



Paper 26

**The Sexual Harassment of Industrial
Workers: Strategies for Intervention
in the Workplace and Beyond**

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Price Tk. 100.00

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June, 2003

CPD-UNFPA Publication Series

It is now widely recognised that there is a need to take the scope of the population policy in Bangladesh beyond the confines of merely achieving population stabilisation through reduction of fertility. Although in recent years the approach to reduction of fertility has changed from narrow family planning to a broad based reproductive health approach, it is being increasingly felt that Bangladesh's population policy should encompass other equally important issues which have wide implications for the development process and the quality of life of people of Bangladesh. To address some of the related pertinent issues the Centre for Policy Dialogue initiated a programme which aimed at undertaking a series of studies covering the broad area of **Population and Sustainable Development**. The major objective of these studies was to enhance national capacity to formulate and implement population and development policies and programmes in Bangladesh, and through close interaction with the various stakeholder groups, to promote advocacy on critical related issues. This programme, which was implemented by the CPD between 1999 and 2002 addressed, *inter alia*, such issues as population dynamics and population momentum and their implications for education and health services, the nexus between population correlates, poverty and environment, impacts of urbanisation and slumification and migration, as well as human rights. The study has benefited from generous support provided by the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA). The programme also envisages organisation of workshops and dialogues at divisional and national levels and also holding of international thematic conferences.

As part of the above mentioned programme the CPD has taken an initiative to bring out a series of publications in order to facilitate wider dissemination of the findings of the various studies to be prepared under the programme. The present paper on the theme of ***The Sexual Harassment of Industrial Workers: Strategies for Intervention in the Workplace and Beyond*** has been prepared by Dr. Dina M. Siddiqi, Fellow, Centre for Policy Dialogue and Senior Associate, Alice Paul Center for the Study of Women and Gender, University of Pennsylvania, U.S.A. The paper was presented at the National dialogue titled ***Workplace Environment for Women: Issues of Harassment and Need for Interventions*** on **March 4, 2003** at **CIRDAP Auditorium, Dhaka**

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Preface and Acknowledgments

Female industrial workers in Bangladesh, at least those in the ready-made apparel sector, have been the subject of numerous studies and expositions. These studies tend to focus on hazardous work conditions, low and irregular wages, health, housing and transportation dilemmas and, more recently, on the effects of globalization on job security. However, researchers, activists and union organizers alike have been relatively silent on the topic of sexual harassment. This silence can be read in several ways. Mostly obviously, it can be understood in relation to workers' priorities. The majority of garment workers readily acknowledge that their most pressing problems concern low or irregular wage payment, 'stolen' wages¹ and arbitrary dismissals. From the perspective of a worker barely able to make a livelihood, holding on to a job is certainly more pressing than demanding the elimination of *all* workplace exploitation. Labor activists, taking their cue from workers, focus on workers' security, safety and health as well on wage levels. Without doubt, steps to prevent workers' deaths or disability from fires resulting from employer negligence, or demanding fair wages received in due time, are matters that require urgent attention. Nonetheless, other intangible factors work to silence both workers and researchers from addressing questions of sexual harassment. Given the stigma attached to open discussions of sexuality, and the potential loss of honor involved, most women are understandably reluctant to reveal experiences of a sexually exploitative nature. Thus, dominant cultural practices militate against women's admitting to or seeking redress for incidences of harassment. Reluctance to press charges also comes from the awareness that it is notoriously difficult to verify allegations of sexual harassment under the best of circumstances.

Garment workers, in addition, are acutely conscious of their 'low' status in *bhadralok* (respectable) society, especially their supposed lack of sexual discipline. Fear of being sexualized further in public discourse deters women workers from speaking out on the issue. By the same token, cultural taboos associated with sexuality, especially in relation to women, do not encourage research on the subject. Researchers' unwillingness to broach the subject may be reinforced by an appreciation of the numerous practical difficulties of eliciting information on such sensitive and personal matters.

Although it is a less visible form of exploitation, sexual harassment poses a serious problem for women workers. It has significant repercussions, both for worker well being and for enterprise efficiency. The present study to seeks to understand the extent and impact of sexual harassment on women who are employed in industrial

¹ Every worker is allotted a time card, which is used to record the number of hours he or she works per day. There are widespread allegations that many factories tamper with the entries in time cards in order to pay workers less than is due to them. Such practices are easier to 'get away with' in the case of workers who are not literate.

wage work. The analysis that follows locates the predicament of garments and electronics workers in the larger context of shifting gender relations in Bangladesh. Hopefully, the study will contribute toward breaking down some of the silences around sexuality and workers' rights in contemporary society.

Commissioned by The Centre for Policy Dialogue (CPD) with United Nations Fund for Population Activities under their Joint Program on Population and Sustainable Development, this is the first study that deals exclusively with the problem of sexual in the industrial workplace in Bangladesh. I would like to thank Dr. Debapriya Bhattacharya and Professor Mustafizur Rahman for encouraging me to take up this research project, Dr. Ananya Raihan and Ms. Fatema Yousuf for subsequent assistance with the project, and the entire CPD team for organizing a public dialogue based on an earlier version of this report. The participants at the dialogue deserve special thanks for their challenging and perceptive comments on the presentation. I hope they will recognize their contributions to my thinking in this version of the paper. I am grateful to my research assistants, Hasan Ashraf, Farhana Islam and Sheikh Tariquzzaman for their diligence, enthusiasm, and acute intellectual insights. Thanks also to Fahmida Sultana for her assistance with creating a database. Conversations with Nazma Akhter, Rani Khan, Amirul Haque Amin and Shima Das Shimu greatly enriched my understanding of the research problem. Faustina Pereira, David Ludden and Willem van Schendel made detailed comments on the first draft. Comments from the anonymous reviewers helped to clarify definitions and relevant debates in feminist theory. Professor Hafiz Siddiqi provided logistical assistance and materials at short notice. I would like to thank everyone, above all, the workers who shared their precious time and thoughts with the research team.

Executive Summary

- Existing studies of industrial workers are silent on the topic of sexual harassment. At one level, this silence can be understood in relation to workers' priorities, which revolve understandably around 'bread and butter' issues. However, cultural taboos associated with sexuality are also responsible for discouraging research on the subject. The knowledge-gap notwithstanding, sexual harassment constitutes a fundamental violation of labor rights, with repercussions both for worker well being and for enterprise efficiency.
- The present study seeks to break the silence and understand the impact of sexual harassment on women employed in industrial wage work. Given the lacuna in existing literature, the study is exploratory in nature. The aim is to open up questions for further research, as well as build on the existing information base. As such, a major objective is to go beyond statistics and fill gaps in knowledge by tapping into the everyday experiences of women workers.
- Discussions of sexual harassment in feminist and legal scholarship take harassment to be a workplace phenomenon. However, women's work environment in Bangladesh doesn't begin and end at the workplace. An understanding of the specific predicament of Bangladeshi workers calls for a broad definition of harassment. While it acknowledges the existence of harassment at work, the definition of sexual harassment used in this study does not limit itself to the workplace. Further, harassment is taken to be conduct that undermines the individual worker's right to dignity – rather than the violation of her modesty. It thereby avoids engagement with culturally sanctioned – and highly patriarchal -- notions of female propriety.
- The most obvious cause for sexual violence, including harassment is unequal power relations in society as a whole. Nevertheless, contemporary forms of harassment have a more proximate cause -- the increasing numbers of women who are entering the workforce throughout the world. Given trends in female labor force participation in Bangladesh, harassment constitutes a major concern for individual women and their families, for society, and for the national economy. This study shows that the specific conditions of employment associated with globalization create 'enabling' environments for employers and others to get away with sexual harassment, simultaneously making it harder for employees to press for redress.

- The study seeks to understand the main parameters through which women workers conceptualize and experience harassment. It also examines the relationship between sexual harassment and specific occupations. It looks at practices of recruitment and job security as they affect women's vulnerability to sexual harassment. A major objective of the study is to assess the impact of sexual harassment on the work environment, on productivity, and workers' attitudes and responses to their work. Finally, the study has been designed to formulate strategies, based on workers' experiences, which the state and labor rights groups can take to combat sexual harassment.
- The project compares the experiences of three groups of women: garment workers in Export Processing Zones (EPZ), those who work in non-EPZ garment factories and workers in the electronics industry. Existing studies tend to take for granted the monolithic and uniform nature of working conditions in the industrial sector. The study provides a more complex understanding of the differences between and within the two industries than is currently available.
- The age and marital distribution of the sample population, chosen randomly, do not conform to conventional images of multinational sweatshop labor – teenaged, unmarried and burnt out by the time they are in their early twenties. Of the sample, nearly half were between the ages of 22 and 30 and one fifth was over 30 years. Nearly half the women were married. The study confirms that poverty is not the only 'push factor' in women's entry into the industrial labor force. The promise of a better life acts as a significant stimulus.
- The study found multiple forms of verbal and physical harassment in the working environment of the two industries, with distinct difference between smaller locally owned garment factories and those in the EPZ, as well as between the garments and the electronics sectors.
- The different categories of abuse within factories should not be blurred; it is essential to note the boundaries between verbal harassment, physical abuse and rape (a relatively rare occurrence limited to the smaller factories). These are obviously of quite different orders and magnitudes.
- Harassment forms vary by time and place inside the factory. The most common form identified by all three groups was the *gali* or expletives to which women are subjected during work hours. The highly sexualized vocabulary and body language used to discipline female workers creates a hostile, intimidating and sexually charged environment.

- Women in smaller, non-EPZ garment factories also reported high rates of sexual coercion and intimidation. Night work is associated with high risks of sexual assault or rape, with those working in the non-EPZ factories being the most vulnerable. Electronics workers, who are not forced to work overnight, face the least risk of sexual assault in the workplace. Garment factories located in Export Processing Zones, with their extreme regimentation, appear to provide more physical safety to women workers than those on the outside.
- Workers, especially in factories where payments are irregular and other privileges are limited, can be under considerable pressure to succumb to the advances of men who have some form of power over them. The line between consent and coercion is blurred at best when power is so unevenly distributed, so that the quality of such transactions are difficult to judge.
- Substantial differences exist in the frequency and forms of harassment between garment factories, especially local or *bangla* factories, and electronics factories. Discrepancies also exist between factories located in the EPZ and those outside the so-called Free Trade Zones, and between smaller and larger establishments. In all cases, the smaller factories producing garments tend to have the most exploitative conditions.
- The garment industry should not be viewed in monolithic terms, with homogeneous structures or conditions across the board. The financial stability of enterprises, the pace and structure of production and the distance from the operational control of international capital all inform differences in the labor management practices that promote sexual harassment.
- Further, sexual coercion and verbal abuse are part of the general spectrum of ‘traditional’ methods of labor discipline found in Bangladesh. That is, the lack of a culture of rights and the prevailing view of workers as inherently slothful and undisciplined, and so in need of ‘prompting to get work out of them’ (*kaaj adai korey neya*), promote coercive practices in general.
- The predominantly ‘male’ spaces between the workplace and the home appear to constitute the most dangerous sites for industrial workers. As with harassment in the workplace, the risks differ depending on the time of day as well as on the mode of commuting. The presumption is that no unescorted woman who appears in public/male spaces like the street, especially after dark, could have legitimate business at hand. The same cultural logic prompts surveillance and harassment by night guards, policemen or any other male

wishing to exert his ‘guardianship’ over women. In other words, the individual man’s sense of entitlement or right to regulate all women’s mobility and sexuality, works to encourage and legitimate sexual harassment on the streets.

- Responses to verbal and sexual coercion, in the workplace and beyond, depend to a great extent on job security, the general work environment and individual economic circumstances. The more precarious a worker’s job situation, the less leverage she will have, therefore the more likely she is to be subjected to sexual harassment. The lack of documentation and the ease with which workers can be dismissed are directly associated with the vulnerability and powerlessness of individual workers.
- Almost half of all workers reported that verbal or physical harassment in the workplace impairs their productivity directly. In the absence of any mechanism to correct an abusive situation, workers frequently resort to actions such as intentionally slowing down their output per hour or faking illness. For many women, this kind of oblique resistance may be the only means of expressing their anger or helplessness. In other words, experiences of verbal or physical harassment generate forms of resistance that effectively lower productivity.
- The study shows that workers’ sense of self-respect and honor are intimately, and strongly, tied to their morale and the desire to perform well. Gender was not the only axis through which workers experienced exploitation in their daily lives. A sense of economic and social deprivation profoundly informed workers’ views of their fate and the possibilities for justice. Women perceived sexual harassment as attacks not only on their physical selves or their reputations but as assaults on their class identity and dignity as workers.
- Other modes of resistance on which women rely rework existing ideological beliefs about the ‘good’ Bengali woman. Self-imposed passivity and visible conformity with patriarchal norms afford women some degree of social protection. Wearing a *borkha* or a large *orna*, as well as refraining from talking back, appears to be the most common strategies for avoiding unwanted male attention on the streets. Paradoxically, entry into ‘modern’ wage labor encourages women to reinforce so-called ‘traditional’ practices of female modesty. Notably, no one reported covering herself as a sign of personal piety.
- Neither the electronics nor the apparel sector has enough viable unions that are willing or able to negotiate cases of sexual harassment. A major deterrent

appears to be the difficulty in winning such cases, for lack of appropriate evidence and the reticence of women to come forward publicly with charges of harassment. The workers in the sample had minimal or no knowledge of labor legislation or the law on sexual harassment.

- Male workers expressed considerable solidarity with their female colleagues. Most of the men did not think sexual harassment had any particular impact on productivity. They did concede, however, that harassment would have psychological effects on women “because their honor was involved.”
- The complicity between human rights discourse and geo-politics today makes the task of advocacy and policy intervention especially difficult. The contents of this paper should not be generalized or taken out of context. Rather, the situation requires an informed understanding of how the politics of representation and reception internationally can have serious material consequences locally.
- Harassment must be located and understood in context -- without sensationalizing the facts. The objective of this paper is not to depict working class factory women as passive and sexually exploited victims, thereby reinforcing dominant stereotypes about class and gender. Nor should recognition of harassment be used as an argument to deny women access to the labor market. Speaking out on harassment is not an endorsement of withdrawing women from wage work. In the same way, it does not follow that women should be banned from doing night work because the risks of sexual assaults are higher for those working the night shift. This kind of logic relies on a discourse of protection that is ultimately quite disabling for women. The purpose of the present study is to understand the factors that make women more vulnerable to sexual harassment in specific situations, and to find effective measures to combat them, so as to create safer, more enabling conditions for all working women.
- The government in collaboration with women’s and labor rights groups should draw up a code of conduct appropriate for the industrial sector. Subsequently, all factories should put in place a clear and simple complaints procedure. No procedure will work unless workers are assured of protection from retaliation. In this respect, the system of hiring and firing workers informally needs to be replaced. This does not require any new legislation but simple compliance with existing labor laws.
- Factory owners must be convinced that it is in their own interests to mete out fair treatment to their employees. This calls for highlighting the relationship

between low productivity, coercive management practices and sexual harassment.

- Basic amenities such as company buses and improved street lighting should be provided.
- The root causes of harassment cannot be eliminated without a transformation in social attitudes toward women, especially toward poor working women. Gender sensitivity training for all persons in positions of authority, especially for police personnel is essential. In this respect, the mass media arguably has the most important role to play.
- In order to gain a better understanding of the root causes of sexual harassment in the workplace and in contemporary society as a whole, further research in two areas should be carried out: on different management practices and the culture of the workplace and on male attitudes toward working women. In particular, the relationship between shifting or threatened forms of masculinity, and rising violence against women needs to rigorously interrogated.

The Sexual Harassment of Industrial Workers: Strategies for Intervention in the Workplace and Beyond

Introduction

Women's work environment in Bangladesh doesn't begin and end at the workplace. In all the public spaces they inhabit – inside the factory and on the streets -- they must negotiate culturally embedded and highly gendered codes of spatial use and respectability. Consequently, working women face a double jeopardy with respect to sexual harassment. Not only are they vulnerable to physical, verbal and sexual abuse inside the workplace, they are frequently subjected to harassment once they leave their work premises, in the public spaces they must traverse before reaching home.²

Women from impoverished backgrounds are the most at risk of this dual harassment, which derives legitimacy from culturally dominant associations between poverty, promiscuity, and public visibility. The predicament of garment workers is emblematic in this respect. The reputation of the industry and the conditions of work offer an implicit license for otherwise unacceptable behavior, making garment workers fair game for male attention inside the factory and beyond. For these women, the street – male public space – can be an extremely dangerous and intimidating space. Perceived 'low' status (which translates into a lack of social protection) combined with late working hours and inadequate transport facilities expose female workers to all sorts of insecurity and harassment.

