

Getting real about globalisation in Bangladesh

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Writing on **openDemocracy**, [Anita Roddick](#) [0] describes systematic abuse of basic human rights in Bangladesh's ready-made garment industry.

Anita Roddick [argues](#) [0] on **openDemocracy** for a new campaign to improve working conditions in Bangladesh

It is true that many workers suffer in appalling conditions. But it is important to understand that the garment industry continues to form a vital part of Bangladesh's gradual and uncertain emergence from poverty, and that without it, the conditions for millions of people would be a lot worse.

Consider this:

“Hosne Ara, living with her unemployed husband and two children was driven out of her village in Comilla by poverty and hunger. With her limited education, she hardly had a chance for a decent job. However, she got a job two years ago at Dekko Apparels and now Hosne Ara cannot only survive physically, but also dream of a future in which her school-going children would have much better prospects. Hosne Ara is not looking back anymore. She is striding forward to that future. For a Hosne Ara, the access of Bangladesh's garment industry to the global market was a blessing.”

This account of the empowerment of one worker, by the World Bank's country director for Bangladesh, is backed by a consensus that ready-made garments have been the backbone of growth for Bangladesh since the beginning of the 1980s. Most economists, policymakers, and Bangladesh-watchers agree, “that the success of ready-made garment exports from Bangladesh over the last two decades have surpassed even the most optimistic of expectations”. Apparel exports have grown over 24% annually, doubling every three years since 1984. Although this growth has slowed down in recent years, garments are still the single most important item for export earnings, easily accounting for over two thirds of export revenue in 2003.

Back in the mid-1980s, when a delegation from Bangladesh appealed to the US Congress to expand its multi-fiber quotas for ready-made garments, it was told that the more prudent course would be to diversify exports. However, that diversification has been an elusive aspiration. No other source of dollar earnings has come up and foreign direct investment has been abysmal, while import bills have soared due to donor led import liberalisation policies.

Export competition from other developing countries such as India and China leave little room for Bangladesh, a country with practically no industrial base and a labour force with little literacy and training.

In fact, the only light at the end of the tunnel seems to be the prospect of exporting natural gas, a resource which is plentiful in Bangladesh but one which would employ very little of its huge labour force and the export of which may leave far less for its own use at the existing low prices. This would be particularly true if foreign companies were to be the primary players in the extraction process. These companies have already lined up to bid for many gas fields, which have been discovered in the last decade.

Women in the workforce

Ready-made garments remain the main manufactured export base in Bangladesh. Most producers are small local firms which generate a fraction of the value of the apparel they make by cutting and stitching in sweatshop-like factories housed in buildings which are much like residential structures. These “factories” often have – among other problems – poor lighting, dangerous electric wiring, inadequate water and toilet facilities, cramped spaces, and no fire escapes.

Several times in the past few years garment workers [1] have died in fires. Worker rights are few, wages and benefits are paltry, and the little that has been won through hard earned struggle and union formation exists only on paper and is rarely implemented. Almost all of the lowest rung of the workers are female, many of whom are displaced for economic and social reasons from rural areas and in dire need of a basic means of livelihood. This is hardly surprising in a country with one of the lowest per capita incomes in the world, and a large proportion of the population living below the poverty line.

The participation [2] of women in the workforce in Bangladesh is a relatively new phenomenon. Apart from domestic work, there was little public space for women in an atmosphere of *Purdah*, or veiling, in this primarily Muslim country. Rural schoolteachers have always been men and the urban health sector, which hires female nurses, is extremely small and serves less than 5% of the population.

The great majority of Bangladesh’s 130 million people continue to live in rural areas and rely on agriculture for their income. Garment work – which employs around one million people, 90% of them female – has therefore been a novelty [3] and it is no wonder that many economic experts have applauded this new development. Along with their sisters who have entered financial markets by receiving micro-credit loans, found employment in NGOs and public and private organisations, or migrated to other countries as domestic workers, these women have lifted their veils and come out of their homes in larger numbers than ever before.

They have done this despite threats and suppression from men who have taken advantage of them in the workplace; on the way to and from work; on the street; at home within patriarchal family structures; and in communities, which are under increasing influence of Islamic fundamentalism. The various forms of brutality women have faced could almost be considered the price that they have paid to enter the public realm.

Human rights in Bangladesh have not kept pace with modernisation and consumerism in the economy. The emergence of Islamic fundamentalism, along with rising criminality and an increasingly repressive police force and state, has impeded the well being of these women. It is hardly appropriate to cast these female workers as passive and hapless victims of both global capital and religious fundamentalism. They have repeatedly shown that they are aware of their interests, ready for struggle, able to organise [4] and engage in various forms of resistance.

Women in European and American garment sweatshops faced many similar situations less than a century ago, and third world working conditions strike a special note among suburban liberals

and many otherwise well-meaning voices. But the call for higher labour standards from both anti-globalisation activists and first world protectionists, together with the ending of the Multi Fibre Arrangement (MFA [5]) quotas in 2005, will lead to a loss of jobs for female garment workers, and perhaps even to a worsening of working conditions as producers try to cut costs to deal with global competition. At that time, Bangladesh as a country may turn to natural gas to replace its export revenue, but the garment workers will have no place to turn to beyond low paying domestic work or sex work.

How to improve workers' lives

Pressure [6] on giant corporations for better working conditions and wages [7], as advocated by Anita Roddick and others, may have some beneficial effects. But it would probably be more effective to put pressure on the buying houses that deal directly with small-scale producers. These buying houses could be required to buy only from factories where labour rules are followed. Nevertheless, in an environment where laws are rarely followed, the beneficial effects of this increased pressure are likely to be extremely limited (see this article [8] from the *Daily Star*).

Focusing on the working conditions of those who sew shirts is, therefore, only one way, and probably not the best way, to improve the lives of workers in Bangladesh. Better to lobby for increased market access for Bangladesh within the World Trade Organisation framework. This would lead to increased demand for export production and so increase the value of labour. Putting pressure on industrialised country governments to give market access to least developed countries would provide more employment opportunities and wages for workers.

If liberals and feminists really want to help improve the lot of the world's poorest people they should put more pressure on their states to permit freer immigration rather than restricting labour flows under the guise of combating terrorism. This is because allowing workers to move more freely between countries would increase the wages of surplus workers from poor countries, and increase the remittances they would send home, which in turn could help improve living conditions in poor countries. In the case of Bangladesh, remittances are already the largest source of foreign exchange earnings. Freer movement of labour would increase this still further.

Agencies such as the International Labour Organisation could concern itself with this as well, instead of agreeing that all labour should stay within national boundaries, no matter what the scope of employment. If both capital and labour were mobile, there would be more possibility for a global order that benefits the world.

Globalisation [9] as it exists today has fostered the conditions for social uprooting as well as religious fundamentalism. As the World Bank country director says:

“For everybody in Bangladesh, including the poor, the problem is not the effects of globalisation, but the possibility of being left out. Let's remember Hosne Ara, the garment worker I mentioned at the beginning of this article. Being left out means denying the Hosne Aras a chance to live better.”

We need to take seriously the question of how hundreds of thousands of women like Hosna Ara may have better options in life than to face the horrific conditions described by Anita Roddick. The evidence points overwhelmingly to providing more employment choices for female workers by enabling a greater flow of goods, labour, and resources from Bangladesh to other countries, and a greater flow of capital to enter Bangladesh.

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