Chapter 3

Women, Migration, Ready Made Garment Factories in Dhaka: Formation of New Class, Culture, and Relationships?

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ABSTRACT

The Chapter addresses the plausibility and transformatory potential of internally migrated women working in the readymade garment factories in Dhaka to work as a critical mass to challenge the existing class and culture in urban Dhaka. Based on a feminist research methodology and reviewing of relevant scholarly research, the chapter breaks down itself into two main parts. The former focuses on the literature on migration, paid work and empowerment and the latter part deals with the evidences of credibility and potentiality of working women to make a rupture into the existing class system and cultural set up of urban Dhaka, the capital of Bangladesh. The chapter ends with a realistic standpoint that calls for further investigation and sanction into this area of immense and strong possibility.
INTRODUCTION

In Bangladesh, a recent television advertisement on the reliability and easy accessibility of phone banking system projects a working woman of a readymade garment (RMG) factory using her cellular phone to effectively transfer her remittance to her parents in village. The advertisement shows the woman confidently taking help of phone banking system of that said commercial bank instead of a village person as a carrier to send money back home—a practice she used to follow till she was familiar with the new system. The viewers hear the woman getting confirmation from her father over phone on receiving the money. The woman happily ended up conversation with her father saying that it was her holiday and she would now like to go to cinema hall to enjoy a movie. In the background, a male voice is heard saying, ‘with the advancement of country, women are also progressing and contributing to the economy and taking right decisions’.

Capitalizing the image of women’s paid work in Ready Made Garment (RMG) factories, her economic and public access, public visibility and contribution to macro and micro economy, working women are being integrated and commercialized through the mainstream media. Women working in RMG factories have become the epitome of mass women’s empowered self not only in feminist research, but also in popular thoughts, media and culture in Bangladesh. The prevalent practice of young, unmarried working women (in RMG) regularly sending money to her parents/family now permeates through the systematic process of social sanction and acceptance. Her power of purchasing and using a particular brand of cellular phone instigate consumerist desire for a certain class, that is stamped as valid in the advertisement by the patriarchal authority--through the male voice in the background for the above stated advertisements.

In this backdrop, this chapter attempts to see whether gendered migration and paid employment in garment factories in Dhaka offer the plausibility to bring any substantive impact in the dominant socio-cultural set up of urban Dhaka. And as a viable process to the former, the chapter also attempts to unveil whether such impact and transformatory potential of women working in the RMGs in Dhaka offers a distinct space and potential in creating or forming a separate class, culture and/or relationships with that of the existing class structures. That is, by connecting women’s transformatory potential, the chapter assess RMG women’s strength and plausibility to give rise to a new social structure, class and relationships in Urban Dhaka.

To understand the whole dynamics of gendered migration, women’s work in the RMGs, its transformatory potential vis a vis its capacity to hard hit into the existing social structure, it is important to find a connect among all these factors. Thus the chapter is divided into two parts. The first part revisits some scholarly works to find a connect between gendered migration, paid employment and empowerment. It tries to encapsulate some important findings on the stated areas. The second part focuses on the main topic of the paper that seeks to address the socio-cultural impact of women’s migration and paid employment in the broader arena of class, culture and relationships. While the first part of the paper provides background and foundation for discussion, the latter offers a possible future state and direction drawing from the validations from earlier research findings on women’s empowerment, discussed in the first part.
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