Empirical or qualitative data on the extent of sexual harassment in Bangladesh is limited; in studies of industrial workers the topic usually comes up obliquely. Despite the large body of research on women in the industrial sector, harassment as a specific issue has received relatively little attention.³ Moreover, available data is primarily of a quantitative nature. A survey of health and safety regulations in the garment industry found that sexual harassment is likely to be the most dominant source of

² This analysis does not apply to highly professional middle and upper class women in Bangladesh. These women are also subject to sexual harassment but they tend to face a somewhat different set of social restraints and obstacles since they are protected by certain class privileges. The many prominent female lawyers, academics and feminist activists in Dhaka, for instance, generally don't need to worry about working late or walking on the streets alone at night since most have the luxury of traveling in private cars.

³ See the relevant essays in Muhammed Muqtada et al. (eds.) *Bangladesh: Economic and Social Challenges of Globalisation*, 2002; Bangladesh National Women Lawyers Association *Globalisation and Recent Economic Debacle: Impact on the State of Women Garments Workers of Bangladesh*, 2002; Petra Dannecker *Between Conformity and Resistance: Women Garment Workers in Bangladesh* 2002; Naila Kabeer *Bangladeshi Women Workers and Labour Market Decisions: The Power to Choose* 2001; Anwara Begum and Pratima Paul-Majumdar "The Gender Imbalances in the Export Oriented Garment Industry in Bangladesh" 2000, and the essays in Khundker and Sobhan (eds.) *Globalisation and Gender*, 2001, for examples of the more recent literature on industrialization and women workers.

psychological stress for garment workers.⁴ Another survey by the Bangladesh Institute of Labour Studies (BILS), based on news reports in 12 national dailies, reveals that *at least* 51 women working in the industrial and service sectors were raped in the first six months of the past year.⁵ Several were murdered brutally in the aftermath of rape. The survey also identifies the current conditions of industrial work – late working hours, inadequate transport facilities and lack of security commuting to and from work—as contributing causes to sexual assaults on working women. Predictably, garment workers constituted a significant number -- 31 out of 51 -- of those raped.

Overall, the picture appears to be grim. Rape is only the most extreme form of sexual harassment; its frequency an index of generalized attitudes of hostility toward women workers. Moreover, statistics drawn from newspapers only capture those incidents that have been reported officially. One can assume that there is considerable under reporting of such incidences. Women may be reluctant to reveal experiences of harassment for fear of being socially stigmatized, or, increasingly, because of the threat of retribution.

The issue becomes even more fraught when the workplace is involved. In the absence of job security, viable legal protection or an established cultural discourse of rights, female employees are understandably wary of bringing up charges against superiors or colleagues. Therefore, the prevalence of sexual violence inside the workplace is difficult to gauge accurately. Whatever the figures, the severity and widespread nature of sexual harassment undermine women's right to the pursuit of a secure and safe livelihood.

The scope of the current study is limited to the experiences of women in the garments and electronics sectors, but the conclusions are applicable to women working in many other informal and formal sectors. This study is exploratory rather than definitive in nature. It is hoped that it will open up questions for further research, as well as build on the existing information base on the sexual harassment of women industrial workers. A major objective of the study is to go beyond the statistics and fill gaps in knowledge by tapping into the everyday experiences of women workers.

In the Eye of the Beholder? Toward a Situated Definition of Sexual Harassment

Although sexual harassment affects individuals, it should not be viewed as a private issue. Nor should harassment be considered purely a woman's issue. It is a human rights, labor rights and human resource management issue. Harassment has a range of

⁴ Nazma Begum, "Women Workers' Status in Bangladesh," 2001 p. 13

⁵ *The Daily Star*, Dhaka. Tuesday August 6, 2002, p.2.

consequences, from the social and the economic to the physical and the psychological. From a macro perspective, harassment functions as a serious barrier to women's integration in the labor market. In that sense, it hampers the attainment of gender equality and economic growth.

At the individual level, subjects of harassment experience emotional stress, depression, fatigue, anxiety, an inability to concentrate, humiliation, and anger, among other things. It follows that work performance is significantly lowered. Tension, hostility and fear in the workplace hinder teamwork and collaboration, leading not only to decreased productivity but also to increased absenteeism, loss of interest in work and in severe cases to the resignation of valuable employees. The financial costs to enterprises can be huge. The United States Merit Systems Protection Board estimates that sexual harassment caused the Federal Government US\$ 267 million over a two year period. This figure represents costs associated with reductions in productivity, sick leave and the replacement of employees.⁶

The language of sexual harassment is relatively new, although the various behaviors it encompasses are not. American feminists in the 1970's first made available a socially recognized vocabulary to describe specific gendered experiences as sexual harassment. Legally, the concept emerged through the development of civil rights legislation in the United States. Feminist legal scholar Catherine MacKinnon was foremost in naming sexual harassment as an expression of male dominance and as a form of sexual discrimination. Mackinnon drew on Title VII of the 1964 Civil Rights legislation, which prohibits discrimination based on religion, race and sex. Thus, in the US and a number of other countries, sexual harassment constitutes a form of sex discrimination.

Two kinds of harassment are identified under Title VII of the American Civil Rights Act. The first is *quid pro quo* harassment, in which employment related decisions are contingent on the employee's response to sexual advances. The second type refers to the creation of a hostile work environment. The latter could include demeaning or inappropriate language (including body language) or actual physical conduct.

Over the last two decades, sexual harassment has received much attention as both a social and a legal problem. Rights groups across the globe have mobilized around the issue, pressuring individual governments as well as international institutions to take action. In 1979, the United Nations Convention for the Elimination of All forms of Violence Against Women included sexual harassment in its definition of violence. In 1986, the Women's Bureau of the International Confederation of Free Trade Unions published a Trade Union guideline on Sexual Harassment. In 1992, the International

⁶ Radhika Coomaraswamy, *Report of the Special Rapporteur on Violence Against Women*, 1997, p. 17.

Confederation of Trade Unions adopted a resolution recognizing sexual harassment as a legitimate trade union issue.⁷

Despite sustained interest in the subject, debates over what constitutes sexual harassment have by no means been resolved. The evolution of sexual harassment laws in the American courts set the precedent for similar measures elsewhere. However, a major contention revolves around how adequately or effectively claims of sexual discrimination capture all forms of harassment.

Interpretations of Title VII based sex discrimination, for instance, rely on the mindset of individual judges for their effective application; the latter's perspective on culturally appropriate standards of femininity and masculinity determines whether or not a given situation is judged to be discriminatory toward women. How to determine discrimination in the case of men or of homosexuals makes matters even more complicated.⁸

While there is no consensus on what constitutes sexual harassment, it is generally agreed that such conduct is unwelcome, unsolicited and offensive to the recipient, regardless of the ‘intentions’ behind the conduct. Indeed, denial and a lack of awareness are major obstacles in the battle against harassment. Many of the behaviors that constitute harassment are naturalized in social practices and taken for granted by the perpetrators. Experience indicates that while some people deny the phenomenon altogether, those who experience it assert it equally strongly. More specifically, resistance to acknowledging verbal harassment arises from confusion and anxiety over the boundaries between complementary comments and sexually coercive verbal behavior. Of course, a complement is not a crime. However, the context, tone and language of ‘complements’ – the overall relations of power involved -- all inform the meaning of any particular statement.

Internationally, four types of laws are used to address such situations. Criminal laws are the most comprehensive since they hold the accused liable, regardless of context or place of harassment. The disadvantage of this approach is that there is no compensation for the victim, no employer liability and no consideration of the discriminatory aspects of sexual harassment in the workplace. The discrimination framework is specifically applicable to work situations, with the employer liable for not providing an environment free of discrimination based on sex. In addition, the victim can claim compensation from the employer. Labor laws are frequently used in *quid pro quo* cases, as part of discriminatory employment practices such as unfair

⁷ <http://altindia.net/gender/harassment/INTERNATIONAL>

⁸ Margaret Talbot “When Men Taunt Men, Is it Sexual Harassment?” *The New York Times Magazine*, October 13, 2002.

dismissals. The main limitation of labor laws is that they do not cover situations outside the workplace. Lastly, tort laws or non-contractual judgments and civil laws have sometimes been used in sexual harassment cases on the grounds of mental anguish, negligence, etc.⁹

Sexual harassment is not part of any binding international Convention; even the core labor standards of the International Labour Organisation (ILO) do not refer specifically to sexual harassment in the workplace. The ILO's Committee of Experts considers sexual harassment to fall within the scope of the ILO Discrimination (Employment and Occupation) Convention, 1958 (no. 111), one of the eight fundamental conventions that form the basis of the ILO's Decent Work Agenda. In other words, relevant bodies of the ILO interpret sexual harassment as a form of sex-based discrimination.

The ILO recognizes sexual harassment as a violation of the fundamental rights of workers, one that constitutes a problem of safety and health, a problem of discrimination, an unacceptable working condition and a form of violence.¹⁰ In 1992, the ILO Conditions of Work Digest published *Combating Sexual Harassment at Work*, which carried examples from industrialized countries on measures to combat sexual harassment. The ILO website records research currently being carried out on the nature and extent of the problem, trends in law and jurisprudence, and enterprise policies and programs to combat sexual harassment at the workplace.¹¹ Moreover, the ILO's annual meeting in 2003 will explore the possibility of introducing an expanded definition of sexual harassment to its core labor standards.

1991 marked an international milestone when the European Commission adopted a Recommendation on the dignity of women and men at work. The Commission states:

Sexual harassment means unwanted conduct of a sexual nature, or other conduct based on sex, affecting the dignity of men and women at work. This includes unwelcome physical, verbal or non-verbal conduct. This conduct constitutes sexual harassment under three conditions: the behaviour must be (a) unwanted, improper or offensive (b) refusal or acceptance of behaviour influences decisions concerning a job and (c) the behaviour in question creates a working climate that is intimidating, hostile or humiliating for the person.¹²

The fundamental feature of the European Commission's definition lies in its emphasis on the violation of worker dignity, as opposed to simple sex discrimination, as the basis for sexual harassment. The Commission also considers sexual harassment to be

⁹ This section summarizes information from the ILO's "Combating Sexual Harassment," 1992.

¹⁰ Leyla Tegmo-Reddy "Sexual Harassment at the Workplace in Nepal," 2001.

¹¹ <http://www.ilo.org/public/english/protection/condtrav/sex/>

¹² In Bajema and Timmerman, "Sexual Harassment in Northwest Europe," 1999, p.423.

a form of employee misconduct, meaning that employers have a responsibility to deal with it as they would any other form of employee misconduct. In view of the risks to health and safety, the Commission holds employers responsible for taking steps to minimize such risks. The Code, however, is neither binding, nor enforceable.

Clearly, discussions of sexual harassment in international feminist and legal scholarship focus overwhelmingly on the workplace and its dangers for women (and some men). That is, harassment is defined primarily as a workplace phenomenon. Indeed, the development of sexual harassment laws as pioneered by US feminists was shaped by considerations of discrimination in employment opportunities for women.¹³ However, for most women in Bangladesh harassment is not exclusively or even primarily a workplace issue. Therefore, any definition of harassment must encompass much more than the workplace and the discriminations engendered therein.

An understanding of the specific predicament of Bangladeshi workers calls for a broader definition. In this respect, the International Confederation of Free Trade Unions of the Asia Pacific region that, in collaboration with the ILO, organized a regional workshop on sexual harassment in 1991 provides a point of departure. The workshop defined harassment as *work-related* (instead of ‘in the workplace’ or ‘at work’) unwanted and offensive behavior of a sexual nature, which includes the elements of 1) quid pro quo 2) hostile work environment and 3) an abuse of power and authority.¹⁴ Notably, the workshop account of harassment limited itself to conduct of a sexual nature.

The Nari O Shishu Nirjaton Domon Ain (2000) for the first time made sexual harassment a criminal offence punishable by law in Bangladesh. Section 10 (2) of the Act states:

Any man who, *in order to satisfy his lust in an improper manner, outrages the modesty of a woman*, or makes obscene gestures, will have engaged in sexual harassment, and for this, the above mentioned male will be sentenced to rigorous imprisonment of not more than seven years and not less than two years and beyond this will be subjected to monetary fines as well (my translation, emphasis added).

The Bangladeshi law deals only with the expression of inappropriate sexual desire and conduct, without specifying geographical jurisdiction. Unfortunately, the law is problematic both in language and overall conception. The current law does not mention workplace or quid pro quo harassment since the definition of sexual harassment is limited to acts or intentions of a sexual nature, regardless of place. Further, the law does not accommodate actions that are not directly connected to the

¹³ For an overview, see Timmerman and Bajema, “Sexual Harassment in Northwest Europe,” 1999.

¹⁴ <http://www.icftu-apro.org/aplabour/APLabour070.html>

“satisfaction of lust.” It also assumes that what is ultimately at stake is a woman’s modesty, where the parameters of modesty are taken for granted. In practice, modesty is a highly contentious and unstable term. The patriarchal assumptions embedded in dominant ideologies of female modesty are hardly conducive to the protection of women who do not conform to accepted social codes.

In light of the above discussion, I have produced a working definition of sexual harassment that is more appropriate to the Bangladeshi context. The definition draws on various public sources including the European Union’s Code of Practice. Here it should be noted that the lines between sexual harassment and physical violence against women (such as rape) tend to get blurred conceptually, if we are not careful. It is important to draw the line between physical harassment and rape, which is a criminal offense of a different order.¹⁵ Sexual harassment is:

- Conduct of a sexual nature or *other conduct based on sex* affecting the *dignity* of men and women -- at work or in any other public space -- which is unwelcome, unreasonable and offensive to the recipient.
- Where a person’s rejection or submission to such conduct is used explicitly or implicitly as the basis for decisions affecting that person’s employment status (*quid pro quo* harassment).
- Conduct that creates an intimidating, hostile or humiliating work or *work-related* environment for the recipient. Such conduct includes demeaning or inappropriate language (including body language), verbal threats or actual physical contact.

As described above, sexual harassment need not be limited to potential or actual conduct of a sexual nature, but can include conduct based on a person’s social identity as a woman (or man, for that matter). Some commentators would call this gender role harassment -- acts precipitated by a person’s perceived transgression of socially sanctioned gender roles and spaces¹⁶. This broader definition accommodates the experiences of those women who are verbally or physically accosted without being threatened with *sexual* violence.¹⁷ The definition also stresses an individual’s right to dignity – rather than the violation of her modesty. It thereby avoids engagement with culturally sanctioned – and highly masculinist -- notions of female propriety. Finally, while it acknowledges the existence of workplace harassment, the definition is not limited to any specific context or location.

¹⁵ I would like to thank the anonymous reviewer for urging me to clarify this point.

¹⁶ Ruth Finney Howard *Breaking the Earthenware Jar*, 2000. p. 259.

¹⁷ The example of Simi Banu, who was routinely stalked and subjected to extreme verbal harassment but never explicitly threatened with sexual violence, comes to mind. For details, see Dina M. Siddiqi, “Sexual Harassment and the Public Woman,” 2001.

Globalization from Below: Sexual Harassment as a Contemporary Phenomenon

Clearly, there is growing concern at national and international levels about preventing and combating sexual harassment, especially in the workplace. Moreover, there is recognition that harassment itself is increasing. While it is true that many of the behaviors that constitute sexual harassment are not new, the forms and contexts of harassment today must be historicized.

The most obvious cause for sexual violence, including harassment in the workplace is unequal power relations in society as a whole. Gender-based violence is informed by the distribution of social, economic and legal power in society. Women are more likely to be victims of harassment because they lack power, occupy insecure positions or are socialized into suffering in silence.

However, contemporary forms of harassment have a more proximate cause -- the increasing numbers of women who are entering the workforce throughout the world. A technical report of the ILO compiled in 2001 notes that the scale of sexual harassment has increased considerably in the last two decades.¹⁸ Over the same time period, women have come to constitute an increasing share of the world's labor force, at least one-third in all regions except Northern Africa and Western Asia. In most of Asia, the share is even higher. In East, Southeast and Central Asia, the percentage of women registered in the workforce is well over 40%; it is around one-third in South Asia. Further, the report observes that women workers in Asia are typically employed in a narrow range of occupations, which are characterized by high job insecurity, low pay, and bad working conditions, as well as low status and minimal bargaining power. These characteristics enhance the risk of workers being subjected to sexual harassment.

