

Constructing and Practicing Rights: A Perspective of Female Factory Workers in Bangladesh

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Abstract

This paper focuses on the meaning of constructing and practicing rights to female factory workers in Dhaka, Bangladesh. In response to the dynamic relations of power and authorities, claiming rights for female factory workers often means to step out of the familiar social-cultural framework. In the uneven process of rights formation, participating in urban geopolitics, confrontations with gender order is inevitable. I describe how state policies and the influence of transnational capitalism have effects on shaping gender order. Also, various worker organizations, including local and transnational workers' NGOs and trade unions, have deeply participated in the representation of rights. By assisting with mental and physical health care for workers to fulfill their motherhood responsibilities, these organizations consolidate connections between female workers. In this process, working experiences and personal lives are intertwined by the workers' NGOs. By examining how dominant forces interplay and compete with one another, I point out that female factory workers in Bangladesh exercise their rights through various approaches and develop more empirical and relational concepts of rights. The ways female workers organize and claim their rights reflect the transformation of the social-cultural context of Bangladesh.

Keywords: South Asia, Female workers, Governance, Rights, Export-processing zones, NGOs, Urban slums

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I. Introduction

To Bangladeshi females, becoming a factory worker may face deterioration of rights in multiple aspects, despite gaining a relatively stable income. The concept of 'right' is interwoven with 'identity,' such as women or factory workers in the local context.

The paper observes the condition of working, living, and social organizing of female factory workers. On the one hand, I argue that the interweaving and competing forces of the gender order, factory management, politics of urban space, and policies of national development, make up governance to female workers. On the other hand, I argue that female workers recognize their rights empirically and contextually instead and practice rights in practical response to local relations of power. Therefore, the paper considers the form of governance and the subject of rights as dynamic and intertwined.

II. Method and Approach

By taking a qualitative research approach, the paper was based on interviews and participant-observation fieldwork for a total of five months in 2016 and 2017, at mainly three sites in Dhaka, the capital city of Bangladesh. The three sites are Dhaka EPZ, Korail slum area, and Awaj Foundation, which is an NGO working on improving worker's rights.

III. Multifaceted Governance

i. Gender Order and Factory Management in Dhaka EPZ

Located in Savar Upazila, the suburb area of Dhaka, Dhaka EPZ is about 35km from the city center and about 25km from the Hazrat Shahjalal International Airport. Established in 1993, the EPZ accounts for around 356 acres now, with 102 firms in operation and over 94,000 employees (BEPZA 2018). According to official data, readymade garment counted for 85% of the country's export earnings in the final financial quarter of 2019, employed 4.4 million people, of whom 80% are female (BEPZA 2018 ; Bangladesh Bank 2018). Water and noise pollution are explicit in the nearby areas. Walls and checkpoints have been set up around the zone to examine people and cargos.

Anika, a 28 years old female worker in Dhaka EPZ, is the first and currently the only female production line supervisor in the factory where she works. She speaks a little English and even memorizes some Chinese words commonly used by the Chinese engineers stationed in the factory. Her husband works in another factory in the EPZ. According to Anika, the couple came to Dhaka after married and has lived in Dhaka for more than two years.

Me: What is the difference between working in Dhaka EPZ and other places?

Anika: Here is very clean ... very discipline. Others will not stare at me just because I talk to a male colleague. (Adds on after a few seconds) I like to work here. I learned fast without too much difficulty.

Unlike most textile and garment factories in the zone, the factory where Anika works specializes in lens production. Several regulations are implemented to meet the requirement of cleanliness: operators must change shoes when entering the factory; a dustproof hat is required when working in special workshops; slogans like 'Keep clean' and 'Get things back in place' are posted on walls and tabletops. The environment itself becomes part of the discipline.

