

ACTIVATING COMMUNITIES, MOBILIZING WOMEN:
AFFECTIVE ORGANIZING IN BANGLADESH'S READY-MADE GARMENT
INDUSTRY

NAUSHEEN QUAYYUM

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Abstract

This dissertation explores the development of class consciousness among women workers, the process of their activation, and their contributions to contemporary labour organizing in Bangladesh. Focused on the country's ready-made garment (RMG) industry – a notoriously anti-union sector where women comprise approximately eighty per cent of the work force, and which generates USD \$46 billion per year in export earnings – this dissertation demonstrates that contrary to the popular portrayal of garment workers as victims to forces outside or beyond their control, women workers in the Bangladeshi RMG industry have been at the forefront of efforts to transform their workplaces, and the communities that have formed around them, through affective organizing.

I begin with a discussion of methodology and introduce the analytical framework used to conduct my study. In this section, I bridge recent work on social reproduction and affect to explain how women organize themselves. Next, I contextualize this framework in reference to the industry and worker in question. This section documents the shift of global garment production to Bangladesh, how it altered the demographic composition of the Bangladeshi working class by bringing women into the world of formal waged labour and, finally, the specificities of the women employed in the RMG sector. I then introduce the institutions at the forefront of mobilizing these women. Discussed here are the formal/informal spaces and strategies activists use to mobilize women workers, and how the networks formed in this mobilization support an emergent infrastructure of dissent which sustains women's activism in the sector. Critically, this section discusses how these efforts have upended the formal compartmentalization of workers' public and private lives to not only to advance workplace rights but, equally, longer-term efforts to

broaden the social lives of women workers. While traditional workers' institutions in Bangladesh have been slow to identify, address, and incorporate strategies relevant to the growing proportion of working-class women in Bangladesh, labour activists have developed unique patterns of affective organizing amongst women workers that have proven to be essential to the development of their growing class consciousness.

Drawing on semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions with workers and organizers, and participant observation at activist training sessions in Dhaka, Bangladesh, this dissertation contributes to theoretical debates on women's activism in anti-union industries of the Global South today.

Key words:

Women workers, activism, social reproduction, affect, Bangladesh, garment industry

Dedication

To my dearest parents:

Late Abdul Quayyum (Bappi), who would have been proud,
and
Suraiya Sinowar (Ammu), who is proud.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

The solutions start with the workers themselves; they must be allowed by their employers to unionize, so they can engage in collective bargaining and hold their employers responsible for basic standards of pay and safety. Their organized power is the only thing that can stand up to the otherwise unaccountable nexus of business owners and politicians, who are often one and the same...Today I grieve with my fellow countrymen, but I also raise my voice to say that this must not continue. As we mourn our losses, let us rekindle that spirit of liberation. As we mourn our losses, let us rekindle that spirit of liberation.

Fazle Hasan Abed, founder of BRAC¹

“[We] have not created the environment for trade unions yet.”

Ashok, labour activist

On 24 April 2013, Rana Plaza collapsed, killing 1,134 people and injuring more than 2,500 others. This eight-story commercial building housed five garment factories along with several shops and a bank. For days, I, like millions of others, watched, waited, and witnessed the horror of the rising death tolls and ongoing efforts to pull people out from the rubble. Soon enough, we learned more: that the day before the collapse, large structural cracks had been discovered in the building. The shops and bank on the lower levels were closed immediately, but workers were told to report to the production floors of the building's upper levels, which housed the garment factories. Global condemnation of Bangladeshi factory owners soon followed, and with it came an expression of concern fueled in part by an emerging narrative of corporate greed and the need to help industry's predominantly women labour force. The two narratives – though connected – gave rise to two very different public responses. One centered on boycott of ‘Made-in-Bangladesh’ products, and the other, on accountability. For the boycott campaign, Bangladeshi

¹ Fazle Hasan Abed is the founder of BRAC, the largest NGO in the world. This quote is from his Op-Ed published in NY Times several days after the collapse of Rana Plaza. Full text: <https://www.nytimes.com/2013/04/30/opinion/bangladesh-needs-strong-unions-not-outside-pressure.html>.

factories were sweatshops that exploited women workers in unsafe workplaces. For those concerned with accountability, it was foreign brands sourcing the garments from Bangladesh that had created the conditions for these sweatshops and it called on them to rise up, take responsibility for unsafe factories, and pay for what had happened. Each campaign had little to say about the more holistic demands made by Bangladeshi garment workers themselves: greater say over their working conditions and the right to refuse work in unsafe environments.

Given that between 2005 and 2013, approximately 1500 garment workers had died in preventable factory disasters, I wondered if these garment workers were prepared at all to respond to the current disaster. It would appear, at first glance, that the waves of spontaneous and public protest broke out after each factory disaster, but that they were short-lived with little meaningful change in the wider industry. Was this actually the case? If so, how did activists – with little to no prior organizing experience – mobilize themselves and collectively decide on their demands? What forms of organizing allowed them to come together and respond so quickly now? As I scoured through media coverage of workers' protests in the sector to find any indication of sustained labour organizing, I noticed a pattern: that the majority of the images associated with these protests were of decidedly masculine in tone – with men figuring prominently – whereas the majority of the images associated with discussions of exploitative working conditions presented women workers. It reified the idea that women workers were victims of the exploitative garment industry and that labour activists – predominantly men – were attempting to transform the status quo. Were women workers involved in the overall organizing that was now appearing to take root in the aftermath of Rana Plaza? Had they

been involved before and as such, prepared to mobilize now? If so, why couldn't we *see* them? What challenges and opportunities lay before them? I grappled with these questions as I prepared to do my fieldwork.

What was evident when sifting through the literature on Bangladeshi ready-made (RMG) garment workers, and the industry itself, is that both are overstudied. There is a vast body of literature on various aspects of Bangladesh's RMG industry, specifically the impact it had on the working conditions and livelihood of women workers (cf. Paul-Majumdar 1996; Kabeer, 2000; Saxena, 2020; Siddiqi, 2022; Karim, 2023). However, there continues to be gaps in the literature on the emergence of labour organizing that has taken root in the sector over the past couple of decades, with some exceptions (cf. Khan, 2001; Rock, 2003; Brooks, 2007; Rahman, 2008; Rahman 2011), and more specifically, women's role and participation within such mobilization efforts. This struck me as surprising. In an industry where over eighty percent of the workforce is women, for there to be such little interest generated on their activism against the exploitative working conditions seemed bizarre. Surely, women were organizing against their own and apparent victimhood? Knowing the rich history of feminist organizing and workers' organizing in Bengal and later, through (particularly the latter's) involvement in the liberation war that led to the formation of Bangladesh, I wondered if this gap persisted because women workers simply weren't organizing, or because it was being overlooked.

Motivated to learn more from organizers and activists in the sector itself, I quickly learned that the case was, in fact, decidedly the latter. Perhaps more accurately, the types of organizing that women workers are doing or are interested in doing to make change do not neatly fit into our conventional understanding of activism *per se*. I observed that

much of the organizing they take on are, on the hand, ‘non-public’ and on the other hand, critical, steps to activating and adding in new layers of workers to the existing labour movement in the country. The forms of organizing they engage in, and the spaces they choose to do it in, are often private and not visible to the public or those outside of their circles. And lastly, much of it is carried out in the ‘periods of calm’ when there is less of a need for immediate, reactive, and public workers’ agitation; they had been organizing in between (and during) factory disasters. Put differently, women workers in Bangladesh’s garment have indeed been organizing for a long time but they were doing so in ways that appeared nonexistent because we – researchers and labour activists alike – didn’t know *what to look for* or *where to look*: affective organizing within spaces of social reproduction that are ultimately critical for activating new cadres of workers: young, poor women that have been left out of organized labour in Bangladesh.

Aim, Objective and Research Questions

The overarching aim of this dissertation is to investigate this layer of nonvisible, yet formative, organizing that women workers in the RMG industry are involved in. The key objective of my research is to bring together the experiences of women workers and labour activists from Bangladesh’s garment industry to develop a systematic analysis of the process of activation and organizing, and contribution to the broader efforts of organized labour in the country. The goal of this project is to fill important gaps in theoretical understanding of activism and empirical research on women’s organizing. The dissertation is guided by a three-part research question: i) How do women workers in Bangladesh’s RMG industry develop class consciousness and mobilize themselves? ii)

Why, how, and where do women organize? iii) What is the role of women's organizing in the broader efforts of the labour movement in Bangladesh?

Analytical Framework and Research Interventions

Despite considerable growth in the size of the formal labour force, the disproportionate increase in the number of women in the labour market, and the subsequent growth in labour unrest in Bangladesh, there appears to be little academic interest in how the feminization of the working class affects organized labour in the country. This has meant that, with few notable exceptions, we have relatively little information on shifts within labour, the lessons to learn from this change in its demographic composition, the issues new segments of the working class are raising today, the strategies they use, the success and challenges they face in organizing (cf. Dannecker, 2000; Dannecker, 2002; Kabeer, 2018). Women workers' organizing in Bangladesh is not unique in this regard. While there is a rich history of research on women's entry, role and vision of organized labour (cf. Briskin & Yanz, 1983; Luxton, 2001; Cobble, 2007) much of it has been concentrated on labour in the Global North with some exceptions (cf. Mohanty, 2003; Chun, 2009; Agarwala, 2013). However, the exponential growth in both the number, and density, of women's entry in the formal sector of developing countries, and their deployment across a range of industrial supply chains, the lack of detailed study on the specific ways in which women workers develop class consciousness, become active, and mobilize on the basis of their class, demands more empirical case-studies on women's experiences with, and in, labour movements to close this important gap in research. It is also testament to the pervasive devaluation of the important contributions made by racialized women both as workers along these

supply chains, and as organizers in various labour movements; the result of this is an under-theorization of the ways in which race, gender and class are bound in unique ways in activism within the Global South itself. This dissertation seeks to attend to both relative silences using the case study of women workers in the garment industry of Bangladesh.

The global garment industry – and the nascent forms of labour organizing that has taken root among the newly emerged and relatively nonorganized feminized labour force – presents an opportunity to contribute to this gap in research. It allows us to bring to the center the analysis of workers within the industry themselves, and the activists who are organizing and mobilizing today. The context of labour organizing by women in the RMG industry in Bangladesh is also interesting because it allows us to investigate the early stages of autonomous organizing, by workers who are new to the formal sector and have, for the most part, been left out of organized labour. My research with women workers' labour organizing in Bangladesh focuses on the integrative role of affect in developing class consciousness among new garment workers, and the importance of affective spaces of social reproduction for organizing them.

Affect is the embodied emotional labour that is synonymous with reproductive labour, care and/or sex work. Despite the rise of affect theory in Social Sciences and Humanities (Clough and Halley 2007), the materiality of the concept remains under-theorized and rarely appears in analyses of labour organizing (Hennessy, 2013; Hardy and Cruz, 2019). But, as Gould (2009) notes, this emotional turn provides a crucial missing link because it “introduces a different ontology, a different conception of social reality, into the study of social movements and other forms of contentious politics.

Scholars in the emotional turn offer a multifaceted picture of human beingness that, without denying the rationality and ability to reason of social movement actors, recognizes emotion as a ubiquitous feature of human life that is present in, influences, and brings meaning to every aspect of social life, including the realm of political action and inaction” (17-18). It is in this vein that we see the emergence of feminist scholarship highlighting the importance of affect and affective spaces of organizing including, but not limited to: Hennessy (2009; 2013), Chowdhury and Philipose (2016), Hardy and Cruz (2019), Francisco-Menchavez (2018), and Tungohan (2023).

Hennessy’s work with labour activists in the Mexican *frontera* uses the materialist framework of affect-culture – the transmission of sensation and cognition through cultural practices – to show how affective relations are crucial to collective agency. Her book demonstrates how affective relations “permeate the standpoint from which an alternative way of knowing and surviving can be built,” going so far as to argue that these relations “are the glues and solvents of social movement” (2009, 311). Similarly, Hardy and Cruz’s work on informal, self-employed sex workers in Argentina documented how relationship building amongst and between sex workers formed “the basis for the production and development of new subjectivities and political identities to generate collectivity among individualized sex workers” (2019, 257). As with Hennessy’s claim of affect being the glue and solvent of labour organizing, Hardy and Cruz’ work asserts that at the core of collectivizing working-class identities is positive affects: that is, developing class consciousness through inclusion and subjective well-being rather than through the experience of exclusion.

The concept of dissident friendships as developed by Gandhi (2006) and expanded in Chowdhury and Philipose's (2016) edited volume is useful for understanding how friendships and fictive kinships become resources for collaborative organizing. The concept focuses on the specificities of women's collaboration with one another, without falling back on the romanticized tropes of sisterhood or reductive notions of strategic alliance. Critically, the concept of dissident friendships demonstrates that how we come to form such relationships with others lies in a common struggle toward liberation – rather than a shared assumption of oppression in and of itself – and in doing so, eschews a reading of such relationships as reactive and instead, recasts them as proactive and generative of the larger goal of solidarity through belonging.

And finally, Francisco-Menchavez and Tungohan's work are particularly helpful at demonstrating how "communities of care" become sites of resistance for women. Communities of care is a concept that emerged from Francisco-Menchavez's research with Filipina migrants in New York. The concept refers to new forms of fictive and filial relations built by migrants with shared subjectivities of motherhood and collective experiences of being both racialized and working class. Francisco-Menchavez argues that communities of care are activated for both practical and affective bonds of support. They are created for more than expectations of mutual assistance in that they also activate identities that are produced through systems of power. Tungohan's framework of care activism explores the formation of affective care networks as "covert sites of resistance" where subversive friendships emerge and flourish. The framework of care activism challenges dominant understandings of social movement organizing by showing that

migrant care worker activists strive not only for material improvements, but for the cultivation of community and a critical hope.

This dissertation is an extension of these insights: it builds on the materialist reading of affect, dissident friendships, and communities of care. Situating these concepts and frameworks within scholarship on class consciousness and social reproduction, I show that Bangladeshi activists' experiences highlight the importance of activating the communities that women embed themselves in – be it biological, friendship or other fictive kinship – for the development of class consciousness and sense of belonging with workers. Having been drawn into spaces of social reproduction as sites of activism during my fieldwork, I explore not only the range of activist tactics, but equally, the strategies employed to develop a collective class consciousness broad enough to encompass both the needs and aspirations of women workers, as well as those that they live and share their lives with. In observing the organizing strategies of labour activists and workers, I quickly became aware of the manifold ways in which community belonging was continuously cultivated and how the practice of dissident friendships and communities of care mimicked the activities of social reproduction itself; namely, through learning, teaching, carework, cultivating and nurturing friendships. These activities, in turn, take place not only in formal workers' organizations but equally – if not more – in places of socialization such as the home, neighbourhoods and other community spaces.

In doing so, this dissertation makes two principal arguments. First, what encourages the development of class consciousness is women's participation, sense of membership in, and belonging to activist communities. Second, that developing the consciousness of communities is foundational for organizing individual women workers.

This affective dimension of organizing is central to labour organizing in Bangladesh, and analytically comparable to social reproduction's relationship to production. At once hidden and overlooked, relationships and communities that extend from factory floors to the spaces of social reproduction are crucial for developing capacities for activism and for strengthening workers' institutions. I argue that just as social reproductive labour is the necessary and invisibilized counterpart to productive labour, affective organizing is the necessary and invisibilized counterpart to women's labour activism and the building of a community of activists. As I explore the process by which women attempt to mobilize in the garment industry, I highlight not just the utility of the concept of affect but equally, the missed opportunities to learn from the organizing strategies of women workers.

Methodology, Methods and Research Ethics

This research draws on Aziz Choudry's (2010; 2015; 2024) work on knowledge production, activism, and social movements within academic and activist contexts. It is also informed by my own experiences of Palestine solidarity work in Toronto: namely, the friendships that bound activists together as we organized for change. As I navigated the research process and drew upon the many theoretical frameworks and concepts developed within academic contexts, I found myself returning time and again to activist experiences of belonging and community. My experience suggests that we have much to (un)learn about theorization, methodology, and the process of research, and much more to learn from activists beyond the academy, including those largely cast aside as victims, such as women workers and labour activists in Bangladesh.

More generally, my research is guided by feminist methodology (cf. Harding, 1987; Neilson, 1990; Fonow & Cook, 1991; Harding & Norberg, 2005) and political

activist ethnography (Smith, 1990; Doll, Bisailon & Walby, 2024). It foregrounds the experiences of women workers in Bangladesh's RMG industry to engage with, assess, and 'speak back' to current theoretical trends and existing empirical research. By placing women workers as not merely the object of study, but rather, as the study's active subjects (cf. Freire, 1970; Bannerji, 1995), this dissertation foregrounds the notion that class and gender are theoretically integrated (Bannerji, 2005; Aruzza, 2013; Mojab, 2015). In so doing, women workers are understood – and presented here – as agents of social change. I draw on Dorothy Smith's work on institutional ethnography (1974; 1987; 1990) and George W. Smith's (1990) work on political activist ethnography to argue that women workers' standpoint – as mediated by their various interlocking relations of power – “shifts the ground of knowing, the place where inquiry begins” (Smith, 1992, 91). Women workers aren't taken up as subjects in my research because they serve as a given form of knowledge, but rather, because their experience pivots our understanding of activism itself and draws us into an affective realm of organizing.

Building on Dorothy Smith and George Smith's mutually-reinforcing theorization, the purpose of this dissertation is to offer a more direct orientation toward social change, by learning and building upon the perspective of women activists themselves. I see my role as researcher as less for explaining or categorizing activist practices, and more for learning from their work, specifically to understand how they 'do' and think about organizing, but also how they refine their practices to advance the change they wish to see. Returning to Choudry (2024), I acknowledge that these practices do not have to fit into an existing research paradigm to have validity and equally, that the insights generated from women workers' organizing experience can help us to develop

and/or bring together concepts to better understand how organizing and social change unfolds over time. For me, the generation of analytical frameworks from creative agents – such as women workers in Bangladesh – is crucial as it suggests that the very interplay between activist research and social action helps to hone in on the purpose – and ultimately, the utility – of the research I attempt to bring together in this project.

The research I did took place over the course of two years beginning in the summer of 2014. I spent several months at a time, going back and forth from Canada to Bangladesh, getting to know the activist culture and environment, building relationships and rapport with key organizers, and finally, through snowball sampling, conducting interviews. I based my fieldwork in Dhaka, the capital city of Bangladesh, where the majority of the country's garment factories and workers' organizations – including trade union offices, workers' centres and NGOs – are located. The first-hand accounts of histories and present-day experiences of organizing allowed me to grasp how on-the-ground mobilization in Bangladesh's primary location of garment production is occurring, and to help me to better understand the challenges and opportunities as they organize.

The majority of my interviews were one-on-one semi-structured interviews, while a few were with more than one participant, and one was a focus group discussion with several participants together. They were conducted in Bangla and often on-site (for example, at union offices, official training sessions or activists' homes) to ensure their safety and security. I chose to do most of the interviews one-on-one because I wanted participants to feel comfortable with disclosing personal experiences or critiques without fear that either would be shared with those they work and/or organize with. I noticed this

through the process of interviews themselves – that participants’ experiences tended to reveal many aspects of their personal lives. I also felt that it allowed participants the freedom to leave the interview and/or skip questions should they feel it necessary without scrutiny from others. In total, I conducted 25 single interviews and focus group discussions. While all my interviews and focus group discussions contributed to the development of this dissertation, I draw most heavily on the insights of 16 workers and activists.

In addition to interviews and the focus group discussion, I conducted participant observation. I attended activist training sessions organized by NGOs and unions where I not only saw first-hand the types of organizing efforts currently underway in Bangladesh, but also got a sense of questions and concerns that women raise (or don’t raise). In addition to participant observation at training sessions, I also spent quite a lot of time in various workers’ organizations including workers’ centres, trade union offices and NGOs that deliver various services for workers. Being in these spaces allowed me to catch, and participate in, informal conversations that were sometimes more helpful for understanding how women were relating to each other than the more formal interviews they participated in. It also helped me develop a better rapport with workers and activists as they started to see me as a more familiar face rather than someone who had come in for an official interview and leave.

Beyond this ethnographic work, I spent considerable time conducting an extensive document review while in Bangladesh. Particularly helpful was the resource library at the Bangladesh Institute for Labour Studies (BILS) that houses locally-developed reports, surveys, interviews, pamphlets, and posters among other things, that I would not have had

access to had I not been physically present in the city. The staff at BILS generously and patiently directed me to other sources ranging from official governmental data, union data, laws/by-laws, and policies, as well as local newspapers, and other sources of communication. These helped me to better situate and contextualize the primary data that I collected over the course of the fieldwork and helped me to identify and fill in gaps that were present not only in academic research, but more popular research as well.

Throughout the writing of this dissertation – from initial research, to fieldwork, to the writing – I have attempted to weave the development of theory with the collection of data itself; indeed, this dissertation’s research question emerged from this mutually-informed approach to theory and observation. The chapters of this dissertation, I hope, reflect this approach as well. The dissertation begins with observation, providing an alternative narrative of the RMG industry which, in turn, contributes to new questions about RMG workers and the context in which they mobilize. The narrative and the questions that flow from it transform the conceptualization of workers from productive units to creative agents. Having established the conceptual and theoretical base of the study, I then move to its operationalization and empirical evaluation before returning, once again, to theory itself. Here, I consider the implications of my observations for theory itself. The continual molding of theory with observation is an attempt to ensure that workers and activists are not written about in an abstract manner, with their creative interventions ignored or devalued.

Equally important to my approach to data collection and writing are issues of positionality and reflexivity. I aim to bear witness and take the responsibility to engage in social transformation, aware that my role as researcher is to ensure that women workers,

activists and their organizing efforts are at the center of my analysis. This presents specific challenges as I am an insider-outsider, and was understood as such by the workers and activists whom I observed and interviewed, despite the fact that I communicated in fluent Bangla and am Bangladeshi. Although never spoken, the implicit assumption of my conversations with workers and activists was that I was undertaking this research for a *reason*. From my questions to them, and their questions to me, it was understood that our dialogue was between people in struggle, and a researcher sympathetic to that struggle, because despite our different socioeconomic locations, we were somehow contributing to the organizing work. We operated, in other words, on a foundation that assumed – on both sides – a progressive outlook on workers’ rights, women, and activism, and that my work would prove useful and relevant for those I was collecting information from. My role as both an insider and an outsider meant that I could not simply collect the data and complete the dissertation; I was being held accountable and the goal of my project was molded in the process of research by creative agents themselves.

Throughout the process of research, and specifically its fieldwork component, I ensured ongoing consent not only for the ethnographic work, but also, for ensuring I could share my analysis of activists’ strategy and tactics. Sharing strategies and tactics of activists can – and in many cases, is – extractive research (Smith, 1999), particularly in highly anti-union, repressive contexts where activists have struggled to develop ways of connecting with one another without arousing suspicion from authorities. Guided by non-extractive research ethics, I take the trust and responsibility placed on me by labour activists and workers seriously. While I wanted, on the one hand, to learn from activists’

approach to organizing and share these strategies with others, particularly with other activists, I was also mindful that I needed to do so in a way consistent with the needs and security of workers themselves. The assumption, expectation, and hope in many of my interactions with activists and workers was that I would share these findings in ways that would be helpful for RMG workers' organizing. My hope is that my study can inform future training workshops by one or more of the organizations I worked with and offer insights to other activists working nonorganized women in other settings. To this end, this dissertation is not merely a case study but equally, a learning tool to learn from historically marginalized subject-agents who have, and continue, to inspire and drive social, political, and economic change. This is, after all, the political project of Marxist feminism to which my own theorization, and research methodology draws from, and adheres to.

Organization of Chapters

This dissertation is organized into five chapters and a conclusion. Each chapter is guided by overarching questions.

Chapter 2 is organized around the two-part question. What is the role of the global RMG industry in creating the *nari srawmik* (woman worker) in Bangladesh? And, what are the opportunities and challenges the industry poses for its predominantly women workforce? I begin with this question to advance an alternative narrative of the garment industry in Bangladesh, one better suited to address the context in which workers and activists mobilize themselves. In this chapter, I argue that the global RMG industry has played a foundational role in transforming the demographic composition of both the formal working class in Bangladesh, as well as surplus labour, through its absorption of

young, rural, and poor women into its workforce. I further argue that it is the socio-demographic conditions of this group of workers which explain why they were selected to comprise the industry's workforce. Indeed, given the significance of the industry for the Bangladesh economy, it can be said with some certainty that there is a necessary and specific dependence of the state on this segmented and gendered domestic labour market. These women in turn endure and challenge deteriorating working conditions within factories, in their own ways, and it is important to classify these endurances and efforts as gendered efforts, as only then do we understand the spectrum of limitations and possibilities within organizing spaces which have changed drastically over the past few decades.

In Chapter 3, I develop an analytical framework to explore the development of class consciousness, solidarity, and activism among women workers. Here, I answer the question: how do the concepts of social reproduction and affect expand our understanding of class consciousness and activism of nonorganized women workers? The principal argument of this chapter is that dissident friendships of women workers are central to how they connect to one another, mobilize together, and develop affective communities by drawing in those beyond the factory shopfloor. What encourages the development of class consciousness is women's participation and sense of membership in, and belonging to, affective communities. This sense of belonging is developed continuously and in ways that mimic the activities of social reproduction itself – through learning, teaching, care work, and cultivating and nurturing of various relations between activists, workers and community members. This, I call the affective dimension of organizing – something that is central to organizing more broadly, and analytically comparable to the ways in which

social reproduction makes possible the process of production as a whole. At once hidden and overlooked, these relationships and micro-communities that span the factory floors to spaces of social reproduction are crucial for developing the capacities for activism and strengthening workers' institutions. I suggest that just as social reproductive labour is the necessary and invisibilized counterpart to productive labour, affective organizing is the necessary and invisibilized counterpart to activism and the building of a community of activists.

In Chapter 4, I apply the analytical framework to the context of Bangladesh to answer the question: how might the organizing experiences of young, nonorganized women workers in Bangladesh's RMG sector help to broaden the way in which class consciousness and activism are theorized? Exploring workers' migration from the countryside, their experience of finding work in the city, how and why women workers came to work in the RMG industry, and women's experience of home *away* from home, I argue that spaces of social reproduction and the dense social networks that span households and neighbourhoods help to explain the various micro-communities workers are embedded in, and their belonging in these in turn inform how and why they mobilize: by doing the affective work of community building.

In Chapter 5, I answer two questions. First, how do women workers in Bangladesh's garment industry engage in labour organizing in the workplace and beyond? And second, what institutions are helpful for mobilizing nonorganized women workers and why? Delving into my empirical research once more, I demonstrate how much of the work of activating and mobilizing women workers has been taken up by NGOs. In the case of Bangladesh, these NGOs have been central to creating spaces for

women to create, think, contextualize, and become activated workers. I investigate the work of three such worker-driven NGOs. I argue that these organizations serve as examples of formal institutions that are actively creating spaces for, and working with, women workers to develop their collective agency as workers, consciousness of their gender-and-class-based exploitation and prepare them in their role as aware and educated labour organizers in the RMG sector. The strategies implemented by these NGOs rely heavily on informal spaces of social reproduction – workers’ intergenerational homes, neighbourhoods and micro-communities – as sites for affective organizing.

In Chapter 6, I answer the question: what does visibilizing the invisibilized organizing that is currently taking place amongst, and within, women workers in the sector, tell us about the ways in which an infrastructure of dissent is organized in Bangladesh? Here, I argue that once we begin to look at affective organizing as organizing, we make visible what was formerly rendered invisible: the important, ongoing, and everyday contributions women make to the construction of a viable infrastructure of dissent and workers’ movement in the country. In doing so, I suggest that it challenges the anti-feminist reading of class consciousness and struggle/activism.

Finally, by way of conclusion, in Chapter 7, I provide a summary of the key findings of the dissertation and offer suggestions for future research.

Chapter 2: The Rise of the Ready-made Garment Industry and the *Nari Srawmik* in Bangladesh

“This is a global trade, and we all know how global trade works – you squeeze the person you can squeeze. The person to be squeezed is the worker.”

Sarwat, activist

“[We must] show the value of women.....the most important thing is to create an awareness that [women] are human. To make them understand this thing - that they are human - and what Begum Rokeya said one hundred years ago, ‘tell yourself with pride that you are a human’... this fight needs to be taken on by women themselves.”

Salma, labour activist

This chapter explores the contemporary landscape in which workers in Bangladesh’s ready-made garment (RMG) industry mobilize and organize, and advances an alternative narrative to official accounts of the industry. The chapter seeks to answer the following two-part question: what is the role of the global RMG industry in creating the *nari srawmik* (women workers) in Bangladesh; and, what are the subsequent opportunities and challenges that the industry poses for its predominantly women workforce?

The first section of this chapter provides an overview of the transformation of the global RMG industry under neoliberalism. It explores the impact of neoliberalism on RMG production methods, specifically, the relationship between geography and demography. The relationship between geography and demography, I argue, is a central consideration for understanding the expansion of the industry into peripheral countries (Agathangelou, 2004), such as Bangladesh, as it provides the industry – and the state – the opportunity to financially benefit from the hyper-exploitation of a large, and non-organized, racialized and feminized workforce.

In the second section, I examine the making of an export-oriented economy in Bangladesh and the growth of its RMG industry over the last five decades. Central to this discussion is the neoliberal development model of the country, which gained traction in the 1980's, and the absorption of young rural women into export-oriented industries – such as RMG – for economic growth. Here, I argue that the RMG sector has quantitatively and qualitatively altered the demographic composition of the working class in Bangladesh, and further, that the state has been deeply implicated in the creation of a segmented and gendered domestic labour market.