The ILO report notes that those at particular risk of harassment include women in male-dominated occupations or in situations where a large number of women are supervised by a small number of men. Workers in temporary, casual or part-time work are also vulnerable. *The report, therefore, points to the connections between globalization, its attendant flexible modes of production and the precarious working conditions associated with sexual harassment.*

Given trends in female labor force participation in Bangladesh, harassment constitutes a major concern for individual women and their families, for society, and for the national economy. The female labor force participation rate, most visible in the industrial sector, has been rising steadily since the 1980s. Women are also increasingly present in the tertiary or service sectors of the economy. As of 1996, the

¹⁸ The contents of the report have been summarized from <http://www.dawn.com/2001/10/03/nat32.html>

female labor force participation rate was 51%, with 63% of women engaged in the agricultural sector, 27 % in the service sector and 10% in industrial activities. Statistics compiled by the Directorate of Women's Affairs show that there are 2,995 women among 59,177 gazetted officers in 33 ministries; 17,233 of 30,126 non-gazetted officers are women.¹⁹ This is in addition to 30,000 low-grade female government employees.

The average annual growth rate for female workers in the industrial sector was 16 % in 1990, compared to 9 % in the preceding decade.²⁰ In the private sector, the garment industry is the most prominent employer of women, with around 1.5 million women working in various capacities. Women are also increasingly visible in banks, corporate offices, shopping malls etc., mostly in low-level positions as receptionists, clerks or salespeople but occasionally in management and supervisory capacities. Indeed, the global trend towards the deployment of female labor continues unabated, in Bangladesh as elsewhere.²¹ In all cases, women's work is increasingly subject to market forces, global and local. Therefore, there is a pressing need to revisit the question of women and work in the contemporary moment.

Globalization has had a significant impact on the lives of women in Bangladesh.²² The changes are most notable in terms of increased participation in the labor market, women's independent migration to urban areas, and in their greater visibility in the public sphere. At the same time, globalization has brought into focus a new set of issues, including the right to freedom from violence and the right to work with dignity.

In Bangladesh, all indicators point to a close relationship between increased sexual harassment, women's work participation and increased mobility/visibility. The current study has been designed taking into consideration the relationship between globalization and the increasing vulnerability of women in the labor force. However, the argument does not presume a simple one to one relationship between globalization and sexual harassment. Globalization is a complex and multi-layered process rather than a monolithic, all-pervasive phenomenon. By the same token, the effects of globalization are not uniform but highly uneven and inconsistent. It is true that many

¹⁹ M. Rahman and R. Karim "Harassment and Hazards of Working Women in Bangladesh." *The Daily Star*, Dhaka. February 03, 2002.

²⁰ Rita Afsar "Sociological Implications of Female Labour Migration in Bangladesh," 2001, p. 92

²¹ However, Bhattacharya and Rahman caution that with the phasing out of the Multi Fibre Arrangement, the concentration of women in low skill tasks and the push toward technological upgrading, there may be some substitution of male for female labor in the garment industry. See Debapriya Bhattacharya and Mustafizur Rahman "Prospects for Internalizing Global Opportunities in the Apparel Sector in Bangladesh," 2001, pp 219-267.

²² Nasreen Khundker "The Impact of Globalisation on Gender," 2002.

women have benefited from new employment opportunities, especially those who are in the private and corporate sectors. Nevertheless, as this study shows, the conditions of employment most women continue to labor under create ‘enabling’ environments for employers and others to get away with sexual harassment, simultaneously making it harder for employees to press for redress.

The Politics and Perils of “Saving” Bangladeshi Workers

The potentially sensationalist subject matter of this report, and the numerous international exposés on the “scandalous” working conditions in Bangladeshi garment factories, calls for a cautionary caveat at this point. Globally, “sweatshop” workers occupy center stage with respect to activism and the clamor to universalize labor standards. Paradoxically, the World Trade Organization (WTO), Northern labor unions and the many anti-globalization protestors in Seattle and elsewhere all share a concern over the fate of factory labor in Asia, Latin America and Africa. In the United States, the quest to globalize labor standards appears to have galvanized university students into action after a considerable lull in political activism. There now exists a strong movement across many campuses to pressure university authorities into divesting funds from any company operating in the South that contravenes internationally acceptable labor standards. Northern unions such as the Union of Needletrades, Industrial and Textile Employees (UNITE), as well as organizations promoting workers rights, such as the Asian-American Free Labor Institute (AAFLI) and the International Labor Rights Fund (ILRF), also are pressing for more uniform labor standards globally.

A measure of their success will be revisions to the Generalised System of Preferences under consideration by the US senate. The GSP lays out the preconditions for duty free access to Northern markets. In practice, the conditionalities of the GSP act as non-tariff barriers to free trade. For the first time, beneficiary countries will be required to prohibit discrimination with respect to employment and occupation if they are to export goods to the US. According to a report in the Washington Financial Times, international trade unions hope that the US Senate action will be the first step in a broader campaign to discourage what they say is the most serious form of discrimination overlooked in current labor rights standards – the sexual abuse and harassment of women in export-oriented industries.²³

Moreover, the 2003 annual meeting of the ILO will include discussions on whether or not to add an expanded definition of sexual harassment to the ILO’s core labor standards. As the Washington DC based International Labor Rights Fund argues, it is critical to incorporate an expanded definition since so many trade agreements and voluntary labor codes are based on ILO defined core labor standards.

²³ <http://www.laborrights.org/press/rfw051602.html>

The recognition of sexual harassment as a serious violation of a worker's rights must be applauded. Unfortunately, as with other issues linking labor standards to trade opportunities, the timing and strategies pursued cannot help but engender skepticism. As Naila Kabeer and others have argued, the new international division of labor, and the loss of labor-intensive jobs in Northern countries that this entails, provides part of the impetus for the global discourse of ethics that has emerged in relation to international trade and WTO rules. Within this discourse, what used to be seen as the comparative advantage of poorer southern countries – their abundant labor – has been transformed into unfair advantage – their exploited labor. This is then used to justify a double closure -- starting with restrictions on movements of labor out of low wage economies, followed by restrictions to the entry of goods produced by low wage workers in their own economies.²⁴

In short, the discourse of universal labor standards disguises measures to protect jobs in the north *and* maintains the illusion of free trade for all. The complicity between human rights discourse and geo-politics outlined above makes the task of advocacy and policy intervention especially difficult. As is well known, movements to boycott Bangladeshi goods have had less than salubrious effects on the workers they were meant to help. Among other things, the situation calls for an informed understanding of how the politics of representation and reception internationally can have serious material consequences locally, not all of which are salutary.

The deployment of a language of horror, of sensationalized narratives that are generalized from individual stories that may or may not be representative, has become a compelling means of capturing public attention in the North. I reproduce below the introductory paragraph of an essay on Bangladeshi garment workers written by an investigative journal employed by UNITE:

There's a saying among girls in the slums of Bangladesh: *If you're lucky, you'll be a prostitute--if you're unlucky, you'll be a garment worker.* Pinky was both lucky and unlucky. She was sold into a brothel when she was 11. At thirteen, she was living at a shelter for victimized women and girls in the capital city of Dhaka and working at Expo World Wide Garments. Undernourished since birth, then fed according to the nutritional standards of a pimp, the bird-boned girl stood on her feet for up to fourteen hours a day, six to seven days a week, for the equivalent of \$12.50 a month. The foreman came on to her all the time. No doubt he could sniff out her background. But that wouldn't have made a difference. No, not for a pretty one like that in a garment factory. Just threaten to fire them and they're yours.

²⁴ Naila Kabeer "Globalisation, Labour Standards and Women's Rights: Tensions and Possibilities," 2001.

A girl in the labor force means she's unprotected. Either her family has abandoned her, or the family men are too poor and desperate to make trouble.²⁵

Presumably, the writer's objective is to unmask the rampant sexual harassment that accompanies the 'inhuman' conditions of work in garment factories. As the findings of the current study confirm, there is indeed a strong association between job insecurity and the inability to resist sexual harassment. That being said, one cannot help but be troubled by the rhetorical strategy employed by the UNITE journalist to drive home her point. In just one paragraph, the writer manages to reduce all Bangladeshi workers to would-be or one-time sex workers, as well as to reinforce every imaginable Bengali middle class stereotype about the female factory worker.

This strategy ends up working against the interests of the very workers it is designed to 'save.' First, the Western reader is presented with predictable Orientalist tropes -- the passive, helpless third world woman, always already sexualized and victimized, and preyed on by lustful and exploitative 'native' males, therefore urgently in need of rescuing. Second, the association of sexwork with factory work, and the invocation of prostitution to indicate the horrors of garment work, provides the main shock value of the passage.²⁶ Leaving aside problematic assumptions about sexwork being the worst form of female degradation imaginable, this is precisely the kind of association that politically correct constituencies -- including feminists -- in northern countries find compelling.

Grossly generalized and sensationalized images of exploitation can be extremely effective in garnering public support for actions such as boycotts, or sanctions through international trade bodies, all in the name of protecting women workers' rights. Consequently, Northern labor activists have little incentive to present the complex and "messy" reality that exists on the ground.²⁷ In the process, as Kabeer points out, distinctions between situations where the problems are largely due to poverty and underdevelopment, and those that entail gross violations of human rights are erased.²⁸

²⁵ Eleanor Spielberg "The Myth of Nimble Fingers," 1997, p.113. Emphasis added. For a detailed critique, see Dina M. Siddiqi "A Passion for the Cinema: Making Women's Work Respectable," 1999.

²⁶ For the record, I have never come across the saying about prostitution being preferable to factory work in my decade-long research on the garment industry.

²⁷ Trying to present a more complex picture is an uphill battle. In 1999, I was invited to speak at a workshop at the University of Pennsylvania organized by the local chapter of United Students Against Sweatshops. My refusal to recount the horrors of Bangladeshi factories and insistence on critically assessing the collusion between rights discourse and neocolonial relations of domination were met with a studied silence from an audience eager to "set things right."

²⁸ Naila Kabeer "Globalisation, Labour Standards and Women's Rights: Tensions and Possibilities," 2001.

Clearly, multiple stakes are involved in the act of representing and prioritizing Southern workers' lives. The export economy of Bangladesh is in a vulnerable position with respect to international "free" trade. Global recession and the retrenchment of labor in recent years have had disastrous consequences for many women and men in export industries. The phasing out of the MFA at the end of 2004 will undoubtedly bring more uncertainty to the apparel sector.

In the circumstances, raising the issue of sexual harassment in export industries could be interpreted in some quarters as yet another sop to Northern interests. The prospects of sexual harassment becoming a new buzzword in international trade and human rights discourse after 2003 are slim but not entirely outside the realm of possibility. While one has to be vigilant, the potential dangers of appropriation cannot preclude analysis of or intervention into the situation on the ground. Most importantly, factory owners should not be allowed to use this as an alibi to stave off meaningful action and reform.

Male-dominated trade unions also have a record of feeling threatened by any shift in the focus of 'core' labor issues. In South Asia and elsewhere, there are many precedents for such reactions. In the wake of an Indian Supreme Court Guideline on Sexual Harassment issued in 1997, one experienced trade unionist responded, "They are attacking the working class by different methods. Now they are bringing a new Act on sexual harassment of women. *When there are not enough jobs, where is the question of sexual harassment?*"²⁹ Trade unionists, perhaps legitimately, may fear the possibility that management, under the pretext of protecting women workers, could easily manipulate harassment laws to victimize militant male workers. While such reservations hold some validity, they also obscure the fact that the more the scarcity of jobs, the more women workers are susceptible to harassment. Besides, the protection of working women's rights can hardly be seen as an attack on the working class, unless women do not constitute a legitimate part of the working class.

In a low wage, job scarce economy, the trade-off between the opportunity to work and improved conditions at work is constantly present. The challenge for policy makers and gender/labor rights advocates is to formulate a position that does not call for further sacrifice from one of the most exploited and vulnerable sections of the population – without compromising the nation's fragile economic standing. It is hoped that stories of the women who have been interviewed will provide a point of departure to this end.

²⁹ Quoted in Sujata Gothsakar "Trade Union Responsibility Toward Women Workers: The Case of Sexual Harassment." <http://altindia.net/gender/harassment/unionresponsibility.html> Emphasis added.

Main Research Questions and Methodology

The primary objective of the study was to ascertain the following:

- 1) What constitutes sexual harassment? What are the main parameters through which women workers conceptualize and experience harassment, that is, what are the boundaries between acceptable and unacceptable behavior? What are the continuities and disjunctures between harassment outside the workplace and such conduct inside the workplace?
- 2) What is the relationship between sexual harassment and specific occupations/conditions of work? How do practices of recruitment and attendant job security issues affect women's vulnerability to sexual harassment?
- 3) What is the impact of sexual harassment on the working environment, on productivity, and workers' attitudes or commitment to their work? The objective here is to provide a qualitative understanding of the pressures faced by working women and their ability to compete in the labor market rather than to measure losses in productivity empirically.
- 4) What kind of knowledge do workers have about their legal rights with regard to harassment? Has the introduction of a sexual harassment law made a difference in perceptions of appropriate behavior or punishment?
- 5) In the absence of effective measures for redress, what steps do workers take to protect themselves? What measures could the state and labor rights groups take to combat sexual harassment?

The project compares and contrasts the working lives of three groups of women: garment workers in Export Processing Zones (EPZ), those who work in non-EPZ garment factories and workers in the electronics industry. The apparel and electronics industries have been chosen for their specific location in the Bangladeshi economy and in the larger global arena.

The garment industry is by now very well established. It has also become increasingly unstable, especially with respect to the labor market. Existing studies tend to take for granted the uniform and monolithic nature of working conditions in the industry. Very little research has been conducted on the differences in working conditions between factories located in the EPZ and those on the outside. It is hoped that this study will provide a more nuanced understanding of those differences than is currently available. Presumably, work regimes inside the EPZ are more regulated than those on the outside. This may or may not be favorable to workers.

The electronics industry is relatively new, a marginal actor in the economy so far and, the inequities and unpredictability of globalization notwithstanding, not subject to the

same constraints as the apparel sector.³⁰ Electronics assembly plants represent a sector with *potential* growth prospects, especially for female employment (if development trajectories in other countries are any guide, although this might be an overly optimistic reading). Recruitment procedures in the sector are much less flexible than those in the garment industry, since workers need a minimal level of education as well as several years of training before they can join the workforce. In other words, the supply of labor is not especially elastic and turnover rates not as high as in the garment industry. Therefore, one would expect the profile of female electronics workers and garments to differ in important aspects.

Research sites were located in or around Dhaka city. The objective was to maintain maximum uniformity in public perceptions of the visibility and cultural acceptability of women working in the public/male sphere. Factories located in an EPZ in Savar, just outside Dhaka, provided the main source of respondents for the EPZ workers interviewed. The remaining garment workers lived and worked in Uttara, Tejagaon and Mirpur in Dhaka city. The electronics workers lived mostly in Tejgaon and Mirpur, near their work sites. Respondents were located through a multiple snowballing technique.

The sensitive nature of the subject matter determined data gathering techniques. As it is, the stigma attached to sexuality makes the task of eliciting information on the topic difficult as well as time-consuming. Moreover, the term sexual harassment (*jouno hoirani* or *jouno nipiron*) has little linguistic resonance for either women industrial workers or in the larger cultural universe. In light of these constraints, questionnaire based opened-ended interviews without specific limitations on time, as well as informal conversations and group discussions, offered the most reasonable modes of data collection. The research team, comprised of three research assistants as well as the author, carried out semi-structured interviews with 41 female garment workers and 40 female electronics workers, as well as with 10 men from each industry.

The results of the quantitative components of the questionnaire were processed into a database, and used as the underlying structure of the final report. The qualitative information elicited from the interviews and informal discussions furnishes the more interpretive aspects of the report. Several factors should be kept in mind with respect to methodology and interpretation of data. We can assume that definition and methodology critically mediate the incidents and frequency of reported sexual harassment.

