

Compliance versus accountability: struggles for dignity and daily bread in the Bangladesh garment industry

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The women workers in the Bangladesh garment industry have had more public attention to their rights than any group of workers in the entire history of the country. (Journalist, Development Research Centre (DRC) Inception Workshop on Inclusive Citizenship, Bangladesh, 2001)

I believe that the 'culture of compliance' is far ahead in the garment manufacturing sector and changes in the RMG [ready-made garments] sector are dramatic compared to other sectors. (Director, Labour Department, Bangladesh, 2004)

The process of globalisation has brought workers in the poorer countries of the global South into direct competition with workers in the wealthier countries of the global North, exposing the stark inequalities in the conditions under which they work to the full glare of international publicity. Trade unions, the media, human rights activists and others in prosperous Northern countries have made consumers aware as they never were before about the conditions under which some of their regularly purchased consumer items are made. The international garment industry is one that has consistently attracted the attention of these groups and given rise to various campaigns, including Students against Sweatshops, the Clean Clothes Campaign and OXFAM's Make Trade Fair (See Luce, Chapter 12).

The working conditions of Bangladeshi export garment workers, predominantly women, have featured regularly in these campaigns: the absence of written contracts, long working hours, delayed payment of wages and routine violations of health and safety standards. Since working conditions in the garment industry are no worse, and generally are considered to be better, than those prevailing in the rest of the

economy, the intense concern with garment workers' rights, referred to in the first quote above, reflects both the publicity generated by international campaigns as well as the unusual visibility of its largely female workforce in a society in which women have historically been regarded as a vulnerable group, in need of protection and hence confined to the shelter of the home. Currently the export garment industry employs 1.8 million workers, of whom 1.5 million are women. The mass entry of women workers into a sector hitherto dominated by men dramatically changed the character of the urban manufacturing labour force in the span of a few years¹ and explains some of the attention they receive domestically.

The second quote comes from the Director of the Labour Department, the government department responsible for ensuring that workers' rights are upheld. It testifies to one of the consequences of the intense public scrutiny on the working conditions prevailing within the export garment industry. This is the proliferation of codes of conduct imposed by the various international buyers operating in the export garment sector and anxious to avoid adverse attention from their consumers at home. The Director pointed out that the attempt at self-regulation on the part of garment manufacturers reflected the fact that non-compliance with basic labour standards in this sector carried real penalties in the form of lost orders from their international buyers.

It is worth noting that these observations were couched in the language of 'compliance' and that the compliance in question was to a voluntary code of conduct drawn up by the affected section of the private sector. He was not referring to compliance with national labour laws drawn up by the state to set out the rights of all citizens of Bangladesh, including its garment workers. There is clearly a gap between compliance of the kind the Labour Director is referring to and the kind of accountability that this book is about.

As we saw in Chapter 2, there are two key elements to the concept of accountability: *answerability*, the right to make claims and demand responses; and *enforceability*, the mechanisms for ensuring that answers are backed by actions and for sanctioning non-responsiveness. Accountability thus gives 'teeth' to the concept of rights and hence is indispensable to the status and practice of citizenship. A 'culture of compliance', on the other hand, refers to the willingness to abide by a given set of regulations (whether laws or codes). It is not the same as a culture of accountability, but it need not be incompatible with it, and may even contain the seeds from which such a culture can emerge. Whether it has done so or not in Bangladesh is a matter for empirical investigation, one

that will be addressed in this chapter. We will be basing our analysis on in-depth interviews with 20 garment workers, with relevant officials of the Department of Labour, employer representatives and factory managers, with trade union officials and NGO workers. The chapter also draws on previous research carried out by the authors as well as media reports and the secondary literature. In the next section, we sketch out the context in which our analysis is located.

The context: poverty and patriarchy in a labour-surplus economy

There are a number of features of the Bangladesh context which represent 'the initial conditions' from which cultures of compliance and accountability have had to grow. Bangladesh was, and remains, a poor, largely agrarian economy, with 45 per cent of its population below the poverty line; it is one of 49 'least developed countries' in the world, according to the United Nations (2002). Although industrialisation dates back over a hundred years, it has been very narrowly based, confined largely to the processing and manufacture of jute, until recently its main export. The spread of market relations and infrastructural development has led to increased rates of economic growth and a small but steady decline in poverty over the 1990s. However, growth in agriculture has not been sufficient to absorb this annual increment and there has been increasing diversification into off-farm activities in rural areas, partly assisted by the spread of microfinance activities, and migration into urban areas.

Bangladesh was, and remains, a society that continues to be largely governed by patron–client relations. The intersection of patron–clientelism and a modern state apparatus with monopolistic control over rules and resources created a particular type of patrimonial ruling élite in Bangladesh (Khan 2001), whose search for political power and personal profit is pursued through the granting of special privileges to politically influential actors – including industrialists and trade unions – in return for their support at national and local level.

Finally, Bangladesh was and remains an extremely patriarchal society, with strict cultural constraints on women's participation in the public sphere and their confinement to reproductive work and the domestic domain. Socialised into this role from an early age, denied independent access to economic resources and defined as life-long dependents of male breadwinners and guardians, women occupy a subordinate position within the family as well as the wider society. Women have consequently