Mary (1966): *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of Concepts of Pollution and Taboo*

Praeger, New York.

Elson, Diane and Ruth Pearson (1984): 'The Subordination of Women and the Internationalisation of Factory Production' in Kate Young et al (eds), *Of Marriage and the Market*, Kegan Paul Press, London.

Export Promotion Bureau (1997): *Export From Bangladesh 1972-73 to 1994-95*, Export Promotion Bureau Publications, Dhaka.

Feldman, Shelley (1992): 'Crisis, Islam and Gender in Bangladesh: The Social Construction of a Female Labour Force' in L Beneria and S Feldman (eds), *Unequal Burden: Economic Crises, Persistent Poverty and Women's Work*, Westview Press, Boulder.

Fernandes, Leela (1997): *Producing Workers: The Politics of Gender, Class, and Culture in the Calcutta Jute Mills*, University of Pennsylvania, Press Philadelphia.

Fuentes, Anna and Barbara Ehrenreich (1983): *Women in the Global Factory*, Southend Press, Boston.

Gardner, Katy (1995): *Global Migrants, Local Lives: Travel and Transformation in Rural Bangladesh*, Clarendon Press, Oxford.

Haraway, Donna (1991): 'A Cyborg Manifesto: Science, Technology and Socialist-Feminism in the Late Twentieth Century' in *Simians, Cyborgs and Women: The Reinvention of Nature*, Routledge, New York.

Marx, Karl (1983): *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts of 1844* in Eugene Kamenka (ed), *The Portable Karl Marx*, Penguin Books, New York.

Mitter, Swasti (1986): *Common Fate, Common Bond: Women in the Global Economy*, Pluto, London.

Nash, June and Fernandez-Kelly (eds) (1983): *Women, Men and the International Division of Labor*, State University of New York, Albany.

Ong, Aihwa (1987a): *Spirits of Resistance and Capitalist Discipline: Factory Women in Malaysia*, State University of New York Press, Albany.

– (1987b): 'Disassembling Gender in the Electronics Age' in *Feminist Studies* 13:3 Fall.

Paul-Majumdar, Pratima and Salma Choudhuri (1991): *The Conditions of Garment Workers in Bangladesh – An Appraisal*, Bangladesh Institute of Development Studies, Dhaka.

Rai, Shirin M and Geraldine Lievesley (1996): *Women and the State: International Perspectives*, Taylor and Francis, Washington.

Siddiqi, Dina M (1996): 'Women in Question: Gender and Labor in Bangladeshi Factories' PhD Dissertation, University of Michigan.

– (1998): 'Taslima Nasreen and Others: The Contest Over Gender in Bangladesh' in H Bodman and N Tohid (eds) *Women in Muslim Societies: Diversity Within Unity*, Lynne Rienner, Boulder.

Spivak, Gayatri (1996): 'Diasporas Old and New: Women in the Transnational World' in *Textual Practice* 10:2.

Taussig, Michael (1980): *The Devil and Commodity Fetishism in South America*, University of North Carolina Press, Chapel Hill.

Tolentino, Roland B (1996): 'Bodies, Letters, Catalogs: Filipinas in Transnational Spaces' in *Social Text* 48, 14:3, Fall.

Whee Rhee, Yung (1990): 'The Catalyst Model of Development: Lessons from Bangladesh's Success with Garment Export' in *World Development* 18:2, Saleheen, Mesbah-us and Mia Jahan (1991): 'Women Workers in Export-Oriented Garment Industries of Dhaka' in *Oriental Geographer* 35:1 and 2.

World Bank (1996): *Bangladesh: Labour Market Policies for Higher Employment*, World Bank Report No 13799-BD, April 22, Washington, DC.