First, the wording of questions has a direct bearing on the answers elicited. As mentioned earlier, the phrase *jouno hoirani* has little or no cultural resonance at present. That is, conceptually sexual harassment has little social meaning and so is

³⁰ That is, it does not have the historical burden of anything like the Multi-Fibre Arrangement to bear.

not part of everyday social vocabulary. Moreover, as other studies have noted, the extensiveness of the questions about experience with sexual harassment generally influences the reported incidence rate.³¹ On the assumption that an exclusive focus on harassment would lead to an underreporting of its incidence, respondents were presented with two categories of questions: direct queries about *jouno hoirani* and a series of leading questions on actual behavior and practices. The most direct questions on harassment were asked toward the end of the interviews, once the interviewers and respondents established a common language (*nari nirjaton, ottachar* etc.) as a point of reference.

Second, measures of sexual harassment are difficult to estimate, whether we call it *nirjaton* or *jouno hoirani*. Perceptions of what constitutes harassment tend to differ from person to person, even when they are located in similar structural positions. Many people – not only workers – consider certain kinds of behavior toward women to be natural or socially sanctioned rather than as forms of sexual harassment. Some women, for instance, may not consider sexualized verbal rebukes to be harassment. They may take this to be a routine aspect of their working conditions and limit their definitions of harassment to severe cases of sexual assault or inappropriate behavior. The researcher's parameters also may be quite different from those of the respondents. It follows that if the researcher subscribes to a broad notion of sexual harassment, the incidence of harassment reported will be higher than if the definition is very narrow.

Third, female respondents frequently tended to answer in the third person when faced with direct questions about their sexual experiences. As noted earlier, workers are understandably reluctant to reveal personal experiences of an explicitly sexual nature. This skewing of the data must be taken into account. I should add, however, that considerations of modesty and reputation did not preclude women from reporting the sexualized behavior – often in vivid language -- of male colleagues, supervisors or strangers on the street. Such behavior, however, was invariably recounted as being directed at others.

Fourth, sampling methods critically inflect results produced. Snowballing techniques do not produce 'pure' random samples; rather they lead to clusters of individuals who know, work and live with one another. The advantage of the method is that it taps into the lives of those who inhabit similar discursive and experiential universes. A possible disadvantage, from a statistical point of view, is the skewing of the sample population. Almost all of the EPZ respondents turned out to be employed in one of two very large (and well-known) foreign factories. However, the non-EPZ garment

³¹ See for instance, European Commission *Sexual Harassment in the Workplace in the European Union*. 1998.

workers worked in factories scattered across the city. I discuss the possible implications of this distribution further on the section on reported rapes in factories. We have used a random sample population of 81 female workers. This has both advantages and limitations. Such a small sample size cannot yield rigorously representative results, *they can only be indicative of current trends*. However, the objective was not to collect accurate statistics (if that is ever possible), but to map the contours and nature of sexual harassment in Bangladesh today.

The randomness of the sample population highlights some interesting facts in themselves. Of the 81 women workers interviewed, not one was a member of a union. Only a handful of those interviewed had any knowledge of labor laws or the sexual harassment law. Presumably, a purposive sample that included union members would have yielded somewhat different results. Critically, *every* single one of the respondents expressed anxiety, some more than others, over the confidentiality of the information they shared with the research team. The fear of retaliatory action, especially of dismissal, cut across the board (and was especially acute among male electronics workers, some of whom also asked for assistance with organizing a union). Finally, the sample included only a handful of minorities so that the question of whether there are specific forms of sexual harassment directed at women from minority groups could not be assessed with any validity.

Interview sites also shape the nature of data generated. Interviews carried out on the shopfloor not only have severe time constraints but also are likely to be censored or circumscribed by the proximity of management and the corresponding fear of retaliation. Therefore, all the interviews were carried out at the place of residence of the respondents. Consequently, interviews could only take place on holidays and evenings. Many were taken over two or three sittings. The duration of the actual interviews varied greatly, depending both on how much an individual was willing to share and how much time she could give. Some respondents spoke at length about their lives, while others remained reticent. Interviews ranged from an hour to several hours each. Respondents occasionally chose not to answer specific questions or to deviate from the topic under discussion. When asked about one thing, women would frequently talk about something else. In such cases, the data was entered as missing.

In general, the empirical output should be read with caution. Questions that involved respectability and reputation invariably generated a simple negative answer. Yet respondents frequently went on to describe an event or situation they had experienced that contradicted their negative response. For instance, when asked if they had ever been sexually harassed, most women replied in the negative. In the next breath, *without being prompted*, some women would recall an occasion when they had been accosted by night guards or the police or had nearly been kidnapped. In other cases where a respondent had denied being harassed, the research team later discovered

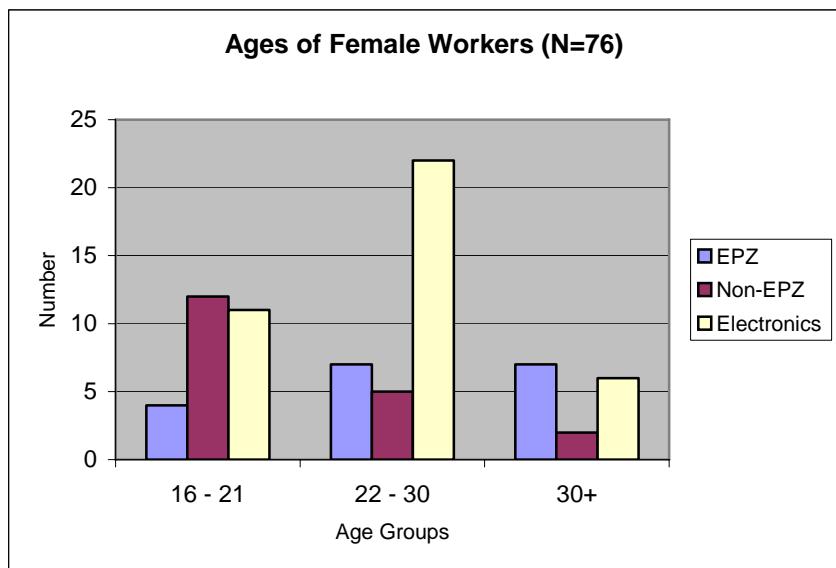
(inadvertently, usually from neighbors or relatives) relevant events that had been deleted from the respondent's own account of her life. In sum, the statistics generated cannot capture the contradictions and inconsistencies of respondents' thought processes. The empirical data must be supplemented by information of a more subjective and interpretive nature.

The accessibility of workers is an issue that has considerable influence on the quality and quantity of information gathered. Garment workers, who worked the longest hours and had the least amount of free time, were especially difficult to track down. The original research proposal included plans to organize several workshops that brought together groups of respondents for a brainstorming session to generate a set of recommendations. After the first fifteen interviews, an initial workshop was organized in a private residence at Jahangirnagar University, in close proximity to the villages where the respondents working in the EPZ lived. Of the 15 workers invited, only five attended the workshop, which was held on a Friday. Some of the other respondents had to go to work, and the rest pleaded it was impossible for them to leave their homes on a Friday unless it was urgent since it was the only time they could catch up with domestic responsibilities. It was clear that pressure from the research team would have obliged more women to show up for the workshop. However, in light of the burden already placed on these workers for the sake of the study – without any appreciable immediate benefits to them -- the idea of further workshops was dropped from the research agenda.

It is also a fact that garment workers have been studied many times over the last two decades; perhaps they are increasingly cynical about the tradeoffs and gains of giving time to yet another inquisitive interviewer. As one woman said, "*God has sent me into this world as the daughter of a poor man. You'll benefit from writing these words, but what will it do for me?*" This kind of subaltern consciousness, the subalternity of developmentalism, if you will, cannot be brushed aside with pat answers. Research projects are not inherently or naturally exploitative. Indeed their aim is quite the contrary. In reality, however, the returns are slim – at least in the short run – for those who are the objects of research.

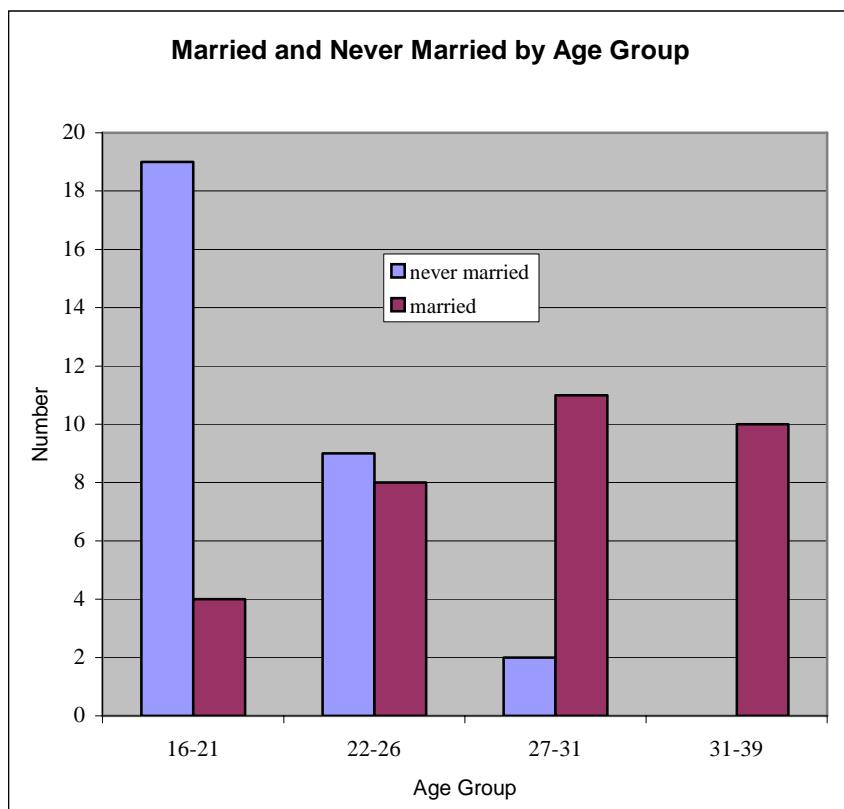
A Profile of the Female Respondents

20 workers from garment factories in the EPZ, 21 from non-EPZ garment factories and 40 from the electronics industry were interviewed. Of this sample, nearly half were between the ages of 22 and 30 and one fifth was over 30 years. The remaining third were between 16 and 21. The EPZ had the smallest number of workers in the 16-20 cohort, while the non-EPZ garment factories had the lowest number of women over thirty. The electronics industry had the highest number of women between 22 and 30 in the workforce (see Figure 1).

FIGURE 1***Age Profile of Female Workers***

Of the sample population, 44% were married and 41% were never married. The rest were either divorced, separated, widowed or abandoned. Fully 50% of the electronics workers were never married, in contrast to 15% of women in the EPZ (see Figure 2). The age and marital distributions are quite interesting since they do not closely conform to conventional understandings of multinational sweatshop labor – teenaged, unmarried and burnt out by the time they are in their early twenties. The marital status of the sample group reflects the general pattern of marriage in Bangladesh, with some variation. There are no women over the age of 30 who have never been married. However, the age of first marriage for women appears to be higher than average. In the sample, over half the women in the 22-26 age group were single. This may be a sign of increasing marriage costs, the desire to become financially stable before marriage, or the need to support natal families for longer periods.

FIGURE 2
Marital Status of Female Workers



The sample population did not include any underage workers. One reason may be that campaigns to stamp out child labor have succeeded. It may also be that, because of falling demand for exports, the first workers to be retrenched are the youngest and least experienced. The age profile of the electronics workers, who tended to be older, reflects the fact that workers must undergo a period of technical training or experience before joining the industry. It may also be that labor turnover rates are lower for electronics workers.

Nine percent of the workers interviewed were illiterate, while 13% could sign their names. Fully 45% had studied up to Class six at least. None of the electronics workers were illiterate; several had graduated from high school and a few had higher degrees. The high education levels of the electronics workers clearly skewed the sample since most garment workers had studied only up to the primary level (see Figure 3).

FIGURE 3
Educational Profile of Female Workers

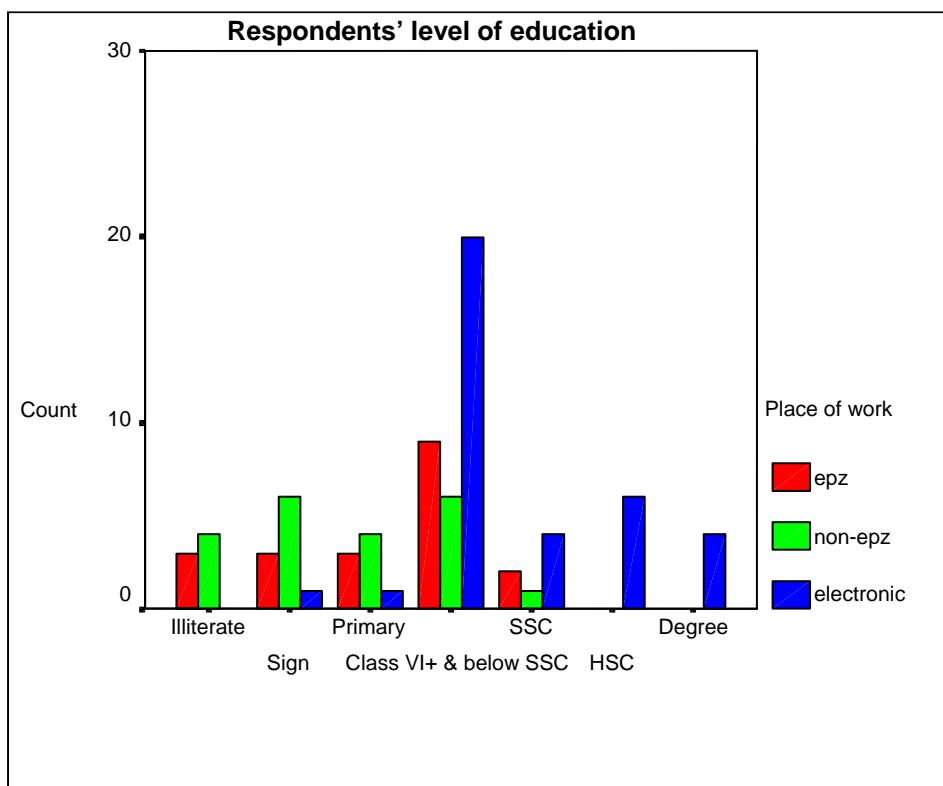


Figure 4 suggests that the electronics industry, which is still tiny and relatively new, has the most stable workforce. Significantly, no one in the non-EPZ apparel sector reported working in the industry for more than five years. One can surmise that excessively long working hours and the pace of production, as well as the generally unsatisfactory working conditions, wear out workers more easily in this sector than in others. From the interviews themselves, it was clear that women who worked in the EPZ were much healthier than and not as overworked as their counterparts in the *bangla* factories (the term for non-EPZ garment factories that EPZ and electronics workers use).