Next, I document the working conditions in Bangladesh's RMG factories. It identifies problems within the industry, as well as the role of domestic and international civil society in documenting and working through these problems. Here, I argue that the working conditions, while improving in some respects, are in general declining and further, that being a worker and mobilizing in this sector entails challenging one of the most exploitative industries in the world.

The fourth section of the chapter provides an historical overview and landscape analysis of social justice and labour organizing in Bangladesh. Here, I look broadly at Bangladeshi civil society and conclude that there is a general foreclosing of civil space, coupled with a gradual rise in social conservatism – problematic particularly for women workers – and the increasing space that non-governmental organizations (NGOs) take up in the country for developmental initiatives.

The Global RMG Industry and Expansion into Bangladesh

Neoliberalism and the Global Garment Industry: Overview and Growth

The global fashion industry generates a revenue of \$1.7 - 2.5 trillion and employs over 75 million people worldwide. This industry, consisting of low-technology products including clothing, textiles, footwear and luxury goods, is now truly a global one, with supply and value chains that spread out across multiple countries across different continents. A key turning point in the transformation of the global fashion industry was the end of the Multi-Fibre Agreement (MFA), a protectionist trade regime set up in 1974 to shield developed countries from textile and clothing exports from developing countries. This agreement was phased out over a ten-year period from 1995 to 2005, and it is this phasing out that ultimately shifted the vast majority of garment production to the Global South into countries such as Vietnam, Mexico and Bangladesh. Today, the knowledge-intensive parts of the production process are based in North America, Europe and Japan while the labour-intensive production process is based in developing countries.

The Bangladeshi garment industry emerged in the late 1970s. It was the outcome of several factors, some of which were national, others international. Nationally, during this period, Bangladesh was at a crossroads. Highly dependent on aid and with a mounting balance of payments deficit, the newly independent country was faced with an option: either maintain its pre-independence commitment to an industrial policy centered around policies designed to foster an indigenous manufacturing base and (protected) domestic market or, as later happened, move towards a model of development that revolved around export-oriented growth. Key to this debate, and the decision ultimately made, were the changes then underway internationally. As Kabeer and Mahmoud note, the imposition of quotas on clothing exports from some of the early industrializing countries in East Asia led the global garment industry to search for quota-free locations to

set up garment assembly plants (Kabeer and Mahmoud, 2004, 136). Facing a financial crisis, but sensing opportunity, Bangladesh took its first steps toward reducing support for indigenous manufacturing, a process that accelerated in the early 1980s as the Bangladeshi state initiated a series of reforms to open its economy under the guidance of the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank. Export-led growth became the development model for the country with economic growth to be spearheaded by the private sector, supported by the introduction of a number of direct export incentive schemes, alongside the establishment of export processing zones outside the two largest cities in the country, Dhaka and Chittagong (Ibid). The culmination of these processes is an industrial system with dual and distinct traits: on the one hand the country has an export-oriented sector primarily driven by RMG production, with many firms serving as sub-contractors for multinational corporations (MNCs) and on the other hand, there is a more shielded, domestically-oriented sector that supplies the domestic market.

Today, RMG and textiles industry of Bangladesh account for over 70% of formal manufacturing jobs and contribute to 57% of the domestic value added in manufacturing (OECD/UNCTAD, 2023) and is the key economic driver of Bangladesh, a country that is poised to transition to an upper-middle income country in the next few years and a high-income country in the next two decades (World Bank, n.d.; OECD/UNCTAD, 2023). Despite even the setbacks of the COVID-19 pandemic (McKinsey & Company, 2021b; Quayyum 2022), the RMG industry has generated sufficient revenue to maintain its status as fundamental to the economic growth of the country. Today, the RMG industry accounts for 84 percent of Bangladesh's exports (McKinsey & Company, 2021b; OECD/UNCTAD, 2023), and brings in over USD \$46 billion in export earnings

(Bangladesh Garment Manufacturers and Exporters Association, n.d.). It employs upwards of 4 million workers in the country's approximately 5,000 garment factories. Out of 4 million workers employed in Bangladesh Garment Manufacturers and Exporters Association (BGMEA) member factories, 3.20 million – or eighty percent – are women.

Bangladesh has positioned itself as the second largest exporter of ready-made garments in the world, after China (McKinsey & Company, 2021b). The costs associated with the production of these garments has, moreover, continued to decline, which has allowed Bangladesh to remain globally competitive and secure for itself the foreign investment needed for the industry's continued development. The overarching need to remain competitive has, along with factors related to land scarcity, lack of political will etc., meant that there has been little effort or incentive to move toward higher value-added production, or develop auxiliary industries that could potentially 'feed' into the existing industry. Consequently, Bangladesh's garment industry remains located at the lower end of the value chain, tasked with producing low-cost commodities, namely, 'cut-make-trim' garments that generate a very low per-piece price.

This chapter offers an alternative narrative of the RMG sector in Bangladesh. As a starting point, this section began by discussing the trends within the global garment industry. As other scholars have pointed out, analyses of the RMG sector in Bangladesh has suffered from a methodological nationalism advanced by researchers which obscures "critical nodes of power in global garment supply chain production" (Siddiqi 2022). Instead, this chapter strives to move discussion of the RMG sector in Bangladesh beyond the "bounded and self-contained nation state" to which it has been unjustly circumscribed by researchers, to better interrogate the rise and consolidation of a "development model

that privileges abstract notions of growth over the long-term well-being of those who labour in the name of the nation” (Ibid). Building from the work of Siddiqi and others, I argue that it is impossible to understand how women workers in Bangladesh emerged as central to the nation's development model – and global industry growth – without being attentive first to the simultaneous feminization and racialization of the industry's labour force more generally and, secondly, the consequences of that shift.

Neoliberalism and Different Strategies of RMG Factories: The Significance of Simultaneous Feminization and Racialization of the Labourforce

Building on Marx's theoretical and methodological insights from *Capital, Volume I* – principally the notion that every abstraction or category of analysis captures only a moment or aspect of a complex totality – I argue that feminized and racialized labour generates greater surplus value during the production process as their labour is de-valued *because* it is feminized and racialized in the production process. With this as the starting point, we can begin to grasp analytically how the reproduction of such bodies in turn present greater opportunity for the appropriation of surplus value.

To understand how poor, racialized women from Bangladesh have become absorbed into global garment production, let us begin with Marx's assertion that the appropriation of surplus value is directly contingent on the availability of exploitable labour power. As Ferguson and McNally (2014) note, a central feature of the neoliberal era has been the globalization of primitive accumulation; large-scale processes of dispossession that, on the one hand has swelled the size of the global labour reserve while, on the other making it more international than before. As they note, “[t]he global working class has grown by at least two-thirds (and has perhaps doubled) across the

neoliberal period, from something between 1.5 to 2 billion people reliant on selling their labour-power in 1980 to over 3 billion today – with half or more of this number making up the global reserve army. This is a stunning increase in dispossession and proletarianization – and one that has been utterly crucial to the neoliberal reorganization of the capitalist world economy” (9). Significantly then, economies of the Global South, once seen as ‘peripheral’ now play a significant role in the global process of capital accumulation. This is an important point to set aside for now, but to which I will return later in this section.

Beginning in the 1980s, the liberalization of the Bangladeshi economy saw the mass migration of dispossessed people from the countryside into urban areas. But while both men and women were dispossessed and added to the reserve of pool of available, exploitable labour, it is predominantly women that were absorbed into low-wage, export-oriented garment production within the EPZs. How might we explain this feminization of ‘lowest of the low’ wage work under neoliberalism? And further, how might we recast the discussion to explain the racialization of workers, when both men and women come from what *appear* to be similar socio-spatial locations? It is to these questions that I now turn.

As Bhattacharya (2011) has noted, EPZs – and as I argue, garment production as a whole – “mimic in truly macabre ways the contours of the home under capitalism. Like homes they are private, shielded from social and state scrutiny, produce items of social provisioning (clothes, shoes, food processing, toys) by female labor, and are secret theatres of rampant violence.” Like the home, where reproductive labour is typically done by women, the type of work women are hired for in garment production are gender-

specific, and allocated on the basis of presumed naturalized skill. In the context of garment production in EPZs, women's labour predominates in sewing and assembly work, which accounts for approximately eighty percent of all labour costs in clothing manufacture (Collins 2002). Siddiqi's (2000) ethnographic work suggests that this work is widely considered to be the 'lowest value-added' work in the industry and accordingly, those hired for these roles are also paid the least when compared to other areas of production. Moreover, the workforce must embody the skills necessary for the successful prosecution of the task, which is predicated first and foremost on their dexterity and physical attributes (consisting of their nimble fingers, quickness, and small bodies) that ultimately serve to render them 'naturally' suited to this form of work (Ramamurthy, 2014). Women workers are also perceived by employers as being more easily domesticated (more disciplined and less rebellious), strengthening the perception of their being naturally suited for the task. The notion of requisite skill, therefore, reduces the price of women's labour by defining their *paid* work as an extension of the work they would otherwise have already been doing, *unpaid*, in the home. As Collins (2002) notes, the unpaid reproductive labour undertaken at home becomes the basis upon which their labour power is conceived in the factory, and is used by employers to construct female waged labour as 'natural', and therefore unskilled. It is this gendered notion of naturalization that effectively legitimizes lowering the price of women's labour, and serves as an example of how labour is socially priced, *a priori*, so that its value is commensurate to the socio-spatial location of the worker, in relation to men who are hired in the industry.

The similarities between reproductive labour and garment production for women in Bangladeshi EPZs does not end there. In addition to the notion of skill, women's work in garment production is also comparable to the continuous, 'routine' work that reproductive labour entails. In the context of the deadline-oriented assembly line, which requires continuous motion and speed, falling behind in sewing ultimately slows the entirety of the production process, similar to the ways in which activities associated with social reproduction such as preparing meals and childcare, if not done (timely and without question, everyday), halts the reproductive processes in the private home. Siddiqi's ethnographic work is again useful here, as she notes that in Bangladesh, women workers are both economically and *literally* trapped by their sewing machines as they are closely guarded and/or monitored by male supervisors on the floor. As her research suggests, in the eyes of many women, they effectively become part of the machine that they in theory control. She further argues that the factory itself can seem like an even bigger machine – one that is guarded, controlled and owned by men, with women trapped inside (Ibid).

Beyond the ways in which women's labour within garment production renders them exploitable in *specific* ways, it is also important to identify the ways in which all vulnerable sections of global labour are managed and disciplined. This stems from the informality of garment work itself. For example, within Bangladeshi garment factories, employment arrangements are characterized by informal and/or insecure working conditions. As Kabeer and Mahmud (2004) have documented, this means that recruited workers are generally provided with only minimal employment-related training, while also tending to remain, irrespective of the length of their tenure, classified as 'temporary'

employees. Moreover, the hours of work are longer than elsewhere in the manufacturing industry, with workers frequently having to work all night to meet buyer deadlines. All of this contributes to precarious workplace existence, not only in terms of employment security, but also physical security. There is routine failure on the part of employers to protect workers from sexual and verbal harassment, as well as physical harm. With regards to the latter, the severity of the problem has led to the deaths of over 1,500 workers since 2005 in factory fires and the more recent building collapse.

The RMG workforce is managed and disciplined by global capital in ways that are then both gender-specific, and not. In the context of garment production in Bangladesh, the low wages, various levels and forms of discipline and control, and denial of the right of workers to be housed in secure workplaces – that are free from verbal, psychological and physical threats – render those workers highly vulnerable to forms of hyper-exploitation. Capital is able to exert such high levels of exploitability on the presumption that when the supply of *potential* labour is high, workers are ultimately disposable. Given the dispossession of both men and women, as discussed earlier, countries such as Bangladesh have now become so-called labour-surplus economies, or new sites of capital accumulation.

It is the continual reproduction of such economies that, under neoliberalism, provide capital with its industrial reserve army. In contrast to Marx's assessment, the surplus population is not *always* available for exploitation in any given region. Indeed, as Ferguson and McNally (2014) have rightly noted, the limitations of Marx's explanation of the reproduction of labour power stem from his consideration of reproduction as solely a natural-biological process, rather than one that is a biologically-grounded realm of

human material life, socially mediated, and therefore, historically variable. Under neoliberalism, the reproduction of the industrial reserve army has come in the form of an increasingly feminized workforce from the Global South. Similarly, Ahmed (2004) argues that contrary to theory, a ready supply of workers does not always exist, in reserve, to be channeled to formal waged labour and fulfil the needs of global capital. Instead, her analysis of the rise of the Bangladeshi garment industry suggests that the specific use of the rural middle-class and cash-poor women was a rather “ingenious innovation of the nascent Bangladeshi industrialist” (38) – and I would argue, by extension, of global capital. As Ahmed argued, not only did they rely on the presumed physical attributes such as ‘nimble fingers’, and assumed social characteristics like docility and compliance, of these women from the Global South (Elson & Pearson, 1981; Kabeer, 1994; Ramamurthy, 2014) she further argues that by drawing on women that are effectively kin, hailing from the same village, these factory owners secured the trust and assurance required by their guardians that such work was acceptable for this group that would otherwise have not been available for them.

If we are to look at the restructuring of global garment production and the shift of production to Bangladesh as a concrete example of neoliberal transformation in the Global South, it then becomes crucial to find the analytical link between primitive accumulation under neoliberalism and the construction of a hierarchically based, racialized and gendered global labour market that renders specific groups of workers ultimately disposable for global capital. The contradiction here is remarkable: on the one hand, we need the reproduction of a labouring body that is decidedly female and racialized as these characteristics *make possible* the domination, exploitation and

devaluation of both the price of their labour and life while, at the same time, these are the very bodies that are required for the materialization and expansion of global capitalism. As Wright (2006) succinctly puts it, “a story of a worker’s devaluation is simultaneously a story of capital’s valuation because even as this worker is said to lose value, she continues to generate value as she works” (12). This devaluation is greatest (and therefore, so is the production of value) when labouring bodies are gendered and racialized in the production process.

Meet the RMG Worker

As mentioned previously, approximately 80% of RMG workers are women. Numerous studies and surveys have been conducted to observe the socio-demographic characteristics of this workforce recording basic demographic data as well as rich qualitative data on experience of work (c.f. Kabeer and Mahmud, 2004; Paul Majumdar & Begum, 2006; ILO 2013; ILO 2020; ACD 2020). These studies show that women employed in the RMG sector typically have lower mean average age compared to men in the workforce; whereas the average age of women workers in a recent survey was 20.4 years, that of male workers was 25 years (ILO 2013). A larger share of women workers in the RMG sector is unmarried when compared to women employed in other manufacturing work. The average educational attainment levels of these workers continue to be low but increasing with some showing average schooling in 1993 as being 4.1 years, rising in 1997 to 6.3 years (ILO 2013) and more recent surveys suggesting that 22.8% have attained primary school, 35.1% have completed junior school and 13.1% have finished high school (ACD 2020).

Gender, young age and low education attainment levels of women workers in the RMG sector are the three common characteristics that are highlighted in most studies to account for the low wages in the sector. Kabeer's (2001) study, however, delves into a more critical analysis of the consequences of these characteristics. She argues that employers' preference for women workers were ultimately rooted in their (perceived) docility – derived from the lack of opportunities for women to work in other sectors that would hire women of young age and low levels of education – and their unwillingness to demand higher wages. This, she suggests, is considered an advantage for RMG management.

My findings corroborate this analysis and suggest that this advantage is the leverage that allows RMG factory owners – and ultimately, the global industry itself – to exploit the poor, working-class women workers that they do. I observed similar socio-demographic characteristics among the women workers and activists I interviewed. Most current workers were young, and those who had retired from garment production and moved on to full-time activism noted that they had started garment work at very young ages – as early as 11 years. As activists like Monno Miah and Farzana explained to me, the age of retirement for RMG workers is in fact quite early; when women workers reach their 40s, they are usually unable to keep on working given the long hours of exhausting and continuous motion that sewing, cutting and assembly line production entails. Most of these women were literate, with some level of primary school education – this is particularly important today as garment workers need some level of literacy to be able to read measurements. Marriage rates among workers were mixed – approximately half were married, and the other half unmarried.

The socio-economic background of garment workers I spoke to was telling as they spoke of why they took on employment in the industry. All the workers and activists I spoke with, with the exception of two activists – both of whom were men – noted that they came to the industry out of financial need. They all recounted stories of either illness, death, or sudden financial loss of the primary breadwinner of their families ‘back home’, all of whom were either their father or husband. They recounted the backlash and shame they, and their families, were forced to endure as they left their village or home to find employment, rather than stay at home and eventually get married. Madiha captured this sentiment for me in the shocked voices of her aunties: “[y]ou sent her there?” As she recounted, they wouldn’t even use the word ‘work’ to describe garment work. And as Sultana explained to me so succinctly: “[t]hey think women garment workers go everywhere. They go wherever they want. They have no fears, they are not scared. They don’t know how to differentiate between day or night. They come and go as they please. People from the village view these things in a negative light.” The burden of having to find work is therefore compounded with having to accept and tolerate the backlash they faced from their own communities. This is tied to the reputation women garment workers have in society of being too independent, fashionable, and culturally ‘fast’. The fact that women’s honour is tied to their ability to stay at home and be cared for by male breadwinner is interesting precisely because maintaining honour means to have a certain socio-economic standing, thereby revealing the class nature of such patriarchal norms in Bangladesh.

To preserve some sense of honour and dignity, many workers’ families arrange for these women to live with relatives or other people from the same village when they

first migrate to the city. Households of newly-migrated RMG workers are therefore not necessarily nuclear households: many are kinship based and inter-generational, and include in-laws, children, aunts, uncles, cousins of garment workers. Others still are bound by non-kinship relationships whose living arrangements are structured around a wider network, which can include co-workers or people from the same village. Once settled into the city, many unmarried women workers may also rent together in a *mess* with fellow co-workers, or garment workers in other factories. If and once they are married, they tend to live with their new families – consisting of husbands and in-laws. Many of these households are also composed of inter-generational RMG workers – often, mothers, daughters, younger sisters, cousins all partake in garment work at the same time, or at different times in their lives. These rental homes are in working-class neighbourhoods and communities, many of which are near factories that workers are employed in.

The way in which new workers find employment in the RMG industry is then largely through the informal channels of kinship and the new communities they come to inhabit once in the city. In my interviews, workers and activists all recounted how they found their first RMG job, with the help of a relative, sister, mother, or another woman in their new neighbourhood. These diverse networks provide a sense of belonging for many newly migrated women. It is through them that newly arrived migrants are integrated into the working-class neighbourhoods that surround the factories, and new relationships are forged. It is also in these neighbourhoods where women's lives continue to be culturally regulated, as their new home away from home.

The way in which workers and activists described their *elaka* (neighbourhoods) was crucial to an understanding of how young, migrating women find a sense of belonging in the city, and how they become formal workers. It is through kinship ties and neighbourhood connections that they learn the ropes of city life, cope with life without their immediate families, and create new networks of survival. The cultural regulation of women's lives continues in the city, albeit in different ways. They of course do not shed the shaming they and their families face back home simply because they are in a different – more urban – setting. This struck me as I spoke to countless women who all defended the work they did, vehemently noting that the work they did was not 'bad' or degrading in the way people back home assumed. While in the city, they find solace in other women workers and breadwinners, but are nonetheless monitored regularly and consistently by members of the neighbourhood. For example, Beli noted to me how one man from her neighbourhood dropped her off and picked her up from the factory to ensure her safety and wellbeing on the streets. While, in this case, she welcomed the paternalistic friendship, other examples suggest harassment. Rahima, for example, commented on the ways in which her neighbourhood *murrubi* (elder) harassed her when she left her home during non-work hours. Sheelpi similarly commented on how people in the neighbourhood gossip if they wanted to go to protests and other public events, warning that such activities are for *kharap meye* ('bad women' i.e. lacking honour and decency).

The socio-economic conditions of rural women, defined principally by deteriorating economic conditions and/or prospects in their home villages, is generally the impetus for migration and, once they arrive in the city, garment work. Living lives structured by not only poverty, but also by experiences of shame, migrants in urban

centers also find themselves navigating a new cultural and social terrain – navigating city life, developing new and often much broader sets of social relationships, and new forms of paid labour – in ways that are (at least seen) to conform to culturally defined moral standards reserved for women in Bangladesh. Often, migrant workers see their time in the industry as temporary work, work which must be done to supplement their family income. It is not, in other words, work they themselves aspire to do, and nor is it work their families want them to do. Women migrant workers in Bangladesh, then, tend to view garment work as something akin to a last resort. From the perspective of employers, what women migrant workers are seen to bring to the industry – labour structured by rural poverty, low levels of education, and conditioned by a pervasive cultural regulation of female behaviour – are seen as central to the production and reproduction of the docile and nonorganized workforce, and it is on these grounds and sets of assumptions that women migrants have incorporated into the industry *en masse*.

The RMG industry in Bangladesh is forecasted to expand and the size of the garment workforce hired is likewise set to expand. As the industry recovers from the negative impacts of the pandemic on its revenue, it is now equally focused on maintaining its position as the second-largest garment-exporting country in the world after China (McKinsey 2023). It is safe to assume that the industry in Bangladesh will continue to be structured and propelled by its predominately women labour force. That this workforce is comprised predominately of women migrant workers who are young, poor, low-skilled and/or endowed with low levels of education, is an interesting, but vitally important development in the country, as this demographic now comprises the majority of the workforce of the country's largest, most labour-intensive, and most

profitable export industry. The arrival of the RMG industry in Bangladesh, and the shifting of the developmental trajectory of the Bangladeshi state more generally, has been instrumental then in not only transforming the residential, gender, and class composition of rural women, but in so doing, fundamentally transforming the demographic composition – both quantitatively and qualitatively – of the country’s working class. Given the significance of the industry for the Bangladesh economy, we can equally say that today, there is a *necessary* and *specific* dependence of the state on this segmented and gendered domestic labour market, as well as in its regulation and management.

Working Conditions in Bangladesh’s RMG factories

Working Conditions in Garment Factories: Business as Usual?

Working conditions in export-oriented garment factories in Bangladesh have been widely documented in both academic and popular literature. Scholars, human rights activists, and development practitioners have, over the past few decades, concluded that working conditions – both physical and psychological – range from insecure and dangerous to inadequate but improving. The most optimistic accounts of working conditions are supplied by manufacturer associations such as Bangladesh Garment Manufacturers and Exporters Association (BGMEA) and Bangladesh Knitwear Manufacturers and Exporters Association (BKMEA), government publications, as well as media coverage. These accounts highlight the ways in which working conditions have improved from the last four decades as the industry accommodates larger volumes of export production. Among the topics addressed in these reports include the formalization of work and workers, as evidenced by the introduction of employment contracts which

stipulate payment date and other benefits; payment of wages in line with the minimum wage negotiated by employers and workers; the introduction of safety mechanisms that ensure workplaces abide by fire and health regulations; provision of toilets and drinking water; and promotion of workers' committees within factories to whom workers can turn to if they encounter work-related problems.

In contrast to the literature on improving factory conditions, anti-sweatshop, social justice activists, as well as academics from the 1980's onwards have documented the poverty wages that are among the lowest for RMG workers in the world and the inability to advocate for their rights due to the lack of organized labour in the sector (Kabeer and Mahmud, 2004; Human Rights Watch, 2015; Ahmed, Greenleaf and Sacks, 2014; Alam and Natsuda, 2016). Documented in these reports is the ongoing informalization and precarity whereby garment workers work without official employment contracts, endure persistent non-payment – or at best, inadequate or irregular payment – of wages, overtime salary and benefits; unsafe workplaces in the form of inadequate building infrastructure to factory floors environments that are so unsanitary and unhealthy that have been linked to various forms of respiratory and reproductive illnesses; sexual harassment and sexual assault, directed particularly at women workers; non-compliance with domestic labour legislation, such as mandatory work breaks; and finally, the active suppression of workers' organizing.

What is interesting to note in these diverging accounts is not so much that they portray very different accounts of working conditions on Bangladeshi garment factories – which is to be expected given the source of the accounts – but rather, the way in which workers themselves are positioned as objects of study. In other words, while the literature

differs on the extent to which the conditions of work in Bangladesh are seen to trend, the analysis advanced is technocratic in orientation, leaving little room for an understanding of workers as agents of change in and of themselves. In neither literature do workers feature as the subjects whose struggle, interests, and activity figure as shaping the environment in which debate and change are made. Put another way, workers appear in this literature as passive objects of study, as opposed to potentially active subjects.

I argue that both the narrative of progressive, but incremental change as well as and the narrative of workers-as-victim, displace the worker as a formative and central to the changes that analysts seek to describe. There is a tendency, in other words, to overlook the underlying causes of any institutional change – i.e. the struggle waged by workers in their places of employment – and to assert, rather simplistically, that the improvement or deterioration of the conditions of work occurs independently of events taking place on the shop floor, or conversely, is the result of elite-level negotiation, legislation, and enforcement regimes. What the analysis fails to address, then, is the question of power, and how the question of power is central to conditions of work. As a consequence, the analysis put forward in these two narratives is unable to account for institutional change within the industry, either for the better or for the worse. Indeed, in my own research, it has been clear that it is the workers themselves who have been responsible for much of the institutional changes that have occurred in Bangladesh.

Most of the workers I interviewed were long-term employees in the industry, and they were able to relay both the nature, and the degree of changes that have occurred in the industry during their tenure. Their narrative of the conditions they themselves endured in their experience as workers in the garment industry is important to consider here, as it

demonstrates the degree to which garment workers are active and creative subjects – subjects who not only experience and endure conditions that analysts debate and describe, but equally, in their analysis of these conditions and then attempts to address them, see and position themselves as central to the process of not only transforming these conditions, but transcending them. For example, when former garment-workers-turned-activists discuss the extent to which conditions have changed for the better or worse, they are not interested in explaining anything other than what they have witnessed, and continue to witness in their work with others, and the extent to which they can – and do – intervene in these struggles.

Current and former garment workers I interviewed reflected on the working conditions in various factories throughout Dhaka. Their accounts confirmed descriptions found in the latter literature of unsanitary factory floors; non-compliance with labour laws, specifically in enforcing employment contracts; production targets that are unimaginable – and often met only at great costs to themselves; non-payment, or at best, irregular payment of wages and benefits. Beginning with my participation in a union training workshop for RMG workers in Dhaka, I heard first-hand the variation between factories in terms of implementation of formal employment contracts. While most workers were aware of the existence of employment contracts, not all knew the importance of it, and not all workplaces seemed to have this formal structure in place. Employment contracts of course serve to identify an individual as a worker in the factory, without which there is no legal obligation for an employer to pay an employee, or to pay the amount agreed upon at the time of employment. Most workers with whom I spoke had *hajeera* cards (an important source of identification and documentation that is used

by management to record worker attendance as well as the number of hours worked); others, however, did not. Variation in the terms of employment may be attributed to the size of the factory – larger factories, for example, will likely have more comprehensive systems in place to keep record of their employees, whereas smaller operations might be more informal – and/or the degree of compliance with the Bangladeshi Labour Act. The reality is that not all factories are compliant at this very basic level and workers do not have the ability, means or even sometimes the know-how, to hold their employer accountable to the law.

Workers and activists I met and spoke to highlighted the importance of turning to the Labour Act – which they themselves acknowledged was insufficient, but a place to start. Putul, for example, explained the high rates of reproductive and respiratory illnesses experienced by garment workers because of the very dusty conditions on the workplace floor. She noted that due to a combination of lack of toilet breaks, production pressure, and lack of awareness of reproductive issues, women workers develop various reproductive problems from using dirty, toxic and dusty bags that clothes are packed in lieu of sanitary pads. She noted that this is a common issue that needs to be addressed as workers are developing reproductive problems. She also recounted the high rates of respiratory problems such as Tuberculosis among all workers. Monno Miah noted how garment factories work around compliance issues today. He notes that as garment factories shift to the greater Dhaka area away from the over-populated city, factory owners are keeping ‘model factories’ in Dhaka, as sites for foreign buyers to visit. In these factories, workers have access to all the benefits they ought to have by law, including access to water and toilets and work masks. Sonya noted the unachievable

production deadlines that supervisors at her own factory, specializing in trousers, used to give out. She notes that a single worker was tasked with completing 80 trousers per hour. To highlight the ridiculous nature of this demand, she pointed that on average, a single worker could produce 50 trousers in an hour.

The experiences and conditions described by current and former garment workers, as well as activists, corroborate – in great detail – the findings of many decades of investigative research, journalism, and activism around working conditions within garment factories in Bangladesh. Indeed, the themes of precarity and informality of employment predominate, as do those which describe the dangers attendant to the shop floor experience. Yet, as many activists with many years of garment work under their belt explained to me, things are slowly starting to change, and they are changing because management no longer has the ability to ignore workers' demands. According to many activists I spoke with, workers themselves are much more knowledgeable about what is and what is not acceptable. Keya captures this sentiment – and critical hope – as she explains how workers are pushing back.

