

Feminist Perspective on the Future of Work in Bangladesh

Farzana Nawaz



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Foreword

Despite economic growth and declining poverty levels across Asia, inequality continues to grow, with large groups of society remaining marginalized in economic and social terms.

Women in Asia continue to experience massive structural disadvantages, from early childhood education through their retirement from work—if they wanted and were allowed to work—and into their older age. It is mainly women who are exploited as cheap labour in Asia's export industries and low-skill sectors, especially agriculture, textiles and the footwear and electronic industries. They are paid subsistence wages and experience increasing precariousness of their working as well as living conditions.

On the heels of all the economic progress now comes rapid technological transformation that is altering the present and future nature of work in ways that offer a multitude of opportunities but also add new levels of risks for social groups across the Global South.

Women are particularly vulnerable and disproportionately affected by these changes, both in the context of the Fourth Industrial Revolution and in the ever-expanding care work across the formal and informal sectors.

Unfortunately, the predicted productivity gains through automation and digitalization in many sectors possibly will not give women much hope for fundamental improvements of their prospects. Due to their poor access to education, skills development and professional know-how, Asia's women are at risk of slipping deeper into unemployment or resorting to migration far from their home for jobs they can manage.

The goal for them and for us in development cooperation work is to find socially just and gender-equal responses to

these challenges. Solidarity and coalitions across a range of progressive movements in Asia are essential.

Through our regional networks, Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung (FES) brings together diverse voices from social movements, civil society organizations, trade unions, political parties and academia to work together in developing progressive ideas and narratives for advancing social justice. Among the most innovative platforms is the newly established FES Asia project Women's Perspectives on the Future of Work. With insights from distinguished researchers in nine Asian countries, FES and its partners aim to further promote gender equality in the world of work, with emphasis on enhancing women's participation in public and political life and promoting decent work for all along with gender-just and human-centric economic models.

Desk reviews from nine countries, including this one from Bangladesh, are presented as a first step to understanding the concerns for women in the future of work and to discuss possible interventions. We are highly thankful to Farzana Nawaz for authoring this paper. Her analysis of the situation of women in Bangladesh and their perspectives on the future of work is rooted in her deep understanding of both the women worker's and the women's rights movement in the country.

We hope that this publication contributes to a fruitful discussion and provides valuable insights for future initiatives.

Mirco Günther and Lea Gölnitz

FES Office for Regional

Cooperation in Asia

Arunduty Rani and Tina Marie Blohm

FES Bangladesh Office

Brief overview of women's participation in the labour market

Bangladesh has made significant progress in women's rights in recent years. It is currently the top performer in ensuring gender equality in South Asia and among the top five countries in the world in ensuring political empowerment of women.¹ Women's participation in the workforce increased by 35 per cent between 2008 and 2017, while male employment increased by 11 per cent.² Despite that progress, women's share of the labour market continues to be quite small—women still comprise less than 30 per cent of the total workforce in the country, and 56.9 per cent of women aged 15–65 years belong to the “not in education, employment or training” category.³

Most working women (more than 90 per cent) work in the informal sector.⁴ Agriculture continues to be the largest sector of employment for women, but in recent years there has been a steady increase in female employment in the industrial, service and manufacturing sectors. The ready-made garments sector has been the biggest source of formal sector employment for women, particularly semi- and low-skilled women. According to estimates from a recent Centre for Policy Dialogue study, approximately 2.1 million women engage in that sector.⁵ Women's employment is also increasing in the hotel and

restaurant, transportation, telecommunications, banking and insurance sectors. Experts have pointed out that this is likely to be an outcome of women's increased access to and participation in higher education.⁶

Recent World Economic Forum research indicated that despite significant achievements in women's labour market participation, worrying trends are emerging: Real wages for women are declining faster than those for men, leading to a widening gender pay gap. Real average wages for female employees fell 3.8 per cent between fiscal year 2015/16 and 2016/17 (from 12,732 taka to 12,254 taka). During that same time period, real average wages for male workers declined by only 1.9 per cent.⁷ And Bangladesh still performs extremely poorly in terms of the number of women in leadership positions, top management or boards of publicly traded companies.⁸

Job opportunities for poor, semi-skilled or unskilled women are also on the decline. Women's employment in the ready-made garments sector is decreasing, with an estimated 850,000 jobs lost between 2013 and 2017. Experts have warned that the opportunity gap between men and women is also growing in rural areas, where new jobs are increasingly being taken by men.⁹

Future of women's work: Key sectors and trends

The ready-made garments sector has been at the forefront of discussions regarding automation and the future of work in Bangladesh. It is not only the most important industrial sector in the country, accounting for more than 80 per cent of export earnings,¹⁰ it is also the largest formal sector employer of women in Bangladesh. Discussions of automation in the agriculture sector are less prominent in the public discourse, but such trends as increasing mechanization and introduction of genetically modified crops present challenges for women. In recent years, an emerging sector that has gained prominence in discussions on the future of work is the business process outsourcing sector, which provides software, data processing and call centre services, among others.