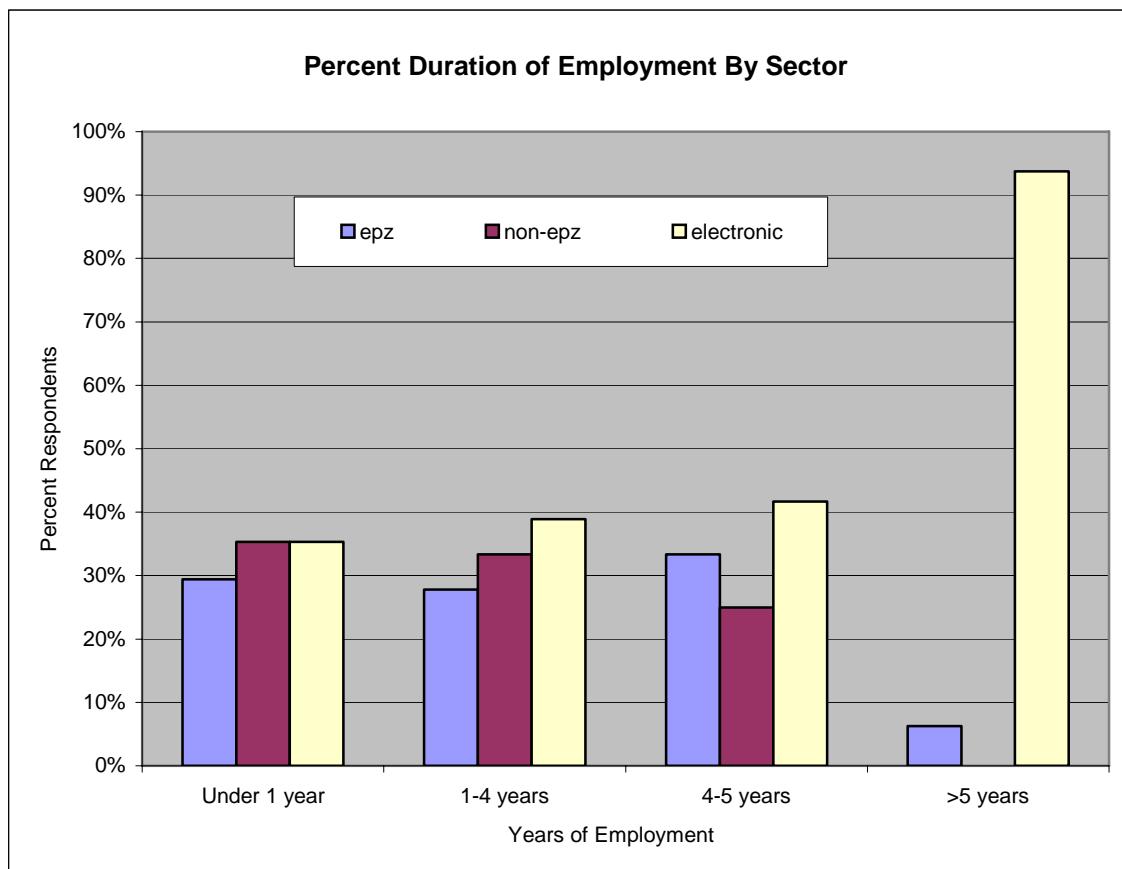
FIGURE 4***Duration of Female Workers' Employment in each industry***

Table 1 enumerates the reasons women gave for entering industrial wage labor. (See Appendix for all tables.) There do not appear to be appreciable differences between garments and electronics workers in this regard. Not surprisingly, the majority of women (almost 70%) reported they were compelled to seek work due to the inability of traditional breadwinners (natal families or husbands) to provide adequate livelihoods. However, almost one third of the respondents expressed the desire to attain financial autonomy or to improve their standard of living and chances for social mobility (including escaping the drudgery of domestic service). This confirms what other studies of Bangladeshi workers show – that poverty is not the only ‘push factor’ in women’s entry into the industrial labor force. The promise or lure of a better life acts as a significant stimulus. Those who are not desperate for jobs but are looking for a better life presumably have more leverage with respect to avoiding sexual harassment at the workplace. As it happens, 80% of the *bangla* reported entering the workforce for pressing financial reasons.

Existing research on the labor force in the electronics industry is minimal or non-existent. Several interesting features of electronics workers emerged from our study. These workers possess a distinct social identity in relation to the industry. Both male

and female workers consider their occupation to be high status – a perception that appears to be directly related to the nature of the goods they produce. The electronics workers interviewed generally assembled television sets, car batteries or batteries for uninterrupted power supply (UPS) used for computers. These are all products associated with technological expertise, and so of relatively high ‘social’ value. Their production required not only some education but also some degree of technical skills. The self-image of electronics workers as professionals also derived from the implicit social respectability of their occupation. Curiously, the women construct their identities directly in opposition to dominant cultural presuppositions about female garment workers. Women workers were anxious to distinguish themselves from ‘garment girls,’ whose characters and habits the former considered to be dubious at best. Older workers were especially keen to draw on this contrast to buttress their respectability – ensuring that the research team understood that ‘they’ were quite unlike women in the garments sector who were often illiterate and had no ‘class standing’ or morals.

An interesting differentiation within the ranks of female electronics workers became obvious during our research. Older workers had learnt their trade on the job, in an informal manner over the years. Most did not have formal training or certificates, so that their social status depended on the longevity of their work life. These workers suddenly found themselves in competition with much younger women who had graduated from the various Underprivileged Children’s Education Program (UCEP) technical training centers in the city. UCEP’s placement program allows its graduates to enter directly into key positions in electronics factories, without the benefit of work experience. Unlike the older workers, the newly trained entrants begin their working lives with considerable technical knowledge and hold over specialized vocabulary. This background, and their UCEP certificates, inculcates in them a degree of confidence and self-assurance the older workers did not have when they entered the industry.

Clearly, UCEP’s placement program presents a direct threat to older workers livelihoods and job options. Employment in the electronics industry is not exactly plentiful or easy to acquire. Workers’ ability to negotiate with management rests not so much on the threat of changing jobs but on their individual value as experienced and loyal workers. The availability of a pool of trained young workers substantially destabilizes this situation. Not only is there more competition but also older workers find that factories now show a marked preference for UCEP trained workers.

The anxiety of older workers manifests itself in ways that resonate with the premises of this paper. A typical lament of the former is that UCEP workers are too much like garment workers in their behavior: they wear too much make-up, they chat freely with male coworkers and they are willing negotiate ‘underhand’ deals with male

supervisors in order to get ahead. Moreover, they are seen to have no professionalism and so do not pay due respect to their elders. In short, UCEP graduates supposedly blur the lines between garment workers and electronics workers, thereby exposing the latter to social opprobrium and sexual harassment. Significantly, some female electronics workers insisted that they were harassed on the streets primarily because people were unable to distinguish them from garment workers.

Workers' Narratives of Sexual Harassment

They treat women in the garments like dogs.

Anyone can do whatever they like, whenever they want to, to them.

Working in a garment is like being in prison.

As mentioned earlier, *jouno hoirani* was not a term with which any of the respondents were familiar. However, most women were forthcoming with problems they faced as working women and did not have difficulties in identifying, in quite shocking (to the middle class ear) detail and language, specific forms of *hoirani* they had experienced. Definitions of harassment that women gave ranged from rape and sexual assault to leering, suggestive comments, disrespect and verbal misbehavior on the part of male colleagues, superiors and strangers on the road. A few women stated they had never thought of such behavior as *jouno hoirani* before hearing the term for the first time, indicating that the discourse of harassment -- the act of naming it -- gives the practice a specific reality.

In answer to the question of whether they had ever (at least on one occasion) been sexually harassed, 24 % of women replied in the positive. When asked if they had ever been physically harassed (that is, subjected to any unwanted physical contact), 22% of the women reported having had such experiences. Over the course of the research, it became clear that a fundamental ground for discontent was *disrespectful* behavior toward workers. In workers' minds, the absence of respect and the lack of dignity they experienced regularly constituted the main thread that connected sexualized behavior with other kinds of maltreatment. In other words, women workers were acutely conscious that, by virtue of their profession and poor economic standing, they were excluded from respectable society and the social protection this affords women from more affluent backgrounds.

Respondents reported verbal, non-verbal and physical abuse inside factories. Forms of harassment vary by time and place inside the factory. Verbal abuse and coercion on the assembly line appears to be a widely accepted mode of labor discipline. This corresponds to the most common form of harassment identified by all three groups -- the widespread use of *gali* or expletives to which women are subjected during work hours. At first glance, this may not appear to be a significant or threatening form of

sexual harassment. However, the highly sexualized vocabulary and body language that supervisors, line chiefs, production managers and others use to discipline female workers creates a hostile, intimidating and sexually charged environment. A common grievance concerned insults hurled at parents and families (*Baba ma tulay gali deya*). The consequences for workers' physical and mental well-being, and for levels of productivity, will be discussed later in the paper.

Thirty-five percent of workers reported having been subjected to sexual or other abusive expletives in the workplace. Eighteen percent of electronics workers, 68% of non-EPZ and 25% of EPZ workers reported verbal harassment, including being sexually propositioned (Table 2). A small sampling (of a much larger stock) of quotes illustrating the verbal harassment experienced by the respondents follows. All but one of the quotes are from workers in *bangla* factories.

Linemen don't open their mouths without calling us bitches and whores.

*The Lineman and PM say, "Daughter of a whore, why don't you work?
You can die for all I care but you have to finish your work.*

*When we would make mistakes, the linemen and supervisors would
scream at us and call very bad names.*

*They don't think of us human. If we make the slightest mistake, or spend a
minute too long in the bathroom, they put their mouths very close to our
faces and scream right into our ears, using such filthy words, it's too
embarrassing to tell you. They curse and shout so much, they leave us in
tears.*

Workers in the *bangla* factories also accused supervisors, linemen, line chiefs, and production managers of various forms of physical abuse -- pulling hair, slapping, hitting on the head, stroking, touching the body, and even kissing workers as the latter sit at their machines. Supervisors and others also indulge in verbal jousting or baiting. Non-verbal forms of harassment include winking, staring, whistling, standing very close and pinching. There are also instances of public humiliation to punish workers charged with theft or insubordination – of women being paraded throughout the factory with hands on ears, or who are made to stand for hours on end on stools with legs apart. Such stories may be apocryphal but they indicate the kind of coercive and corporal practices of labor discipline present in smaller factories.

Respondents also reported numerous incidents of sexual intimidation and coercion, that is, quid pro quo harassment. Again, the smaller, non-EPZ factories predominate in these accounts. Owners or their close male relatives, production managers and their relatives and buyers, as well the supervisory staff, were implicated in such charges. Sons and other male relatives of the upper levels of management frequently show up on the factory floor and tease or proposition attractive younger workers.

They may stand too close, stroke the heads of workers while they work at their stations or invite the women to go out with them. Some respondents felt that buyers, local and foreign, were especially dangerous. Apparently, certain buyers are always on the lookout for attractive young women on whom to prey. Several workers from the same factory named a local buyer notorious for going through the assembly line and picking out good-looking young women. "He bugs them until they agree [to his proposition]. In the end, whatever happens, the girl is forced to leave her job." Unscrupulous buyers may take advantage of the fact that they are not directly accountable to factory management, or that it would be against the interests of the ownership to challenge their behavior.

Given the composition of the sample population, it is not possible to evaluate to what extent ethnicity or religion plays into forms of sexual coercion. Of the three minority women interviewed, one reported that her lineman frequently taunts her with the accusation that "Wherever Hindu women go, they make themselves sexually available."

The Dangers of the Night Shift

EPZ and electronics workers invariably identified their counterparts in *bangla* factories as being the most vulnerable to physical harassment and rapes. For those respondents who have to work night shifts (usually in the *bangla* garment factories), the risk of sexual assault or rape inside the factory rises after work ends and before they are able to go home. If the shift ends very late – any time from midnight to 4 am – workers are forced to pass the night at the factory premises, which have no facilities for safe transport or for secure overnight stays. Women bed down wherever space is available. After the lights are turned off, various people continue to have access to the shopfloor. These include linemen, PM, supervisors, security guards, owners, management or their close relatives.

The night is an especially vulnerable time for those women who catch the fancy of male superiors or colleagues but who succeed in staving off any personal encounter during the day. Called out with some excuse, such as apparent mistakes in their work that require urgent attention, women may be escorted into deserted or darkened areas (store rooms, office rooms, an unlit section of the sleeping area, or even just behind a column) and assaulted. According to the women interviewed, this is when the greatest numbers of attempted and actual rapes take place.

One worker recounted the following story, which I have reproduced in full. It should be noted that this is 'second-hand'- testimony. As it happens, it resounds considerably with the narrative of events recalled by another woman (working in a different factory), speaking of her own experiences. She was the only one among the 81 interviewed who admitted to having been raped. Obviously, the reader should be

cautioned against drawing generalized empirical conclusions about the frequency of rape from these stories.

Rapes are common in all garments today. From the guards to the MD and even the buyers, everyone “tears into/apart” the girls. Once in P. Garments, we finished work around three and spent the night in the factory. A pretty young woman was next to me. The MD had made it clear he wanted her badly. The girls slept in front of the MD’s room in a long corridor, the male workers slept in a large room to the side. Around 4am the MD came and dragged away the girl. I jumped up, startled. He took the girl to a deserted corner behind a pillar. The MD tore apart the 10 yards of cloth the girl was wearing and ripped into her. After taking her honor, he left her naked, and returned to his room. The girl crawled toward me, crying and begging for a piece of cloth. I gave her a swath of fabric that had been sewn earlier. The girl wrapped it around herself and sat there like a zombie until they opened the gates at 5.30. The security guard didn’t want to let her leave because she was wearing factory property. I explained the situation and promised I would return the cloth later. The girl was absent from work for two days after that. They cut her wages for those two days. A few of us wanted to protest, to ask for a *bichar* (hearing) but we were told we would be fired if we made a fuss. We withdrew into silence.

I have heard various versions of this story over the years, although this was certainly the most harrowing and detailed. What is the responsible researcher to make of such stories? There is always the danger of sensationalizing, of inflating the interpretive potential of the material, especially given the limits of the methodology used. Moreover, it could be argued, as one anonymous reviewer did, that the sampling was not ‘random’, so that the women interviewed could all be from the same one or two factories recounting the very same event. The same reviewer also pointed out that other studies of the industry had not uncovered such evidence.

Social science research, it is now widely acknowledged, is neither pure nor objective. The kind of questions the researcher asks inflects greatly the kinds of answers she receives. Unlike other studies of the garment industry, this one focused exclusively on the subject of sexual harassment. The questions sought from respondents were limited to the field of inquiry so it is not surprising that much more in-depth information on the subject was gleaned during the course of this piece of research than in more general studies.

As for sampling techniques, the workers interviewed from the EPZ factories worked in one of two large establishments while those employed in locally owned factories worked in enterprises spread in three disparate location in Dhaka City. Even if one were to assume that the same set of stories *did* circulate among a given community of workers, what is important for our purpose is that such stories do exist and travel in a

particular framework. Rape narratives, like the many narratives of physical punishment (shaving the head, blackening the face) that animate the cultural worlds of garment workers, function primarily in an apocryphal mode. Their excess is not to be taken literally but to be interpreted as an indicator of how subjects interviewed perceive the limits and possibilities of a given situation.

Overall, the interviews do suggest that attempted sexual assaults on factory premises are a feature of night work *in smaller non-EPZ establishments with correspondingly low accountability*. I have to underscore that I am talking only about conditions of work inside the smaller, non-EPZ factories. This is not to claim that rape is a widespread form of violence women workers face in the garment industry as a whole. Indeed, workers in the EPZ factories made it clear that they felt quite safe physically inside the factory space and expressed considerable sympathy for their 'sisters' in the *bangla* factories.

By the same token, the risk of physical harassment in the workplace also varies considerably between the apparel and electronics industries. The *bangla* factories clearly have many more incidents of physical harassment than the others. These are also the factories where workers are forced to work late into the night. Not a single electronics worker reported being physically harassed inside the workplace. In contrast, 15% of EPZ workers and 38% of non-EPZ workers answered "yes" to this question (Table 3). Notably, electronics factories do not require late night or all-night work. No electronics worker reported hearing of rape or attempted rape in their place of work or in other electronics factories. In contrast, 50% of non-EPZ and 10% o EPZ workers reported hearing stories of rape in their own other factories. (Table 4) Surprisingly (at least to this author), factories located in Export Processing Zones appear to provide more safety to women workers than those on the outside. At first glance, this is a rather disturbing finding, given that enterprises in the EPZ operate completely outside the purview of national labor legislation. Workers attributed the feeling of safety inside the EPZ to the lack of men in the workforce. "Men in the EPZ are like sheep," one worker said. "They've been silenced, the ones who remain are terrified of losing their jobs." In this context, workers recounted an incident some years ago, when hundreds of male workers were ousted during a strike and replaced with apparently less militant women workers. Through this highly publicized measure, EPZ enterprises appear to have ensure the docility of those who want to remain in the workforce. The highly regimented EPZ environment, in which freedom of association or the right to strike is not recognized, provides a degree of protection to its women workers. But this comes at a high cost with respect to one of the core rights of labor – the right to organize.

Consent, Coercion and Agency

Workers, especially in factories where payments are irregular and other privileges are limited, can be under considerable pressure to succumb to the advances of men who have some form of power over them. Supervisors, line chiefs and others frequently use their position to tempt or threaten women into giving in to their sexual demands. The extent and quality of such transactions are difficult to judge. There is a general impression, among the public as well as among some workers, that many women voluntary develop sexual relations with their supervisors or bosses as a means of securing benefits or perks. The “perks” involved seem minimal to the external observer – getting paid on time or receiving bonuses that are due to all workers.

In answer to the question of whether any female coworkers got special privileges from male superiors, 44% of respondents replied positively. 36% did not think so and the rest said they didn’t know. However, this is slippery terrain from which to draw any solid conclusions. In the first place, workers’ perceptions may be tempered more by dominant constructions of feminine modesty, which dictate that certain women are by definition sexually suspect -- if they wear too much make up or are too ‘friendly’ with male supervisors -- than by the reality on the ground.