However, while employers – in the optimistic accounts of some of the activists and workers interviewed – may have lost the power to compel, they have as yet not been made to comply, particularly with safety and building regulations. This has been demonstrated, in recent years, with devastating regularity – from factory fires to the biggest building collapse in the country's history over the past decade. The most prominent among these were the November 2012 factory fire at Tazreen Fashion which killed 112 workers and the collapse of Rana Plaza in April 2013 which killed 1127. In both cases, hundreds more were injured. However, while these two cases are among the

better known to have come out of the country in recent years, similar so-called accidents in garment factories are actually quite common. In fact, since 2005, approximately 1500 workers have died in preventable factory disasters. In the case of the Rana Plaza disaster, it is now widely known that workers had noticed cracks in the building on the day of the collapse and had alerted this to their supervisors, but were directed to report to work. Indeed, as a post-Rana Plaza study by a team of engineers found, approximately 60 percent of garment factories currently in operation in Bangladesh are deemed unsafe workplaces.

As workers have consistently noted – observations that were echoed in my interviews – many of the deaths and injuries associated with these disasters could have been prevented had workers in these workplaces been more organized. As Keya noted to me, that these deaths could have been prevented. Citing the lack of union voice and the right to refuse to work in unsafe workplaces, she notes that these workers had no option but to report to work. In other instances, she notes the ways in which management themselves give out incorrect and dangerous advice to workers when factory fires break out. Citing her own experience of working in a factory where a fire had broken out, she remembers the way in which floor supervisors locked the main door to the floor and proceeded to tell workers not to worry, and that the fire will not spread upwards. This is reminiscent of the ways in which the now widely condemned actions of management at Tazreen Fashion and subsequent factories such as Smart Export Garment Ltd., who had locked workers in their production floor or prevented them from leaving thereby making it impossible to escape the fire which would later kill them. Keya was lucky in that this did not happen to her, but notes that this type of ignorance is common. As she notes, the

presence of strong worker-led unions would allow workers to defy ignorant advice from management and stand their ground.

The experiences of recent years, and my interviews with current and former garment workers, present a portrait of life in the garment industry approximate to those described by anti-sweatshop, social justice and critical academic literatures. Prominent are themes related to precarity and informality of employment – particularly as it pertains to employment contracts, or lack thereof (though this is changing as factories consolidate and become larger) – unsafe and unsanitary work environments (in which workers are made susceptible to illness, disease, and in the case of women, sexual harassment); and inadequate building infrastructure. While garment workers, and labour organizers recognize that better labour organization in the factories would have likely prevented at least some of the disasters of recent years, they also recognize that the development and consolidation of workers power has been slow to emerge. As a consequence, it is expected that the threats garment workers today endure are likely to remain, at least for now.

The Role of Domestic and International Civil Society, NGOs and International Organizations

The result of these large-scale disasters in garment factories has been a growing call from civil society organizations in Bangladesh and overseas – including international trade union bodies, social justice groups and NGOs – to ensure factory compliance with existing legislative and regulatory frameworks. Compliance is now a buzzword in the sector, and utilized by organizers, factory owners as well as international buyers. However, the meanings ascribed to the term by these diverse bodies is by no means

uniform. Indeed, such is the uncertainty of the term, and its implications, that two – competing – camps have emerged in the wake of recent tragedy, each of whom are trying to control both the direction and pace of change in Bangladesh. On the one hand are those who advocate for adherence to Alliance for Bangladesh Worker Safety (Alliance), and on the other, those who advocate for adherence to the Accord on Fire and Building Safety in Bangladesh campaign.

The Alliance was organized in May 2013 in the aftermath of the Rana Plaza collapse by a group of international activists that have partnered with employers, factories and buyers to create a legally-binding, five-year commitment to improve safety and working conditions in RMG factories. Alliance members are predominantly North American buyers which include companies such as Gap Inc, Walmart, HBC and Costco. The Accord on Fire and Building Safety (Accord), also formed in response to the Rana Plaza disaster in in May 2013, is another a five-year legally binding agreement between global brands, retailers and trade unions designed to ensure workplace safety in the RMG Industry. The Accord has been signed by over 200 apparel brands, retailers and importers from over 20 countries, and also includes two global trade unions, and eight Bangladesh trade unions.

A joint initiative of civil society organizations from both Bangladesh and abroad, the Alliance and Accord agreements garnered significant local and international media coverage, focusing the world's attention on the conditions that prevail in Bangladeshi garment factories. It has also demonstrated both the need, but also the difficulty, in holding both international buyers and Bangladeshi factory owners responsible for ensuring a safe workplace. While the main goal of both agreements is to ensure a greater

degree of safety in garment factories, the recommendations and strategies for ensuring such safety varies between the two agreements significantly. Since the signing of these two agreements, much of the activism, both by activists based in Bangladesh and those outside, have entailed advocating, lobbying, and awareness raising of the terms and responsibilities of those associated with the Alliance or Accord. Union activists I interviewed threw their support heavily behind the Accord campaign rather than Alliance as they believed the former to be insufficient, and employer-driven, and therefore, less concerned about workers themselves.

Social Justice and Labour Organizing in Bangladesh

This section presents an historical overview and landscape analysis of social justice and labour organizing in Bangladesh. The intention is to describe and analyze the different phases, or contexts, of political mobilization in the country so as to better contextualize the challenges and opportunities of the present. Addressed in this section then are: the socialist-inspired landscape of early post-independence Bangladesh; the anti-labour military regimes that followed; the return to parliamentary democracy; and the neoliberal turn in the 1980s and its impact on organizing in the present. Based on lengthy discussions with past and current activists and organizers across various movements including the workers', women's, anti-poverty and student movements currently based in Dhaka, secondary materials and a review of the literature, this chapter concludes that the political present is structured by a rapidly diminishing civil space, coupled with a growing social conservatism in Bangladesh whereby a growing non-governmental sector, has assumed a more prominent role in developmental initiatives.

This dwindling space for activism, I argue, poses unique challenges for labour organizers and activism in the present moment, but also certain opportunities.

The period of ‘early Bangladesh’, 1972 – 1975, is seen by most activists and organizers as the ‘golden age’ for organizing, marked by notions of liberation, secularism, and democracy. This was the time when new visions shaped by workers’ and students’ movements – a combination of which led to the rise and winning of the liberation war of 1971 – was venerated as being possible. Women’s, labour and students’ movements all appeared to have more strength and optimism in this period for a number of reasons, the key among which was the post-liberation socialist-economic and culturally progressive landscape. However, and as Sumaiyna characterized so effectively, this period soon gave way to the ‘dark periods’ for activism: the rise of autocratic rulers, subsumption of trade unions and student parties into partisan politics, and the rise of social conservatism.

Upon assuming power in 1972, the Awami League government nationalized the majority of the newly independent country’s industries and initiated workers’ participation in all nationalized industries through the Workers’ Management Council. However, the government simultaneously compromised the autonomy of workers’ organizations by incorporating all labour unions within a single organization that was treated as integral to the socialist government. Here, the labour front of the Awami League – the Bangladesh Sramik League – assumed authority in almost every industrial unit. Student activism and campus politics also began to be formally institutionalized within the Awami League as the Bangladesh *Chhatra League*. Beyond worker and student activism, the women’s organizations also took root in the form of Bangladesh

Mahila Parishad, which had been established in 1970, and mobilized in the post-independence period using the discourse of human rights.

This period of early Bangladesh appears as a hopeful period for activists, one in which substantive gains – related to the workers', student, and women's movement – were assumed to be within reach. But it was one in which autonomous organizations, many of whom were actively involved with the liberation war, began to be institutionalized within, and subsumed to, the Awami League government. This process of incorporation has been read in different ways. On the one hand, it has been read as an indication of the progressive nature of the then Awami League government – an attempt, in other words, to integrate popular organizations and their respective bases, into a state to which they had formerly been excluded. On the other, it has been seen by critics as a way for the Awami League to co-opt popular movements and their organizations for their own purposes. Whatever the intent, however, the effect of these processes was to limit the scope for independent action and organization in Bangladesh, as once autonomous organizations became instruments more of patronage than of collective representation.

The period between 1975 – 1990 was marked by two different military regimes – the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) under General Zia and the Jatiyo Party (JP) under General H. M. Ershad – each of whom embraced a liberal, free market economic policy, coupled with repression of all forms of social justice organizing and the political incorporation of workers' movements. As the activists I spoke to explained, much of the organizing effort in this period was directed at subverting military rule and overcoming repression, rather than the proactive building up of social movement power.

General Zia's de facto rule began after the assassination of Sheikh Mujib in 1975. In this tenure, he introduced privatization policies prescribed by the IMF and the World Bank and handed over many nationalized enterprises to BNP affiliates at very low prices. On the flip side, he introduced "the Political Party Rules (PPR)" in 1976 which furthered the political incorporation of labour unions, and set the stage for union fragmentation, nepotism and corruption within the labour movement. In 1979, the BNP formed its own labour front, Bangladesh *Jatiyatabadi Sramik Dal* (Nationalist Labour Party). Zia was assassinated in 1981 and political power shifted to another military general, H. M. Ershad.

General Ershad captured power from the BNP in 1982 and ruled the state until his regime was eventually overthrown by a mass student movement in 1990. Similar to the experience under Zia, Ershad continued the privatization policies of his predecessor, and sold state-owned enterprises to private owners at very low prices. The anti-labour, pro-military climate created by Ershad's Jatiyo Party served at once to actively repress anti-military movements and/or bring progressive labour leaders into its fold. The Ershad regime was ultimately toppled by a multi-party alliance between the Awami League, the BNP and the Jamaat-e-Islami Bangladesh. This is also the way in which Islamist parties gained access to mainstream politics in Bangladesh once again.

The Zia and Ershad years may therefore be characterized as the anti-labour and pro-military years. During this period, there was a spike in repression which disrupted all forms of activism – including political, social justice and labour organizing – that contributed to the subsequent absorption of popular organizations into party politics. It was also in this period that the socialist policies of the Mujib era were reversed,

beginning first with the privatization of state-owned industries. It is in this period – and this context of political narrowing – that the infant RMG industry took root. The limited organizing that did take place in the country was directed in large part against repression of political activism and a return to democracy, and less towards other causes.

In 1991, a successful mass uprising ushered in a return to parliamentary democracy. However, while the political landscape was transformed by the events of 1991, the economic orientation of the country was not. In the years that followed neoliberal policy prescriptions for national development were adhered to, and were coupled with a deterioration of civil space, on the one hand, and the rapid entry of non-governmental organizations into civil society, on the other. From 1991-2024, Bangladesh was ruled primarily by the centre-left Awami League under Sheikh Hassina, the daughter of Sheikh Mujib, and by the centre-right BNP under Khaleda Zia, the widow of General Zia. In terms of alliances, the centre-left Awami League has tended to align itself with smaller leftist and secularist parties while the centre-right BNP found allies among Islamist parties including the Jamaat-e-Islami Bangladesh. For a brief period between 2007-2008, the country came under the administration of a non-party, interim caretaker government with the former World Bank staff and Bangladesh Bank governor, Fakhruddin Ahmed, acting as the Chief Adviser and head of government.

Between 2009-2024, the Awami League was the ruling party. During the party's tenure in power, it systematically decimated the political opposition, smothered the growth of new political formations, and with each passing year, slid further and further into authoritarianism. The student-led protests in the summer of 2024 ultimately led to Sheikh Hasina's ouster and the toppling of the regime. Since then, the country has been

under administration of a second caretaker government with the economist and civil society leader, Muhammad Yunus, who is currently serving as Chief Adviser of the interim government.

Despite the fractious nature of contemporary Bangladeshi politics, and the escalation of both political violence and military involvement in recent years, there is – in terms of economic policy – not much that distinguishes what has been pursued by the Awami League from the Bangladesh Nationalist Party. The primary concern of both parties, when they have been in power, has been to i) pursue open market economic policies, and ii) stifle dissent through incorporation.

From being one of the world's poorest, Bangladesh has undergone significant economic transformation since independence. Starting out as the world's ninth-poorest country with a nominal income per capita of \$95 (OECD/UNCTAD, 2023), it reached lower-middle income status in 2015, is predicted to graduate from the United Nations Least Developed Countries (LDC) list in 2026 (World Bank, n.d.) and is forecasted to become an upper middle-income country by 2031 (World Bank, n.d.). To ensure that this positive economic growth continues, each successive government has ensured that the infrastructure for neoliberal economic policies – and therefore, the inflow of foreign direct investment – remains intact. Much of this success has been because of the RMG industry itself – the key driver of economic growth – and as such, it has become the site of national pride and promise, the bridge to the nation's attaining middle-income status (Siddiqi, 2022). As the industry became the pipeline of export earnings, both government rhetoric and official policy has been to ensure the smooth functioning of all aspects of garment production.

Smooth functioning of RMG sector in turn has meant keeping price of labour low, providing tax incentives to foreign investors to the sector, minimizing disruptions to production – including during periods of political crisis that culminate in general strikes – and repression of any attempts to organize not just in export processing zones, but outside the zones as well. Whereas trade unions are prohibited in EPZs, in factories outside EPZs, labour organizing – while legal – continues to be heavily repressed and punished. It is only in the aftermath of the 2013 Rana Plaza collapse that we have seen a drastic rise in militant labour organizing in the sector.

The weakening of trade unions since the 1980s, alongside present-day obstacles to organizing in Bangladesh's largest industry, has meant that much of the activism in the RMG sector in this period has been undertaken by developmental NGOs and to a lesser extent, informal civil society groups. These NGOs are both domestic and foreign funded. The primary focus of these NGOs tends to be poverty eradication and women's empowerment, and today, NGOs operate throughout the country. The nature of activism in this sector has, therefore, been shaped in large part by the priorities and agenda of NGOs – namely, project-based, short term campaigns including health and safety campaigns and programs, anti-sweatshop labour campaigns, anti-violence against women campaigns. As Sumaiyna described, women workers in the sector were not captured by NGOs from the beginning – their intersectional reality as worker *alongside* being poor women with little access to healthcare and education was foreshadowed by the fact that they were i) urban-based, and ii) had access to employment. Increasingly however, in large part because of the dramatic rise in activism from women workers themselves, developmental NGOs began to incorporate workers' issues into their agenda. This came

in the form of campaigns around workers' rights as well as occupational health and safety. In turn, activists in the sector used the NGO system to side-step the distrust of unions by both government and factory owners, which in turn culminated in the emergence of several worker-led NGOs that today organize workers. This paved the way for labour-oriented NGOs to access funding, and to work/collaborate with plant-level unions and trade federations in the sector.

Beyond NGOs, there are very few examples of sustained, collective social activism in Bangladesh. In recent years, a large-scale movement developed in early 2013, composed primarily of secular middle and upper-class youth, who occupied Shahbagh Square in Dhaka to demand capital punishment for those convicted of war crimes by the International Crimes Tribunal of Bangladesh and to ban Jamaat from political participation. However, the demands of the movement did not extend beyond this. There was also a brief uptick in attacks in recent years on middle and upper-class secular activists, many of them religiously inspired. These have included attacks on secular bloggers, LGBT rights activists, and writers and literary activists. 2016 also saw the deadliest terrorist attack in Dhaka when seven members of an Islamist group attacked and killed 20 people in an upscale café in Dhaka. The political landscape, then, has tended to revolve around political or legal struggles related to the country's political elite, rather than on social questions of political and economic inequality. Indeed, of all the movements in Bangladesh, it has been the country's growing Islamist movement which has set the terms of social debate in recent years, principally to remold the country to fit the movement's conservative ideals. In this political and social context, little room has been left for the popularization of secular progressive ideas, or social justice organizing

more generally. With the student-led protests of 2024 – which eventually led to the fall of the ruling party – we await, with much hope, for socially-progressive movements and political formations.

The rise of the RMG sector in Bangladesh developed amid a context marked by progressive dismantling of independent popular organizations, and their incorporation into different state and party apparatuses. This process had its origins in the early post-independence period, but was consolidated in the close to two decades of military rule which followed it. During this period, the economic trajectory of the state shifted, from a project intended to spur independent state-led development, to one that prioritized export-oriented growth. The deterioration of the post-independence project, and the dismantling of the popular organizations that were its base, led to a widespread depoliticization (leading to a situation in which NGOs became the primary vehicle of social, economic and labour organizing), which allowed to the developmental trajectory of the state to shift with a minimal degree of organized resistance. The result of these transformations, in the realm of industrial production, has been the emergence of a highly gendered workforce, who have in the years since the 1980s, become the largest contributor to the country's export earnings, propelling the state in turn to become the second biggest garment producer in the world. But the industrial disasters attendant to this transformation – which have led to thousands of work-related deaths and injuries, to say nothing of the ongoing mass repression of grassroots labour organizing – have also inspired new forms and layers of activism in the sector.

In sum, the workers' movement in Bangladesh has had a contentious relationship with the newly independent Bangladeshi state, and the political parties that have

traditionally vied for control of it. Political instability at the top contributed to greater efforts to control and incorporate social classes, and their organizations, whose independence was perceived both as a threat but also as a potential asset. The result was a labour movement that was both highly fragmented, but also subject to a clientelist relationship with ruling powers that compromised the independent expression of working-class activism and politics at the same time as other avenues for political organizing in the country were increasingly repressed. However, while ‘official’ labour politics was increasingly ensconced in the intra-party struggles that consumed the energies and resources of the Awami League and the Bangladesh Nationalist Party, other forms of civic life, most notably those that are ostensibly independent of existing social forces in the country, thrived. Thus, while a significant amount of attention – and commentary – was devoted the contest between existing parties, their affiliated social institutions, and the military for control over the Bangladeshi state, little critical attention was paid to the particular ways in which ‘independent’ institutions, such as NGOs, bear the imprint of the particular locales in which they operate. This is a key point that emerged from my interviews with activists, organizers, and leadership affiliated with these organizations. Namely, while institutional forms may travel across borders, the social purposes to which they are put are uniquely informed by the existing political context and the ingenuity, ambition, and needs of the social forces who embed themselves within them.

Because of its ubiquitousness, understanding of the NGO form has been reduced to a certain shorthand – caricature, even – that appears to have precluded serious investigation of how the institution is applied and shaped by context. While this can be a

limitation, particularly as it pertains to our understanding of the institution, in contexts of political repression and co-option, the relative invisibility of the institution can also be an asset. In the case of Bangladesh, both instances are true. The assumption that NGOs, often the local partner of an international organization, stood outside politics, afforded these organizations a measure of autonomy within which to conduct their operations that stood in stark contrast to the regulation and harassment endured by other bodies understood to be squarely situated within the realm of the political. And, as I demonstrate in this dissertation, this fact did not go unnoticed by activists in search of respite, resources, and international solidarity.

Conclusion

This chapter provided an alternative narrative of the Bangladeshi garment industry and highlighted the context in which workers mobilize. In doing so, it explored two questions: what is the role of the global RMG industry in creating the woman worker in Bangladesh, and what are the subsequent opportunities and challenges the industry poses for its predominantly women workforce?

With regards to the first question, I argue that the global RMG industry has been foundational in transforming the demographic composition of the formal working class. In the first section of this chapter, I explored the impact of neoliberalism on different strategies of RMG production, specifically, the correlation between the geography of production and the demographics of its workforce. Upon ‘meeting’ the RMG workers themselves in the second section of the chapter, I found that the socio-demographic conditions of this group of workers – namely, poverty, low levels of education, the reality of economic-migration, and cultural regulation of gender in society – helps to explain

why this group of people has been selected as the workforce in the industry. Here, I argued that given the significance of the industry for the Bangladesh economy that there is a *necessary* and *specific* dependence of the state on this segmented and gendered domestic labour market.

The second question is addressed in the chapter's third and fourth sections. As the workforce of the garment industry, women workers have both endured but also challenged the deteriorating working conditions within factories in their own ways. These endurances and efforts – well documented in popular human rights and other non-academic sources, and which stand in contradiction to the narratives produced by manufacturer associations, government publications, and buyer/fashion house publications – are best understood as gendered, as only then do we understand the spectrum of limitations and possibilities within organizing spaces. The final section of this chapter demonstrates the changing landscape of social justice and labour organizing in Bangladesh. Much of the challenges that women organizers face in the sector, and outside of it, are related to the shifting fortunes of popular organizations more generally. The period of 'early-Bangladesh', for example, was a period of hope and rising expectation. The military years dashed the hope of independence and post-independence activists, and dismantled popular organizations. The years since 1991 were characterized by the return of parliamentary democracy. Neoliberal policies of the military period, which structured both industrial policy and activism, continued.

Chapter 3: Belonging, Class consciousness, and Activism: Social Reproduction and Affective Organizing

“This relationship is not with workers, it’s with their households, it’s with their families. The families they have – mother, father, brother, sister, other relations – it’s with them. They treat us like their own and I treat them like my own... That’s why it is possible to work with [women workers]. Otherwise, it would not be possible.”

Rahima, labour activist

In this chapter, I develop an analytical framework to explore the development of class consciousness, solidarity, and activism among women workers. I answer the question: how do the concepts of social reproduction and affect expand our understanding of nonorganized women workers’ class consciousness and activism? The principal argument of this chapter is that dissident friendships of women workers are central to how they connect to one another, mobilize together, and develop affective communities by drawing in those beyond the factory shopfloor. What encourages the development of class consciousness is women’s participation and sense of membership in, and belonging to, various micro-communities organized along kinship, friendship and other lines. This sense of belonging is developed continuously and in ways that mimic the activities of social reproduction itself – through learning, teaching, care work, and cultivating and nurturing of various relations between activists, workers and community members. This, I call affective organizing – something that is central to organizing more broadly, and analytically comparable to the ways in which social reproduction makes possible the process of production as a whole. At once hidden and overlooked, these relationships and communities that span the factory floors to spaces of social reproduction are crucial for developing the capacities for activism and strengthening workers’ institutions. I argue that just as social reproductive labour is the necessary and invisibilized counterpart to

productive labour, affective organizing is the necessary and invisibilized counterpart to activism generally.

The chapter begins by drawing on the concept of social reproduction to understand processes that are critical for the development of micro-communities. I then explore the concept of affect to understand the development of class consciousness amongst nonorganized women workers new to waged work. Finally, I explore the role of affective communities in developing class consciousness amongst these workers, and expanding and contributing to an evolving infrastructure of dissent by bringing in workers that have been largely left out of traditional workers' institutions.

Social Reproduction and Visibilizing Women's Organizing

Social reproduction is “the fleshy, messy, and indeterminate stuff of everyday life” (Katz, 2001, 711) that makes possible the reproduction and maintenance of intergenerational life. It consists of paid and unpaid labour that is consistently obscured, devalued, and unpaid or underpaid (Hall, 2023, 322). Social reproduction theorists – in an effort to correct/add to Marx's analysis of reproduction – bring together analyses of production and reproduction by foregrounding the *processes* behind what appears to us as visible facts (cf. Vogel, 1983; Mies, 1986; Benzanson & Luxton, 2006; Bakker, 2007; Federici, 2012; Bhattacharya, 2017; Mezzadri, 2021). In this section, I provide a brief overview of the concept of social reproduction and explore its utility for explaining the processes that are critical for activism but not seen to be central to it, namely the cultivation of interpersonal relationships – the dissident friendships spanning mentor-mentee relationships and extra-familial support systems – as tactical choices for both survival and activism by women workers.

Social reproduction theorists build from Marx's (1976) approach to study the commodity and the labour power required to create it. Marx's concept of labour-power, which he defines as "the aggregate of those mental and physical capabilities existing in the physical form, the living personality, of a human being, capabilities which he sets in motion whenever he produces a use-value of any kind" (270) we discover the inseparability of the body from that which is labour-power itself. Indeed, it would be impossible to produce labour-power without, or outside of, the labourer's body. As such, labour-power is always, and *necessarily*, embodied. Marx argues that labour-power itself is a commodity whose "use-value possesses the peculiar property of being a source of value, whose actual consumption therefore is itself an objectification of labour, hence a creation of value." (Ibid). He argues that without this commodity, the entire system of surplus value production could not reproduce itself, for it is through our labour-power that we produce all other commodities. Going back to the notion of the inseparability of labour-power – conceptually, sensuously, and materially – from the body that creates it, we can therefore broaden Marx's argument to suggest that the reproduction of capitalism is also tied to the reproduction of *specific* bodies – i.e. those seen and understood to be available for hyper-exploitation. However, doing so requires that we explore, in greater detail, the relationship between bodies and exploitability – i.e., what makes specific bodies exploitable under capitalism. Going back to Marx's conceptualization of labour-power again, we note that one of the peculiarities of this 'special' commodity is that it is the only commodity that cannot be reproduced in capitalist ways. It has, in other words, no (internal) mechanism to create and sustain itself. It is the process of social reproduction – referring here to the host of activities involved in maintaining and

reproducing labour-power, including but not limited to the biological reproduction of labour power – that helps to explain the key role of production/reproduction – in its *totality* – in determining the conditions that lead to the exploitation and oppression of racialized women’s bodies in particular (cf. Vogel, 1983; Mies, 1986; Federici, 2012; Bhattacharya, 2017).

My research suggests these processes of social reproduction do not simply sustain and regenerate the labour power needed for production but that it is equally essential to sustaining activism itself. Extending from Banks’s (2020) work on Black women’s community activism as unpaid, nonmarket work, and insight that the community serves as an important site where racialized women perform such work, I argue that such reproductive work applies in the context of a particular form of activism: community and capacity building of activists. In this way, the community itself – consisting of households (whether organized along familial or other kinship-based), workers’ neighbourhoods, friendship groups and other groupings they are entrenched in, become sites of activism and covert sites of resistance (Tungohan, 2023). The processes of social reproduction within – and of – these communities include, but are not limited to, care work, emotional labour, education and sharing of intellectual knowledge and informal skills, connecting and developing support systems within workers’ households, neighbourhoods and broader society. These processes connect activists to workers, workers with other workers, and activists with workers’ familial and fictive kinship circles. In turn, the activities of social reproduction renew and regenerate the worker not only for productive work, but equally, for life-making. Life-making in this sense is about

both survival, but also about transgressing the status quo, not only for the worker, but also for the range of communities they are embedded in.

Hall's (2023) work on gender violence provides clarification on the dual quality of social reproduction – its relationship to capitalism and its substance – that is particularly useful for understanding the activist-worker relationships and the cultivation of affective communities that my research speaks of. She notes that “as a set of social relations necessary to capital and yet shaped both inside and outside of its logics, social reproduction is a liminal space, a place of day-to-day resistance to dominant material and ideological systems of power” (322). She further argues that “[t]he relations of social reproduction remain untamed, dictated by intimate and life-giving imperatives that extend far beyond the demands of capital” (341). The analytic utility and applicability of the concept of social reproduction for this research lies, therefore, in its substance: its ability to clarify the transgressive and transformative potential of the processes and activities of social reproduction for life-making, both for workers and their micro-communities.

The cultivation and maintenance of social networks – be it activist-worker relationships or worker-worker relationships – and the slow building and integration of workers' neighbourhoods and micro-communities into these networks entails the mundane, repetitive, emotional, intimate, and intergenerational care work and education. As with social reproductive labour more broadly – and what became further clarified through in my conversations with labour activists – is that these roles and tasks are generally under-valued, private, and done primarily by women organizers in spaces of socialization. In turn, these life-making processes of social reproduction are neither recognized nor given the level of importance it warrants, become invisibilized within the

range of activist strategies and processes, and become displaced from the transgressive and transformative role they play in shaping the very possibility of the labour mobilizations that we see and study. What became abundantly clear through my research with activists and workers is the very real need to (re)visibilize them, and to develop strategy and tactics to put them into practice in effort to create the communities of care described by Francisco-Menchavez (2018) and Tungohan (2023) for not only material improvements, but for the cultivation of community and a critical hope, particularly among new, inexperienced workers in the industry.

My conversations with organizers drew me into these strategies of re-visibilizing these processes of social reproduction: forming, nurturing and sustaining relationships between workers, building camaraderie and trusted networks, creating and implementing practices that educate workers and create a sense of belonging and ownership in the broader activist community. Much of the tactics to implement these strategies are purposefully relegated to sites of social reproduction by organizers: to workers' homes, neighbourhoods and other community spaces, to foster activist-worker and worker-worker trust, solidarity, and camaraderie, but equally, to draw in and work through the kinship, and familial groupings workers are embedded in. These spaces of social reproduction are activated as covert sites of resistance (Tungohan, 2023), serving as both a short-term, practical tactic (to bypass patriarchal barriers and challenges in developing relationships with women) and a long-term strategy (to build solidarity with the different communities they are a part of). Given that the composition of workers' homes, neighbourhoods, and other places of socialization are intergenerational and comprised of co-workers and workers from other RMG factories, these micro-communities of care are

where notions of shared experience are reinforced in the course of daily discussion, informal patterns of interaction, and so on. The informality of everyday life, and the discussions of the matters that preoccupy the minds and concerns of these worker communities, often mean that the ideas discussed, strategies and plans hatched, and networks which form, are imperceptible to those outside these communities, precisely because they integrate place-based and/or lived experience-based tactics. The specificity of this type of organizing is therefore bound to the personalized nature of these spaces.

The nature of these organizing spaces is also reflected in the form of organizing itself: the development and nurturing of dissident friendships (Gandhi, 2006; Chowdhury and Philipose (2016) between workers, activists, and other community members. Much of it is informal and based on existing kinship or friendship ties to workers and the premise of it consists of building trust, framing a common struggle and the critical hope that transformation of the status quo is possible and within reach of workers. The organic and cultivated forms of dissident friendships bind workers and activists in ways that go well beyond organizing and in large part draws on support and solidarity through personal and familial vulnerabilities. Workers will often turn, for example, to their co-workers – before familial or other pre-existing friendship networks above – for emotional, financial support or other personal advice. What dissident friendships allow then, are communities for care, love, support, for survival on the one hand, and equally, serve as covert sites of resistance that activate worker-worker solidarity on the other.