Automation in the ready-made garments sector and its impact on women workers

The ready-made garments sector in Bangladesh has been experiencing increasing competitive pressure in recent years due to many factors: increased cost of production due to international pressure for factory upgrades after the Rana Plaza collapse; intensifying competition from sourcing countries, such as Ethiopia, Cambodia, Myanmar and Viet Nam; and diminishing prices offered by international buyers.¹¹ As the biggest source of export income for the country, the industry is under significant pressure to maintain (and even increase) its contribution to the gross domestic product value. Automation has offered a solution in terms of cutting costs to stay competitive while appeasing international concerns on working conditions and labour rights violations.¹²

Women workers in the ready-made garments sector are particularly hard hit by automation. The recent trends, as already mentioned, indicate that women's employment in the sector is declining. According to studies by the Centre for Policy Dialogue, the number of women as a percentage of the ready-made garments workforce declined from 64 per cent in 2015 to 61 per cent in 2016. Automation was the primary driver behind the reduction.¹³

Experts and workers' rights advocates have pointed out that low-skill jobs are most vulnerable to automation.

These are also the jobs in which the female workforce is concentrated, as opposed to supervisory or managerial positions.¹⁴ Women workers also suffer from the patriarchal perception of employers that they are less capable of handling modern machinery. As a result, they are less likely to receive the training necessary to upgrade their skills to keep up with automation. In fact, the Centre for Policy Dialogue study found that, with the exception of single- and double-needle machines, male workers are better trained to operate all other types of machinery in a garment factory.¹⁵

Industry response more focused towards competitiveness than equitable outcomes for workers

Industry leaders expect automation to become a bigger feature of the ready-made garments sector in Bangladesh over the coming years, leading to bigger job losses.¹⁶ A 2016 study by the International Labour Organization found that automation can destroy up to 80 per cent of jobs in the garment sector in developing countries.¹⁷ As the second-largest producer of ready-made garments in the world, Bangladesh is expected to be acutely vulnerable to this trend.

One of the prominent discussion points within the ready-made garments industry has been the need to move up the garment production level towards more high-end items, such as lingerie, sportswear and men's suits. Yet, production of these items is also leading to more automation and loss of jobs due to the level of precision required in the production process.¹⁸

Automation is also exacerbating the unequal power dynamics between workers and factory owners in the ready-made garments industry. The rate of unionization in the sector is still extremely low, with only around 10 per cent of factories having an active union.¹⁹ Labour rights advocates have cautioned that automation is leading to further erosion of the bargaining power of workers.

As Nazma Akter, President of Sommolito Garments Sramik Federation, one of the largest women-led trade union federations in Bangladesh, told the *Wall Street*

Journal last year: “Factories that before had 300 workers now might have 100 workers only.” This has emboldened the factory owners to resist worker demands and use the threat of automation as a bargaining tool, she added.²⁰

Technological changes in the agriculture sector impacting women

There is an increasing trend of mechanization in the agriculture sector for tasks, such as tilling fields using tractors and using mechanical pumps for irrigation. Studies on the trends in mechanization in the country's agriculture sector found that women are less likely to own or operate agricultural machinery.²¹ Experts point to a range of reasons for this: internalized beliefs among men and women that they are less capable of operating machines, such as tractors and reapers; women are less likely to engage in providing agricultural machinery services to other farmers because it requires them to travel outside of the home and negotiate with other farmers (often men), with cultural norms prohibiting them from doing so; and investment in machinery is expensive and women lack access to adequate financing mechanisms that would enable them to purchase agricultural machines.²²

Another major technology-led change in the agriculture sector is the introduction of genetically modified (GMO) crops. Bangladesh is the first country in the South Asia region to approve the commercial cultivation of GMO crops.²³ GMO strains of *brinjal* (eggplant), a staple vegetable, is now being produced by nearly 20 percent of *brinjal* growers,²⁴ and there are plans by the government to introduce new GMO crops, such as a vitamin-A enriched rice variety called “golden rice.”²⁵

Environmental and women's rights groups have strongly protested against the push for GMO crops. They pointed out that women in Bangladesh have traditionally been vital in the production and preservation of seeds and maintaining biodiversity and ecologically sound farming practices.²⁶ The introduction of GMO seeds threatens this important role of women in agriculture.