Moreover, the line between consent and coercion is blurred at best in situations in which power is so unevenly distributed. For instance, how much – and what kind – of agency can a woman exercise if she has an entire household to support, no alternative means of livelihood and is under intense pressure to succumb to the advances of her superior or lose her job if she refuses? Does she really have the ‘choice’ to walk away? What of the woman who finds herself trapped alone with a supervisor at night, whose only recourse may be to submit quietly if she is to salvage a vestige of her social dignity? In this case, one can think of women exercising a limited agency, one that is circumscribed the micro-realities of her everyday life, as well as by the larger political economy. Of course, not all women are victims or in such vulnerable positions. Some women may very well use their bodies as sexual currency, in the absence of any coercion. That is an entirely different matter.

The Production Regime and Sexualized Modes of Discipline

Sharakhon bonduker gulir moto eder mukh choley³²

(They fire off their mouths like guns all the time)

Production is production. Live or die, you’ve got to produce.

³² It is impossible to adequately capture in translation some of the nuances and richness of the language respondents used in narrating their experiences and feelings. Where the Bengali version has seemed especially powerful to me, I have included the original with the English translation.

It should be clear by now that substantial differences in the frequency and forms of harassment exist between garment factories, especially the *bangla* factories, and electronics factories. Discrepancies also exist between factories located in the EPZ and those outside the so-called Free Trade Zones, and between smaller and larger establishments. In all cases, the smaller factories producing garments tend to have the most exploitative conditions.

What explains these divergences? For the garment industry as a whole, the financial stability of enterprises and the distance from the operational control of international capital (that is, the degree of internal operational autonomy, accountability and surveillance) appear to be two fundamental features that determine management practices and the general work environment. In addition, differences result from the structure of the production process and the nature of the end product.

Indeed, the pace and structure of production in garment factories -- more specifically, the 'lead-time' -- critically inflect disciplinary practices on the shop floor. Sexualized disciplinary regimes -- including the intensity of *awkottho gali* (unspeakable verbal abuse) -- in the *bangla* factories obtain directly from the frenzied pace of production that comes with extremely tight delivery schedules. The imperative of meeting production targets with shortened lead-time translates into the incessant verbal coercion of workers to meet their individual production quotas.

With respect to deadlines, size and financial stability make a considerable difference. Smaller factories are often fly by night operations, working with the least margin of profits, and under the greatest time and financial pressures. Many of these factories take on subcontracting work from bigger enterprises. As such they have the tightest delivery schedules and are the most vulnerable financially. Slim margins of time and profit correspond to what respondents said over and over to the research team -- that no extenuating circumstances could override the demand to meet individual quotas. The machines are never turned off and they do not remain idle for one minute.

Factories located in the EPZ tend to be large and fairly stable financially. Further, many are owned by foreigners or at least under more regular and thorough surveillance by foreign buyers. This does not imply the absence of exploitation in the EPZ or that foreign capitalists are more benign or benevolent than their Bangladeshi counterparts. It is clear that EPZ workers are subject to a distinctively 'modern' kind of regulatory regime – their bodies and their movements are minutely regulated and their freedom is minimal.³³ And, as we have seen, EPZ garment factories have purged potentially 'troublesome' or even vocal workers from their work force.

³³ The disciplinary regimes in these factories resemble the practices of modernity, self-regulation and internalization described by Michel Foucault in his *History of Sexuality*. For details, see Dina M.Siddiqi, "Women in Question: Gender and Labor in Bangladeshi Factories," 1996, Chapter Five.

Arguably, the primary condition of employment in the EPZ is a legally binding, non-negotiable ‘docility.’ Paradoxically, the absolute lack of labor rights as we know them may work to protect workers in other ways. Internationally owned factories operate under a different set of constraints and are accountable to a different constituency than are local factories. It is increasingly in the interests of the former to take account of the preferences of Northern consumers and labor rights groups. This -- and perhaps a greater awareness of the relationship between productivity and harassment --presumably accounts for the greater surveillance and physical safety of workers in EPZ factories.

By the same token, smaller local factories, especially if they are dependent on subcontracting work, tend to have more informal networks of surveillance, much less accountability and a pervasive culture of ‘non-modern’ hyper-exploitation, including widespread physical coercion.³⁴ Although a close analysis of managerial culture was outside the scope of this study, it is safe to say that a tremendous disjuncture exists between management and workers with regard to the uses and effects of verbal abuse. Sexual coercion and verbal abuse are not free standing practices but derivative of two lines of thought. On the one hand, their use as a disciplinary mechanism draws on ideologies of the lazy and morally lax woman worker. On the other, they are part of the general spectrum of coercive and corporal methods of labor discipline found in Bangladesh, especially in smaller establishments. The lack of a culture of rights and the prevailing view of workers as inherently slothful and undisciplined, and so in need of ‘prompting to get work out of them’ (*kaaj adai korey neya*) promotes these coercive practices. A female supervisor we spoke to reported with confidence that workers tended to be sluggish and inattentive so that the occasional tap on the head or verbal reprimand was essential to get their attention.

It is important to keep in mind that supervisors and production managers are as much under pressure to reach specific production targets as workers. The former view verbal coercion, or the occasional whack or hair pulling as normal disciplinary techniques to maintain or boost production rates. Those who deviate from such practices are marked as weak or ineffective managers.

In contrast to garment factories, production regimes in electronics factories are much less frenetic, partly because the nature and market structure of the end product are quite different. Indeed, producing electronic goods requires a degree of concentration

I am grateful to Shima Das Shimu of UBINIG’s Sram Bikash Kendro for reminding me that workers in the *bangla* factories have much more flexibility with regard to their bodies and to their general mobility compared to those in the EPZ.

³⁴ For an elaboration of different modes of discipline in relation to production processes and factory size, see Dina M. Siddiqi “Women in Question: Gender and Labor in Bangladeshi Factories,” 1996, Chapters Five and Six.

and a quiet environment impossible to imagine in a garment factory. Unlike their counterparts in the garment industry, electronics workers labor under deadlines that are regular and not subject to frequent market fluctuations.³⁵

Finally, there does not appear to be an appreciable association between respondents' education levels and their experiences of harassment. As we have seen, verbal harangues are common in garment and electronics factories. However, women who had studied between Class V and SSC reported the least amount of physical harassment. This group also happened to be clustered in the electronics industry, where physical harassment was minimal. Still, education may protect workers – not only by teaching them of their rights as workers and as citizens but more obliquely by instilling in them a sense of confidence and entitlement when negotiating with those in power.

Contested Public Spaces

All three groups of women are susceptible to harassment on the streets, although in varying degrees. Most workers in the EPZ use private buses provided by their companies for at least part of their commute. Non-EPZ garment workers in the sample population all reported walking to work. One quarter of the electronics workers use public transportation, mainly buses, while the others walked to their workplace. (Table 5)

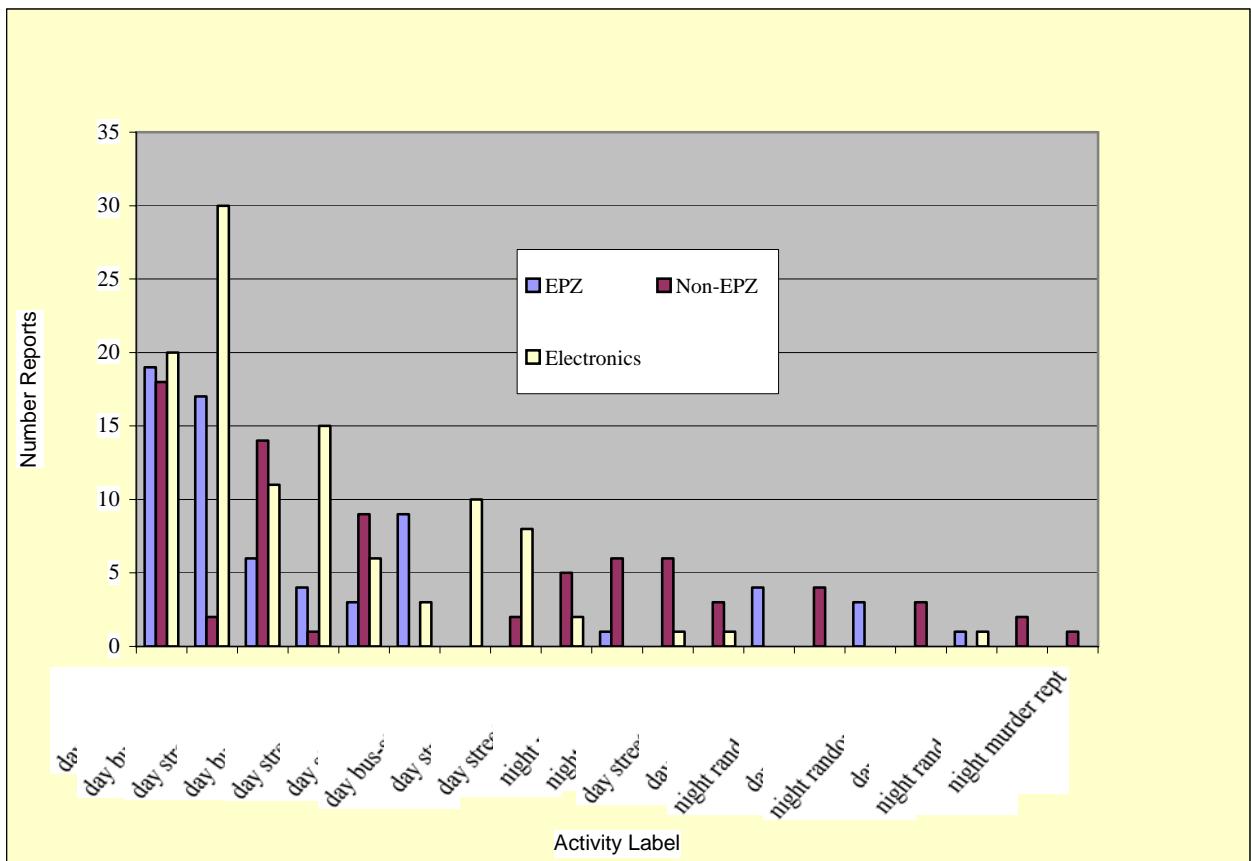
Figure 5 documents the different forms of harassment experienced by workers as they commute to and from work. The predominantly 'male' spaces between the workplace and the home appear to constitute the most dangerous sites for industrial workers. Electronics and non-EPZ workers face the most risk since their firms do not have any provisions for private buses. However, EPZ workers report that their safety plummets as soon as they leave their work premises, while they are waiting at bus stands. Risks include the possibility of abduction, theft and mugging. Notably, stories of rapes-cum-murders of garment workers, with corpses abandoned near the train tracks on the edge of the EPZ, have been incorporated into the general lore of all EPZ workers.

As with harassment in the workplace, the risks differ depending on the time of day as well as on the mode of commuting. During the day, offensive and/or suggestive comments (*what's your rate, how much will you go for?*) and whistling from pedestrians, rickshaw pullers, storeowners as well as personnel and passengers on public buses are widespread. Women who walk to work usually do so in groups for safety. This does not preclude the possibility of physical assaults in the form of rickshaw pullers or three wheeler drivers running into workers or trying to drive them

³⁵ Workers who assembled television did report that they were forced into overtime work, occasionally toiling through the night, in order to meet the increased demand for TV sets during the World Cup Cricket Tournament.

off the road. Physical assaults also include pedestrians kicking or tripping over women as well as groping, shoving and pinching them. A number of respondents accused rickshaw pullers of strategically positioning themselves early in the morning and exposing their private parts to workers.

FIGURE 5
Harassment Activities



Those who take public buses report considerable abuse from conductors and helpers. Not only are female workers charged higher than normal fares, conductors often refuse to allow them on board. While getting on and off buses, helpers take every opportunity to grab and grope workers. Bus passengers – especially older males – also shove, squeeze, pinch and make suggestive comments. Electronics workers reported that it was impossible for them to wait too long for buses because of harassment from pedestrians. Inadequate street lighting in the evening also increases the risk for women who walk to their homes.

For those who use the streets after daylight, the threat of abduction appears to be a possibility. Women waiting for buses, especially in deserted areas late at night, face similar dangers. Two respondents said they had been subject to attempted abduction.

In both cases, men tried to force them into passing three wheelers or vans as they were walking by. A few workers narrated stories of neighbors being picked up as they return from late night shifts and dropped off days later, after being gang-raped. The most surprising reports concerned the occasional attempt at the abduction of workers walking along the streets by men who claimed they were trying to recover runaway wives or daughters. These men actually sought the help of passers-by in their abduction attempts. The first presumption at work here is that no unescorted woman who appears in public/male spaces like the street after a certain hour could have ‘legitimate’ business at hand. She is suspect one way or the other. The same cultural logic prompts -- and legitimates -- surveillance and harassment by night guards, policemen or any other male wishing to exert his ‘guardianship’ over women. Moreover, by the logic of male rights to the female body as property, it is incumbent on the ‘community’ to help restore a runaway woman to her rightful place/owner. Indeed, in all instances of street harassment, the individual man’s sense of entitlement or right to regulate all women’s mobility and sexuality, works to encourage and legitimate sexual harassment.

An unanticipated profile of the ‘average’ sexual harasser emerged from informal conversations with respondents. Women reported that they had the most difficulty with older men, that is, with men who were ostensibly respectable -- middle aged, presumably married with children and of relatively high social standing. The consensus was that this category of men constituted the worst offenders, in buses, on the roads and other public places. When quizzed further, some workers claimed since older men have a demeanor of respectability, they think they can get away with their actions. They frequently grope and caress women, especially on buses, with the excuse that the workers were like daughters to them. Here is what one respondent, who had been working for five years in a garment factory, had to say:

The ones who make the most trouble are older men. They’re not afraid of women. The way they treat us sometimes, it’s as though they’re married to us. On top of it, they try to discipline us. Out of the blue, these complete strangers start up conversations with us. *Sometimes they act as though women are ripping the country right apart.*

This last sentence captures the essence of male hostility toward working women. I will return to this point at the end of the paper.

Negotiating and Resisting Sexual Harassment

If a woman asks for bichar (justice), she's fired. If the man involved is fired, he'll get even with her outside the factory, so she ends up bringing about her own downfall.

It's very difficult to protest. It endangers one's life.

If a lineman or chief or security guard wants to take my honor, and if I resist, they can take away my job.

Responses to verbal and sexual coercion, in the workplace and beyond, depend to a great extent on job security, the general work environment and individual economic circumstances. The greatest fear workers in both the apparel and electronics industry have is of job loss. Sexual harassment aside, considering the ease with which workers can be dismissed, the fear of retrenchment casts an omnipresent shadow in workers' minds. As stated earlier, the conditions of globalization today encourage the establishment of labor regimes that are flexible, casual and impermanent. The more precarious a worker's job situation, the less leverage she will have, therefore the more likely she is to be subjected to sexual harassment.³⁶

It follows that some workers are more vulnerable than others (Table 6). Helpers tend to have the least job security and also report the most vulnerability to harassment. Helpers enter the trade when they are relatively young and with little no experience. They are the most likely to be illiterate and to possess the least space for negotiation in economic terms. Operators, especially if they are skilled, are likely to have much greater job security. The number of operators who reported having job security is almost twice the number who responded in the negative. In conversation, these women reported that they were valuable to the company and so would not be easily fired. They also said that they would be able to find work elsewhere should they need to leave their current place of work. Helpers are aware that they have no such leeway. Even so, almost half of all the operators interviewed reported some form of physical harassment. Moreover, the number of years of experience does not necessarily preclude the perception of job insecurity. (Table 7)

Recruitment methods and hiring procedures in both the electronics and garments sector tend to be informal, undocumented and entirely to the advantage of employers. The lack of documentation and the ease with which workers can be dismissed are directly associated with the vulnerability and powerlessness of individual workers. Except one cleaner and one assembler in an electronics plant, none of the respondents

³⁶ In this light, the increase in subcontracting currently seen in the garments sector does not bode well for ensuring the rights of women workers.

had signed a contract (Table 8). On the contrary, some women had been made to put their signatures or thumbprints on blank pieces of paper as a pre-condition of their employment. By short-circuiting any potential attempts at protest or militancy, this is yet another way in which employers try to exercise power over their employees.