The reproduction of dissident friendships – whether through the expansion of existing friendships, kinships circles, household relationships, neighbourhood or other groupings – is at the heart of connecting women workers with activists and other workers

from within and beyond their factories. As Gandhi (2006) and Chowdhury and Philipose (2016) show, these forms of friendships are neither simply calculated, strategic and political alliances, nor driven merely by a form of sisterhood; my research suggests that they are both. They are complex relationships that are themselves sites of power, struggle, care, trust, all of which are specific to particular socioeconomic and political moments, and fundamentally, about solidarity. It is these relationships that workers and activists rely on to create and diffuse a sense of collectivity amongst women.

Affective Organizing and Belonging

A materialist conceptualization of affect offers important insights on the ways in which affective relations are crucial to collective agency. Building from Hennessy's (2009, 2013) materialist framework of affect-culture – the transmission of sensation and cognition through cultural practices – to show how affective relations can create alternative ways of knowing and surviving (2009, 311), my research suggests that affective organizing strategies are pivotal because they nurture dissident friendships and create spaces for reproducing these relationships over time, and cultivate a sense of belonging and political subjectivity amongst nonorganized women. It is this which activates pre-existing micro-communities – be they organized around kinship, friendship, fictive familial circles – into the communities of care and covert sites of resistance as described by Francisco-Menchavez (2018) and Tungohan (2023). I refer to these circles as micro-communities because they very often consist of only 2-3 people, though sometimes more; they are in some form of relationship with one another (for example, women that connect with one another as friends and who work on the same factory floor); and their networks overlap with other groups (intergenerational family

members, for example, that live in the same household and work in the same factory; groups of neighbours that work in the same factory and walk home together; and so on). The micro here denotes both the small size and the informal nature of these groups.

Activating these spaces is in large part about broadening the membership of, and fostering integration within, these micro-communities that span across factory floors and go deep into workers' households and neighbourhoods. Before they can broaden these communities, however, organizers and activists have to first integrate *themselves* in order to reach women facing different forms of *baadha* (barriers) to organizing. Thus, much of the organizing is about ensuring a deep integration into these circles; the deeper and denser the relationships formed between workers, the more integrated they are into activism and organizing.

Being integrated into workers' kinship, friendship and other micro-communities give organizers the ability to create and implement various strategies for creating feelings of inclusion and subjective well-being. As with Hardy and Cruz (2019), I found there to be an overwhelming and strategic focus on positive affects on the part of organizers. In my conversations with them, I learned about the range of strategies that they implement in order to bring workers into activist spaces, feel included in programs and activities (for example, workers' health campaigns for themselves and their families), and to foster a sense of belonging with other workers. These strategies were implemented through formal institutions (such as workers' centres and NGO offices) or in informal sites of social reproduction. As organizers relayed to me, one of their biggest challenges was to bring women into activist spaces where workers and activists can get to know each other. These strategies were therefore developed to increase the associative possibilities for both

worker-to-activist and worker-to-worker. In turn, these associative possibilities open up to create spaces and opportunities to form relationships and networks which, over time, form the (possibility for) basis for the production and development of new subjectivities and identities as workers, activists, dissidents, comrades and so on. Similar to the way in which Bourdieu (1986) conceptualized social capital, the deliberate sociability of workers through these dissident friendships across various micro-communities forms the basis of both migrant workers' survival and activates their sense of being a collective.

Held together by positive affects and a vision of a shared struggle, workers' micro-communities serve as repositories and sites of *potential* resistance. The subjectivities formed do not always appear as political or politicized; nor are they always acted upon or mobilized. What they do is normalize norms of participation, solidarity, and foster a collective outlook that resonate with the individual experiences of workers. This dynamic interplay between a keenly felt *shared* individual experience, and a growing collective outlook, are important dimensions that make possible participation in forms of political life that were once outside the realm of possibility for many women workers. For organizers, activating women workers in the RMG industry is in large part about broadening the membership of, and fostering integration within, the micro-communities that spans across factory floors and go deep into worker communities. The strategies, tactics, and goals of affective organizing that I observed shows the creative agency of labour organizers and workers. Whereas activism suggests acts of resistance – of varying forms and content – organizing centers and emphasizes the role of (an) agent(s) in *creating* such acts, giving it direction and rationalizing its meaning, tying the act to longer-term goals. The term organizing therefore unveils the extent of work and

creative agency that goes into activism, let alone sustaining it. Focusing on activism alone tends to naturalize the work of movement building, and renders invisible the toll it takes on organizers and those around them – such as their families, friends and communities of which they are a part. Furthermore, in naturalizing the work of movement building, we assume that such work is either effortless or unnecessary – structural conditions, the argument appears to be, determines movement action. But as organizers know only all too well, organizing is hard work. Not only do they face structural barriers, but they also encounter internal challenges that require affective organizing – of motivating, engaging, activating, educating, innovating, and sustaining a community of organizers and activists. This is especially true when attempting to organize nonorganized workers with little to no exposure to activism itself. It is important then to understand how organizing is sustained and made viable.

Drawing from Scott's (1990) concept of *infrapolitics* – the disguised, low profile and undeclared forms of political action – I argue that the work of organizers is too often also unseen, undocumented, or as a consequence of its relative invisibility and informality, deemed analytically unimportant. But as Choudry (2015) suggests, it is important to engage with the intellectual life of activists who organize for social, political, and ecological justice – particularly, the learning, knowledge, debates, and theorizing that worker-intellectuals engage in. This, in turn, means that we often miss something which is vitally important, and is surely deserving of more study – the seemingly mundane, but essential, work of day-to-day organizing. This work, which depending on either time or situation can manifest itself in different forms (such as care work, education work, training work, mentorship work, general outreach, etc.) – happens

both within the existing community of organizers, as well as with potential new members to expand the base of organizers and to ensure that the base can sustain itself. And, as Bleakney and Choudry (2013) remind us, community outreach itself presents opportunities for workers' education and mobilization. My conversations with organizers in Dhaka reaffirmed this assertion that there is in fact a false separation that tends to exist between community and labour organizing, and to overcome this, we need to look more closely at "the key sites of informal and non-formal learning and knowledge production" for labour activists (Ibid, 578). These key sites of socialization and social reproduction, in turn reveal the variation and specificities of the often overlooked and understudied tactics and strategies for developing worker-to-activist and worker-to-worker relationships to generate and indeed, scale-up, a form of collective agency of workers in solidarity with one another. The sense of trust, and feeling of belonging, in these spaces is what activates dissident friendships.

Shared experience of exploitation in the workplace is one reason for bringing these women together, but it is not the reason that makes them cohere as a group. As Chun (2016) recounts in her study of alternative histories of grassroots worker organising, "[w]hile anger can be a powerful mobilising force, it does not automatically translate into empowered forms of collective agency" (138) and instead points to the "significance of alternative political traditions that have cultivated political agency and collective solidarity for 'traditional denizens' around non-work social identities and communities" (144). My research suggests that affective organizing within kinship, friendship and other micro-communities is what builds women's collective agency – the ways in which women chose to come together around a common struggle and mobilize to

create change on its behalf – amongst an otherwise nonorganized group. I argue that strategies for affective organizing reproduce, and make viable, and expand dissident friendships to micro-communities of workers. Returning to Hall (2023), it is these life-making processes of social reproduction that reproduce workers’ micro-communities, thereby creating life-enhancing communities for women – and their families and others they share their lives with – to not only survive and grow in, but equally, to develop a sense of belonging in, and political and strategic alliance to. What makes them organize together is not only the fact that they have a common employer against whom to launch their grievances as workers, but also, because they have come to see in each other themselves – shared personal histories, dreams and aspirations, an affirmation of the value and purpose of their workplace and non-workplace struggles/achievements, and perhaps most importantly, the critical hope that they can transform their reality in their collective form. In this way, organizing together appears almost common-sensical to those workers who have formed deep bonds and have the strongest relationships with their co-workers, but less so for those women who have been at the margins of friendship, kinship and other groupings.

Building from Chun’s method of recentering the lives of women, I find that it is through women’s sense of belonging, alliance, and solidarity found within dissident friendships and affective communities that fosters class consciousness. Given the absence of the labour movement in the lives of most of these women, affective organizing serves as an alternative political tradition that ultimately cultivates a collective and political agency around their subjectivities as women. These friendships and communities around women workers are at heart built less around their work identities and working-class

status and more around their struggles as women that are (re)making their lives in urban areas with varying access to life-making support systems such as healthcare, childcare, education, and so on.

It is the long-term and largely invisible affective organizing that makes the more visible manifestations of collective agency and political action possible. Direct action – whether they take the form of rallies, strikes, or workplace occupations are thus rarely as spontaneous as they appear. More often, they are the product of detailed and preparatory work which includes bringing activists together, visioning sessions, internal education and consciousness building, and clearly outlining the steps required for the action to bear fruit. Creating activist communities is often the most challenging aspect of this work, as workers and activists rarely see immediate and direct results from their labour, which can be demotivating as there is no way to know in advance how successful – if at all – they will be in mobilizing people. The broader point, however, is that despite the difficulty of the work, it is essential to what people ‘see’ as political work. But focusing exclusively on the visible politics of contention – either its successes or failures – leaves unremarked the degree of organizational activity behind the scenes that made it possible. As this dissertation shows, much of this type of organizing is done by women organizers. The work of reproducing nurturing trusting relationships, systems of support for well-being and inclusion, and activist communities is effectively naturalized as women’s characteristics, rather than as strategy and tactics by creative agents, and as such, affective organizing is ‘read out’ of activism by male organizers and much academic research on activism.

Affective Micro-Communities, Nari Srawmik, and Infrastructures of Dissent

Affective organizing involves reproducing dissident friendships and micro-communities organized around kinship, friendship and other circles. The hope of organizers is to collectivize and politicise workers' identities. The host of affective communities that form are dynamic: at times they cohere (for example at times of public displays of contention in times of crises) and at times, they *appear* to disappear (for example, in the absence of public manifestations). This dissertation aims to show that similar to Scott's concept of infrapolitics, the unobtrusive realm of political struggle, the mundane affective work of community building entails sustained, crucial, and hard work of organizers. Moving beyond Scott's theorization, I argue that the reason these periods appear as nonactive periods of activism is precisely because we don't read these activities as activism proper; rather, there is a tendency on our part to dismiss these activities as merely activities associated with social reproduction, *because* they are taken up largely by women in spaces of socialization and reproduction.

There are three key issues here. One, we limit ourselves to only study what is a public display and as such, fail to see the full course of organizing that takes place. Two, we misinterpret the strategies, tools and tactics developed by those on the ground. Three, we assume that those who do not take on a public role neither contribute to the movement's growth, nor have a stake in its evolution. My research shows that these limitations devalue the nascent and real organizing that women workers in the RMG sector are engaged in. It also requires that we reconceptualize the notion of an infrastructure of dissent (Webber, 2012; Sears, 2014) to include spaces, actors and institutions that are traditionally left out of it because affective communities expand and

contribute to the evolution of such an infrastructure of dissent by bringing in workers that have been largely left out of traditional workers' institutions.

As Sears (2014) outlines, an infrastructure of dissent consists of a variety of institutions that collectively work to build the capacity of rank-and-file workers through critical and popular education in a range of physical and virtual spaces. Workers need institutions to build and generate counter-hegemonic ideas and strategies, to achieve effective communication independent of the state and corporate media, and to archive and share memories, tools and tactics of past struggles. At a national level, this broad infrastructure of dissent includes institutions that range from the informal networks of workplaces, neighbourhoods, and communities, to the structured settings of plant-level trade unions, and national labour federations; at the global level, it includes international labour unions, and international solidarity activists. As Sears notes, an infrastructure of dissent provides the means for workers to address their fragmentation as well as diversity (in regards to their level of political consciousness, demographic composition etc.), to make sense of their own experiences – both in the past and present – and develop autonomous capacities and a political culture that may be reproduced both in the workplace and in the community; this is crucial for driving the working-class as well as activist mobilization. As Sears further notes, the infrastructure of dissent itself is renewed and restructured in response to the restructuring/ reorganizing of production as well as social reproduction.

Webber (2012) adapts Sears's concept of infrastructure of dissent to formulate the notion of infrastructure of class-struggle. For him, an infrastructure of class-struggle includes all those formal and informal networks – in the workplace, community,

household, land and territory – that orient, organize, politicise, and mobilize the class-struggles of the largely indigenous proletarian and peasant majority, such that “revolutionary memories and popular cultures of resistance and opposition can be sustained and adapted to changing contexts of struggle” (20). This conceptualization is helpful because it shows that class consciousness cannot be taken out of the practical process and the context within which they occur; for RMG workers, we are speaking specifically about young women and this has an impact on the ways in which they become conscious of their class-based struggle, specifically, through their gender-based identity. This shows that what has largely been considered non-material in the eyes of many, actually has infused within it, a very material reality.

Building from Sears and Webber’s conceptualization of an infrastructure of dissent, this dissertation explores the ways in which a wide range of institutions can help nonorganized women new to waged work develop a class consciousness. In the context of the RMG industry in Bangladesh, intergenerational households, intra- and inter-factory networks, district-based networks connecting workers from the same rural ‘home,’ development NGOs are particularly important for bringing workers together, to orient and to politicise them as *nari srawmik*. The dual emphasis that is placed on both workers’ gender and status as workers is important because it points to the ways that the development of class consciousness is intricately tied to their perception of their gender for these workers and organizers. In this dissertation, we see that making the connection between gender and class is particularly helpful for organizers because of the strategies they use to mobilize workers both on the production floor and across spaces of social reproduction.

As women who have been left out of traditional workers' institutions and the broader labour movement, these organizers appear to reify the notion that the subjugation of labour to capital itself cannot be seen or understood as having a direct and causal relationship to the development of class consciousness; rather, as Thompson (1963) argued, class consciousness is more of a relationship and process than a structure. The analytical connection drawn by Thompson between experience and class consciousness indicates that the development of class consciousness is a long and complicated process, one that cannot be taken for granted among heterogeneous groups of people. Instead, the development of class consciousness can only be determined by self-activity in a complex social web in which one's class position is bound up with, and experienced through other historically relevant social relations of power – such as race, gender, nationality, ethnicity, immigration status, etc. The complex totality of social relations and historical legacies that human beings are embedded in, and the products of, means that at a theoretical level, we must be prepared to explore how various social relations of power impact the unity of workers and the conception of class. To put it another way, class formation cannot be taken for granted because both because it is a) a process, and one that changes and evolves over time and b) because it is ultimately determined by the self-activity and political practice of the class in making. Thompson's analysis of the ways in which experience, and the self-activity of historical actors create class identity – that is, come to see themselves as constituting and being part of a class – is important because it demonstrates that workers themselves are actively present and active in the process of class-formation. Indeed for Thompson – and these organizers – the factory system alone does not produce a working class, it is merely a pre-condition of its formation. The focus

on the subjective experience of otherwise objective relations is important because consciousness – or awareness of one's class – will always and necessarily be a subjective response to an existing objective mode of production. To suggest otherwise – that is, to suggest that political activity and self-organization will inevitably occur in the face of exploitation – merely romanticizes the possibilities rather than analyzes it when it does.

The strategies of RMG organizers show us, in concrete ways, that the experience of class is shaped by workers' social positioning and that they will necessarily understand, see, and interpret their class position through their current social status. This is because workers cannot disembody the various relations of power that prescribe their bodies – and minds – from their particular social position and *as such*, they cannot understand or articulate their class from outside this social location. To this end, gender is a central determinant of class consciousness in the RMG sector because for the majority of women workers, dispossession and entry into the garment industry is the first step in their entry to formal waged work. Before their move to urban centres, the majority of women were either doing unpaid household or agricultural work. The fact that they move to the city, cognizant of the reality that the garment industry is an option for them to earn money, is interesting as it indicates that somewhere along the way, would-be migrants are either told, or intuitively knew, that they can become waged workers *because* they are women. That is to say that the waged work available to women – be it in garment production or domestic labour – is tied to a very gendered set of skills or characteristics that women are understood to embody: skills and characteristics such as obedience, hard work, dexterity, dedication, among others. These traits helped women to navigate gender-based power relations in the home (for example, in relation to grandfathers, fathers,

brothers, uncles, husbands or fathers-in-law, or other males in their immediate or extended families), and it is these attributes that are valued in the garment industry, and for which they will receive a wage. There are two interesting things to note here: one is the transition these young women make from unpaid to paid work on the basis of their gender, and the second is the knowledge they bring – i.e. how to negotiate and navigate power hierarchies – from their unpaid labour duties to the waged labour setting.

To this end, organizers and workers in the RMG industry understand their working-class status as a gendered status; as such, the strategies adopted by organizers reflect this interplay of class and gender across the various institutions they work through. It is in large part this premise that pushes their organizing into spaces of social reproduction and through institutions that normally fall outside of the scope of traditional workers' institutions. And, it is in this way that their strategies and tactics push our current conceptualization of an infrastructure of dissent.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I explored the relationship between the reproduction of dissident friendships and affective communities, and the development of class consciousness among nonorganized workers. I argued that what encourages the development of class consciousness is women's participation and sense of membership in, and belonging to, affective communities. This sense of belonging is developed continuously and in ways that mimic the activities of social reproduction itself – through learning, teaching, care work, and cultivating and nurturing of various relations between activists, workers and community members. Finally, I explored the role of affective communities in developing class consciousness amongst these workers, and expanding and contributing to an

evolving infrastructure of dissent by bringing in workers that have been largely left out of traditional workers' institutions.

Chapter 4: Women Workers in Bangladesh Organizing in the Ready-made Garment Sector

In the previous chapter, I explored the relationship between the reproduction of dissident friendships and affective communities, and the development of class consciousness among nonorganized workers. This chapter grounds the analytical framework discussed. It is organized around the following question: how might the labour organizing experiences of young, nonorganized women workers in Bangladesh's RMG sector help broaden the way in which class consciousness and activism are theorized?

The first section of this chapter looks at the experience of class by young rural women. Here, I provide an overview of the life of the average RMG worker/activist – including their experience of migration from the countryside, finding work in the city, how and why they came to start working in the RMG industry, and experiences of home away from home. I examine how these experiences impact the development of their class consciousness. The second section of this chapter explores the agency of young women as they become RMG workers and activists. The third section of this chapter looks at the process of activation in women and the ways in which it affects their lives. The final section explores the parallel: social reproductive labour is the necessary and invisibilized counterpart to productive labour as affect is the necessary and invisibilized counterpart to activism and the building of a community of activists.

The Experience of Class by Young Rural Women

As discussed in Chapter 3, the experience of class and the development of class consciousness is powerfully shaped by the different social relations of power within

which workers are embedded. This includes those related to gender, race, and age, all of which contribute to uneven patterns of incorporation into political and organizational life, and therefore, the uneven development of class consciousness. In the context of RMG workers in Bangladesh, women workers' gender precludes them from participation in existing workers' organizations, while at the same time, provides them the opportunity to participate in non-traditional workers' organizations such as women's NGOs and other informal networks within their communities and neighbourhoods. What also affects RMG women workers' development as workers – and therefore, their ability to think of themselves *as such* – is their experience of migration from rural Bangladesh as well as their age. This raises the question to what extent do we need to think through the ways in which rural culture and experience shapes the class identities of these workers. Indeed, these workers generally arrive at garment work young, single and/or unmarried, and whose only work experience is generally unpaid domestic and care labour. Building from the stories of women like Sultana, Reena, and others who moved to Dhaka in search of work because of unforeseen financial difficulties, let us now turn to their experience of looking for work, entry into gender-specific waged labour, and how and why they came to start working in the RMG industry.

Before moving to the city, women were generally aware of the employment options available to them. The 'respectable' options were limited and included domestic work in middle- or upper-class homes and garment work as both fields of employment were seen as comprising a form of 'home away from home.' Garment work provides a greater income than domestic work where average entry-level work for new, inexperienced workers ranges from 8000 BDT (\$72.90) in garment work as opposed to

3000-5000 BDT (\$27.38-45.56) per month, plus the option of food and board in domestic work. For a lot of women, garment work not only provides a greater income, but also more security in the sense that they do not have to live or work for long periods in the home of strangers. The option that most women choose then is that which pays them the most and where they feel safe as women. Indeed, the perception of garment work is that there are greater opportunities for advancement where one can move from entry level positions such as cutting work to machine operators which offers workers a better wage, skills development, and thus, the option to move to other factories in search of even better wages. In the case of domestic work, wages do not substantially increase with experience, nor are there as many opportunities to switch employers.

In entering waged work, young women are confronted not just with having to think about negotiating and bargaining for their wage, or weighing options to protect their physical security, but also of suddenly having to think about a career. In addition to workplace issues, women migrants also have to find adequate and affordable housing, pay their way around the city, and be integrated into a society of non-relatives. In the village context, women never had to think through these life-choices as this was dictated by their parents, brothers, or extended family. And perhaps most importantly, in addition to having to 'fend for themselves,' women migrants are also confronted with having to work for someone other than those living in the same household or those who they know.

As young women, the worlds of these migrants were shaped and defined in large part by the hierarchies of family. Their experience of other forms of hierarchy multiplies substantially upon entry into the urban landscape, as waged workers – that is, outside the home. Here, they are met with hierarchies of class (in the workplace as well as in society

– i.e. as reflected in various residential neighbourhoods, the markets in which people shop, the forms of transportation people utilize, and spaces of leisure), race (made evident by the foreign buyers who visit the factories in which they work, the places they frequent in the city that are off-limits to workers – for example, special neighbourhoods characterized by heavily securitized hotels and restaurants), and gender (in the workplace, the lowest paid work of cutting, trimming, and sewing are done in the same spaces by women while men hold floor-supervisor positions, and mid-management and upper management positions). Thus, it is only through their entry into formal work – outside the household – that women become exposed to the diverse forms, sources, and expressions of power.

On the one hand, waged work in the RMG industry – and the exploitation that ensues – is seen as somewhat familiar to that encountered in the home or village community. They are used to labour-intensive domestic work and around the clock affective labour of care and emotional work – both of which are unpaid. On the other hand, working outside of their household or community makes their exploitation feel more questionable as exploitation here is not rooted in familial relations. The experience of gender-based exploitation in the household in a sense socializes would-be migrants for further exploitation in the workplace. At the same time, however, working for and being exploited by someone other than the family means that it appears less normalized and therefore, a more readily contestable form of exploitation. Furthermore, surrounded in the urban landscape by other waged workers, and living in households that are less defined by naturalized kinship-based relations, women begin to draw connections between their new class position (whether they experience it as class *per se* or not) and their gender.

These women know why the range of employment options are limited, and restricted to positions akin to reproductive labour, such as caring for children, cooking, cleaning and washing etc., or those which necessitate disciplined, demanding, and repetitive labour, such as sewing, cutting, trimming, packing, cleaning etc. under strict time constraints. It is because they come to the city with no formal skills, making them less competitive in the labour market. Yet, the labour they are being hired to do is precisely that which they are supposedly trained for, naturally, as women. This irony has not gone unnoticed, and further helps to bring into sharper focus the ways in which gender determines class position.

In Chapter 3, I argued that sociological categories such as race, gender, urban and/or rural shape the development of class consciousness. I further argued that we cannot abstract the experience of this process out of workers' social reality – that which is shaped by parallel, but interlinked social relations of power. Building from this theoretical premise, here I am showing how the women I interviewed and observed during the course of my research came to occupy a working-class position and class-based exploitation because of their gender, and became conscious of the connection between their gender and their class. In my conversations with organizers, I quickly became aware of how little workers and organizers referred to their struggle for change in terms of class; it was first and foremost related to their gender. This does not mean they are not conscious of their working-class position in society; rather, it is because they are not integrated into institutions (unions, political parties and so on) that organize around class-based issues. The development of class consciousness is something that evolves, over time, upon integration into the various alternative institutions and political

strategies. As my research suggests, workers' centres and NGOs and the range of affective organizing strategies they implement are one way for nonorganized women to develop a sense of class consciousness, understanding their shared experiences of exploitation and organize collectively.

Agency of Women Workers

Mainstream narratives and social perceptions of women working in the RMG sector in Bangladesh are that they are lucky. They have the opportunity, and most importantly the means, to sustain their families in villages or contribute to family income, and to have the chance at becoming modern working women with bargaining power in the household. While the feeling of agency in being able to do this certainly came through in my interviews, workers and activists also pointed to the sources of disempowerment they feel when they become workers, be it on the basis of their age or gender. A sense of agency was restored, however, in the discussion of their experiences as organizers. How might the experience of being waged workers and the experience of organizing problematize our understanding of women's agency? Moving away from assertions which reduce the experience of women workers in the RMG sector to exploitation, I document the ways in which collectives are born, and agency forged by and through the work of garment workers, something that is missing from mainstream analysis of agency. This may be seen as a 'classed' reading of agency, something that is crucial for us to think through when discussing organizing women.

When interviewing current and former RMG women workers, I noted time and again the extent to which financial struggles had led them to garment work, and their relief and excitement at the prospect of finding work in the industry. As Sultana

described, she was young, and looking forward to working, earning an income to support her family and herself while also lamenting the loss she felt that she could no longer go to school even though that is what she really wanted to do. As she recounted for me, she started working as a helper when she was 11 years old: *“Sometimes I felt good, but other times I felt bad because I had bought the books but couldn't go to school. In class 5, I got second division in my exams, my results were good, my roll number never dropped below 2. As a student I was good. My parents were sad too because they knew I was a good student but I couldn't continue my education. Another reason I felt bad is that if I continued to study, my younger siblings would not be able to go on. I can't just look after my shukh [happiness] ... So I thought, let me work hard so that my brother can have a good future. That's what I told myself.”* Reena described a similar experience, as did many others that I interviewed. Common to their experiences was a sense of financial empowerment and independence from family members: a sense of agency that they did not, and could not, before experience, and which only became apparent in the process of migrating to the city, living away from relatives and their community, building a new community for themselves, acquiring work, sending money home, and even saving some wages – or at the very least, having a say on how the funds they earn are spent. While earning wages is a big part of their sense of empowerment, the agency I am referring to here however encompasses more than their financial empowerment – it came from the totality of experiences that made women aware of their potential *as women*, and their ability to actualize for themselves a very different life from that which they had previously led.

Farzana captured this type of agency best in her reflections on how far she had grown as a woman while organizing. As she described, with organizing came her confidence to become more independent, speak up for what she believes in, and to do as she pleases, whether or not it was acceptable to her husband. She notes for example, how her range of choices expanded as she became an organizer – choices related to her work and personal life. She noted that she got the opportunity to choose even whether she wanted to be intimate with him. Similarly, as Noori recounted the struggles of negotiating with – and ultimately defying – her husband and his opposition to her activism, she noted with pride and determination, *“if I don’t open my mouth [to speak up], who will?... If I had a daughter, I would want her to be like me.”* Rono, on the other hand, explains how proud she felt to be known to others as an activist. As she notes, she likes the respect she has earned: *“I can walk down the street with my head held high. Everyone looks at me and says no one can buy this woman out. This, for me, is my greatest source of power.”* And finally, Rahima explained how others came to rely on her increasingly for a range of supports, not just within the workplace. She explained to me the responsibilities she shoulders as a *Leader-Apa* [sister who is a leader]: *“now when there are problems, we run over to help out. If a worker has problems, we don’t sit around at home. Once we build a relationship ... we talk to them, we help with legal cases, we talk or give notices to employers on their behalf.”*

These experiences highlight the development of women’s individual agency through their organizing experiences: in particular, the way in which organizing facilitated a growing awareness among women of their own power, be it to transform their working conditions, or their personal relationships, to project – and become – the

person they wanted to be. These experiences also show that the expanded agency these women felt as they assumed more leadership and public roles as organizers, far beyond what they felt as waged workers. Much of this is because as activists, they grew to realize their potential as mentors, and that their mobilizing could have a real effect on the lives of women, quite aside from that provided by financial empowerment. They could, in other words, as women become agents of change, something that had been out of their reach prior to joining the formal workforce. By doing informal shopfloor organizing, participating in and coordinating union drives, educating and learning with other RMG workers within their homes or neighbourhoods, these women use their expanded feminist agency to develop a consciousness of the collective. On the other hand, agency that they gain from entering the formal labour market potentially gives them increased bargaining power within the household and helps them to become more independent, but it does not necessarily open them up for thinking about the livelihood of others beyond themselves and perhaps their families. In organizing with other women, however, they are exposed to women who collectively drive the change they want to see not just for themselves in their workplaces, but also their co-workers and members whom they have started to see as their own families. As Rahima explained to me, the responsibilities of being a *Leader Apa*, means that you not only develop a close relationship with your co-workers, you also start to see them and their families as *apan jon* (an extension of yourself and family).

The sense of *nijeder lokh* (our people) or *apan jon* extends to members beyond their workplaces, to those embedded within their micro-communities of these organizers and workers. Characterized by friendship, kinship and more, these life-enhancing micro-communities allow women to feel a sense of belonging which comes from being deeply

integrated into them. Collective agency is that which inheres in these micro-communities of women: laden with material resources and affective ties, women with a sense of belonging to these communities act as agents *for* it. Collective agency in this sense is about reproducing and ensuring the survival of the micro-community as a whole. Affective strategies that prioritize these show the extent to which organizers think through the ways in which women's agency is reflected in, and shaped by, the ability of micro-communities to create transformative action. The organizing strategies (as will be examined in greater detail in Chapter 5), therefore, are as much about individual women workers as they are about changing the persisting mores that define the social worlds of women.