Anika's experience of discipline is also related to gender interaction. According to Siddiqi, Changes of gender interaction experienced by workers in the EPZ resulted from gathers of garment industries with a high proportion of female workers, strict regulations, and workplace management in EPZ, which contributed to the development of a field of gender interaction different from the one outside. The production environment restructures gender practices.

ii. Urban Space Politics, National Projects of Development

Housing difficulties faced by female workers are still severe. The high possibility of a single female turned down by landlords in the city has forced them to look for more dangerous places, with worse conditions but higher rents. However, at the time when the RMG industry grew substantially in the late 1980s, neither from the officials nor from factory owners, little attention had been paid to the living difficulties of female workers. It has taken over 20 years for the issue of "single women's housing rights" to gain public attention and caused actions.

Although voices are now openly urging the government to work with corporations, real estate development, and banks to develop public housing programs and housing subsidies, women in the city still hardly find a safe, healthy, and friendly place to live.

In the name of "ensuring security," women are still facing various forms of oppression even though the number of housing leased to females has increased in the housing market since 2000 (Parveen 2008). Female renters need to take the pressure of surveillance from security guards and neighbors. Combined with a house-rental market without sufficient and organized regulations, they constitute an oppressive structure for single women, leading to higher rents. Even though the government has taken more intervention to some extent, options are unreachable for female workers due to limited budgets and few connections (Hossain 2014).

Under all these circumstances, I notice a conflict between the expectation for living space from female workers and the one assumed by the government and public housing initiators.

Mashuda is the executive of Nari Uddug Kendra (NUK), which means 'Centre for Women's Initiatives.' NUK is the pioneer in calling for the attention of female workers' housing issues as early as the 1990s. They have cooperated with both government and private sectors since 1993 to build a female dormitory, providing 600 rental spaces in different areas of Dhaka city. However, when I visited her in 2017, she told me that their projects on the female worker's dorm had been put to an end because the workers had little interest in living in it.

Mashuda: We are now putting more effort on the improvement of rural

community medical facilities and building up factory audit systems. The female worker's dormitory project has been stopped.

Mashuda: ...I found that female workers actually do not like to live in dormitories. They prefer to choose places where they can host their husbands, children, relatives and friends from their hometowns, even with poor living conditions and relatively high rents. They said the dorm is somehow inconvenient.

Mushda's blueprint for the female worker's dormitory failed to take the worker's family needs into consideration. The dormitory preferred single, homogeneous workers and tended to drag the renters away from their original social network. Similar thoughts could be found in many other projects taking place in the same period of time. Many of them said that women, who bring a massive contribution to the country's development, deserve a better living place. The dorm's design usually reflects two ideas - "isolation" and "easy to be managed." In short, the dorms only consider the workers "a worker" rather than "a female" in the social-cultural context, aiming to shape them to fit better in the industrialized urban space.

For a female worker, choose to live in the dorm or to rent a house reveals how she identifies a female as a worker in Bangladesh. The difficulty of single women living in the urban environment of Dhaka comes from the fierce competition of urban space and the pressure, along with the intimate adjustment, from gender order. These are also the impacts derived from the development process of state and capital, toward stratification.

iii. Dwelling in City: the Order and Crisis of Slums

In Dhaka, people use the word *bosti* when referring to settlements dwelled by the urban poor, most of which are illegally occupied. Indeed, a considerable portion of factory workers lives in slums. In fact, according to an official statistic in 2015, in Dhaka District with a population of 14 million, about one-third of the population lives in *bosti* (Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics 2015: 21, 31). Among them, Korail is the most populous and the biggest one. It covers nearly two wards and has an estimation of the population of about 100-200,000.

Rounded by the bustling commercial area of Bannani and diplomat agent area of Gulshan, Korail residents make their living on these high-income districts, as rickshaw pullers, drivers, daily wage workers, domestic workers, boatmen, security guards, street vendors, and factory workers. It is documented that Korail was originally a private-owned land. In 1961, about 180 acres of land was designated to then the State Department of Telephone & Telegraph (T&T). After the independence of the country, T&T transferred half of the area to the Public Works Department (PWD) of the Bangladesh Government in 1990. However, ever since then, the ownership of the land has been divided and become fragment and unclear (Mridha et al. 2009:18-19; Sinthia 2013).