There do not appear to be appreciable differences between the *bangla*, the EPZ and non-EPZ factories with respect to hiring and documentation practices, although only two of the twenty EPZ workers interviewed had to sign off on a blank sheet. It may be that because the possibility of resistance or unrest following arbitrary dismissals or suspensions is minimal in the EPZ, employers are less concerned about assuring worker compliance through such blackmailing techniques.

The incentives for reporting incidents of mistreatment, sexual or otherwise are extremely low. In the case of sexual harassment, retaliation by the offender, especially if the person involved is in a position of authority, is a serious possibility. As the one self-identified rape victim said, there's no point in going to the management since they themselves usually are implicated in harassment incidents. Even if the accused is a lower level employee, the threat of retaliation remains. Security guards and others can easily accuse workers of theft or misconduct, and so have them dismissed.

A less obvious reason workers may be unwilling to report such incidents may concern the conditions of labor recruitment. In response to queries on how they had obtained their present positions, 29% of the women said they found the job themselves without any assistance, 11% said their husbands helped them, 41% reported their relatives recommended them and 19% said non-kin acquaintances helped them find their jobs (Table 9). These last two groups of women are beholden to relatives or others for their positions. The long-term significance of such relations of patronage -- and the social obligations that inhere in them -- can produce an unwillingness or reluctance to 'stir up trouble'. By voicing their protests or unhappiness, women whose jobs depend to some degree on patronage ties risk incurring the wrath of their 'protectors', thereby jeopardizing the possibility of future assistance. Moreover, relations of dependency run both ways, albeit unequally. Those who recommend others for factory jobs are responsible indirectly for the latter's behavior. Resistance on the part of the worker, then, can have repercussions on her patron. This consideration also acts as a barrier to potential action.

Another reason for not reporting sexual harassment is the absence of neutral disciplinary bodies to adjudicate in such matters. Unless the incident is public, the possibilities for the punishment of the offender are minimal. In line with the overall regimentation of the environment, a number of factories in the EPZ have counselors to whom workers can go with grievances. (Table 10) However, few of the workers

we spoke to had taken sexual harassment charges to these bodies. In the other enterprises, workers have to take their chances with their superiors.

The fear of retaliation outside the workplace also constrains women's responses. There is a straightforward relationship between sexual intimidation or annoyance in the workplace and the general insecurity of women in the public sphere. Women who are harassed by coworkers inside the factory must think twice about taking their complaints to the management because of threats of physical and social retaliation outside the workplace. For them, the only option may be to submit silently or find alternative employment.

Workers who refuse to be submissive, who speak out and demand some kind of arbitration or redress, face multiple risks even if they are dismissed. Reportedly there exists an informal network among factory employers who are able to blacklist outspoken or 'insubordinate' employees. Consequently, many workers hide their actual identities and take on new names when seeking reemployment in other firms.

Speaking out has other costs. Dominant cultural constructions of femininity tend to stigmatize women who are outspoken – the ideal woman submits to all manner of misfortune in silence. Those who do not conform to socially acceptable norms of submissiveness find that their personal reputations suffer as a consequence of their speaking out. Such women are immediately branded as '*kharap mei*' or bad women, with the implication that their lack of morals must have brought such actions on them. Cultural tendencies of blaming the victim have repercussions at the family level as well, with parents or husbands holding the woman responsible for her predicament.

The Toll of Sexual Harassment: Workers Well-Being and Enterprise Efficiency

I'm willing to work for just one Taka, but with my honor intact"

(18 year old garment worker, an SSC graduate, who was harassed by supervisor and left her job after one week)

It feels terrible when someone screams and abuses you this way. I can't put it out of my mind, I replay the incident over and over in my mind until my head begins to throb. It makes it difficult to concentrate on what I'm doing.

My whole history comes back to me then. My life flashes before my eyes. I have to ask myself why on earth I even entered this line of work. Why am I working? I feel like crying, I get so depressed.

'Measuring' the impact of verbal and sexual misconduct on productivity turned out to be a daunting task. Initially, it was difficult to elicit concrete answers; questions regarding the consequences of harassment invariably generated discussions of damage

to *izzat* or female honor. The primacy accorded to individual honor is instructive here, for it forces us to rethink the relationship between workers' selfhood, self-esteem and potential productivity. If we take productivity to be the number of items produced per hour, we have one measure. But there are other considerations that inform potential and actual productivity. Workers' sense of self-respect and relationship to the workplace are intimately tied to worker morale and the desire to perform well. Individual commitment and job satisfaction cannot be easily disentangled from an individual's sense of dignity and self-worth.

The findings of this study corroborate existing hypotheses about the relationship between sexual harassment and work performance. Almost half of all workers reported that verbal or physical harassment in the workplace impairs their productivity directly (Table 11). Individual garment workers noted that their productivity per hour suffers greatly in the wake of an incident of harassment. It tapers off immediately after the incident but picks up again after several hours. After some prompting, garment workers were able to give specific counts of the fall in their production levels during the first few hours following any particular event. This was not surprising, since they are trained to meet individual targets under tight production schedules.

Significantly, all but one of the workers in *bangla* factories felt that harassment had some effect on job performance or their mental state. In contrast, a quarter of the electronics workers reported that harassment had no effect whatsoever on job performance. Electronics workers are generally not at risk of sexual coercion in the workplace. Even so, 51% of this group reported that harassment hurt their productivity.

Feeling 'bad' or emotionally upset after an event appears to be the most common response. Women reported feeling acute shame and embarrassment as well as fear, sadness and an inability to concentrate on the task at hand. The helplessness and anger that accompanies such situations can be extremely disabling. Moreover, if a worker is publicly humiliated in abusive language for making mistakes, the ensuing fear and anxiety also increases the likelihood of making mistakes.

The effect of sustained verbal abuse is cumulative – an erosion on worker morale and an increasing antipathy toward the work itself. Workers can hardly be expected to have a professional commitment to their daily tasks in such circumstances. Any job satisfaction or pride an individual may take in her work disappears very quickly.

The most common outcome of experiencing physical harassment is prolonged absence or a compulsion to leave the factory. Understandably, the incentive to avoid the site of one's humiliation is very strong. In addition to shame, the fear of being subjected to the same experience more than once, or of being publicly stigmatized

works as a serious deterrent to those who might otherwise return to their jobs. Respondents noted that in all the cases of sexual assault or rape of which they were aware, the victim eventually left her job – *if she was in a financial position to do so.* In the process, enterprises lose valuable workers whose performance otherwise may have been satisfactory.

In the absence of any mechanism to correct an abusive situation, workers frequently resort to actions such as intentionally slowing down their output per hour or faking illness. For many women, this kind of oblique resistance may be the only means of expressing their anger or helplessness. This is especially true of those women who do not have the option of leaving her job. In short, experiences of verbal or physical harassment generate forms of resistance that effectively lower productivity.

It is not only the individual worker who is affected. If a woman has been humiliated, sexually or otherwise, and it is public knowledge, the atmosphere of fear and resentment infects all workers. Indeed, there appears to be considerable solidarity in this regard. Several respondents noted that if a particularly egregious incident occurs, and is ignored by the management, workers often collectively turn off their machines and refuse to work until something is done. When they return to work, production is low for the first hour or so, but gets back to normal eventually. It should be noted that this kind of behavior is limited to the non-EPZ factories and would not be tolerated in enterprises in the EPZ. Such resistance may or may not be effective in getting the victim justice but it certainly performs a cathartic function in a situation of powerlessness.

Sustained harassment also takes a physical and mental toll. In the long run, incidents of harassment generate depression, fatigue, anger and feelings of hopelessness. Such physical and mental depletion invariably manifests itself in lowered productivity as well as in heightened hostility toward the management.

Considerations of safety and security outside the workplace also have an impact on performance inside the factory. If workers are preoccupied with questions of their physical insecurity on the streets, they likely to be constantly distracted so that their work suffers as a consequence.

The general consensus among workers was that a woman's honor is her most valuable asset. Any incidence of harassment, sexual or otherwise, strikes at the very heart of that honor. Some women have the option of leaving but many others have no choice but to continue to work. They are undoubtedly in the worst of all positions. As a woman in the EPZ said of her counterparts in the *bangla* factories, "Whether its cursing or sexual harassment, those who must, continue to work. If they talk back, they might lose their jobs. *Tai koshto holeyo, kajer khoti holeyo, buke pathor bedhe*

kamrey dhore kaj kore. (That's why even if they are suffering intensely, even if their work suffers, they grit their teeth, turn their hearts into stone and keep on working.”) Another stated, even more poignantly and to the point, “*Lojar matha khey ora abar kaje ashey.* (Swallowing their shame, or literally, eating the head of their shame, they come back to work.)

The Fractured Social Identities of Female Industrial Workers

There's not a single woman in the world that hasn't suffered from this problem [of sexual harassment]. Of course, it's an entirely different story when it comes to the rich Apas (sisters).

I'm the daughter of a poor man so I face danger with every step. God has reserved all danger for the poor (victim of rape inside factory).

Just because I'm poor and I'm fair, I'm in danger (molested by lineman. Threatened with dismissal if she reported it to the MD).

The poor have endless problems on the roads. No one has the nerve to say anything to the rich. Once a rickshawpuller whistled at a woman who was in her house. [After the woman complained] the rickshaw puller had his vehicle taken away by its owner. He was subsequently dismissed.

The workers we spoke to constantly bemoaned the perils of being a woman in a patriarchal society. At the same time, they were acutely conscious of their economic backgrounds and the disadvantages this entailed; most women interviewed strongly felt that gender was not the only axis through which they experienced exploitation every day of their lives. A sense of economic and social deprivation profoundly informed workers' views of their fate and the possibilities for justice in any sphere of their lives. Justice, in this perspective, is something to which only the rich can aspire. Many echoed the feeling of helplessness expressed by this worker, “Anytime I spot a policeman, I cross the road to get away from him. In the movies, the police are portrayed as the people's friends but on the roads the police create a lot of hassle.”

Sexual harassment reveals not only gender vulnerabilities but also “the hidden injuries of class.”³⁷ For women workers, the dignity of labor to which they aspire cannot be disentangled very easily from their perceptions of modesty or honor. Constructions of honor in this worldview are intimately tied to questions of socio-economic vulnerability. That is, honor, modesty and a good name are not free standing categories. Women perceived sexual harassment as attacks not only on their physical selves or their reputations but as assaults on their class identity and dignity as workers. In the circumstances, work itself becomes a source not only of tension and

³⁷ Sennett and Cobb, *The Hidden Injuries of Class*, 1973.

fear but also of denigration. This has extremely negative consequences for workers' attitudes to the workplace and to productivity.

Working class women are the ones who most *visibly* transgress gendered spatial codes and middle class constructions of respectability. They are therefore the most vulnerable, especially because of entrenched class prejudices. Nazma Akhter, the president of BIGUF, raised some interesting questions regarding the vulnerability of young factory workers to sexual harassment.³⁸ As she sees it, young workers, who are usually single, have few outlets for leisure or entertainment. Such activities may be limited to going to the cinema, watching satellite TV or simply getting all dressed up. Young adolescents are highly susceptible to the sexualized notions of love and romance that saturate the media. This makes them more open to adventure, risk taking and to the possibility of being manipulated by men who appear to offer them love.

Akhter's observations point us toward the relationship between the politics of representation and the violations of women workers' rights. The young, female factory worker, who spends her money on make-up and movies, epitomizes the 'consuming subject' of capitalist modernity. At the same time, she is penalized socially and sexually for her desires, for transgressing socially sanctioned ideologies of respectability and protection. Workers who shield themselves behind *borkhas* or *ornas* are at least given the benefit of the doubt by society. The general presumption is that poverty has compelled them to enter the public sphere to make a living. In contrast, the young single woman who appears to be taking pleasure in her independence fits no such interpretive framework and therefore is not entitled to social/male protection or respect.

The lines between sex work and factory work blur at this juncture. Factory work in Bengal has long been associated with tainted or fallen women.³⁹ The social identities of female industrial workers continue to be suspect in the prevailing cultural environment. Stories of the 'fall' of desperate young women into prostitution that have been circulating in the media following extensive retrenchment in the garment sector last year bear testimony to this. These accounts, conjectural for the most part yet presented with great authority on television and the print media, feed into predominant bourgeois suspicions of the "truth" about working class morality. Not surprisingly, the narratives contain more than an air of prurience and voyeuristic pleasure.

³⁸ Interview with Hasan Ashraf, 24 November 2002.

³⁹ See Samita Sen *Women and Labour in Late Colonial India: The Bengal Jute Industry*, 1999. Chapter 5.

Representations of garments workers as always on the verge of sex work have serious material repercussions in the everyday lives of all female factory workers, most acutely in relation to sexual harassment. The presumption or justification for much of the sexual harassment of garment workers described in this report is that by virtue of their profession, these women are of ‘easy virtue’; they can slide into prostitution at any moment and so do not deserve to have their rights respected either as workers or as women.

Parda as Resistance?

Women workers are clearly in a weak bargaining position when it comes to negotiating incidents of harassment, be it inside the workplace or on the streets. Not surprisingly, the modes of resistance on which workers draw tend to rework existing ideological beliefs about the ‘good’ Bengali woman. With respect to verbal harassment on the streets, a third of the respondents felt it was best to ignore such incidents. This conscious passivity and conformity with patriarchal norms resonates with cultural ideals of submissive womanhood, thereby entitling women to some degree of social protection.⁴⁰

About a quarter of the women said they wore a *borkha*; almost one-third wore a large *orna* to cover the hair and the body. That is, half the women interviewed observed some visible form of *parda*. This appeared to be the most common strategy to avoid unwanted male attention. Paradoxically, entry into modern wage labor encourages women workers to take advantage of this so-called ‘traditional’ practice of female modesty. Very few women covered themselves as a sign of personal piety. Their objectives were more practical than religious. The *borkha* hides the shape of the body, thereby providing something akin to protective armor. Moreover, men are apparently more hesitant about approaching women in *borkhas*. Indeed, it appears from that women who wear *borkhas* or cover their hair are much less likely to face harassment than those who do not, although they are not immune from it (Table 12).

The increasing numbers of working women in *borkhas* currently visible on the streets of Dhaka may index the increasing incidence of sexual harassment. The desire to be distinguished from ‘bad’ women on the streets acts as an impetus to observe *parda*. The trend toward wearing *borkhas* also reflects a convergence of another aspect of globalization – the import of ‘foreign’ fashions and ideologies brought about by increased migration to the Middle-East and the Gulf states.

⁴⁰ For an elaboration of this theme, see Dina M. Siddiqi, “Discipline and Protect,” 1991.

Unions and the Possibilities for Justice

In theory, unions should be able provide access to justice for workers subjected to sexual harassment. In reality, neither the electronics nor the apparel sector has enough viable unions that are willing or able to negotiate on behalf of women workers. Our study shows that workers themselves have minimal or no knowledge of labor laws. Only 5 of the 81 women interviewed knew anything about existing labor legislation. And only one of the 81 respondents was aware that the Nari O Shishu Nirjaton Domon Ain 2000 included a section on sexual harassment.

The possibility of forming unions does not exist in factories located in the EPZ. The electronics workers we spoke to were adamant that they would be dismissed immediately if they even considered forming a union. As it happened, two of the respondents had been forced out of an electronics factory some years ago for trying to organize workers into a union.

Paradoxically, it is only in the *bangla* factories that unionizing is a serious possibility. As other studies have shown, however, the prospect of unions fighting effectively for women's rights is slim.⁴¹ The General Secretary of the National Garment Workers Federation (NGWF), Amirul Huq Amin admitted that although sexual harassment was a widespread problem, his organization did not usually deal with the topic. He noted that women workers were not forthcoming with such personal issues so that only the most extreme cases came to the Federation's attention.⁴² He could only think of two instances in which the Federation had pursued a case of harassment successfully. Moreover, it was extremely difficult to win such cases, for lack of evidence and the reticence of women to come forward publicly with charges of harassment. However, NGWF was planning a yearlong programme in 2003 on questions of sexual harassment in the workplace. Presumably, this interest is related to the prominence given to the issue by the ILO and other donors.