Activation and Dissent

In Chapter 3, I argued for the need to distinguish between activism and organizing – activism being the actions taken to further specific goals and objectives, and organizing constitutive of the range of activities workers and activists do to make the activism sustainable in the long-term. Building from this argument, this section argues while economic exploitation, sexual harassment, denial of rights, coupled with charismatic activists and resources, help catalyze workers' activism, they do not explain how such activism is sustained in the long-run. For this, it is important to consider the centrality of relationships embedded in this process: the way in which relationships are formed and the affect mobilized for the purposes of community building, its impact on the women's sense of belonging in, and to, the activist community, as well as themselves as contributing members to it.

For the majority of RMG workers I spoke with, activation began slowly, in the ‘lull periods’ in political contention. Similar to Dutta (2020)’s ethnographic work with women in export processing zones in Tamil Nadu, my participants confirmed that their connection to one another also grew out of the everyday social practice of care and emotional bonds including that of friendships and variations of ‘mentor-mentee’/younger sister-older sister relationships with activists in their workplace, from which their ‘training’ began. They were drawn to activists within their workplace because they had encountered instances of workplace harassment and/or instances of non-payment of wages, alongside other difficulties. Workplace and employment-related problems were then the initial reasons why and how workers came into conversation with particular individuals. As Rono noted, the women in her workplace knew that she was an activist with ties to a workers’ centre, and that they could speak to her if they encountered problems at work. But in other instances, particularly with younger, newer workers, friendships formed as they were often with the same groups of women for the majority of their waking day, where personal struggles, hopes and dreams, and other forms of everyday conversation served to draw them closer together. Unlike romanticized notions of sisterhood, these worker-to-worker relationships are forged and nurtured not only from the growing familiarity, but often because of a sense of mutual care.

While it is certainly true that the friendships and relationships forged in these instances are not always, or even predominately, done with the intention of activating or mobilizing other worker, it is also true that in many instances they were. What is interesting, however, is the extent to which friendships and bonds between people actually moved the activation and mobilization along. The slow, ongoing, and at times

imperceptible acculturation of new workers to working-class life and culture that developed from these relationships had the effect of both ‘renewing’ both the *worker* – providing a new and enriched sense of self in the workplace – and at the same time, the *person*, in that through these relationships individuals became integrated into a broader culture and community.

My interviews and informal conversations with RMG workers and activists in Dhaka showed that workers did not become active or mobilize because working conditions in the industry or workplace were poor or declining. These were merely the broader, general context in which jobs were worked and lives were lived. What made workers engaged was the relationships they were embedded in. These relationships provided workers with the motivation and the courage to work together, and in their day-to-day struggles, an awareness of their strength. The character and context of these relationships proved all the more important as they were formed amid the relative absence workers’ centres and/or unions. As such, when workers do come into contact with these labour bodies, they arrive with a wealth of informal knowledge both of the conditions of work and an understanding of the need and potential of collective action, helping in turn to enrich the more formal, institutionalized knowledge of these organizing bodies. Because RMG workers in Dhaka have not had much experience with formal workers’ organizing and institutions until only very recently, they come to both with perspectives drawn from both their workplace and community relationships. There is then, in Bangladesh, an interesting process of collective education occurring in workplaces and labour centers across the country, one that brings together the education, institutional memory of workers’ organizing, and resources for mobilization from formal

institutions, on the one hand, with the experiential knowledge and workplace relationships of informally organized workers, on the other. While there is certainly a convergence between the efforts of formal workers' institutions and the growing cadres of more independent organizers operating at the local level, it is still the case that new workers – young, recently arrived migrants – are often unaware why they ought to organize together, and untrusting of organizational efforts. It is only from hearing, discussing, and debating with coworkers, over a period of time, that the benefits and rationale of collective action gradually become apparent. But more importantly, it is only when bonds of trust and comradery begin to develop amongst workers that understanding transforms into sustained organizing.

As workers become aware of the need for collective action and feel comfortable enough to take part in its realization, they generally do not jump headlong into organizing, but do so in small, incremental steps. This often takes the form first of open conversation: discussing issues with friends, and friends of friends, within their homes, and with other co-workers. While this would appear small, this initial step is actually the biggest hurdle to overcome. To recognize not that only something is wrong, but that something can be done to correct it, denotes a shifting consciousness. But it is also a recognition that confronting regimes of injustice first entails being secure in the knowledge that support and supportive networks exist: from co-workers, family and community. For Keya, for example, the catalyst was a fire within her own factory whereby she was told to stay upstairs; as she notes, even as a young, under-aged worker, she knew that fire rises and that keeping workers in higher floors would inevitably be dangerous if not life-threatening. She started organizing as a result with co-workers she

knew from her workplace. In this example, a very dangerous workplace situation provided the catalyst for action. But more important to doing something about it was this workers' previous relationship with, and knowledge of activists in her workplace. Of the interviews I conducted, Keya was the only one who started mobilizing because of immediate danger in the workplace. The vast majority of the others such as Rahima, Beli, Reena, Antara, Sonya and others started attending popular educational workshops or union training meetings, or started visiting workers' support centres because friends of theirs had assured them that doing so would be beneficial for them in light the problems encountered in the workplace or at home (for example, in relation to childcare, medical needs etc.). The extent to which young women rely on their friendship networks for support and in the process of their self-organization parallels Chowdhury and Philipose (2016) and Tungohan (2023) notion of dissident friendship – in particular, the conditions for developing a collective consciousness of themselves as workers.

When we examine the ways in which women in the RMG sector rely on relationships for emotional and material support both within and beyond the workplace, and the ways in which they draw from the strength of these relationships to become active, it is clear that activation is a gradual process. It is something they struggle with as they attempt to balance the needs and expectations of family members, the social mores that dictate what women can and cannot do, as well as the reality of organizing itself – particularly its time-consuming nature. It is the incremental deepening of their relationships with coworkers and others that ultimately gives women in the RMG sector the confidence and desire to engage in activism, and which contributes to their seeing themselves as part of the broader activist community. Feelings of belonging and the sense

of obligation to a wider community are factors that determine the extent to which workers engage and activate, rather than the realities of exploitation alone. The community – and the sense of horizontal comradeship and solidarity towards others either imagined or understood as belonging to it – is in turn reimagined in ways that gives it shape, meaning, and political alliance for these workers.

Drawing on Anderson's (1983) ideas of imagined communities is helpful here to understand how these imaginings are produced. For Anderson, the key practical and material condition that enabled the formation of imagined communities is print capitalism because it allowed people across a large territory to access shared information and develop a sense of belonging to a community. In the context of activist communities in Bangladesh, it is activist education workshops and other support services created by workers' centres and NGOs, along with the social reproductive work done by activists spanning from factory floors to spaces of socialization. The gains made through workers' participation in these communities include various acts of service such childcare and other caregiving responsibilities, support network and so on. These create life-enhancing communities for women – and their families and others they share their lives with – to not only survive and grow in, but equally, to develop a sense of belonging in, and political and strategic alliance to.

From Community Building to Capacity Building

Returning to Hennessy, in the same way that social reproduction is surplus labour used by capital without being calibrated into the cost of wages, the contributions made by affective labour to organizing is likewise obscured, and devalued. Whereas social reproduction regenerates labour power outside the workplace, ensuring that it can be put

to productive use day after day, the affective work of labour organizers is foundational in its own right as it is the basis upon which sustainable and organized dissent emerges.

Without it, in other words, activists would not, and could not, have a sense of belonging, trust, responsibility and/or obligation to one another. As discussed in the previous section, and which will be detailed further in the next two chapters, it is this sense of social obligation developed among workers and activists that brings them together, and binds them into collective organizing – perhaps even more so than the ‘cause’ itself.

Building from the findings of Chapter 3 and the previous section, I argue in this section that affective labour is a crucial yet overlooked aspect of the organizing underway in the RMG sector. The question this section addresses is: how might we recast women’s organizing in the RMG sector and see the task of building a community of activists as a form of social reproductive labour itself? To this, I argue in the same way that the labour associated with social reproduction is overlooked as a concrete and necessary aspect of productive labour, the women’s organizing plays in the construction of a viable labour movement in the RMG sector is likewise overlooked. I argue further that the task of community building is comparable to activities typically associated with social reproduction itself. What is important to consider as scholars of social movements, community and labour organizing then, is who is doing the organizing work, and what are the parameters they work within?

As I have already established, women workers and labour activists in Dhaka mobilize under very challenging circumstances. The work they are engaged in proceeds at a pace that is slow and incremental, where participation in large part depends on the extent to which individual workers are – and feel themselves to be – integrated into the

worker-activist community. Cognizant of this fact, workplace labour activists make careful effort to bring new and/or younger generation of workers into their fold, as friends, or acquaintances, before engaging them – or expecting them to become engaged – in organizing. As we shall see in the next chapter, as these activists mobilize other women, they tend to at first steer clear of more masculinist forms activism, such as public forms of protest and contention, and place greater emphasis on developing close and personalized relationships with workers – essentially taking care of them both in the workplace and outside it and ensuring that they feel as though they are part of an extended family. This entails a wide range of activities, including care work for their children, alerting them to medical care, legal services, and other support organizations, and being a confidante. These are tasks that are reminiscent of activities typically associated with social reproduction, but the concern here is not to ‘renew’ the worker simply for work, but for activism as well. The production and reproduction of activists and organizers, in this case, means having – or putting – a support system in place so that workers feel part of a much larger social whole, complete with a network and/or community of workers who can and will look out for them both in the workplace and beyond.

Because the trade union movement in Bangladesh is largely male-dominated, and union organizing is largely seen as male, women do not feel comfortable being present in these spaces. And indeed, as Salma noted, the trade union movement in Bangladesh is still resistant to women entering this structure, and they do not know how to organize with women workers. Yet, as she emphasized, it is crucial to get women organized because the reality is that women are now workers, and workers are now women. To get

women workers to enter pre-existing organizing spaces such as trade unions, she realized that she needed to organize women first, to get them to be comfortable with what organizing entails. Rahima's observations clarified the concrete steps activists take to create this comfort: by building friendships and familial relationships where you come to trust one another, rely on one another for support with things beyond workplace issues. As she explained, building trust is difficult; to gain women workers' trust, you do so by building trust with their family. Returning to Rahima's quote at the start of Chapter 3 serves as a reminder to us once again: "*[t]his relationship is not with workers, it's with their households, it's with their families. The families they have – mother, father, brother, sister, other relations – it's with them. They treat us like their own and I treat them like my own.*" These relationships of fictive kinship, in turn, also offer support in ways that families cannot. Rono, from a different workers' centre, corroborated how important relationship building with women is to get them to trust you and in organizing itself. As she noted, relationship building is what leads to a 'cell' of activists within the workplace that can organize together. This type of organizing continues beyond the workplace, often late into the night as they stay up and strategize about their mobilizing efforts. It is from these relationships built on trust and care that ultimately serve as the 'building blocks' of organizers, and the organizing work itself.

Yet, as with reproductive labour, the informal organizing activists in Bangladesh engage in is rarely 'seen' by other activists, particularly male workers within trade union settings. But as with the activities of social reproduction – the labour of which is unseen but central – this informal organizing is central to understanding what is produced by it – that is, the organization and mobilization of women. The informal organizing that is

taking place in RMG factories and within garment worker communities is largely by women; the male activists I met with tended to do less of the frontline or shop-floor organizing than women. This is undoubtedly because young, recent migrant women are more likely to trust and open up to other women than men, and so, there is an implicit understanding that women are better suited for building relationships with these workers. This division of labour draws attention to the gendered dimension of community building, and the emotional labour that *produces* community. Women activists, then, are not only central to building the organizational power of workers in the garment industry, but also the work of sustaining it, principally by developing the capacities of workers in the industry. This is reminiscent once again of the ways in which women's work and organizing is undervalued or de-valued by their male counterparts.

Conclusion

This chapter set out to apply the theoretical interventions developed in Chapter 3 to the context of Bangladesh, as discussed in Chapter 2. The overarching question guiding the discussion in this chapter was: how might the labour organizing experiences in Bangladesh help to expand the way in which women's class consciousness and dissent are theorized?

In the first section of the chapter, I provided a portrait of the average RMG worker/activist – including their experience of migration from the countryside, experience of finding work in the city, how and why they came to start working in the RMG industry, and their experiences of their 'home away from home.' Here, I examined how each of these factors impact the development of class consciousness. In the second section of this chapter, I explored the development of collective agency among women in

the RMG sector as they begin to build bonds with intergenerational family of workers and/or other workers. The third section explored the changes that take place in women as they become activated. And in the last section of the chapter, I looked at how we might conceive of affective organizing as similar to the ways in which social reproduction functions – as a form of community building among workers within and beyond the workplace, a form of capacity building for the labour movement, but which remains, despite its overall importance, an undervalued aspect of organizing, particularly by male organizers.

Chapter 5: Organizing and Being Organized: Institutions of Dissent and Women Workers

[Workers] are not fully awake. To be fully awake, [we] need more time...It is about workers' rights, not women's rights...there is a difference between the two. If we want to earn rights for women, it is necessary for me to seek out help from male workers. It is not possible alone.

Rahima, labour activist

If families can create opportunities for women, society will surely follow.

Monno Miah, labour activist

This chapter explores how women workers in the RMG sector organize in, and are organized by, an institutional matrix of worker-driven NGOs, workers' centres, and intergenerational households. In doing so, the chapter answers two questions. How do women workers in Bangladesh's garment industry engage in labour organizing in the workplace and beyond? And, what institutions are helpful for mobilizing nonorganized women workers and why? In examining the range of formal and informal strategies adopted by labour activists, principally within the collection of institutions just mentioned, I argue that class consciousness is grounded in, and develops from, a distinctive set of highly integrative informal relationships, social networks (Bourdieu, 1986) and sustained affective labour (Gould, 2009; Hennessy, 2013; Hardy and Cruz, 2019; Tungohan, 2023) that broaden the associative possibilities open to women workers, many of whose lives (prior to entering the industry) had been centered around, and limited to, relations with the immediate and extended family. Conscious not only of the class position of these women, but also the cultural politics within which the women workers are enmeshed in Bangladesh, labour activists inside these institutions seek to work within the established networks women workers have developed. In doing so, they aim to harness their associative potential for ends that, I found, not only have

implications for the degree of leverage and bargaining power women workers are able to exercise on the production floor, but critically, the degree to which both can also be exercised in their private and communal lives. This strategy, which is discussed in further detail below, is slowly integrating women into the workers' movement, and workers into the women's movement.

The first section of the chapter examines the different workers' institutions that bring women workers into the world of organizing. These include traditional unions, NGOs and significantly, the private home, many of which are intergenerational households wherein older and younger garment workers live side-by-side. I begin with an overview of the trade union structure in the RMG sector to contextualize the labour landscape. As trade unions were banned in the RMG sector until 2006, I demonstrate how much of the work of mobilizing and organizing women fell to workers organizing outside traditional union structures, often in collaboration with a unique array of worker-driven NGOs. Three such workers' organizations are examined here. Each operates and functions as registered NGOs; however, they also serve as the NGO-arm of three different – and functioning – trade unions. I then discuss the role of the intergenerational home, which is not typically regarded as a workers' institution *per se*. I find that the combination of these institutions play different, but critically important, roles in activating, organizing, and mobilizing young women workers in the RMG sector in ways that are at times collaborative, and at others, contradictory.

The second section explores how institutions active in the RMG sector cultivate interest among women workers and the concrete strategies they implement to mobilize them. In particular, I explore the collaborative strategies and practices – both formal and

informal – adopted by the different workers’ institutions. By formal, I am referring to the public activist training sessions, popular education workshops, and the provision of resources to women workers. By informal, I am referring to the persistent and private efforts of organizers to tap into the social worlds within which the worker is embedded – be it in their homes, their communities, or the relationships they cultivate both on and off the production floor. In examining these two levels of organizing, the affective dimension of organizing – and its relationship to workers’ material wellbeing and engagement – comes into clearer focus. I argue that supplementing formal training with this more informal engagement is a crucial component of why and how RMG women are mobilizing today.

The chapter’s third section broadly considers the growing ‘investment’ in women’s activism, and how the working-class woman has moved to the center of activist politics in Bangladesh. Here, I focus on the collaborative and sometimes contested efforts NGOs, unions, intergenerational workers’ homes, and the international bodies they engage with – NGOs, trade union federations, and transnational social justice movements – to ‘take-up’ and situate the RMG worker. I argue that while much of this interest began with developmental concerns, specifically around issues pertaining to women’s health and safety, that it has moved beyond these more limited parameters, and toward a more comprehensive concern with workers’ *rights* more generally, including advocating for the right of free association. This growing shift in emphasis draws attention to the ways in which RMG workers, and the institutions they both organize with and are organized by have contributed to broadening the discourse of rights to include working-class women in the women’s movement, and civil society more generally.

The final section of the chapter assesses the social impact of activism. Here, I build on the previous section to explore why it is that women workers become activists, and the range of struggles they engage in – on and off the production floor – for dignity and humanity. In doing so, I explore the continuities and discontinuities in the ways in which RMG women negotiate the space and role they play in Bangladeshi society.

The chapter then concludes with a summary of key findings.

Workers' Institutions: A Closer Look at the Collection of Organizations available to RMG women

Unions in the RMG sector

The history of trade unions in the RMG sector in Bangladesh has been widely documented (cf. Ashraf & Prentice, 2019; Siddiqi, 2017; Rahman, Z. 2011; Hossain & Akter, 2022). Largely banned from the sector until 2006, restrictions on trade union activity remain in force for factories within export processing zones (EPZs). However, while trade unions are now permitted in all non-EPZ factories, their presence is limited – both in terms of absolute numbers and the range of union activities. Indeed, as several workers and activists in the RMG explained to me, it was the collapse of Rana Plaza in April 2013, and the death of 1120 workers, rather than the introduction of the 2006 Bangladesh Labour Act, that contributed to the real loosening of barriers to union activity in the sector, and the subsequent influx of union registration submissions to the Bangladeshi Directorate of Labour that same year. By the end of 2013, for example, union registration submissions went from 2 to 96; by the end of the one-year mark, that number had risen to 464 (Siddiqi, 2017; Ovi, 2015; ILO 2014a; ILO 2014b;). Since 2013 the total number of registered unions in the sector has continued to increase, reaching 644

in 2017, with over 524 having been registered since 2013. However, as impressive as this growth has been, it is important to retain a sense of proportion. The sector comprises 5000 factories, meaning that union density currently sits at approximately 12.8 per cent. The relative absence of concrete collective bargaining taking place within recently unionized workplaces, moreover, has limited the number of tangible benefits that many expected would come from unionization. Thus, contrary to the early optimism of labour activists and workers that unions might flourish in the highly anti-union RMG sector, what we now witness among the same group – especially women activists and workers – are growing concerns about the labour movement’s ability to attract and organize women workers.

With the benefit of hindsight, the difficulties encountered by labour activists after the legalization of union activity were entirely predictable. As one labour activist explained to me, reflecting on the period of opening that emerged after 2006, there was little appreciation at the time that union registration would mean little if the union registered did not have the means, or ability, to institutionalize its presence in the factories it had ostensibly organized. As they noted, factory-level unions encountered considerable difficulty in *mobilizing* those they had registered and struggled to collectively bargain. They recounted to me that even with the benefit of several years’ experience and the spike in registration that followed the Rana Plaza disaster of 2013, factory-level unions had yet to develop either the unity, or the organizational sophistication of their adversaries. They reflected on why this might be the case and their reasons were many. As they noted, the prolonged ban on union activity in the sector contributed to low rates of union density, encouraged union fragmentation, and delayed

the formation of sector-wide mechanisms for industrial cooperation. Political corruption, and an underdeveloped system of industrial relations in Bangladesh have also been important contributing factors for low levels of mobilization at the factory level (ILO, 2014c; Reinecke, J. & Donaghey, J., 2018).

The difficulties encountered by labour activists are not reducible, however, to history, politics or law. Much of it stems from the character of the labour force that has been specifically procured for employment in the Bangladeshi RMG sector. The workforce continues to be young, first-generation women workers in the sector, largely in temporary or contract-based work, with little to no organizing experience. Furthermore, given that securing formal registration from the Directorate of Labour requires the support of a minimum of 30% of current employees, a transient and temporary workforce makes it difficult very difficult for organizers to keep track of workers and cultivate their support. Women workers, who today comprise the vast majority of the industry's workforce, are thus faced with a double-bind. As young migrants, they often have neither the organizing experience, nor access to any institutional memory of previous forms of workers' organizing – whether successful or not. What information they do gather, moreover, often comes from activists in the broader labour movement, of whom many are male, and who themselves have little to no experience either working with women workers, or understanding of how to mobilize women in the sector.

The multiplicity of labour unions and the political affiliation of national federation-level unions adds to the complication of unionizing workers in the RMG industry. As discussed in Rahman (2011), labour leaders at the federation-level have little to almost no contacts with garment workers themselves. Meanwhile, though factory-level

unions may be closely associated with workers they represent, they are often hesitant or sometimes unable to join national federations for political reasons (Ibid). National federations are often closely allied to political parties and face widespread accusations of corruption and nepotism that factory-level unions may want to avoid. Beyond the question of partisan politics are the gender politics of national federations. Much like the political domain itself, national level labour federations tend to be male-dominated. This raises important questions not only about the suitability of these bodies for organizing women, but also their receptiveness to women's leadership and participation more generally.

Having been left out of workers' institutions and the trade union system, there is a seeming reluctance on the part of women workers to get involved in it (Dannecker, 2000), largely because of the resistance on the part of trade unionists themselves to accept women workers as formal workers. According to one union activist I interviewed, though the reluctance stems from both sides, it does not mean that the barriers are insurmountable. The goal, as she described it, was to ensure that women are adequately represented and active in the trade union system so that women workers' issues can be raised and addressed by labour at large, but also so that women workers can be trained and mobilized to take on leadership roles within unions. However, despite both the desire and efforts of women activists, the male-dominated character of trade unions and their politically affiliated national federations, continues to serve as a barrier – and warning – for inexperienced women workers in the sector.

Emerging women activists also revealed that they are often accused, or accosted, for being politically active by their families and communities. The accusation leveled at

them is of *rajniti kora* (doing politics) – a pejorative reference to getting involved with partisan politics. When I questioned why doing *rajniti* (politics) is seen to be negative, I was informed that involvement in politics itself is seen to be both negative and ‘dirty,’ and a ‘man’s thing.’ Thus, while it would still be acceptable (although not necessarily preferable) for men to be politically active, it remains unacceptable for women to be so. Being political, or involved in partisan politics, entails being in the public, being out there, and playing ‘dirty games.’ Occupying these roles and spaces, activists told me, is not acceptable to the patriarchal cultural mores governing Bangladeshi society. In practical terms then, politically-affiliated unions and federations pose a challenge for organizing women specifically because it combines activism with *rajniti*. In the long-run, however, the growing participation of women in these established national bodies may actually be strategic for challenging this assumed synonymy of *rajniti* and activism writ large.

A further issue is the distrust of political parties. As one activist explained to me, her own family members would not accept any money from her because of her work as an organizer rendered her, and any funds she has, *political*. They could not trust the source or motivation of her offer to give money to her uncle and was told “we don’t need that kind of money” by her relatives. While she would not elaborate as to why her family members would conclude that it was ‘dirty money’ or if it indeed was funds passed on her to through such means, what struck a chord was the assumption that i) she had been bought out by a political party and, ii) that she was attempting to do the same to her relatives. There is of course a gendered connotation to all this. Being a woman in a financial position to offer money to male relatives was seen to be a slap in the face, and

she pondered whether all these accusations and rejection of funds in fact was to save face.

The existing trade union system's inexperience with women workers and unorganized women workers' reluctance to engage with a male-dominated and politically affiliated labour hierarchy has meant that, despite no longer being banned, traditional workers' institutions *in their current form in Bangladesh* are inadequate for mobilizing women workers in the RMG sector. As will become evident in the next section, workers and activists in the sector now rely on institutions not typically associated with labour activism to bring women workers into the organizing fold. Foremost among these institutions are: developmental NGOs (for example, those geared towards empowerment and development), workers' centres (which might include organizations that provide health, legal and family services for workers), and intergenerational households of women garment workers (consisting of women who either work from their homes or those who have been, or currently are employed in the RMG sector). These institutions might be formal, in that they operate according to a particular structure, or operate informally, without one. The combination of these institutions, each of whom bring RMG workers in association with one another, in addition to the growing participation of workers in the country's newly forged trade unions and workers' associations, have provided a means for workers to develop their capacities, analyze, and understand struggles (be they past or present), and broaden their associational networks to make possible larger forms of collective action.

Worker-driven NGOs: Overview of Three Organizations

A wide range of NGOs in Dhaka have now taken up *nari srawmik* as their constituency. In the course of my field research, I noticed that a number of them occupied a dual role. On the one hand, they operated as a registered and fully-operational NGOs, delivering a wide range of developmental services, whilst on the other, effectively they operated as the ‘NGO-arm’ to a number of trade union federations. This is not widely advertised by NGOs – particularly those who work with garment workers – but is nevertheless well-known. In what follows I provide an overview of three such worker-driven NGOs I studied in the course of my research. It is important to point out, however, that while trade unions are no longer banned in the RMG sector, union activists continue to be the target of blacklists and harassment by both factory management and law enforcement in Dhaka. Because of this, I refer to these NGOs as NGO A, B, and C and their associated unions as Union A, B, and C, respectively, for purposes of anonymity.

NGO A/ Union A

NGO A provides support to RMG workers and other trade workers in Bangladesh. Its head office occupies a single-story building tucked away in a narrow side street off the busy main road of Rampura, in Dhaka, where a few nearby RMG factories are located. NGO A serves as the NGO-arm of Union A, a trade union that provides support to garment and other workers attempting to unionize at the plant level. The NGO was founded by two former garment workers – who are today prominent labour activists in the sector– and another social justice activist in 2001. While the NGO now has several offices around the Greater Dhaka area, and beyond, the head office is shared with its counterpart union. The office itself is modest in appearance, consisting of a few small

offices, a staff and daycare room, a kitchen and a front space decorated with a collection of staff photos, banners, and posters related to a colleague (and well-known labour activist) who disappeared and was later found to have been murdered.

Two of out the three founders of NGO A were experienced RMG workers. They were intimately aware of working and workplace conditions, connected to the broader community of garment workers and activists, and recognized the need to support and mobilize workers. They also knew that unionizing workers in the RMG sector was not a legally viable option. As such, they opted – in collaboration with an activist ally – to establish an NGO, apply for funding, and set up a structure where they could train workers, and provide workers with the resources they themselves wished they had when they were organizing. Since its founding in 2001, the NGO has broadened its donor base to include large labour institutions – including foreign unions, NGOs and foundations that support workers-rights. Union A, meanwhile, is funded through membership fees from its functioning locals. As explained by the founders, the NGO’s funding is consistent, while the union’s is less so in light of the difficulties of securing *chadaa* (membership dues).

NGO and Union A are both hierarchically organized. The Executive Director coordinates the activities of the NGO and supervises staff while the President of the Union oversees the activities of its network of field organizers – predominantly former and current RMG workers. While there is separate staff for each organization, they collaborate together.

As a self-described ‘grassroots workers’ rights organization,’ NGO A prioritizes women workers, conducts union training workshops, provides popular education workshops on issues deemed relevant to garment workers (for example, Violence Against

Women workshops that at times limits the space to women alone), childcare facilities for workers' children, and hosts a drop-in centre for nearby that serves as a local 'resource hub.' In addition to the services it provides for workers, the NGO does a considerable amount of international solidarity work, particularly in raising awareness of the Accord on Fire and Safety in Bangladesh. For NGO A, international solidarity and support for unions in Bangladesh is crucial; the Executive Director and staff often travel, and respond positively to speaking invitations in Asia and North America.

NGO B/ Union B

NGO B is housed in a three-story building in the Rashulbagh, Mohakhali area of Dhaka, occupying the entirety of the third floor. Founded in 2003 by a former garment worker, and now a prominent labour activist in the RMG sector, the founder currently serves as the organization's Executive Director. As with the previous organization, NGO B serves as the NGO-arm of a trade union federation. The President of Union B is also a former garment worker. His team of field organizers work predominantly with garment workers, but are trying to expand their base in all sectors, including workers in Dhaka's pharmaceutical plants. The office space is very modest with a handful of small office spaces and a large room for meetings. There are no clear demarcations between the NGO space and the union space. Similarly, the staff of each organization interact freely with each other. There is also a fair amount of overlap between the staff of the NGO and the federation. The President of the union for example, also serves as the Director of Operations of the NGO, while the Treasurer of the NGO serves as the Secretary of the union.

An organization that describes itself as ‘founded and led by garment workers,’ the Executive Director of the NGO, the President of the union, and field organizers all have extensive experience in garment production, the RMG industry, as well as working with RMG workers and activists. While they have since retired from RMG work (they are in their 40s now and passed their ‘prime’ working years), many of the field organizers have known both the Executive Director of the NGO and President of union since their working days in the sector. Staff at the NGO, however, tend not to be former workers and come from middle-class backgrounds. This layer also tends to have formal education (including university degrees), a fact evident in their style of dress, ease with computers, book-keeping and proficiency in other administrative tasks. In terms of organizational structure, both the NGO and union are organized hierarchically and are led by an Executive Director and President respectively, to whom staff and field organizers report. Interestingly, both the NGO and the union are built around the personality of NGO founder. Indeed, the organization and the Executive Director often appear to be synonymous at times.