The issues regarding how workers dwell in the city can hardly avoid discussing slums. Living in slums, women actively participate in income-earning, resulted in expanding their mobility, gaining control over access to resources, and sharing the risks of the

households. Since plenty of local and International NGOs have launched their projects in slums, women there develop livelihood on it. They rely heavily on the materials provided by the NGOs; meanwhile, by participating in the NGO's activities, they also empower themselves.

Jahanara used to work in a garment factory for three years. Now she opened a clothing store through a micro-loan from an NGO and acted as an agent for collecting repayment from other women in Korail. She is not only the financial manager of women's self-organized *shomity*, but also one of the leaders in the development plan initiated by UNICEF Bangladesh. "They think they can trust me," Jahanara said.

Jahanara's husband, Hasan, was once a rickshaw driver, a private car driver, and a garment factory worker. He later became one of the leading figures in Korail through participating in the development project. Now he is a secretary in the office of Ward councilor of North Dhaka City Government. He founded a Korail-based development foundation in 2010 (currently has 32 members); noticeable, two of the foundation's sponsors are from the local office of Awami League, the ruling party. Hasan also manages the community clinic.

Me: Hasan bhai, there are still people moving into Korail, how do you help them?

Hasan: I will first find a place for them to stay, and then help them get in touch with the landlord. I will do what I can...for example, the fire in March, I raised funds through my foundation and finally provided 500 tents to accommodate the victims.

When we discuss the living condition in Korail, Jahanara complained about the lack of infrastructure and the constant fear of being evicted. In an effort to solve these problems, residents in Korail established various local organizations in response to the absence of the country's formal system. While maintaining the basic functions of the slums, those organizations have mediated, or 'combined' with the legal and underground life through patron-client relationships, to form an internal order of the slum area. It seems that an urban slum is a unique form of space that blurs the established border or mode of governance in Bangladesh. In such a situation, the connotation of rights and civil society have become ambiguous as well.

iv. Rights in its Social Meanings

Nazma Akter, a female garment worker, founded Awaj Foundation in 2003. It provides a variety of services and activities for workers, such as medical services, legal advice, labor rights lessons, negotiation skills training, and trade union establishment.

Among the Awaj Foundation's courses, those related to nutrition, financial management, and children's education are particularly popular for female workers. The knowledge is in line with their expectations of "motherhood." Female workers also come to Awaj to obtain medical and food supplies, to seek consultation, to relieve pressure, and to learn to negotiate with factory managers. What is important for them is not only about the activity itself but about the exchange of information and social contacts. All of which help the individual worker build a support network, and

thus gain confidence.

The example of Awaj shows that worker organization's activities, in which workers establish new relationships and obtain knowledge, even go through negotiations with authorities, all of which allow them to strengthen the subject of rights. Consolidating connections between female workers increase their willingness to participate in labor negotiations. Therefore, multiple worker organizations, including local and transnational NGOs and trade unions expanding with the garment industry, are deeply involved when workers are claiming over rights.

IV. Conclusion

In this paper, I have discussed how rights are built in response to dynamic powers and authorities in the context of local governance. Women, working in factories in the suburbs of Dhaka, establish a life in the response of the mastery attempts by transnational capital and the state. Female workers become a subject capable of claiming rights, negotiate and participate in shaping urban landscapes. On the one hand, the formation of rights is related to the interlacing and negotiation process of dominant forces, including gender order, factory management, and urban space competition. On the other hand, female workers continue to expand their recognition and practice of rights from different social positions, with NGOs mediating the process of forging new relationships, intermediating knowledge, and negotiating law enforcement.

My conclusion is, for female workers, claiming rights often imply stepping out of a familiar social-cultural framework. In that way, they are enriching the imagination of the subjects of rights. The craggy process of rights construction could not avoid patent traces of patron-client relationships. Besides, when dwelling in the city and participating in urban geopolitics, female workers in particular regularly confront gender order and state policies. Their persuasion of becoming not only a factory worker but simultaneously a wellbeing in social-cultural context.

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