Moreover, there are serious concerns about GMO seeds contributing to the impoverishment of farmers

because patented GMO seeds are far more expensive than regular seeds—the price of 1 kilogram of GMO *brinjal* seeds (5,000 taka) is more than seven times higher than 1 kilogram of non-GMO *brinjal* seeds (700 taka). In the introduction phase, these seeds are being distributed for free by the seed companies; but activists have pointed out that this is likely to change once there is large-scale adoption and dependency on these seeds has developed.²⁷ Because women farmers are already disadvantaged in terms of their access to capital and credit,²⁸ it is likely that large-scale adoption of GMO crops will have greater impact on them.

Emerging information and communication technology (and business processing outsourcing) sector and its role in the future of work

Bangladesh has a burgeoning information and communication technology (ICT) industry that is spurred by both private sector initiative and policy from the government. The ICT sector encompasses an array of products and services, such as technology consulting, software development, product design, animation, systems integration, data processing, call centre operations and other business process outsourcing services.

The size of this sector is still small, with total ICT sector exports amounting to 800 million US dollars in 2018. But the industry is growing fast, considering that total ICT sector exports in 2012 was only 12 million US dollars.²⁹ Compared with other countries in the region, such as India, Indonesia and the Philippines, business process outsourcing is a new area of work for Bangladesh. The availability of a young, educated and low-cost workforce is driving the rapid growth of this subsector, with export income rising 24 per cent, to 210 million US dollars between 2016 and 2017.³⁰ The government set an earnings target of 5 billion US dollars from overall ICT exports by 2021.³¹

Official earnings figures from the ICT sector are likely to be underestimated because there is a growing number of young people who are working as freelancers on online platforms, such as Upwork.³² According to research by the Oxford Internet Institute, Bangladesh was the second-biggest provider of online labour in 2017, accounting

for 16 per cent of all online outsourcing workers, right behind India, which accounted for 24 per cent.³³ This indicates that online outsourcing and business process outsourcing are likely to have a significant role in the future of work for young people in Bangladesh.

Given the nascent nature of the industry, there is little data available on the composition of the workforce. In 2017, more than an estimated 40,000 young people worked in around 100 companies in the business process outsourcing sector.³⁴ Other estimates indicate that more than 30,000 “micro sourcers”, or freelancers, from Bangladesh are joining online outsourcing platforms every month.³⁵

It is unlikely that women are significantly benefiting from this burgeoning industry because they are still severely under-represented in the ICT sector. A survey conducted in 2018 by Daffodil International University in Dhaka found that women comprise only 16 per cent of the ICT workforce in Bangladesh.³⁶ Experts have pointed out that societal attitudes towards women's technological capacities is a major part of the problem. Pervasive patriarchal attitudes in Bangladeshi society that consider women to be less adept at working in the technological sector prevents them from pursuing education and job opportunities in this area—in 2012, only 16.6 per cent of engineering graduates were women.³⁷ If these societal barriers persist, then women are likely to be left behind in this important sector for the future of work.

Policy response from the government

Lack of emphasis on support for the female labour force

The government's Seventh Five-Year Plan (2016–2020) does not explicitly address automation or the technological changes facing the economy. It sets a goal of achieving overall economic growth of 7.4 per cent and a policy agenda to make that growth inclusive and sustainable. It mentions the need to foster greater labour force participation of women and supporting skills development in response to market demand. It acknowledges the gender pay gap and the need to counteract it. It also mentions the need to put in place

an effective social protection system to help individuals who will be impoverished or bypassed by the growth process.³⁸

But the Seventh Five-Year Plan does not provide details on how many of these goals will be achieved, and it does little to address the structural barriers that women face when engaging in the labour market. Bangladesh as of yet does not have an unemployment insurance scheme to support workers through job loss and the transition to new employment. There are also no governmental efforts to provide institutional support for women engaged in unpaid care work. The Seventh Five-Year Plan mentions that the government will “explore possibilities” of institutionalizing a national social insurance scheme that will provide unemployment, sickness, maternity and workplace accident insurance.³⁹ Yet, little thus far has materialized in this regard.