NGO B has a long list of donors and partners, consisting of both foreign and domestic labour organizations, funding agencies, universities, and NGOs – a few of which overlap with the donor list of NGO A. Today, the organization runs programs that provide support, resources and training for worker activation and mobilization. Among these are popular education workshops on collective bargaining, training sessions for both workers and employers on workers’ rights, as well as information/resources pertaining to general and reproductive health. In collaboration with union field organizers

it also hosts special events such as *Iftar* nights during the month of *Ramadan* for workers to get together after hours.

NGO C/ Union C

NGO C is the oldest of the three organizations I studied. Founded in 1991 by a well-known and respected labour and women's rights activist – now an elected Member of Parliament in Bangladesh – NGO C's objective is to organize women workers, develop leadership skills among them, and to strengthen and increase their participation in trade unions. As the founder herself noted during our conversation, the impetus for starting NGO C came from the lack of women's representation and focus on gender-related issues within the trade union movement in Bangladesh; on the one hand, women's issues were left out of class-based organizing, and on the other, class-based issues were left out of women's organizing. Similar to the previous two organizations, NGO C is the counterpart to Union C. Union C pre-dates the NGO itself, which was established as a national trade union federation in 1969 during the upsurge against Pakistani rule over what was then East Pakistan. Today, Union C represents 56,000 members organized into 48 plant level unions. NGO C is located in the Mirpur area of Dhaka.

Donors and partners of NGO C include foreign labour and women's organizations. Like the previous two organizations, NGO C follows a hierarchical structure, with the general committee in charge of steering the organization's direction, structure, staff and priorities. Another similarity is that much of its popularity and legitimacy stems from its founder, who serves as the President of Union C. Under her direction is a team of field organizers; and under the Executive Director's direction is the NGO's staff. Both organizations have overlapping staff. Field organizers with the various

locals affiliated with the umbrella Union C sometimes also staff the NGO, informally ‘drawing in’ workers to organize them via so-called ‘cells’ in various locals.

Out of the three organizations, NGO C struck me as socialist in its ideology and vision, undoubtedly because of the founder’s own political leanings. Today, its programs attempt to bring issues of gender and class together, putting at the centre of its campaign the working woman. The organization’s website notes that the thematic focus of the NGO is gender equality, workers’ rights and economic justice. NGO C recognizes the importance of providing a comprehensive range of resources and support systems for their constituents. Accordingly, in addition to organizational work centered on rights-based campaigns, NGO C also provides daycare centers for the children of women RMG workers, human and skill development training for women and workers, interest-free loans for agricultural workers during the workless period, as well as support for women and workers during disaster and other periods of emergency. As with programs offered by NGO A and B, these programs are attractive to women workers, be they in the formal RMG and agricultural sectors, or the informal sector. Using these facilities and services, women become aware of their rights *as workers*, including their right to organize. It is in this way that they are introduced to the idea of trade unions and labour activism.

While these NGOs coordinate a wide range of programs and campaigns targeting women workers, all field organizers I spoke with recounted the difficulty of bringing workers in to access the programs and spaces available to them. These challenges, as has been documented in Quayyum (2019; 2023), largely stem from a patriarchal understanding of women’s place in Bangladeshi society. There is an assumption, common in Bangladesh, that the role of the working woman is to work, secure their

salary and worry about the family – not activism. An *active* working woman is, as a consequence, seen as unwomanly (in light of their public role), interacting with too many men, and are therefore (potentially) involved in prostitution. Staff and field organizers from all three NGOs/unions that I interviewed confirmed these tropes. Elaborating further, activists I spoke with noted that because of these views they not only work with workers themselves, but also their kinship circle more broadly in order to convince them that their wife/ daughter/ sister was safe, in an employment-related training session, and not putting themselves in a dangerous situation. As the founder of Union B explained – and countless others elaborated on – women workers simply do not have the time or ability after their long work days to take additional time away from social reproductive labour they are expected to perform immediately before and after work days. Whether it is cooking and caring for their families, or simply the expectation that they will return home, women generally do not typically have the luxury to challenge or fight these social expectations.

As such, field organizers – drawing on their own experiences as workers who had to juggle long hours of labour-intensive garment work with social and familial expectations – rely on spaces of social reproduction themselves to ‘access’ women workers before and after work hours. Of these spaces, the intergenerational home, and by extension workers’ communities, become important sites for mobilizing women.

Intergenerational Homes, Neighbourhoods and Micro-Communities: Spaces of Social Reproduction as Sites of Activism

Beyond formal workers’ institutions such as unions and NGOs, the intergenerational homes, neighbourhoods and other micro-communities of garment

workers are important sites for organizing in Bangladesh. As discussed earlier in the chapter, the patriarchal character of the contemporary labour movement in Bangladesh, the reluctance of women workers to enter these spaces, and the difficulties encountered by NGOs and unions in attracting the participation of women has meant that organizers have had to utilize the networks that workers are already apart of, and the spaces where they are already situated. As a result, the homes of garment workers, and the communities that are forged in these spaces, have emerged in recent years as crucial sites of mobilization.

As discussed in Chapter 2, women working in the RMG sector tend to live in households shared with either extended family or other RMG workers. Located in working-class neighbourhoods where RMG workers predominate, intergenerational households allow women to network, find employment and to keep abreast of wages, working conditions, management styles of their own and nearby factories. As households and communities, these institutions are like others in that they are imbued with distinct power relations that women have to navigate whether it is patriarchal/paternalistic forms of power exerted by male members of their families (fathers, husbands, brothers, uncles, male relatives) or others in the community (male landlords, neighbourhood elders, or friends), or similar forms of power relations exerted by women of their families (mothers, aunts, older sisters or cousins) and/or neighbourhood elders.

These power relations do not recede when women enter formal labour, but remain a fixture of working-class life for Bangladeshi women. As such, addressing these barriers are among the earliest of priorities for field organizers and labour activists, who see their removal (or amelioration) as central to activation. This can often be time-consuming

work, which requires flexibility in approach. One approach has been to work with those who erect these barriers to begin with, slowly working to turn the spaces of social reproduction into sites of activist negotiation and community building. As one field organizer from NGO C noted, while part of her work entailed staying up late into the night to talk strategy for an upcoming meeting with another activist, the other part would be geared toward reassuring her friend's mother by keeping her informed, and ensuring that they were not getting into trouble. Another field organizer from NGO B described a similar process for dealing with husbands. They too needed to be reassured – and at times even reprimanded – for women workers wish to attend activist workshops, in part because of their fear of not knowing who – or what – is being discussed in these sessions. Her own husband, she noted, went to great lengths to either persuade her not to participate, berating her when she told him she wanted to attend training sessions, or monitoring her activities when she could not be persuaded, by sitting outside the office door where she was meeting.

Thus, field organizers and labour activists have figured out that taking activism to spaces of social reproduction – the home and the community – is an important strategy to reach women workers, given that many are either unable or unwilling to flout the social norms and expectations imposed on them. Taking activism to the spaces of social reproduction means bringing the broader kinship and community base into activist spaces, and vice versa. Examples of the mobilizing activities that take place in these spaces include union drives and the requisite door-to-door collection of signatures; strategy sessions discussed within or between homes; airing of workplace grievances with roommates or neighbours to figure out solutions; walking home with workers to give

them information on NGOs that provide beneficial services for them or their families, or other programming that might be of interest; and getting to know workers' families so as to build a relationship of trust. What these spaces of social reproduction add to activism then is the building and strengthening of social networks for the activist community.

As discussed in Chapter 3, it is helpful to think of these social networks as the type of social capital conceptualized by Bourdieu (1986). The materiality of affect – the way in which women workers are bound to each other not only in the workplace but equally beyond it – is formed and channeled through these social networks. It speaks to the ways in which activists and field organizers are extending and pushing activism beyond formal workers' institutions and spaces of production.

Organizing women workers: Challenges, Opportunities, and Strategies

Challenges and Opportunities of Mobilizing Women

The challenges of organizing women workers in export-oriented garment manufacturing are many, and have been documented extensively in the context of Bangladesh and elsewhere (cf. Dannecker, 2000; Rahman, 2011; Hennessy, 2013; Quayyum, 2019; 2023). The biggest challenge of organizing women workers in the RMG sector in Dhaka, according to labour activists and field organizers, stem from a patriarchal understanding of a woman's role in society. As demonstrated in the previous section, these impose a distinct set of challenges, barriers, and mores that dictate the ability of women to organize. More specifically, it prevents women from being psychologically and socially open or accessible to activism, aware of the context and

landscape in which they work, and from being active participants of civil society more broadly.

Formal and informal discussions with women workers and labour activists revealed that one of the most challenging aspects of organizing women is the way in which social reproduction is managed and controlled. As activists revealed to me, the social expectation of women in Bangladesh is that they perform social reproductive labour in the home or the community; the expectation that they will also have a life beyond this is not widespread. The fact that an increasing proportion of Bangladeshi women are now working – particularly with the rise of the RMG sector – has posed problems for this socially conservative way of thinking. That said, as many of the women explained to me, the reason why they took on formal employment had less to do with choice, and more to do with a lack of available alternatives. As discussed in Chapter 1, nearly all the women and men that I interviewed noted that the reason why they started to work was because they were faced with an unexpected financial burden, be it the death or illness of a sole-income father, or because they needed to supplement their income at a critical juncture in their lives. As they all recalled, immediate and extended family members – of both genders – did not see women working in the formal sector as a positive thing. For the families of some women it was even a source of shame as it meant that they would be out in society and mix freely with men, something that is often culturally frowned upon. As they explained, many of their family members were completely unaware of how RMG factories were organized – they assumed that ‘anything could happen’ in the workplace and this was a constant source of both shame and anxiety for family members, who feared for their wellbeing and safety. One activist went on to

reassure me even, saying they have no idea how safe the inside of the factory is – you can only do what you came in to do and nothing beyond that.

Given the challenges these women face being able to work in the first place, the challenges of anything beyond employment is even greater. When asked what the perception of activists was in the eyes of their family or community, they revealed that the perception was far from positive. There is still an assumption, common in Bangladesh, that the role of the working woman is to work, secure their salary and worry about the family – not activism. *Active* women are, by consequence, seen as ‘unwomanly’ (in light of their public role), interacting with too many men, and *therefore* potentially involved in sex work. Over a lunch-time conversation with several workers attending a activist training session, for example, I learnt of the amount of jeering and taunting women workers face from neighbourhood elders, parents, brothers and husbands if they attend a protest, meeting, workshop or any activist related event. For the most part, activism was seen as a neglect of their household responsibilities, but equally, of putting oneself in unnecessary danger. Field organizers from all three unions also corroborated this claim as they explained how much work they have to do with family members to convince them that their wife, daughter, or sister was safe and in an employment-related training session, and not putting themselves in a dangerous situation.

As such, these women’s worlds are socially defined and constricted by family and community members. Activists and workers I spoke to understood why their family members tried to shield them from such dishonour but equally, felt that in the absence of an understanding of what activism was, or the purpose behind it, that families were unnecessarily preventing women from shaping the worlds that they were already a part

of. For these activists, their own experience of activism reassured them that they could and would be safe. The main issue was finding time to do their household duties in addition to their activism, or being prepared to fight to not do them. In reality, however, most women try to juggle both responsibilities.

Field organizers noted how little time women workers therefore had for activism. Often, it was found that even if women had interest in organizing, they did not have the capacity to be involved. As the President of union B puts it, it is very difficult to organize women workers because it is difficult to gain access to them. Motherhood and being a wife, daughter or sister took up any free time they might have after work and it is too much of a battle for women workers to challenge these expectations head-on. As such, many women attempt to compartmentalize their lives into segments: for productive work and post-work/reproductive work. This is well-captured by one activist in a training session who explained to me how she manages to cook, clean, do RMG work, and find time to attend these sessions and be active. But while some – mainly younger women – appear to ‘manage it’, the triple burden (Momsen, 1991) of productive work, social reproductive work, and community is one too heavy to maintain for long, and hints at the need for a broader cultural shift in the ways social reproduction is managed and controlled within activist communities if women workers are to be effectively integrated in the labour movement.

However, despite these wide-ranging social challenges, women workers *do* mobilize, and labour activists seek out opportunities to organize them. As shown in the next section, a key component of the formal and informal strategies of organizing and

mobilizing – particularly those that are successful – involves the attempt to liberate the social lives of working women.

Formal and Informal Strategies of Organizing

Field organizers from NGOs and unions, and labour activists outside these circles, provided a detailed picture of the formal and informal strategies they use to engage and mobilize women workers in the RMG sector. Formal strategies include designing and developing activist workshops, training sessions, and popular education workshops; coordinating and promoting activist ‘hubs’; and building awareness of the different campaigns and supports available to workers. Informal strategies include navigating and strengthening social networks, and for workers, expanding spaces of mobilization as well as integrating workers, their kinship, and friendship bases into activist communities. These approaches may also be conceptualized as public and private dimensions of a longer-term labour strategy (Quayyum, 2023). The former involves visible, pre-planned, organized and advertised initiatives to widen the kinship circles of women workers (for example, workers’ cafe, community *iftars*, among others). The latter involves less visible – yet routine and often, mundane – informal strategies to build trusting relationships, friendships, and networks on the part of NGO staff members in an effort to integrate themselves into the social worlds that are worker communities. In both cases, kinship circles and affective relationships are paramount. Indeed, the public and private dimensions of NGO labour organizing in Bangladesh serve to effectively collapse the spaces that divide the public and private lives of women workers, creating new capacities and opportunities in turn.

Formal strategies of NGOs: Integrating women workers by broadening kinship, friendship and other micro-communities

The three NGOs – and their counterpart unions – offer a wide range of training sessions for workers. The content of these workshops vary, as do the structure, number, and experience of participants. The sessions are typically funded by, or developed in partnership with, international organizations such as the ILO or other large funding bodies. Their aim is to provide workers with the information and tools necessary to learn about their rights *as* workers. These range from ‘Union 101’ sessions – which include the basics of what a union is, how to do a union-drive, the process of registering a union, and the notion of collective bargaining – to sessions on the Bangladesh Labour Act and how to uphold the rights of workers and responsibilities of employers regarding fire and safety issues in the workplace. These training sessions take place either within the NGO/ union offices or activist-procured third party locations and can last either a day or more in length. Attendees partake in several interactive modules where they are encouraged to ask questions or share their own stories. Participants may be reimbursed for their travel to and from the workshop by the NGO or union, and are offered meals and/or snacks for the day(s) attended. Some workshops are offered over weekends to ensure a wider level of participation. The workshops are typically set up in a seminar format, with a facilitator and varying numbers of RMG workers as participants. The facilitators tend to be long-standing activists from within or beyond the NGO/union circle.

Having been an observer of a few of these training sessions, I was struck by a number of things. The first was the gender composition of these sessions. Whereas the industry’s workforce is 80% women, the number of women attending these workshops

often formed a minority. Having spoken to women workers and organizers about their own experiences of attending workshops they reported a number of challenges they have in attending them, ranging from having to forgo their pay for the day (when they are held during the week) or having to forgo the time they are expected to spend with their husbands, children or families (when sessions are held on the weekend). A second notable feature of the sessions was the range of topics that were covered, which were clearly designed to ensure a wide range of activists were attracted to them. Some modules were very basic and others were far more advanced, integrating the history of labour activism in Bangladesh and workers' history more generally. The modules were catered, in other words, to participants' varying levels of organizing experience. For example, one workshop I attended recounted the history of women's organizing beginning with the well-known story of Shopura Begum in the 1990s, but which most of the attendees were unaware. The third feature of note was the quality and quantity of women workers' participation. Women in these sessions tended to be very passive, and facilitators often had to prod or diffuse the number of hands raised by male participants in the room to encourage women's participation. Interestingly, when I spoke to these women during their lunch break, they were lively and conversational. However, being in the same space as male counterparts meant they did not/could not voice their opinions to the same degree. The fourth is social distance between the facilitator – typically a staff member in the NGO or well-known activist in the sector, without a background in garment production work itself – and the participants, who were mainly RMG workers with varying levels of education, work and activist experience, gender and age, and who were all pre-selected to attend by the NGO/union itself. This meant that workshops tended to

be for those who had either already shown interest in organizing or had the potential to be an activist in their factory; in this sense the workshops were – at least informally – designed to ‘train the trainers.’

In addition to training sessions, worker-focused NGOs act as ‘hubs.’ Here, workers can drop-in after hours for advice on non-employment related issues (for example, day-care for their children) or participate in special events organized by the NGO, such as board game nights or *iftars* (meals with which Muslims break their daily fast during the month of Ramadan). These social gatherings may, and often do, have activist-training components built into them. NGO B, for example, provides union training using a well-known board game in Bangladesh called *Ludo* to educate players about the Bangladesh Labour Act, the process of collective bargaining or other organizing-related issues. These make the training more accessible, less formal, and inclusive of workers with low levels of literacy. Similarly, NGO A is considering creating a drop-in resource centre where workers can learn basic computer and social media skills. The NGO believes that helping workers learn to use technology and social media is an important way to get them to start creating activist events on platforms such as Facebook or spread their own messaging to others. These programs are much shorter in length and take place in the NGO office with funding coming from either international NGOs or the parent NGO itself.

By establishing themselves as resource and community hubs, NGOs achieve several objectives at once. They bring together workers from different factories, make available educational resources, tools and support systems that facilitate organizing in a supportive environment, initiate communication and knowledge-sharing between and

amongst workers from different factories and provide an open space for workers to socialize amongst themselves. According to both staff and field organizers, the social aspect of their work is foundational, particularly given the limited free time (and space) workers have to discuss, or interact, among themselves. It also helps to develop an awareness of the similarities and differences in factory practices, while providing workers with the opportunity to share strategies for tackling issues they may have, either with work or with life. Providing a space where workers can congregate freely also provides opportunities and institutional support for a range of activist events including meetings, strategy sessions for union drives, etc. It also means being able to accommodate larger gatherings of workers in trusted locations rather than in workers' homes and communities which may not always be possible or desirable to use for organizing purposes.

Finally, NGOs and unions design, implement, and support longer-term campaigns for worker rights. These include support for the Accord on Fire and Building Safety in Bangladesh, and workplace safety and security, violence against women in the workplace (and beyond), health and working conditions in factories, among others. The services that are provided in support of these campaigns include legal aid, basic healthcare, school and day care centres. While these campaigns and services – funded by the NGO in partnership with external funding agencies – exist to support workers, it is up to workers to utilize and promote awareness of these services themselves.

The responsibility for awareness-building lies with particular staff: field organizers. Field organizers and NGO staff that I spoke to recounted the arduous nature of this work and the tactics they employ. All said that they wait outside RMG factory gates in their area, or in nearby side streets or alleyways to intercept workers on their way

home, careful not to be caught by factory guards. As workers walk out of the factory gates alone, or with their peers, field organizers offer them business cards, provide them with information on health clinics and other services they offer. It is services, rather than the activist credentials of NGOs, that are emphasized in outreach and that get workers into the doors of worker-based NGOs. Examples such as these show the nuance with which Field Organizers approach workers' issues. Perhaps because of their familiarity with factory work themselves, they see organizing as involving not just workplace issues, but fundamentally, about issues that affect their life more generally. Indeed, as is often the case, issues arising outside of work bear directly on their working lives, particularly their physical and mental health, and they are shared and felt by women workers generally. As described in Chapter 3, workers' kinship circles – held together by common needs and experience, and defined by ties of mutual aid – normalize and foster a collective outlook, and it is the interplay between the shared individual experience and a growing collective outlook that makes possible political participation possible.

These formal practices help workers together off the production floor, educate them about tools and support systems available for their use, and help initiate communication and knowledge-sharing amongst workers from different factories. While education is a key goal, associating with others working in the sector is equally – if not more – important, given the limited free time available to workers, particularly when it comes to developing their collective awareness of the similarities and differences in factory practices, or sharing strategies for tackling issues they may have, with respect to work or beyond. The process of attracting workers and getting them through the doors requires a lot of follow-up by field organizers with little to no return, especially as

workers are typically in a hurry to get to their homes and back to their lives. But as one activist notes, the returns do come, especially when workplace issues arise.

Listening to the stories of field organizers, a question that struck me was that of trust. Why would workers trust field organizers, simply because they were given information about an NGO purporting to work with workers? What makes a worker trust another individual enough to believe their story, follow their suggestions, potentially jeopardize their employment to *maybe* learn about workers' benefits and rights? Put differently, what makes the field organizer *believable* in the eyes of other workers? The overwhelming majority of field organizers and other labour activists I spoke with noted that the Rana Plaza disaster had been *the* impetus for a lot of workers – they were simply more willing to learn and stand up for themselves. According to them, the climate of organizing had changed after the disaster: more was now needed and more was now deemed possible. Yet, while the context of organizing and mobilizing has undoubtedly changed since April 2013, this alone is not enough to understand the wave of activism that resulted.

Below I outline the informal strategies adopted by field organizers and activists – related to navigating and strengthening workers' power; expanding the spaces of mobilization; and integrating the kinship and friendship circles of workers into activist communities – to mobilize women workers and draw them into activism.

Informal strategies: Integrating the NGO into existing workers' kinship, friendship and other micro-communities

I discovered through my interviews that a crucial element of organizing women workers in the RMG sector was the particular sets of relationships established between

workers themselves, activists and field organizers from the organizations discussed above. Over the course of my conversations with both workers and field organizers, I was drawn into the manifold ways in which the cultivation of these relationships speak to the affective dimension of women's activism today.

The seemingly simple step of reaching out – to an NGO, union, or even a community activist – is, for example, dependent upon and shaped by the degree of trust women workers have in each other, and the relationships they have in their workplaces and community. As one activist told me, working ten hours a day, everyday for six days a week, you inevitably develop a close bond with those around you – whether you want to, or not. By default, you often become close enough to be family. Another activist noted that for her, it was the close relationship she developed with her machine operator, whom she was a helper to, that sparked her own activation. Having developed a relationship akin to sisterhood, she said that it was the trust she had in this woman that made her seek out an organization that would teach her more. Others still spoke about the love and support they had for each other in the factory – sharing their lunch together, particularly with those who did not have enough to eat that day, or their personal stories and problems.

Workers develop various levels of personal relationships on the factory floor. Found within these relationships are those of mentor-mentee (typically between machine operators and helpers, who also differ vastly in age with the former having been promoted after many years of service, and the latter having very limited experience in RMG), sibling and even guardian. Many of the activists I spoke to recounted their own, similar, relationships. One activist, for example, recounted how her more-senior machine

operator had a pet-name for her, and in many ways, protected her. Another activist recounted the relationship she had with a male worker who had helped her get the job, and looked out for her, especially when she was being sexually harassed beyond the factory gates. Another worker recounted how, unable to meet her production target when she first started, she was helped by faster workers on the floor who would give her their ‘extra’ pieces. As discussed in Chapter 3, these relationships are necessarily complex. While they serve as mutual aid for both the mentor and the mentee, they should not be romanticized as being innate or organic forms of sisterhood *per se*. There exists inequalities and divisions between workers. For example, there is a gendered dimension to these relationships: those ‘taken under the wing’ are often younger women – expected and assumed to be willing to accept and even desire mentorship – while those in the mentoring role are older women and/or men. Those, in other words, assumed to have earned their position as mentor by virtue of experience, or simply, by virtue of their being male. Yet, despite the tensions, the comradeship is felt, solidarity is imagined, and imaginings of a collective consciousness are solidified. This, then, is the power of the dissident friendships that emerge.

Given that the overwhelming majority of these relationships are intergenerational, and that women have very different life experiences because of age, migration pattern, or marital status, these relationships prove particularly beneficial for younger, more recent arrivals, who are supported as they acclimatize to work, and city life beyond it. These relationships create in turn a sense of shared responsibility – similar to those within households – to and for each other. That said, it is important to note, of course, that not all relationships are positive. However, workers I interviewed were keen to point out the

positive aspects of their relationships with each other, and limit discussions of exploitation or discord to those that existed between themselves and the with various levels of management. This is perhaps partly because they did not want to ‘air their dirty laundry’ or because, as activists, they did not want to reveal any divisions they may have among themselves. Nevertheless, what these stories speak to is the at times remarkable solidarity that exists between women in the sector, and the strength of the relationships that working women forge in the industrial districts of Dhaka.

Much of the activist knowledge, wisdom and know-how that women acquire comes from the workplace – between production deadlines, during lunch breaks and walks to and from work. It also derives from relationships forged in their neighbourhoods and communities. What makes workers take an interest in activism thus depends on the ability of women activists to motivate their peers. This, in turn, is itself dependent upon the relationships and social networks they have created and nurtured over time. As one field organizer from union C – who is coincidentally also a current worker – explained: many of the workers she worked with knew about her because their coworkers would point her out. This is how she came to have the reputation of an activist, but also as someone others could trust and talk to if they encountered problems at work. In many respects, then, much of the activism that field organizers engage in – particularly with respect to knowledge-sharing and capacity building – can be compared to the reproductive work these women do in their households or communities. It entails building informal networks of support and knowledge sharing, and developing systems of support. The act of building and enlarging these networks, both within and beyond an existing factory, is also similar to the ways in which women beyond the workplace support each

other with issues in other aspects of their lives. Being part of this network, then, secures for women workers tangible benefits. They develop the know-how, and a community to whom they can turn or rely when dealing with employment and non-employment related issues. In this way, women have begun to connect material wellbeing to trust and care for each other.

Worker-to-worker relationships are not only formed through the workplace. As discussed in Chapter 2, many women workers also rent and live together. These tend to be women with no family ties in the city and thus required to find accommodation with others in the same workplace. They live in worker communities, renting with women from other RMG factories or living beside them. For these women, the relationships they develop in the workplace expand *literally* beyond the factory floor and into their homes and neighbourhoods. The social lives of these workers, particularly newer ones, revolve around household duties, socialization, and financial obligations. The larger family unit that is created within a factory floor, then, is made more viable by the smaller units – consisting of women that live together – that extend beyond the factory. This pattern of social relationships is replicated in factories throughout Dhaka, drawing women into the dense social networks of RMG workers that activists throughout the sector have attempted to tap into.

The dense and overlapping character of these networks inevitably lead to increased contacts with workers outside their immediate factory-community, and a growing familiarity both with the conditions of these workplaces, and those who work in them. Field organizers, having worked and been part of such workplace and work-life arrangements know and understand the importance of the relationships workers develop

amongst themselves. As such, field organizers are uniquely placed to immerse themselves in these social milieus, and attempt to harness their inherent potentialities for projects of social change.

Much of the outreach begins at the factory gates where informal conversations are started as workers leave the factory premises, while follow-ups take place in neighbourhoods and communities. As one field organizer from Union B pointed out, her work as an activist means being aware of, and being willing to help with, all aspects of a woman's problems whether it be the legal issues of family members, to registering their child in a hospital, or negotiating their fees of admission at schools. This means that as an organizer she must be able to solve problems that lie well beyond the job description of field organizer, and depend primarily on her own experience with social reproductive work and life in the city. It also means being available, even on call, to attend to the emotional and material needs of workers, whenever they are in crisis. She described the close relationship she develops with women she has worked with over the course of her activist life as coming to care for others' children as if they were her own.

Moreover, as mentioned earlier in this chapter, convincing a worker to become active in their workplace means not just convincing them, but equally, their parent(s), sibling(s) or other relations. This is a difficult challenge and takes up much of their time and energy as organizing has to be legitimated in the eyes of the husband, the father/mother, and/or brother of the women workers. It also entails expanding workers' issues to read as community or household issues, rather than a workplace issue alone. For example, safety and security issues within the workplace will be framed in ways that highlight the potential health risks to the worker and by extension, their family and

community. Field organizers, then, are strategic in terms of how they navigate the country's gender dynamics, and strike a fine balance with respect to knowing when to push and when to pull back with the men in women workers' lives.

Expanding the sites of mobilization beyond the factory floor and into workers' neighbourhoods, and broadening the scope of outreach to include the family members of workers' themselves, is thus foundational to labour politics in the Bangladesh's growing RMG sector. The need to secure approval – from household or community, and particularly male members of these units – to engage in activism may at first seem disempowering for the worker. In practical terms, however, both activists and workers themselves know this is a small and necessary step they have to integrate into their lives, at least until more women are active in the movements now being built. Addressing the concerns of men – whether voluntarily or involuntarily – has therefore become a fixture of organizing women workers today. Interestingly, having female representation in the trade union leadership helps to assuage community elders' concerns. For example, a field organizer recounted the story of her landlord who continuously harassed her for going out all the time until the day he spotted a photo of a demonstration in the newspaper featuring a photo of a prominent workers' activist and Member of Parliament, and her among others. Having the patronage of such important women figures reassures male family members both that 'their' women are taken care of and in good company.

Tapping into these networks is crucial for mobilizing women workers. As a field organizer from NGO/Union A explained, it is crucial to develop friendships because ultimately, these friendship groups act as cells where women can collectively support one another and discuss issues, problems, and/or strategies related to workplace issues. As

another field organizer, this time from NGO/Union B explained, it is through the development of these relationships that women learn to trust one another as they would their own families. They become confidantes, and lean on one another with regard to private matters of the home as well as issues that stem from the very public lives they lead in the city or factory. Beyond the workplace, friendship groups garner the support – or at the very least, tolerance – of family and community members for activism, something that is in the interest of both the worker, and the activist community.