The Bangladesh Independent Garments Union Federation (BIGUF) is arguably the most active in organizing apparel workers. BIGUF was set up with support from the Asian American Free Labor Institute (AAFLI) and with funding from USAID. As such, it is viewed with suspicion by progressive labor rights organizations. Whatever the intentions of its sponsors, BIGUF has successfully established itself as a forum for women workers to gather, exchange experiences and press for their rights. Unlike other garments federations, BIGUF has a fairly friendly working relationship with the Bangladesh Garment Manufacturer and Employers Association (BGMEA). Its president, a fiery and eloquent young woman named Nazma Akhter, worked her way

⁴¹ S.I.Khan "Gender Issues and the Ready Made Garment Industry in Bangladesh: The Trade Union Context," 2001.

⁴² Interview with Amirul Huq Amin, taken by Hasan Ashraf on 21 November 2002.

up from being an operator to a union leader. BIGUF has no specific programmes on sexual harassment as such but raises the issue during training on AIDS prevention.⁴³

One obstacle to pursuing cases through unions is that labor laws in Bangladesh do not mention sexual harassment specifically. By the same token, the criminal law used to prosecute cases of harassment do no mention the workplace or workers rights specifically. This puts unions in a double bind.

Male Attitudes in the Workplace

Twenty men, 10 from the apparel sector and 10 from the electronics sector were also interviewed for this study. Although this is a small sample from which to draw conclusions about male attitudes, some interesting contrasts emerged from conversations with men.

It was clear that male workers felt considerable solidarity toward their female colleagues and that they were acutely aware of the power imbalances women had to negotiate in their work lives. Over half of the men interviewed said they had a high opinion of their female coworkers. In response to the question of whether any of their female coworkers had ever been sexually harassed, almost half replied in the affirmative. It is striking that most of the men did not think sexual harassment had any particular impact on productivity. They did concede, however, that harassment would have psychological effects on women “because their honor was involved.”

While most men had a high opinion of their coworkers, a few of the respondents said they did not or would not allow their own wives to work outside the home. Perhaps too good a grasp of the realities of women’s work environment generated this response. It would be interesting to pursue this further and see if men would change their minds if adequate social protection could be offered to working women.

The men interviewed gave practical solutions to the problem of harassment. Most felt that the best strategy for combating street harassment would be the provision of company buses for commuting. Notably, a significant number felt the solution lay in changing dominant social attitudes toward working women. At the same time, half of the respondents claimed that out of work garments became sexworkers. When they were asked how they knew, several replied that they had seen a program on Ekushey Television on the subject.

Concluding Analysis

The situation in Bangladesh resonates with the analysis on globalization and sexual harassment in the aforementioned ILO report. The instances of reported sexual harassment and gender-based violence in the last two decades has shot up, as has the

⁴³ Interview with Nazma Akhter, taken by Hasan Ashraf on 24 November 2002.

number of women and girls who have entered the wage labor market.⁴⁴ Indeed, all of the South Asian countries appear to be facing similar problems.⁴⁵

Women are especially vulnerable to sexual harassment because of informal practices of recruitment, lack of documentation, and the consequent fear of job loss. Few factories outside the EPZ provide any ‘independent’ bodies to deal with workers complaints. Moreover, working class women are aware that their access to justice is limited equally outside the workplace. Few women have any knowledge of their rights as workers or as citizens of the nation. Existing trade unions do not seem able or willing to grapple directly with the issue, although this may change somewhat in the coming year.

The garment industry in Bangladesh presumably will survive the phasing out of the MFA in 2004. Regardless, the female industrial labor force is bound to increase. Worker exploitation and low productivity will continue if the state and factory owners continue to pay no heed the basic concerns and rights of women workers, including the right to work in an environment free of violence and intimidation.

Female industrial labor in Bangladesh has one of lowest productivity levels in the South. Strategies to improve productivity must take into account the coercive methods of labor discipline, including sexual coercion or verbal threats that have been normalized as part of everyday management practices. The hyper exploitation of labor found in smaller establishments not only violates basic labor rights but also works to the detriment of enterprise efficiency in the long run. This ‘low road to development’ is extremely shortsighted, even if it appears to be the most effective strategy for maximizing profits in a labor surplus economy.

Questions remain about how best to raise awareness about sexual harassment in the industrial sector without stigmatizing any specific group or class of women. Harassment must be located and understood in context -- without sensationalizing the facts. The objective of this paper is not to depict working class factory women as passive and sexually exploited victims, thereby reinforcing dominant stereotypes about class and gender. Nor should recognition of harassment be used as an argument to deny women access to the labor market. Speaking out on harassment is not an endorsement of withdrawing women from wage work. In the same way, it does not follow that women should be banned from doing night work because the risks of sexual assaults are higher for those working the night shift. This kind of logic relies

⁴⁴ For an analysis of globalization and increasing violence against women in Bangladesh, see Dina M. Siddiqi “Gender-based Violence in Bangladesh: Political and Social Dimensions,” 2002.

⁴⁵ For instance, see the recent cover story on sexual harassment of middle class women in Pakistan in *DAWN: The Review* September 19-25, 2002.

on a discourse of protection that is ultimately quite disabling for women. The purpose of the present study is to understand the factors that make women more vulnerable to sexual harassment in specific situations, and to find effective measures to combat them, so as to create safer, more enabling conditions for all working women.

Recommendations

The debate on the remedy for sexual harassment hinges on the specificity of definitions and legal traditions in each country. In most cases, harassment is defined as a workplace phenomenon, in which case the discrimination or civil law framework becomes applicable. In other instances, sexual harassment is considered to be a generalized phenomenon so the legal solutions have been framed with the ambit of criminal laws.

Industrial workers in Bangladesh are harassed on the streets because of the conditions of their work, even if when incidents of harassment occur outside the workplace. This study has attempted to provide a definition that is consonant with the experiences and views of workers themselves. From the findings, it is clear that workers do not think of harassment exclusively as a woman's issue but as one that is integrally connected to class, honor and the dignity of labor. It is the specific working conditions of industrial workers that expose them to dangers on the street. Thus, the definition of sexual harassment cannot be limited to actions within the workplace.

The current sexual harassment law in Bangladesh provides a point of departure, although its language, which refers to harassment as an outrage to a woman's modesty, is antiquated and limiting. Just what constitutes a woman's modesty is open to interpretation and as we have seen, many people don't consider industrial workers to possess modesty to begin with. There are no written codes for behavior on the street and in any case 'moral codes of decency' are applied selectively. This is a social reality that must be addressed in the law. Moreover, sexual harassment laws need to accommodate forms of gender harassment that are not explicitly sexual.

Assuming that laws that refer to female modesty are inherently limiting, it is advisable to take a cue from the Indian Supreme Court judgment of 1997, and stress the violation of a woman's right to equality, and freedom from all forms of discrimination.⁴⁶ These are rights that are enshrined in the Constitution of Bangladesh. To fill lacuna in existing legislation, reference to international legal documents, including those of the International Labour Organization and CEDAW, to which Bangladesh is a signatory, can be made.

⁴⁶ See Dina M. Siddiqi "Sexual Harassment and the Public Woman," 2002 for details of the Indian supreme court ruling.

The UN Special Rapporteur on violence against women has noted that the criminalization or legal prohibition of sexual harassment is inadequate in assisting victims of violence. The Rapporteur underscores the importance of establishing procedures that ensure redress in cases of harassment. If there is no institutional support for reporting incidents of harassment, and if her job status is insecure, it would not be in the victim's interest to break her silence.⁴⁷

However, enacting progressive laws by itself will not suffice to change the situation. As we all know, it is critical to ensure that existing legislation is implemented and that those in charge of enforcement be held accountable for their actions. By the same token, the efficacy of laws will be constantly undermined if social attitudes, especially widespread cultural tendencies of ‘blaming the victim’ in cases of sexual harassment, are not transformed. This requires, among other things, serious gender-sensitive training for those charged with protecting the rights of citizens, especially police personnel and judges. Women cannot expect legal or police protection if the authorities already assume “guilt” or “moral laxity” on the part of women complainants.

ILO research indicates that workplace harassment policies should include four main components: 1) a clearly defined policy statement 2) a complaints procedure that maintains confidentiality 3) progressive disciplinary rules and 4) a training and communication strategy. In addition, any complaint procedure must ensure that the victim is protected from retaliation.⁴⁸ The ILO framework provides a useful model with which to proceed.

In terms of concrete actions, the first step should be for the government in collaboration with women's and labor rights to draw up a code of conduct that would be applicable and appropriate for the industrial sector. Subsequently, all factories should put in place a clear and simple complaints procedure. The disciplinary body overseeing such cases should be constituted of persons who will be able to maintain their neutrality during proceedings. The majority of members should be female. Workers must be assured of full confidentiality throughout the process.

No procedure will work unless workers are assured of protection from retaliation. In this respect, the system of hiring and firing workers informally needs to be replaced. Workers should be provided with the appropriate documentation upon hiring. This does not require any new legislation but simply compliance with existing labor laws. Factory owners must be convinced that it is in their own interests to mete out fair

⁴⁷ Radhika Coomaraswamy, “Report of the Special Rapporteur,” 1997, p. 16.

⁴⁸ Leyla Tegmo-Reddy, “Sexual Harassment at the Workplace in Nepal, 2001.

treatment to their employees. This requires highlighting the relationship between low productivity, coercive management practices and sexual harassment.

The workers interviewed for this study, male and female, listed some practical solutions for combating harassment. Their two main recommendations concerned the elimination of street harassment -- the provision of women-only buses and company buses as well improved street lighting and patrolling by police who have undergone special training.

All personnel in positions of authority should have mandatory gender sensitivity training, especially on the topic of sexual harassment in the workplace. Gender sensitivity training for police personnel is essential.

The language of the law against sexual harassment must be amended to reflect a less patriarchal orientation toward women. However, legal solutions that set out to punish perpetrators do not necessarily help those who have experienced sexual harassment. Psychological scars do not necessarily disappear once the offender has been brought to book. It is strongly recommended that employers take a proactive stand and provide all women employees with training and counseling services that will prepare them to face potential situations of harassment.⁴⁹ Women need to have the self-confidence to be able to distinguish – and report without fear -- between casual, friendly comments and sexual intimidation and blackmail. Counseling services for those who have been subjected to harassment should also be made available.

However, the root causes of harassment cannot be eliminated without a basic transformation in social attitudes toward women, especially toward poor working women. Women's right to inhabit public places, whatever the time or place, should be non-negotiable -- without their having to risk their reputations or their physical safety. In this respect, the mass media arguably has the most important role to play. The media must be sensitized to the relationship between sexual harassment and dominant representations of women workers so that they do not contribute to the problem with sensationalized coverage.

Finally, gaining a clearer understanding of the root causes of sexual harassment in contemporary society calls for further research in two areas. The first is the culture of the workplace – of managerial norms and practices of labor discipline -- as they differ across industries and in the larger cultural discourse. Equally important is a consideration of masculinities and male attitudes toward working women. The relationship between shifting or threatened forms of masculinity, and rising violence against women, has not been analyzed adequately in the context of globalization and

⁴⁹ I am grateful to Fatema Yousuf of CPD for bringing this issue to my notice.

increasing inequality. Given the extent of harassment on the streets and other non-work public places, an interrogation of male attitudes appears to be urgent. I have argued elsewhere that the hostility expressed through harassment in contemporary Bangladesh is a sign of threatened male social power rather than simply of sexual power or desire.⁵⁰ I found corroboration for this line of argument in the haunting words of one of the garment workers interviewed for this study, “Sometimes they [men] act as if women are ripping society apart.” Just why and how working women are perceived to be ripping society apart is a subject that needs to be interrogated further.

⁵⁰ Dina M. Siddiqi, “New Trends in Violence,” 2003.

APPENDIX

Table 1: Reasons for Entering Industrial Workforce

Place of Work	Why did you join the workforce?			
	husband's low income	father's low income	For self independence	total
EPZ	7	3	6	16
Non-EPZ	7	13	5	25
Electronics	10	15	13	38
Total	24	31	24	79
EPZ	44%	19%	38%	100%
Non-EPZ	28%	52%	20%	100%
Electronics	26%	39%	34%	100%
Total	30%	39%	30%	100%

Table 2: Verbal Harassment at Work

Place of Work	Do you hear sexual expletives or sexual propositions at work?		
	Yes	No	Total
EPZ	4	12	16
Non-EPZ	17	8	25
Electronics	7	33	40
Total	28	53	81
EPZ	25%	75%	100%
Non-EPZ	68%	32%	100%
Electronics	18%	83%	100%
Total	35%	65%	100%

Table 3: Physical Harassment at Work

Place of Work	Have you ever been physically harassed in your workplace?		
	yes	no	total
EPZ	3	17	20
Non-EPZ	8	13	21
Electronics	0	40	40
Total	11	70	81
EPZ	15%	85%	100%
Non-EPZ	38%	62%	100%
Electronics	0%	100%	100%
Total	14%	86%	100%

Table 4: Rape at Work

Place of Work	Have you ever heard of any incident of rape at your own or another factory?		
	Yes	No	Total
EPZ	2	18	20
Non-EPZ	10	10	20
Electronics	0	34	34
Total	12	62	74
EPZ	10%	90%	100%
Non-EPZ	50%	50%	100%
Electronics	0%	100%	100%
Total	16%	84%	100%

Table 5: Mode of Travel to Work

Place of Work	How do you commute to and from work?				
	walk	public transport	private (EPZ bus)	rickshaw	total
EPZ	0	1	19	0	20
Non-EPZ	21	0	0	0	21
Electronics	27	10	0	2	39
Total	48	11	19	2	80
EPZ	0%	5%	95%	0%	100%
Non-EPZ	100%	0%	0%	0%	100%
Electronics	69%	26%	0%	5%	100%
Total	60%	14%	24%	3%	100%

Table 6: Job Security by Job Designation

Do you feel that you have job security?				
Job designation	yes	no	total	% Yes
helper	3	7	10	30%
operator	15	8	23	65%
supervisor	3	0	3	100%
cleaner	0	2	2	0%
others	1	2	3	33%
technician	8	2	10	80%
assembler	15	12	27	56%
Total	45	33	78	58%

Table 7: Job Security by Duration of Employment

Do you feel that you have job security?	number of years at job				
	< 1 yr	>1<4	>4<5	>5	Total
Yes	9	21	8	8	46
No	6	15	4	8	33
Total	15	36	12	16	79
% Yes	60%	58%	67%	50%	58%

Table 8: Documentation at Hiring

Place of Work	Did you sign any paper at hiring?			
	Contract	Blank Sheet	Nothing	Total
EPZ	1	2	17	20
Non-EPZ	0	12	9	21
Electronics	1	8	31	40
Total	2	22	57	81
EPZ	5%	10%	85%	100%
Non-EPZ	0%	57%	43%	100%
Electronics	3%	20%	78%	100%
Total	2%	27%	70%	100%

Table 9: Means of Getting Employment

Place of Work	Through whom did you get this job?					
	Husband	Relative	Total	Self Only	Others Known	Total
EPZ	0	6		8	2	16
Non-EPZ	5	13		3	4	25
Electronics	4	13		12	9	38
Total	9	32	0	23	15	79
EPZ	0%	38%	0%	50%	13%	100%
Non-EPZ	20%	52%	0%	12%	16%	100%
Electronics	11%	34%	0%	32%	24%	100%
Total	11%	41%	0%	29%	19%	100%

Table 10: Informal Dispute Resolution at Workplace

Place of Work	Is there an informal dispute resolution system in your factory?				
	Counselor	PM/GM/LM/ Superior	none	don't know	total
EPZ	8	11	1	0	20
Non-EPZ	0	11	8	2	21
Electronics	0	24	6	10	40
Total	8	46	15	12	81
EPZ	40%	55%	5%	0%	100%
Non-EPZ	0%	52%	38%	10%	100%
Electronics	0%	60%	15%	25%	100%
Total	10%	57%	19%	15%	100%

Table 11: Productivity and Harassment

What is the impact of sexual harassment on your work?				
Place of Work	Production Affected	Mental Disturbance	No Effect on Production	Total
EPZ	5	5	0	10
Non-EPZ	7	11	1	19
Electronics	18	9	8	35
Total	30	25	9	64
EPZ	50%	50%	0%	100%
Non-EPZ	37%	58%	5%	100%
Electronics	51%	26%	23%	100%
Total	47%	39%	14%	100%

Table 12: Dress and Harassment

Have you been sexually harassed when wearing one of the following as everyday attire?				
	yes	no	Total	% YES
borkha	4	13	17	24%
large orna	6	12	18	33%
purity of mind	2	6	8	25%
shari	0	4	4	0%
shalwar-kamiz	5	16	21	24%
makes no difference	0	3	3	0%
Total	17	54	71	24%

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