Policy initiatives in the ready-made garments and agriculture sectors

The ready-made garments sector features prominently in the Seventh Five-Year Plan: in addition to its economic contribution, it is also touted for its contribution towards poverty reduction and the empowerment of women. While the plan mentions the need to further strengthen the ready-made garments sector with policy measures, such as encouraging more foreign direct investment, it is silent on the challenges posed by automation or the specific needs of the female labour force driving the sector. Similarly, with respect to the agriculture sector, the plan sets out the goal to encourage adoption of GMO technology but does not mention the gendered impact this policy will have.⁴⁰

Policy initiatives in the ICT sector

The government's efforts are relatively more tangible in the ICT sector. The Seventh Five-Year Plan recognizes the need to diversify the export sector through investment in developing an appropriate information technology and IT-enabled service business ecosystem. Towards this end, the plan mentions establishment of hi-tech parks throughout the country and business process outsourcing

centres even in remote areas of the country.⁴¹ Through the government's Digital Bangladesh 2021 vision, which is supported by the Prime Minister's Office, some progress has been made into establishing innovation labs and providing seed funding for ICT innovation initiatives.⁴² Recently, in collaboration with the ILO, the government, through its a2i programme, launched an initiative to train 250,000 youths on digital skills and provide 340,200 apprenticeships by 2023. The government also aims to link the trained youth to job opportunities by partnering with NGOs, development partners and the private sector.⁴³

As cited in the previous section, women in Bangladesh are in a disadvantaged position with respect to participation in the technology labour market. Thus, it is debatable whether these initiatives will have a significant impact on the female labour force. In a positive development, recent statements by government officials, including the State Minister, indicate that this is an issue the government is looking to address. With a goal of equal employment of men and women in the ICT sector by 2030, the government has proposed initiatives to increase social awareness on ICT education and jobs for girls and scholarships for ICT courses for girls.⁴⁴ There have also

been instances of government support provided to social enterprises that are working to develop ICT skills among girls and young women, such as the National Hackathon for Women, 2017.⁴⁵

Women's labour migration

The Seventh Five-Year Plan emphasizes labour migration as an engine of growth and the need to take advantage of overseas labour market opportunities.⁴⁶ This is worrying because labour rights abuses are rampant in most of the destination countries of female labour migration, such as Saudi Arabia, Qatar and other countries in the Middle East as well as in Asia.⁴⁷ An increasing number of women from Bangladesh are now migrating for garment sector work in such countries as Jordan and Mauritius.⁴⁸ Loss of opportunities in the garment sector due to automation will lead to an increasing number of low-skilled, poor women migrating abroad for garment or domestic work. Civil society groups have argued that the government is not doing enough to protect the rights of workers abroad, particularly women,⁴⁹ and the Seventh Five-Year Plan offers no concrete measures to counteract these problems.

Feminist perspective on work and digitalization

Insights from feminist research on women's work in Bangladesh

There is a substantial amount of research dealing with patriarchal barriers to women's workforce participation and the relationship between participation in paid work and empowerment in Bangladesh. The research indicates that engaging in paid work has not necessarily led to improved decision-making power for women. While there is some evidence of empowerment related to engaging in formal paid work, especially for women who have formal education, the relationship is less clear when it comes to informal sector work. Moreover, greater engagement of women in paid employment has not necessarily led to positive change in community attitudes towards women's work.⁵⁰

A study of working-class urban women in Dhaka found that traditional patriarchal beliefs and gender norms strongly influence the perception of women's work in this setting. Female employment in this context is largely seen as a necessary evil, crucial for survival. But it is treated with suspicion and seen as a threat to male dominance and authority. Male heads of households often retaliate to this threat by reducing their own income contributions to the family or taking a second wife. As a result, women are left to maintain a complex balance between their jobs, managing their household duties and marital relationships. In these circumstances, employment doesn't necessarily represent a choice but often a lack of choice for women.⁵¹

It is likely that this dynamic of tension between home and working life is also fuelling domestic violence against working-class women. A PLOS study of garment workers in 2018 found that women working in this sector not only experienced gender-based violence and abuse at the workplace, they also suffered three times as much domestic violence than the national average.⁵² The study found that women working in the ready-made garments sector suffered from serious emotional stress and anxiety; two out of five workers participating in the study showed suicidal tendencies.⁵³

Women's rights advocates have pointed out the disproportionately poor working conditions that women

encounter when they choose to enter the labour force. For example, in the ready-made garments sector, only 35 per cent of women in a 2000 study (only available data) were granted paid leave when they asked for it, compared with 60 per cent of male workers. Women also face worse working conditions because they predominantly hold low-skill jobs, where occupational hazards are higher. Research has found that long working hours (around 12 hours per day) and poor working conditions lead to poor health and illness for many women workers in the ready-made garments sector.⁵⁴

These studies show that participation in paid employment, especially for working-class women in Bangladesh, has been fraught, with women suffering physical and emotional abuse (often both at home and the workplace) as a result of employment.