The insights shared by field organizers into the ‘practice’ of organizing is crucial for understanding both the challenges of labour politics in contemporary Bangladesh, and efforts to overcome them. As they noted, integrating oneself into these informal networks is an arduous task; however, it is one that field organizers take very seriously and work at developing over long periods of time. After all, it is the cultivation of these relationships, and the successful navigation of the country’s cultural politics that makes or breaks organizational efforts to broaden the meaning of community for individual women workers, and the associational forms that depend on it.

What field organizers rely on is the materiality of affect (Hennessy, 2013; Quayyum, 2023) – in the form of the family, kinship and friendship relationships among women workers developed slowly over time; cells of co-workers; communities of workers from different factories – such that material benefits of these networks might accrue to individual workers. The material basis of affect ultimately forms the basis of the community of activists that mobilize and organize together. Indeed, the extent to which mobilizing and organizing in the RMG sector in Bangladesh – amongst women workers – is occurring today is *on the basis of* such informal strategies activists develop with one

another, both within and beyond the workplace. While the source of grievance may be the delay or lack of pay, or the deteriorating working conditions in the workplace, it serves as a strain, not the catalyst for activation; if this was the case, most RMG workers would be active labour organizers by now, seeing as most of them report some form of grievance. The relationships they are bound by in the workplace – trust, love and support – provide them with a sense of community as a source of strength with which to move forward. This community is not simply a collection of individuals who feel similar strain; rather, they are a collective who are bound together because of their interest in actively discussing issues, and challenging, strategizing, and envisioning ways to transform them. They realize that the power to transform lies in their ability to work together as an entity rather than as atomized individuals. These bonds that activists build with one another acts as an allegiance to not just the cause for which they are mobilizing, but also to each other.

In sum, the formal and informal strategies used by, and within, both workers' institutions and field organizers/ labour activists more broadly, challenge and aim to transform the socially restrictive lives of women workers. By broadening the formal and informal activities to include those aspects of working women's lives that extend beyond the workplace and into spaces of social reproduction – provision of day care services, coordination of social events, development of campaigns on issues such as violence against women, the development of various financial supports, and the special considerations made to integrate women workers into the fold of social and civic engagement – field organizers and activists both enable and create opportunities for women workers to bring their own experiences, knowledge, and skills into organizing

and activism itself. In light of the recent tragedies in the RMG industry – the fatalities and injuries resulting from Tazreen factory and Rana Plaza being the most widely documented – these opportunities are particularly helpful for mobilizing women workers so as to create a more politically informed and socially engaged workforce.

Workers' Institutions and Beyond as Activist Spaces: Collaborations and Contradictions of Broad-Based Coalitions for Worker Mobilizations

Unions, NGOs, workers' households and communities are the principal institutions involved in organizing women workers in the RMG sector. They partner and secure resources from a wide range of international and transnational organizations including, but not limited to: the International Labour Organization, large international NGOs such as Action Aid, transnational trade union federations such as IndustriAll, foreign labour unions such as the United Steelworkers, human rights organizations such as Human Rights Watch, as well as national funding agencies such as *Manusher Jonno* Foundation. These collaborations are helping to shift the discourse around labour, women, and rights in Bangladesh, creating wider acceptance for the principle of an informed and organized workforce.

In recent years, the language of many organizations has moved away from a worker-as-victim paradigm to an approach that emphasizes the inherent rights of labour, particularly to associate freely and collectively bargain. This is evident in the reports published on the RMG industry in Bangladesh, which now document not only the persistence of poor working conditions – itself now framed as a denial of the *right* to healthy and safe workplaces – but also the ongoing suppression of workers' other rights. This shift suggests that workers' issues could no longer be ignored or contained – a sign

that workers' on-the-ground mobilizing efforts are working. But without unions to legally hold employers accountable for these rights, the notion of workers' rights continued to fall flat. The 2006 Bangladesh Labour Act, and the later amendments instituted in 2013, provided the legal context and meaning to workers' rights to freely associate and organize. But as activists and workers I spoke with further pointed out to me, it was ultimately the disasters of 2012-2013 that led to the decisive shift in discourse on workers' rights. Particularly important were the – now wide-spread – stories of Tazreen workers who could not escape the burning building as they were locked in, and Rana Plaza workers who had reported their concerns about cracks in the building before the collapse, but were still forced to report to work.

The increasing acceptance of, and focus on, workers' organizing has opened up greater opportunities to secure funding and resources, both nationally and internationally. While much of these funds are ear-marked for training workers on Fire and Safety training programs, worker-driven NGOs such as those discussed in this chapter are tying discussions of these specific issues to a broader rights-based agenda that, their view, contribute directly to the health and safety of workers. These included: highlighting for participants the importance of unions and collective bargaining, the rights and responsibility of workers, and the Bangladesh Labour Act. These formal training sessions are well-funded and therefore able to reach larger numbers of factories and workers. Significantly, in emphasizing rights, workers are now portrayed as agents of change rather than passive victims. This is a significant shift, particularly for solidarity activists within and beyond the country. Solidarity activists, in turn, have now introduced the language of rights and work to bring greater awareness to workers' organizing. They

have also helped link RMG organizing to other sectors in the country, larger trade union federations and transnational solidarity campaigns. Together, the new collaborations forged since 2013 and the continuation of large-scale mobilization contributed to an increase of the legal minimum wage for garment workers in 2018 to 8,000 taka (approximately \$95 USD) per month.

However, despite the gains made from these new collaborations there are a number of issues with this approach to activism. In the first instance, NGOs are widely considered to be problematic. Funded through foreign or domestic funding agencies, these institutions have inadvertently become shadow-states, delivering crucial services that were once the purview of states. Widely – and rightly – criticized for the depoliticization and neoliberalization of local development efforts (cf. Ferguson, 1994; Feldman, 1997; Rahman, 2006), weakening or demobilizing local civil society (cf. Jad, 2007; Choudry & Kapoor, 2013), critical social scientists have long cast a suspicious eye on NGO efforts. Beyond the academy, many labour activists, particularly those more left-leaning, have also voiced concern over the NGO-ization of activism, foreign funding, and its effect on the autonomy of worker's organizations.

Beyond the issue of funding, the collaboration of NGOs with unions in Bangladesh raises the problem of persona-based activism. Interviews I conducted with field organizers from all three NGOs in question noted that perceptions of their work was closely related to the perception or persona of the organization's founder. In addition to constant praise for their leaders, field organizers' reflections on how they became involved in labour organizing show that much of their initial 'push' came from pride in being mentored by, or associated with, that leader. This is not to detract from the valuable

work undertaken by these NGOs, many of whom invest significant time and resources into training, mentorship and development for young women. It is only to state the obvious, namely that in a context where NGO-affiliated unions are ‘branded’ as xyz’s organization, power is effectively concentrated at the top. As organizations dedicated to empowering and developing the agency of others, this is a decidedly disempowering characteristic. It also threatens the long-term viability of these bodies, and the organizing they undertake as organization is, in effect, tied to the amount of time or energy that its leader is able to devote to it.

While it is important to acknowledge the limitations of NGOs the reality is that they are key players in the matrix of organizations currently working with workers in Bangladesh. That this is the case raises some interesting questions. What does, or can, the prominence of worker-based NGOs tell us about the state of ‘progressive’ workers’ organizing in emerging economies of the Global South? What are the particular ways in which progressive voices utilize the discourse and framework of NGOs to navigate contexts where the opportunity to freely associate is highly circumscribed? Bangladesh offers an intriguing lens through which to examine these questions. Confronted with a host of legislative and extra-legal barriers to the organization of workers and the building of workers’ institutions, social justice and labour activists have adopted – and indeed, *co-opted* – the institutional form of the NGO and the discourse of depoliticization attached to it. In so doing, the activists associated with these institutions have not only created a space – legal and physical – to continue their work, but critically, to bring together two otherwise disparate and parallel movements: the women’s movement and the labour movement in Bangladesh.

The literature on the limitations of the NGO as a vehicle for social change is well-developed, particularly in the field of development. Less developed is the literature that offers critical assessments of the uses to which NGOs can be (and have been) put in contexts where opportunities to freely associate is, or has historically been, highly circumscribed. Focusing on the role of worker-focused NGOs discussed in this chapter, it is apparent that social justice and labour activists have adopted – and attempted to co-opt – the institutional form of the NGO in order to overcome a host of legislative and extra-legal barriers to the organization of workers, and the building of workers’ institutions. Moreover, by documenting the formal and informal strategies these NGOs use to engage women workers with little to no organizing experiences in a highly anti-union industry, the importance of developing social networks and of the affective dimension of activism was also revealed. While theoretically, this work could be done within trade unions themselves, the reality is that the labour movement itself is not equipped to work with a non-organized women workers: the trade union movement and workers’ parties remain male-dominated and the vision of integrating and building more inclusive spaces continues to lag behind. The result of these strategies has been the strategic (though incomplete) integration of nonorganized layers of the working class – women workers – into the women’s movement, and vice versa. The specific role of these NGOs, then, is to do the frontline work, build on their institutional knowledge and practices to ‘invite’ women into organizing spaces. This dynamic is crucial for transformative change in highly feminized, labour intensive, and anti-union sectors such as garment production in the Global South. It is also a welcome shift in labour activism, one that has kept its focus on labour and class while integrating gender.

However, it is important to note that organizing women workers in Bangladesh remains in its early stages. Despite the advances made by worker-focused NGOs, they are not institutions that can sustain or legally engage in collective bargaining – these remain the legal purview of trade unions. Therefore, we must be cautious (cf. Braun & Gearhart, 2004) in advocating a greater role for NGOs *en masse* in directing workers' movements. NGOs are one of many types of institutions that are currently involved in advocating for workers' and union rights in Bangladesh (Quayyum, 2019; 2023), but this was a strategic adoption of a very particular kind of institutional form to meet the needs of a workers, yes, but first and foremost a particular conjuncture in the country's broader political economy. They were never intended, and are not organizationally suited, to be at the forefront for change in the sector. Ultimately that remains the purview of small scale organizing by workers themselves, both on and off the production floor.

Where NGOs have been particularly useful as coalition partners in RMG organizing is in their ability to reach women workers. NGOs have a long history of working with disenfranchised women and a reputation of being nonpartisan – a key consideration for women and those keen to avoid directly associating with political parties in Bangladesh. The trade union system, meanwhile, much like the society at large, is bound by strong patriarchal norms that limit the scope for women's independent participation. As a result, women are often wary, uncomfortable, and unwilling to engage in union activism itself (cf. Dannecker, 2000; Quayyum, 2019; 2023). Engaging with women workers outside of the structure of traditional unions is therefore critical, as it provides an independent means to work across the labour movement and the women's movement, ensuring neither leave the interests and issues of the other out. With primarily

women staff, NGOs also offer a respite from the male-dominated trade union system where women – especially younger women – and their families can be made to feel more comfortable and supported in their organizing. As the strategies utilized by unions A, B, and C – *because* of their close collaboration with NGOs A, B, and C respectively – demonstrate, there are new means to mobilize young, nonorganized women, and at the same time, push the male-dominated trade union system into being more open to and supportive of women workers entering formal labour.

The Current Landscape of Labour Organizing: What is Possible Now for Women Workers in the RMG Sector?

While the creation of a more active and engaged workforce in the RMG sector is well recognized, it is also important to recognize the changes that are already afoot. The recent tragedies in the RMG industry have drastically changed the organizing landscape. In the RMG sector, for example, a worker is no longer considered a radical if they question or voice concerns. Moreover, the disasters opened – socially and politically – new space for workers to air their concerns and grievances, and lent weight to efforts to frame workers' rights as human rights. Finally, they served to draw the working class into the broader women's movement and the working woman into the trade union movement.

The Discourse of Rights: The Worker Navigating the Women's Movement and Women Navigating the Trade Union Movement

The women's movement has a long history in Bengal and later, Bangladesh. Prominent activists of the movement today described for me the liberal, urban, middle-class base of these movements and the relative absence of working women. This is not to

say that the ‘working woman’ was unknown to the women’s movement, or vice versa, but only that they did not figure as a constituent base. As a consequence, the specificities of their concerns did not figure dominantly in the movement’s objectives. As one activist noted, this was partly because women did not work in the formal sector until the rise of the RMG industry. Prior to their entry in the industry, these same women had worked in the home or subsistence agriculture in the countryside. As such, they were difficult to access, and their issues were not heard or paid attention to within urban centres where many debates and discussions would take place in groups such as the *Mahila Parishad*. As discussed in Chapter 2, it is only with the emergence of the RMG industry and the subsequent influx of young women into urban centres that activists attached to the women’s movement were able to highlight their concerns. Even so, the women’s movement made little effort to bring RMG workers into the fold of their organizing until only very recently: when it became apparent that the exploitation of RMG workers was intimately bound to the gendered dimension of the workforce. This sudden turn can in part be attributed to the increasing prominence of women leaders among workers and a transnational solidarity work that has highlighted the gendered nature of the work and workforce. As one activist noted to me: after a certain point, the women’s movement could no longer afford to organize without this growing constituency.

Today, women’s and developmental NGOs who focus on gender, are increasingly looking to integrate programs for women workers. Even a decade ago, this would not have been the case. Of course, working-class or RMG women could have theoretically accessed or partaken in gender-focused campaigns, however there was nothing specifically tailored to them or their needs. Increasingly, as foreign and locally-based

institutions ‘take-up’ the RMG women workers, the women’s movement has also started to open up space for working-class women, including those outside of formal employment such as domestic workers. The opening up of the women’s movement to include beyond its small, middle-class base is a crucial step in the right direction, as it opens the possibility to engage in cross-movement organizing. Of course, this is not without its own challenges. Much of the concern with working-class women is still based on liberal ideas of philanthropy, charity, and helping poor women, particularly in times of need. An activist recounted, for instance, when a group of RMG workers had not been paid by their employer and went on strike outside the Dhaka Press Club, it generated a lot of interest among middle-class women active in the women’s movement, but all that came of this interest was a commitment to donate funds – not to sustain the strike – but because the strike coincided with *Eid* and striking workers would not have enough money for *iftar*. This one incident, though anecdotal, confirms what many women in the workers’ movement have long observed – principally that many activists in the women’s movement do not yet have the language to understand or meaningfully confront the systemic oppression endemic to low-wage work, or the limits to philanthropic remedies.

On the other hand, the challenges of integrating women into the labour movement are equally apparent. Predominantly the realm of male workers from jute mills, the public sector and banking, the union movement in Bangladesh been slow to accept women as equals. As the President of union C recounted to me, it has been very difficult to convince activists in the labour movement to accept that i) women are entering the formal sector and, ii) additional resources are required to expand union training and organizational initiatives geared toward women workers. As a result, much of her (and others’) time and

energy is spent negotiating and challenging the patriarchal ideas of those she organizes with. As discussed earlier, echoes of this same sentiment are heard from women workers themselves. As a staff member from Union B pointed out, in line with others doing similar work, women are difficult to access because of family pressures and societal expectations for women's lives. Accordingly, the world of unions and public forms of organizing appears to many women workers as the 'man's-world' with little value attached to their own potential participation. As the President of union C noted, her objective in organizing is to reconcile this separation: by developing women's interest in unions and labour organizing, and by creating that space – in unions and workers' parties – for women to be more vocal and active organizers. For her, the future of organizing depends on integrating women workers from the RMG sector into the trade unions.

The notion of *odhikar* – and more broadly, the discourse of rights – has played an important role in bridging the otherwise parallel worlds of women's and trade union organizing. Speaking to many women workers and labour activists in Bangladesh, it is apparent how widely used the term *najjo odhikar* (inherent rights) has become. This framing indicates that NGOs, trade unions, and activists themselves are beginning to see labour organizing as form of human right – foundational to a person rather than a gendered person – and therefore, something that is at least in theory, accessible to all workers, regardless of their gender. The collaborative efforts of NGOs and trade unions have done much to develop this understanding – and emerging practice – of labour organizing in the RMG sector. The new language and mind-set have, moreover, meant that women workers are more empowered and confident both of the necessity and fundamental justness of organizing activities.

Being Organized Workers

Small Steps, Big Life Changes

One of the striking realities of being an organizer in the RMG sector is the rarity of being an organizer and worker *at the same time*. Workers that I met with and interviewed tended to be younger in age, compared to field organizers or activists. In part, this is due to the fact that once discovered to be an activist within an RMG factory, it is very difficult to continue working in the same workplace, and often, it is difficult to get hired in other workplaces as well. For example, one activist recounted how she was black-listed both within her factory, and others, after being involved in a wild-cat strike. Other activists I spoke to recounted similar stories, and the threats – physical and psychological – they faced as a result of their activities. In short, as an activist, the threat of job loss, harassment, psychological and physical violence are both distressingly common and, for many, enough of a reason to not be involved.

When asked about their motivations for getting involved in activism in spite of the danger all workers and activists I spoke to noted working conditions, delay or lack of payment for work as key factors. Nearly all workers and activists explained that it had come to a point when they could no longer remain quiet. The president of union B, for example, explained how workers he supports as an organizer rely on various forms of credit for purchasing groceries or other necessities from small neighbourhood stores and vendors, and the harassment they face on a regular basis when they fail to repay these amounts. They are embarrassed and harassed as they walk by these neighbourhood stores when employers fail to pay their wages, making the situation unbearable. Similarly, many workers are not able to pay their landlords. These types of debts are personalized as the

relationships workers have with landlords, store owners and others are effectively relationships with members of their own communities, not large-scale stores with depersonalized operations. In these situations, owing money becomes more stressful because the debt and credit system operates within the community, and with those who may be in dire need themselves. As one activist explained to me, she feels a sense of sympathy for the store owners as their livelihoods are on the line and cannot continue to support workers indefinitely simply because their employers are not paying them. The networks of debt and credit that operate within worker communities, while at times very advantageous, are thus also key sources of emotional and physical stress for workers.

While the source of grievance may be the delay or lack of pay, or the deteriorating working conditions in the workplace, these are often strains on workers and not always catalysts for activation. Indeed, if these simple grievances were enough to activate workers, most RMG workers would be active labour organizers by now given that they are so widely shared. Grievances, then, are but one part of the equation. The other is the relationships workers are bound by in the workplace – the trust, love and support – that provide workers with a sense of community, and are a source of strength and support. As noted earlier, community is not simply a collection of individuals who feel similar strain. Rather, it refers to a collective sense of shared interest and an identity forged in discussion, action, and understanding that the power to transform their lives lies in their ability to work together rather than as atomized individuals. These social networks in which community and identity develop, then, are affective communities that also help bind people and interests. Once embedded in these social networks, activists and workers are able draw and depend on each other for support, material and otherwise. The

materiality of affect, as first described in Hennessy (2013) and later expanded by others is ultimately at the core of labour organizing amongst women workers in the RMG sector in Bangladesh.

The first step to becoming organized is to be part of the inner core group of workers who, on the one hand, recognize there are workplace issues and on the other hand, attempt to solve them. This inner group of organized workers – and if not organized as a group, there is some informal sense of leader(s) in the factory – reach out to other workers when they want to do an action of any sort. A field organizer from union A, for example, explained to me her own well-developed strategy to identify trust-worthy and capable colleagues, establish relationships with them outside of work, and bring them into the fold of organizing. As she noted, it all starts with relationship-building in the factory floor. Trust and friendship, for her, is at the core of effective organizing. You must, after all, be able to trust who you ultimately discuss organizing strategy with. The basis of friendship and trust is what allows women to discuss their problems openly with one another. Moreover, investing in one another to solve workplace issues creates a sense of solidarity. These friendship groups act as affective cells that ultimately feed into the broader community of activists. She also revealed the need for her to identify employer informants to ensure that remain outside affective cells and the broader community. This, she revealed, is another example of the importance of building and navigating informal social networks – being aware of who is with them, and who is not. Without such knowledge, any attempts to organize women could fail from the start – through simple gossip within or beyond the factory floor.

Field organizers across the three unions offered much insight into how they organize in the workplace. As former garment workers with many years of experience, they not only know the working conditions of factories, but also how workers relate to one another on a daily basis, and build lasting relationships. This is difficult to do because of the often temporary nature of contract-based work. As such, it is important to distinguish between workers who are hired as permanent and have been on the same factory floor for long periods of time, as they have established more relationships and are keenly aware of plant dynamics. Field Organizers are drawn from this latter group, and have a wide network of relationships and personal connections with workers and supervisors. They secure and navigate supervisors and at times even manage to bring them on the side of workers. A field organizer from union A, for example, proudly recounted a time when she managed to do this at her factory.

Ceasing to be a garment worker – whether it is due to retirement, health reasons or otherwise – therefore does not necessarily mean that workers (particularly established workers) lose their networks. It enables them to professionalize the work they had been doing informally in their factory floors. While many may rightfully raise their eyebrows at the thought of paid activists such as field organizers, those I met with and interviewed, did not appear to be motivated by money. They received a salary for their work as organizers, but this formalization of their informal labour did not change their desire to mobilize and activate other workers; if anything, it allowed them to do professionally and be remunerated for what they had not been compensated for previously.

Not all former RMG worker-turned-activists become field organizers, but most do eventually have to stop working in the RMG sector because they are either driven out due

to harassment and/or security reasons. Other former RMG workers-turned activists go into organizing through political parties or trade union federations, or become community organizers. The decision to leave RMG production – whether the decision is made by themselves or for them – is life altering. Those formally affiliated with an NGO or union have respectable new titles and positions and are readily identifiable through their association with a particular leader in the field. They had a relatively secure source of salary and could save face with their families and friends for not being short-sighted enough to lose a much-needed job by ‘fighting the hand that feeds them.’ Those without any affiliation need to find work in a factory where they have not been heard of, or enter a new line of work outside of RMG. For women workers, the choices are more difficult. There are only a handful of NGOs that work with women workers and a history of activism is easily discovered through informal channels. Moreover, women with little to no formal education do not have the skills to be hired by other industries beyond RMG.

The Struggle to be *Sramik* not *Nari Sramik*

Beyond harassment and threats – which all workers organizing in the RMG sector face – women face a unique set of additional challenges, principally a patriarchal understanding of women’s role in society and the cultural regulation of social reproduction. The social barriers – or *baadha* – they encounter from family, friends and community are gendered in nature. As such, the activism they engage in – and the development of class consciousness – is an attempt to defy the gendered violence they face in society. Women workers’ activism, then, is not merely redressing and transforming exploitative working conditions, but equally about challenging and defying the ways in which social reproduction is regulated. To this end, the struggle waged by

women activists and workers is about becoming and organizing as a *sramik* (worker), and not what is expected of them as a *nari sramik* (woman worker).

RMG workers know why they are hired for employment in the RMG industry – because they are women and can do women’s work, such as sewing and assembly. As the director of NGO B – herself a former child garment worker – elaborated, the reason why women are hired for such labour intensive production work is not only because women *can* do it, but because they have been told all their lives that they should not fight back, there is a corresponding assumption that they can be *made* to do the work. Similarly, when activists see the pattern of exploitative labour, the non-payment of wages, and rampant sexual harassment in the workplace, they understand that they are differently targeted because of their gender. They see the recurring patterns of *baadha* from their families, friends, and communities, and the sexual violence and threats of violence in their workplace. One worker-turned-activist recounted for me the way in which a local *goonda* (thug) was hired by factory management, the way in which he would walk up and down the factory assembly line in his shorts, threatening sexual violence to all the young women on the line if they crossed him. Beyond the workplace, activists encounter routine questions and barriers to activism from their families, in-laws, and friends. As a group of women discussed during a lunch break at a training session, these come not just from immediate family members, but also from their neighbourhood elders. The *baadha* enforced here builds on the gendered roles they play in the household and community, and reinforces the notion that their role is that of mother, wife and care-taker, and that they are only in society to supplement the family income. As another

activist explained, taking an interest in matters beyond this is seen as *baara baari* – going beyond what is needed or warranted, especially by a woman.

A key part of activism in the sector therefore entails having a nuanced understanding the relationship between a worker's gender and their treatment. To be a woman worker in the sector is to endure exploitation, and to be an activist is to (at best) balance the triple-burden of productive work, social reproductive labour, and community activism, and only then by appeasing or engaging in a constant battle with family members and friends. As conversations with women workers and activists revealed, balancing reproductive work of cooking, cleaning, maintaining the household, and doing care work is incredibly difficult for women who work 8-10 hour shifts, 5-6 days a week, with over-time work on top of this. Most workers cook and drop off their children on their way to work, and return home to continue this work in the evening, on top of the expectation that they will cook a fresh meal in the evening and educate their children. Those without children or husbands will do so for other family members. This leaves women with very little time to do much else. On weekends, they are expected to do more reproductive labour, and spend time with their families. To spend time away from reproductive and affective labour is considered unacceptable. Indeed, the worlds of these women are defined by those around them. Meanwhile, the demands of activism are many and requires time for organizing – attending meetings; participating in information, training, and strategy sessions; events and actions; and the affective element of engaging with and building the capacity of other workers and activists. These demands on time and energy means that as an activist, women workers cannot continue to play the role of

woman, as pre-defined for them. Concretely, they cannot do – or do not wish to do – the reproductive labour at home and feel that time and effort could be better spent organizing.

In this sense, activism by RMG women workers concretely displays the experientiality of gender and class as interlocking relations of power (Bannerji, 2005). To be a woman worker and to be a woman activist means that they are exploited on the one hand by capital because of their gendered labour power and class, and on the other, unable to organize because of the gendered reproductive labour and class. The challenge for activists is to link class and gender-based exploitation and violence to develop a gendered form of class consciousness, particularly one that espouses a form of universal humanism and predicates itself on ideas of dignity and humanity. As aptly captured by one activist: the struggle for RMG workers is to become and be recognized as *srawmik* (workers), not *nari srawmik* (women workers). Here, she does not suggest that workers must be de-sexed and cease being women, rather, that they need to identify, and be identified by others, as workers in the non-gendered sense.

Activists Breaking the *Purdah*

The struggle for RMG activists to become *sramik* and not *nari sramik* speaks to a desire to defy patriarchal norms and mores to remain in the private home and instead, step out into the world. Here, private is defined by activists as both the family home and neighbourhood, as well as the paternalistic factory system, while the norms and mores are prevalent all around in society – from the workplace, to the family, to the organizing environment. While conventional wisdom suggests that the RMG industry has helped to break up the socio-cultural practice of *purdah* – in that it has forced women out of the home physically, ethnographic work suggests that the factory system in fact exploits

working women in a similar manner (cf. Siddiqi, 2000). My conversations with workers and activists reveal the way in which factories operate as the home and in many ways, reify norms associated with *purdah*. As one worker and activist explained to me, the factory is very safe and nothing can happen there; it is more dangerous to be outside than inside. The factory floors are locked during production hours and it is mostly women that work on the floor, under their floor supervisor who is typically male. Indeed, it is the premise that women workers will be safe and under the care and control of supervisors that rationalizes the decision of families let them work. The system of control that the industry enforces is therefore very consistent with the way in which society itself is organized, theoretically and paternalistically, protecting women from external danger. The activism RMG women engage in is therefore both a struggle against their working conditions, as well as a struggle against patriarchal notions of what it means to be a respectable woman in society.

Notions of respectability and honour have class dimensions to them. For working-class women, their families define *ijjot* and *maan shonmaan* (self-respect and dignity) in ways that have very different connotations to those of middle or upper-class women. When asked why their families and community members object to them part-taking in union activities, attending meetings or public protests, working-class women explained that these activities entailed spending time away from the home and being out in public. While the idea that women have to enter the productive labour market is a reality accepted by most working-class families, the idea that they should be involved in *rajniti* (politics) and getting involved in a man's world is still not acceptable. This is different from middle and upper-class women in Bangladesh who enjoy the freedom to be out in

public, hold positions of power in corporate or public offices, without fear of reprisal from family or community.

As RMG workers become more experienced organizers, their own understandings of respect transforms. As a field organizer from union B explained to me: she enjoys being a field organizer and being known to all those around her as a leader and activist because of the respect the title and position warrants. The type of respect she speaks of here poses a challenge to the way in which respect has been defined by working class families. It suggests that women can take on public positions, work alongside men, train in mixed gender settings and act in non-gender conforming ways – all the while, maintaining her *ijjot* and *maan shonmaan* in a way that is valuable to her. In this sense, she shows us the importance of being able to define respect beyond the ways in which working-class families define it, to the ways in which workers' affective communities define it. This entails transcending the boundaries of the traditional kinship-based family to that of a non-traditional family based on extra-familial relations; as a woman, this also entails transcending gendered boundaries in that women do not/ cannot readily engage in non-familial relations.

To be an activist, women workers have to therefore challenge the *purdah* physically in that they have to leave their homes and go out into the world of work and activism. In addition to this, they challenge and transform the non-physical elements of *purdah* by embodying and living a life that women are told they cannot have. They have to take on leadership and mentorship roles, conduct training workshops, participate in and organize walk-outs or other public actions. These roles often entail exerting a certain power over other workers, including male workers. This not only disrupts the male-

female division of labour and separation of lives, but turns it entirely upside down. And, as with all attempts to transform gender relations, this comes as a high price.

Women activists disclosed the sexual harassment they face in their workplace, in their activist circles, and from the broader society. The director of NGO B in particular, noted that despite her successes as a leader of the RMG workers' movement, she is still undermined by male activists in the sector. Similarly, she disclosed the threats of rape, in addition to the 'usual' violence from employers and the police. But as she explains, it is being an activist that has given the real bargaining power that she now has in her own relationship with her husband today. As she frankly notes, today, she has the actual ability to tell him that her world is much bigger than him alone. She can opt to sleep with him or not; it is she who gets to decide. Another activist also spoke openly about the way in which her relationship with her husband changed over the course of her activism. Where in the beginning, he would try to hold her back, he was no longer able to do so. She places the blame entirely on him for her not being able to do everything she has wanted to accomplish, but also suggests that she is doing much more than would have been possible before. Similar to her fellow activist from union B who commands respect from her co-organizers, these women command respect from her husbands.

Being respected, for doing exactly what they shouldn't have been doing, by both family members and peers, is a crucial element of breaking the *purdah*, as it entails an element of fear – a fear of what women could be if they break out of the mold of what they ought to be. It challenges the assumption that women can be absorbed into productive work and continue to do the social reproductive work at home to regenerate the household – and therefore, the worker. In the case of gender-specific work such as

garment production, it is inevitable that women will challenge this as they simply cannot do it all, particularly as patriarchal norms push them to do so. Workers' activism has become geared not just against employers, but equally, against the cultural regulation of social reproduction – as manifested through socio-cultural norms and enforced families and communities – that attempt to keep women in their place.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I explored how women workers in the RMG sector organize in, and are organized by, an institutional matrix involving worker-driven NGOs, workers' centres, and intergenerational households. I argued that a range of formal and informal strategies used by labour activists within these institutions help women workers to develop class consciousness, and further that these strategies reveal both the importance and integrative role of informal relationships, social networks, and affect (Gould, 2009; Hennessy, 2013; Chun, 2016; Tungohan, 2023) in mobilizing workers, not just for greater leverage and bargaining power on the production floor, but also within their private and communal lives. In adopting these strategies, I argued that these institutions are slowly integrating women into the workers' movement, and workers in the women's movement – a critical development for transformative social change in a highly feminized, labour-intensive sector.

The findings from this chapter provide the basis for the discussion in the next chapter. Specifically, how we might use women workers' experiences to explore more systematically, the relationship between social networks and affective communities, and their contributions to the building of an infrastructure of dissent.

Chapter 6: Building an Infrastructure of Dissent: Re-visiting Questions of Social Reproduction and Affect

The previous chapter discussed the ways in which labour organizers engage in a wide variety of formal and informal activities. Given that these organizers are, or were at one-point RMG workers themselves, the dominant strategy adopted by institutions like NGOs have been to build on the pre-existing kinship circles that challenge and overturn precisely the socially restrictive mores governing the lives of working women. Taken together, these strategies reveal how these activists collapse the formal compartmentalization of women workers' public and private lives to advance the longer-term goal of broadening the social lives of women workers. In this chapter, I explore more systematically how these strategies contribute to the building of an infrastructure of dissent. The chapter is guided by the question: what does visibilizing the invisibilized organizing that is currently taking place amongst, and within, women workers in the sector, tell us about the ways in which the infrastructure of dissent is organized?

The analytical framework developed in Chapter 3 is useful here to answer the questions just raised. That framework posited that social reproduction is to productive labour what affect is to collective organizing. On the one hand, just as social reproduction is what makes productive labour possible, affect is what makes the collective possible. On the other hand, just as social reproduction is rendered invisible, so too is affective organizing of women organizers. Thus, the utility of the framework of social reproduction as I have used it here is that it illuminates a key aspect of organizing that helps explain how mobilization in the Bangladeshi RMG sector takes place. Here, activism cannot have as its sole area of focus either labour, or the conditions of labour. Instead, the domain of labour is the destination of organizing rather than an entry point,

with the journey to get there requiring a direct and sustained engagement with the social worlds women workers inhabit – an analysis made possible by a materialist reading of affect.

The second argument I advance is that the Bangladeshi context is unique in that it is ostensibly apolitical institutions, such as NGOs, which take on this work. The product of the dearth of available opportunities for Bangladeshi women to meaningfully participate in a male-domination labour movement, a close reading of how labour activism in Bangladesh actually operates – instead of how it is *supposed* to – focuses attention on where an emerging infrastructure of dissent is currently being developed. These findings suggest the need to broaden our understanding of what constitutes an infrastructure of dissent and, in turn, how political communities come to learn, communicate, and mobilize together.

Returning to the Framework of Social Reproduction: Visibilizing Critical Layers of Organizing by and for Women Workers

Chapter 5 outlined the ways labour activists in the RMG section circumvent obstacles erected by the state, factory managers, and the social worlds inhabited by women workers. More specifically, it demonstrated the critical role of women workers' informal networks – within and beyond the workplace – as central organizing spaces that draw women closer together, and foster the emergence of workers' affective communities. The importance of women workers' informal networks stems from its integrative capacity. Organizers navigate the familial, household, and friendship networks in which women workers are already embedded, using these more personal – and seemingly apolitical – spaces to engage individual workers that, otherwise, would remain

unconnected either to other workers or already established worker communities. The chapter concluded by asserting that the development of a class consciousness critical to women's activism in the RMG sector is dependent on the affective labour of labour activists, and their strategy of working beyond the established institutions of the labour movement in Bangladesh.

What this means is that on the one hand, activists are meeting women where they are, in order to mobilize them, rather than expecting them to be the confident, urban worker, that they are not yet; on the other hand, it means that the efforts to organize, and be organized, is not a spontaneous, one-off example of dissent, seeing as different organizations and activists appear to be using similar methods. These findings are crucial for understanding how women workers in Bangladesh are mobilizing on the ground today for two reasons. First, it means that they as a whole are disconnected from workers' institutions – and therefore, disorganized – for the most part, and must be brought together with the help of various forms and levels of institutions; and because they are disorganized, activists have to connect with them on a personal level, make the connections new and young workers themselves cannot, and devote one-on-one attention to them. And second, it means that activists are slowly but surely creating a greater mass of class-conscious workers-as-agents out of young women who are new to waged labour itself. This attests to the foresight of labour organizers to create a long-term, viable and sustainable labour movement inclusive of RMG workers.

The small steps women workers and activists are taking to create, nurture, and sustain the community of activists, are not ad-hoc elements of organizing; rather, community building is understood to be the base of activism itself. It is important in the

context of Bangladesh because it shows that workers have agency: they recognize that their many problems can only be overcome by organizing *as* workers; they understand that it is in their best interest to incorporate new segments of the working class into activism in ways that makes most sense and works best for young women who are marginalized within society at large; and they recognize that it begins by creating bonds within the community whereby women take care of each other's needs emotionally and through popular forms of education. These steps are often hidden or taken for granted because it involves affective labour, done primarily by women, rather than public manifestations of dissent and strategy-development, done primarily by men. Thus, it is not seen to be part of organizing work.

The invisibilized layer of organizing is made visible by expanding the framework of social reproduction itself; indeed, what it reveals is that this layer of organizing requires the same long-term dedication, care, love, trust amongst one another, and is critical for renewing the worker and builds their capacity to become active in workers' struggles. Moreover, because much of this invisible labour takes place in spaces of social reproduction, it entails not only mobilizing the woman worker, but quite often, the sets of communities she is embedded in. As activists I spoke with convinced me: this form and level of activism is fraught with challenges, contradictions, and opportunities, and ultimately, critical for mobilizing nonorganized women workers in the RMG sector.

Infrastructure of Dissent: Institutions and Spaces of Social Reproduction

Institutions are crucial for developing the process of consciousness and class formation, both within/connected to, and beyond the workplace. Both the level and the form of the institutions that are needed vary: they may include, for example, the

intergenerational households of women garment workers (consisting of women who are subcontracted to work largely from their homes or, are employed by the RMG industry at the same time or over different periods), developmental NGOs (for example, those which are mandated to deliver women's empowerment projects or other developmental projects), workers' centres (these might include organizations that provide health, legal and family services for workers), trade unions, etc. Furthermore, they may vary in structure: they might be formal (operates with a particular organizational structure) or informal (operates without any specific structure). As discussed in Chapters 4 and 5, the types of institutions that are particularly relevant for RMG workers in Dhaka is a combination of these different institutions that bring diverse workers – in terms of age, ethnicity, religion, and particularly, gender – together and in the same space on the basis of their class, as well as on the basis of their gender experiences. Workers access these institutions not necessarily to seek out employment advice, or explicitly organizing purposes; they access them for a wide range of reasons such developing or expanding friendship and other networks, seeking legal support, for using day care facilities, for learning and education opportunities because as poor, working-class and/or recent migrant women, they do not necessarily have access to institutions that provide these services free of charge elsewhere. To this end, we can see how a broad range of differently-mandated institutions can help to bring working-class women together on the basis of their practical or strategic gender interests (Moser 1989).

Common experience is necessary both within and outside the workplace, and an infrastructure of class-struggle might be thought of as an incubator of that common experience (Webber, 2012). The coming together of these women workers allows them to

share their experiences about their workplaces as well as other class-based experiences. And, it is through their engagement with this institutional matrix that these women become incubated in the common experiences of the working-class in Dhaka. Without the mix of such institutions, these women would not be exposed to communities beyond their households and neighbourhoods in a city such as Dhaka, where social norms and mores dictate the extent of their exposure to others.

What this dissertation has revealed is that the forms of persuasion, affect, and negotiation needed to get workers into activist spaces, to build and generate counter-hegemonic ideas and strategies, and to archive and share memories, tools and tactics of past struggles, requires a wide variety of institutions, particularly seemingly apolitical ones. Institutions like NGOs and IOs are ultimately needed – particularly in light of the very small presence of organized labour in the RMG sector, the lack of infrastructure for the formal working-class, and lack of popular knowledge of even the small role of workers' movements – for procurement of material and virtual spaces that can support, sustain, and make viable the growing worker dissent that is taking place in Bangladesh. They do not replace the more organic forms of communication that occur in intergenerational and extra-familial worker homes and communities; they are instead, the *products* of the more informal means of organizing, a stepping stone to the building of independent and autonomous trade unions. In the Bangladeshi context, these institutions are needed for initiating and building a momentum for organized dissent, as well as for the education and the sharing and archiving of strategy and tools for workers' collective memory and knowledge. Without them, in a context where trade unions are officially legal but in reality, heavily suppressed, activists cannot organize. To this end, we can see

how worker-led NGOs and workers' centres and spaces of reproduction such as workers' communities and households can be critical institutions to pivot women workers towards a sense of collectivity and integrate them into an emerging infrastructure of dissent that they are otherwise isolated from.

These findings are similar to what Dannecker (2000) and Huq (2019) found in their own work on Bangladeshi RMG workers. Dannecker's study, for example, observed that women workers' informal groups and networks – as opposed to the country's already small group of established labour institutions – were the preferred vehicles of mobilization. Huq's study, moreover, has also found that existing labour institutions – bypassed by women workers – have come to reorient themselves to accommodate the needs and preferences of women workers. My study bridges the those of Dannecker and Huq and in so doing, demonstrates how labour activists have increasingly come to co-opt the institutional form of the NGO as a strategic 'middle-ground' – one that not only overcomes the legal and extra-legal barriers to work organization and activation, but equally, creates those informal settings that women workers are comfortable engaging with.

The decision to organize within the organizational form of the NGO was both strategic, and controversial. From the perspective of many labour organizers, NGOs are seen as sites of depoliticization, rather than the building blocks of an independent and progressive labour movement that would allow workers to engage in collective bargaining. However, while it was true that participation in NGOs offered workers no legal basis upon which to collectively bargain with an employer they were, at the same time, one of the only institutions in the country with a record of collaborative engagement

with the constituencies unions felt themselves entitled to represent. Because of this history, NGOs were uniquely situated. Institutionally, they contained decades of collective memory and experience. For the same reasons, not only were their programs and services tailored to the needs of women workers, but also, widely used. Better funded, with greater reach and institutional ability than many of the country's plant-level unions, the NGO form in Bangladesh provided women workers with unrivaled access to both the human resources – and critically, space – to engage with staff whose expertise was centered on women's empowerment.

What then, may be gleaned from the experiences of women workers and labour activists in the RMG sector and their experiences of navigating and building an infrastructure of dissent in Bangladesh? Given that they organize primarily through informal networks and are relatively new to organizing in a formal or official capacity, we can see that institutions such as NGOs and workers centres, as well as informal institutions such as the intergenerational household and working-class *elaka* (neighbourhood) are key institutions for bringing RMG women workers into the labour organizing. What this underscores is that the infrastructure of dissent – with the increasing participation of women workers – collapses the dichotomy of shop floor organizing and spaces of social reproduction. What we need to be critical of, however, is the extent to which they are able to further their objectives, the problems associated with institutionalization, the extent to which they perform for foreign donors, as well as the extent to which they are stifled from organizing within their communities by paternalistic relations. These are issues to keep in mind as we continue to study labour organizing in the country. That said, to merely suggest that women workers are being co-opted into the

fold of NGOs – or to suggest that they are not doing serious organizing in the home or community is to at once, dehistoricize the context of labour organizing that is taking root, and, devalue the important and crucial work that women specifically are doing in helping to build political communities to learn, communicate, and mobilize the new generation of workers and activists.

Conclusion

As discussed in Chapter 5, the three NGOs I included in my study are developmental NGOs on the one hand, while on the other hand, they operate alongside and in conjunction with – and continue to do so – as unions and workers' associations in light of the former's outright ban in the RMG sector until very recently in Bangladesh. These serve as examples of formal institutions that are actively creating spaces for, and working with women workers, helping them to develop a collective agency as workers, a consciousness of their gender-and-class-based exploitation, and preparing them in their role as aware and educated labour organizers in the RMG sector. Indeed, what began as training programs for health and safety programs is increasingly turning towards those that are training women on the process of collective bargaining, strategies etc. What has made these programs popular among women workers is the way in which information about them is spread – largely through word of mouth of trusted co-workers and others within their social networks. In turn, these are the communities that workers come to rely on in their organizing – communities that are bound by affect and need for material and psycho-social wellbeing.

Returning to the question of the type of institutions that are bringing these working women as collectives, we must pause and recognize that we are in fact talking

about NGOs. As mentioned in Chapter 1, whether autonomous or not, NGOs have in recent critical scholarship come under harsh criticism because of their neoliberal approach to problem solving, their contribution to the displacement of services that would otherwise be provided by states themselves, their mimicking of private sector organizations (lack of accountability, hierarchical model of organization, enterprise model of social service provision rather than delving deeper to find root causes of problems etc.), among others. These are all valid assessments, particularly when looking at the bigger picture in abstract. When such criticisms are applied to the context here for example, this form of organizing appears to be bourgeois socialism typical of NGOs today: they are directed and staffed by middle and upper-class, highly educated, urban women – with mandates beyond their control as they tend to be beholden to funders (either foreign or domestic) which restricts their programming to short-term, issue-specific projects. The fact that workers in the RMG sector in Bangladesh are being organized through these spaces then appears to contribute to the de-activation and pacification of more militant strands of labour.

I argue, however, that broad arguments such as this may at times overlook the agency of workers and the very process of activation. Rather than reading the process of organizing as one where NGOs ‘colonize’ the minds and agency of young workers, my participant observations and experiences suggest that many of those who founded these organizations, did so on the basis of own activism and life experience, not only as RMG workers, but also, as labour activists. While many founders of NGOs I included in my study – and the actions they take – certainly do fall into the category of bourgeois socialists with their emphasis on peaceful means that placate their many foreign funders,

they do not remove the issue of class struggle from the heart of their training, educating, or mobilizing workers and activists. My conversation with activists and workers themselves also reveal that while they do not necessarily use the language of class, they are certainly aware of their class position and organize to transform the production process that reproduces and intensifies the exploitative class relations. They choose to mobilize women on the basis of their gender, because that is what resonates with poor women in the context of Bangladesh – where women’s empowerment NGOs are rampant – rather than simply as workers because in Bangladeshi society, the concept of women as waged workers is still relatively new, despite their entry into waged work for several decades. In the context of a neoliberal production process – coupled with an increasingly conservative and religious society, where monitoring and policing of civil society and unions are rampant – to suggest that women workers will simply spring up and become active, is to romanticize and abstract the experiences of the worker herself, away from the social relations they are embedded in. It also suggests a particularly masculinist understanding of what it means to be ‘militant’ and therefore, effective, in activism.

Furthermore, it attests to the agency and strategic calculus of these former workers and labour activists. Having realised, and faced the many challenges of organizing on the shop-floor, they attempted to ‘tap into’ a resource more readily available and deemed legitimate, than attempting to file for union registrations. It also attests to the trial and error of organizing, and learning by doing in the sense that they tried, failed, and re-evaluated their strategy to figure out the steps necessary to mobilize nonorganized working-class women. To their credit, they knew that these women would be more familiar with an NGO structure, given the likelihood that they would at least

know what these institutions were given their widespread prevalence with working-class and poor people in both rural and urban Bangladesh.

Rather than turning a blind eye to patterns of investment in workers' issues or women's movement, I argue that we need to think equally about *why* women workers are organizing today, and *what* is making their participation possible in the current conjuncture. This allows us to explore what might be generalized about collective activism of the working women in the Global South today. Indeed, what we are witnessing in Bangladesh today is the building of an infrastructure of dissent and this questions and challenges mainstream – and rather patronizing – readings of workers' actions today. It also raises and challenges the anti-feminist reading of class consciousness and activism. By looking carefully at the ways in which women themselves are organizing, and being organized, it suggests that there are particularities in the way they understand and become aware of their gender-and-therefore-class-based exploitation and condition. Much of this can only be made sense of if we consider the materiality of affect, the way in which these women are bound to each other in the workplace and beyond, and why NGOs are able to tap into existing resources and skill-sets to bring them together in informal and formal ways. Ultimately, institutions – not just trade unions and workers' associations and centres, but equally, workers' communities, and inter-generational homes, as well as an existing network of NGOs working on various aspects of women's and workers' issues – are crucial not just for bringing workers together, but also as sites of activation. Taken together, these formal and informal institutions are incorporating women's knowledge and pre-worker ways of doing things, to help build a viable infrastructure of dissent that will help educate, share

and transfer knowledge and skills, and develop an institutional memory of workers' organizing in Bangladesh.

Chapter 7: Conclusion

This dissertation project explored how women in Bangladesh's garment industry develop class consciousness, become politically active, and contribute to an emerging infrastructure of dissent in Bangladesh. It challenged the portrayal of women workers as victims to forces outside or beyond their control, arguing instead that they have increasingly been at the forefront of efforts to transform their workplaces, as well as the communities that have formed around them, through affective organizing. The key take-away from studying how women workers have organized and mobilized in Bangladesh is the integrative role that affect plays in developing class consciousness among nonorganized women workers, and the importance of affective spaces of social reproduction for organizing them. This is because activism in this context involves not only the individual worker, but the range of communities women are embedded in.

Summary of Arguments

Chapter 1 introduced the dissertation. The aim, objectives and research questions were outlined, key concepts and literature informing the work were identified, as were my theoretical and methodological interventions. Upon these foundations I put forward two principal arguments. First, the development of class consciousness is linked to women's participation in, and sense of belonging to, activist micro-communities. Second, developing community consciousness is foundational for organizing the individual women workers who comprise it. These arguments are informed by a materialist reading of affect, dissident friendships and communities of care. Situating these concepts within scholarship on class consciousness and social reproduction, I show that Bangladeshi

activists' experiences demonstrate the importance of activating the communities that women are embedded in – be it biological, friendship or other fictive kinship – for the development of class consciousness and broader understanding of belonging.

Chapter 2 advanced an alternative narrative of the Bangladeshi garment industry and highlighted the context in which workers mobilize. This chapter was informed by two key questions: What is the role of the global RMG industry in creating the *nari srawmik* (women workers) in Bangladesh? And, what opportunities and challenges did the RMG industry pose for its predominantly women workforce? I argue that the global RMG industry fundamentally transformed the demographic composition of the formal working class. I suggest that given the industry's predominantly women workforce, and ongoing significance to the Bangladeshi economy, that there was a *necessary* and *specific* dependence of the state on a segmented and gendered domestic labour market. Women workers in the RMG industry have both endured and challenged the deteriorating working conditions within factories in their own ways. To understand how, I trace the historic ban on trade unions, and discuss how the limits placed on progressive civic participation facilitated the entry of workers into the NGO sector, which has emerged as a strategic alternative to trade unions.

Chapter 3 developed an analytical framework grounding the concepts of social reproduction and affect to explore the development of class consciousness, solidarity, and activism among nonorganized women workers. The chapter's principal argument is that dissident friendships are central to how women workers connect to one another, mobilize together, and develop affective communities. Organized along kinship, friendship, and other lines, the sense of belonging that unites women workers is developed through time,

in ways that mimic the activities of social reproduction itself – through learning, teaching, care work, cultivating and nurturing relations between activists, workers and community members. This, I call affective organizing. Finally, the chapter explored the role of affective micro-communities in developing class consciousness amongst women workers, contributing to an evolving infrastructure of dissent by integrating workers excluded from traditional workers' institutions.

Chapter 4 grounded the analytical framework developed in Chapter 3. It is organized around one question: how might the labour organizing experiences of young, nonorganized women workers in Bangladesh's RMG sector help broaden the way in which class consciousness and activism are theorized? I provide an overview of the average RMG worker/activist, touching upon the experience of migration, finding work in the city, how and why they came to work in the RMG industry, and their experiences of 'home away from home.' I examine how these experiences impact the development of class consciousness, explore the agency of young women as they become RMG workers and activists, the process of women's activation, and how this affects their lives.

Chapter 5 explored how current and former RMG workers organize in, and are organized by, an institutional matrix that comprised worker-driven NGOs, workers' centres, and intergenerational households. This chapter sought to answer two questions: how do women workers in Bangladesh's garment industry engage in labour organizing in the workplace and beyond? And second, what institutions are helpful for mobilizing nonorganized women workers and why? The answer, I argued, lay in the range of formal and informal strategies adopted by activists within these institutions. Together, these strategies help women workers develop class consciousness, and demonstrate integrative

role friendships, fictive kinship communities, and affective organizing in mobilizing workers – not just for greater leverage and/or bargaining power on the shop floor, but also within women’s private and social lives. In adopting these strategies, I argued that these institutions are slowly integrating women into the workers’ movement, and workers in the women’s movement, a critical development for transformative social change in a highly feminized, labour intensive sector.

And finally, in Chapter 6, I examined how the affective strategies adopted by labour activists in Bangladesh contribute to the expansion of an infrastructure of dissent. The chapter is developed around question: what does visibilizing the invisibilized organizing that is currently taking place amongst, and within, women workers in the sector, tell us about the ways in which the infrastructure of dissent is organized? I argue that the Bangladeshi context is unique in that it is ostensibly apolitical institutions, such as NGOs, which are at the centre of this work. The product of limited opportunities for Bangladeshi women to meaningfully participate in a male-dominated labour movement, a close reading of how labour activism in Bangladesh actually operates – instead of how it is *supposed* to – focuses attention on where an emerging infrastructure of dissent is currently being developed. These findings suggest the need to broaden our understanding of what constitutes an infrastructure of dissent and, in turn, how political communities come to learn, communicate, and mobilize together.

Key Contributions of the Study

This study is significant in that it focuses on the subterranean realm of political organizing, the part that people rarely see but that which is foundational for the more contentious and visible forms of political action that capture the attention, and

imagination, of activists and the public alike. Importantly, this is a realm of organizing dominated by women. The strategies adopted by these organizers, and the sites of organizing themselves, are neither widely studied, nor typically associated with activism. But, as I have argued throughout this dissertation, what happens in these spaces *is* organizing, and not merely a prelude to it. The key theoretical, methodological, and empirical contributions of this study start from this premise.

Theoretically, this study joins the emerging feminist research on women's work and activism that highlight the importance of affect. It explores not only the range of activist tactics, but equally, the strategies employed to develop a collective class consciousness broad enough to encompass both the needs and aspirations of women workers, as well as those that they live and share their lives with. My observations therefore build on, but extend, the insights drawn from existing work on the integrative role played by affective organizing. This study also draws attention to organizers' chosen strategies for working with and through the communities that form around workers. As recounted by workers and organizers interviewed for this study, the strategies deployed were designed to encompass not only the material needs of workers, but also the nonmaterial needs of women and their communities. This emphasis on the social dimension of women's lives, as part of a broader strategy of labour mobilization, made necessary the need to develop an analytical link between women, communities, and strategy. Once established, there was also a need to consider how this link was deployed in actual practice. At first, the link between women, community, and strategy – as practiced in Bangladesh – could be read as simply another form of women's regulation. After all, activists often have to negotiate *access* to women workers, which could be read

as securing *permission*. In some cases, this was the case. However, organizers frame this tension differently, regarding it as a necessary (but temporary) tactic, and as a means to bring onside men in a broader campaign to transform the labour movement's – and society's – gender relations. I read the choices of organizers as calculated and strategic, drawn from their deep understanding of the cultural parameters framing their activism, but also a realization that change must come from within, and through, the social relations that structure the lives of workers – and women workers, in particular. It is an understanding that to change society we must, at one and the same time, bear some commitment to transforming ourselves. Working within the parameters set by culture, activists and organizers work within these challenges in order to transform them.

These theoretical insights were revealed, in part, because of a methodological commitment to the critical ethnographic tradition. The various methods I adopted – in particular, participant observation, site visits, focus group discussions and semi-structured interviews – were selected to learn from, and *for*, women workers and organizers. These methods allowed me to learn, firsthand, the opportunities organizers seize, the challenges they encounter, and the complex interplay of structure and agency that together shape the terrain of labour organization in present-day Bangladesh. In this sense, I did not choose women as subjects in my research to hone in on a given form of knowledge, but rather, because their experience transforms our understanding of what activism is. An important consequence of this was to draw attention to the invisibilized realm of affective organizing.

Empirically, this study contributes to knowledge about nonorganized women's activism and affective organizing by marginalized groups. The relative neglect of these

topics translates into missed opportunities, particularly to learn from the organizing strategies developed by activists to reach nonorganized workers. Given women's workers growing prominence across a range of industrial supply chains, particularly in the Global South, greater attention to how they can (and do) organize themselves is both timely and of increasing practical importance. In the context of Bangladesh, my hope is that they are taken up within trade unions that wish to integrate garment workers and women.

Limitations of the Study and Pathways for Future Research

A key finding of this dissertation is that alternative institutional forms and political traditions are useful for mobilizing nonorganized women in the RMG sector. This conclusion was reached in the initial stage of my fieldwork, where I noticed both the relative absence of trade unions and the ubiquitous presence of NGOs, in women workers' lives. This observation was in turn verified in my conversations with activists and as such, the sample I worked with was workers who access NGOs, and field organizers (staff) of NGOs that served as the arm of partner unions. Although this sample was crucial to answering my research questions, it also points to potential bias that may reduce the ability of future researchers to generalize the findings of this study. As such, there is a need to expand the type of research developed here to include organizers from trade unions that work with nonorganized women workers in the RMG industry and/or elsewhere, to test the broader generalizability of my conclusions and expand collective understanding of the strategies, tactics, and tools adopted by women workers in other sectors.

A potential application of my framework to movement building efforts with women working in home-based settings would be particularly interesting. These settings

might include domestic work (in middle and upper-class households in Bangladesh, or as migrants in homes outside of the country) or home-based work (for example, outsourced garment production, artisan and other craftwork) that are generally reliant on women's labour. In these contexts, centering affect to build new movements remains crucial as they draw from similar pools of nonorganized, relatively inexperienced women. I suspect, however, that the tactics and tools used would be significantly different given the private nature of intergenerational homes/workplaces that restrict the sociability of women beyond the household even more so than in the case of garment workers.

A second limitation of the study is the relatively low number of semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions conducted for this study. While the fieldwork was spread out over two years, it was conducted in blocks of several months, rather than over an uninterrupted period. I prioritized sight visits, informal conversations, participant observation (for example during activist training sessions and workshops) for the initial phase to build rapport. The length of time I spent on building these relationships – a key methodological consideration for qualitative research on affective organizing in particular – presented challenges of getting to a position of doing interviews and focus group discussions themselves. Addressing these methodological limitations and applying the framework developed here is important for future research to develop a deeper, more nuanced understanding of the landscape of women's organizing.

Frequently, throughout the writing of this dissertation, I have been reminded of the interviews, and the women, I learned from. Their conditions of work were often harrowing, but their determination to transform them was equally unyielding. However, while I was reminded of individual interviews or anecdotes from the many months I spent

in Dhaka and elsewhere conducting this research, it was apparent that what was being articulated to me was not necessarily an individual perspective. True, the details might speak to the individual character or aspiration, but the vision that animated the discussion was a collective one, forged through the intensity of collective labour, living, and organizing. A quote from Shirina, a garment worker and activist, speaks to the point just made, when she revealed to me:

“If I am scared, if you are scared, another person is scared, if we are all scared, then what is the point in living in an independent Bangladesh? We live in an independent Bangladesh. Someone must wake up and take a stand. Someone must throw the fears and barriers behind us and walk forward. If I walk forward, the person behind me is made *free* to also walk forward. If I stand still, then [we] can’t move forward.”

In a country where the fight for independence was fought within living memory of millions of Bangladeshis, notions of collective struggle, sacrifice, and independence have a particular connotation – and immediacy – that are perhaps not as deeply felt as they are in Bangladesh. They conjure images of the strong against the mighty and conviction over fear. Most importantly, they conjure an image that ends in victory. The allusion made by Shirina was unique, but it also captured something that was common enough to many of the interviews I undertook in that period, namely, that there was a mutually constitutive relationship between oneself and one’s community, and that collective organization was the only way to free both.

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