Important discussions on women and the future of work

Thus far, there has been little engagement by traditional feminist groups on the future of work. Discussions around automation, digitalization and women's work mainly centre on the ready-made garments sector and are led by women-focused labour rights organizations and prominent think tanks, such as the Centre for Policy Dialogue. These organizations have pointed out that the increase in automation is affecting women workers the most, and they are advocating for skills-building programmes for women so that they can adapt to the technological changes in the sector. They have also stressed the need for more women in supervisory and managerial positions so that decision-making in the sector is more inclusive of women's needs.⁵⁵ Labour rights organizations are also advocating on a range of issues that impact the working conditions of women in the ready-made garments sector, such as gender-based violence, maternity leave and benefits, crèche and day-care facilities in factories and women's leadership in trade unions.

Although discussions on digitalization and automation have not yet matured in Bangladesh, civil society and women's rights groups are engaged in research and advocacy on broader structural barriers to women's

participation in the workforce. They are trying to raise awareness of issues, such as the lack of security in the public space, inadequate infrastructure (toilet facilities and safe transportation) and the lack of child-care facilities.⁵⁶ Rights groups have pointed out that the prevalence of child marriage—59 per cent of girls in Bangladesh are married by age 18—is not only a human rights violation but it also prevents girls and women from pursuing education or work opportunities.⁵⁷

The issue of unpaid care work and its toll on women is slowly gaining traction in the public discourse, led by civil society organizations, such as Action Aid, BRAC and the Centre for Policy Dialogue. This is partly due to the emphasis on recognizing unpaid care work and domestic work in the Sustainable Development Goals. A

newspaper report in 2017 pointed out that, on average, women spend more than six hours per day on unpaid care work, compared with around an hour per day for men.⁵⁸ Unpaid care work, which encompasses taking care of the household, cooking and caring for children and older persons, keeps women from pursuing advancement opportunities or prevents them from entering the job market in the first place.⁵⁹

Civil society groups are advocating for both social and policy changes to mitigate this problem. They have stressed the need for a change in societal attitudes so that there is more male participation in household chores. At the same time, they are calling for policy measures from the government, such as widely available day-care facilities and the formalization of care work.⁶⁰

Future research priorities

The impact of automation and digitalization on women's workplace participation in Bangladesh is not yet well understood. From currently available information, it appears that, on one hand, it can lead to massive loss of jobs and economic power for working-class women, especially in the garment and agriculture sectors. On the other hand, it can create new opportunities for educated women to enter the workforce.

But technological changes are not the only, or even the most important, barriers to women's workforce participation in Bangladesh. A feminist approach to the future of work needs to account for deep-rooted structural problems, such as the social perception of women's work, which often regards it as a necessary evil rather than a positive activity, excessive burden of unpaid care work and lack of security. The prevalent societal perspective that women are less capable of handling machinery or engaging in technology-driven work creates obstacles for working-class women in the garments and agriculture sectors and

for middle-class women who might want to enter the ICT sector.

To better understand the various challenges facing women in Bangladesh in a changing labour market and to tackle the patriarchal inequity, the following five research areas should be prioritized:

- The relationship between patriarchy and workplace advancement for low-income women in industrial settings, such as the ready-made garments sector.
- The relationship between gender-based violence and women's participation in the workforce.
- How the burden of care work differs between women in various socioeconomic groups and how that impacts their ability to participate in the labour market.
- The link between automation and migration of poor women to high-risk overseas destinations.
- How automation and digitalization can open up new areas of work for women, given that it provides women flexibility to work from home, and what are the challenges that come with this.

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About the author

Farzana Nawaz is a development expert and researcher with more than 10 years of experience across a broad range of areas that include good governance and labour rights. Most recently, she worked on institutional capacity development of grass-roots labour rights organizations in the garment sector in Bangladesh on behalf of C&A Foundation. She is also working on a publication on women's labour migration in the Asia-Pacific region with the Asia Pacific Forum on Women, Law and Development, a regional feminist development organization.

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House 89 (West), Road 4, Block B
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(Banani P.O. Box: 9051)
Bangladesh

Responsible:

Tina Blohm | Resident Representative

T +880 2 550 34362 / 3

www.fes-bangladesh.org

 Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung, Bangladesh

To order the publication:

info@fesbd.org

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