

CHAPTER SIX: WAGE SLAVERY AMONG WOMEN GARMENT WORKERS UNDER THE FACTORY SYSTEM IN BANGLADESH

6.1 Introduction

"The readymade garments' industry is the success story of the modern manufacturing sector after independence." (1) Bangladesh possesses a sector for the production of trousers, shirts and other modern wear which, like that in neighbouring India, is characterised by a phenomenal, annual growth-rate. From a sector which at its inception, in the late 1970s, counted only a few production units, - it has expanded within one and a half decade into an industry comprising at least 1100 units. Today, garment companies employ, by far, the largest number of wage-labourers of any of the country's industrial sectors. This sector's position in the urban economy is paramount.

Bangladeshi garment production bears some features which are similar to those of garment production in West Bengal, described in the previous Chapter. Like the workforce turning out clothes in Moheshtola/Santoshpur and Dum Dum/Paikpara, the workforce of garment manufacturers in the Bangladeshi cities of Dhaka and Chittagong is largely composed of women. This feature is unique to the country's garments' sector. In jute mills, the number of women labourers, according to the Census of the Labour Office of 1991, form only a tiny minority. There are 573 women in a total of 250 thousand employees. (2) The jute mill owners prefer to employ men. Owners of garment factories, on the contrary, show a marked preference for the recruitment of (young) women. They constitute the bulk of the sector's workforce. The interior of a Bangladeshi garment factory shows long lines of women stitchers bent over sewing machines.

Yet, in spite of some similarities, the differences between the production structures in West Bengal and Bangladesh are vast. Here there exists no hierarchy of subcontract relations with women toiling at the bottom end, in the confines of their homes. Bangladeshi garment women, by and large, are not home-based, but factory-workers. Unlike their sisters in West Bengal, they generally are not subject to a regime of piece rates, but to time-wages. Nor are their tasks diversified. While a woman garment worker in West Bengal could be a machine operator, a *chukai*- or a *dagtola* woman, - the identity of women garment workers in Bangladesh is basically one. Their task is uniformly to stitch trousers and shirts at sewing machines.

The specific reason for drawing attention to the Bangladeshi experience in this study, then, is that its garments production is almost wholly concentrated in factories. Thanks to the emergence of this sector, women for the first time in Bangladesh's history have been recruited in large numbers to toil as collective workers in factory premises. Their number, per unit, ranges from 100 or 150 to 1500 or more. Moreover, since most production is geared towards exports, Bangladesh's experience exemplifies the fact that throughout the Third World, millions of young women today are employed in 'world market factories'. They are **the** target for exploitation in

export-led growth strategies. This Chapter provides an occasion to test the relevance of Marx' theory of economic exploitation, formulated on the basis of factory conditions in 19th century Britain which were similar to those prevailing in Bangladeshi factories today.

6.2 International Relocation of Garments' Production

The rise of a powerful sector of garments' production in Bangladesh needs to be understood in a fast changing international context. The global economy's textile and garments' sectors have been characterised, for several decades now, by a vast process of relocation. First there was a movement from the centres of industrialisation in Europe and the United States to the Middle East and to countries of the Far East. More recently, companies have moved towards other parts of the Third World, as also to the former socialist countries of the Soviet block, i.e. to Russia and Eastern Europe. This process, and its particular consequences for countries of the European Union, has been summed up well in a recent article by Laurent Carroué. (3)

According to the given article, the sectors of textiles and garments of the European Union have lost 1 million and 400 thousand jobs within a period of just 15 years. In France, the sector's employees numbered 765 thousand in 1970. By 1980 the number had fallen to 527 thousand, and 10 years later only 361 thousand jobs remained. A certain portion of the readymade garments formerly produced in Northern European countries is now being imported from Southern Europe - from countries like Greece, Spain, Portugal and Italy. Here, a major share of the clothes is stitched by labourers toiling in small workshops. Thus, whereas in Germany, production units with less than 20 workers employ only 18 percent of the sector's workforce, - in Italy such informal sector workers constitute 45 percent. Out of 58 thousand micro-enterprises with less than 10 workers in the European Union, half are located in Spain and Italy alone.

When the process of international restructuring started, in the 1950s and 1960s, the first area of relocation was the Middle Eastern region. Some governments of countries around the Mediterranean sea have made the sectors of textiles and garments into the centrepiece of their industrialisation policy. In consequence, textiles and garments have emerged as the second largest industrial sector, in Marocco for instance. According to Laurent Carroué, the sector today employs 180 thousand persons. Again, in Tunisia, the sector provides no less than 50 percent of all manufacturing jobs, and provides 35 percent of the country's exports. Turkey, helped by a tripling of its import-quota of readymade garments into the United States after the Gulf war, has a reported 2 million textile and garment workers, occupying a third of the country's industrial employment. As in Southern Europe, much of the stitching occurs in small units, belonging to the so called 'informal sector'.

The principal stimulus for Western European companies to relocate their textile and garments' production is the existence of low wages. As the chart printed alongside the article by Laurent Carroué indicates, the level of wages paid to textile and garment-workers in Marocco and Tunisia is just one tenth of that paid in France. The literature on international restructuring generally associates the practice with 'social dumping'. The primary aim is to evade high labour costs in countries of the North, and to benefit from lack of social protection for industrial workers elsewhere. The practice is further facilitated by the Structural Adjustment Programmes which are uniformly imposed by the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank on

countries of the Third World. These countries face pressure to increase the value of their exports by any means, in order to earn hard currencies so as to repay their foreign debts. The motto of the resident representative of the World Bank in Bangladesh says it all: "You export or you die" (4)

6.3 'Run and Rerun' within the Third World

Once production has been relocated, however, no Third World country can be sure that orders from Western Europe and the United States will continue coming in. The world market in ready made garments, over the decades, has seen a process of 'run and rerun', of a second transfer of production from one area in the Third World to another one. The 'rerun' in some cases has also occurred back from the Middle East and Asia to Northern Europe and the United States, as has happened to the production of fashionable dresses requiring short supply-lines. The collapse of socialist governments in Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union has occasioned the most recent rerun. The production transfers to these countries is facilitated amongst others by their relative geographic proximity to Western Europe, by the existence of a ready infrastructure and by the availability of a skilled workforce.

A typical case of 'rerun' within the Third World, is the shift of garment production from the so called 'tiger' or 'newly industrialised' countries' (NECs) of East Asia, i.e. Hongkong, Singapore, Taiwan and South Korea, - to other parts of Asia. The city-state of Hongkong, for instance, after the Second World War opted in favour of an export-oriented strategy of industrialisation, centred around textiles and garments. Faced with increasing wage-costs locally, large companies in the late seventies started transferring orders and production sites to countries of South Asia, where wage-levels were/are much lower. According to a report of the Dutch research centre SOMO, some 70 thousand women workers have lost their jobs in the textiles' and garment sectors of Hongkong between 1984 and 1991 alone. (5) Since the middle of the eighties, large scale relocation of production has also taken place to China, which now is said to possess the fastest growing clothing and textile sector in the world. (6)

The impact this second and third rerun is having on Asia and on the world market in ready-made garments, is vast. With countries stretching from Indonesia to Pakistan pursuing an export oriented strategy of industrialisation, comparable to that of the 'tiger' countries in an earlier phase, each now avails of a textiles' and garment sector employing hundreds of thousands, if not millions of women workers. At the same time, East Asian entrepreneurs, using the tested ingredients of stiff exploitation and suppression of trade union rights, have surfaced as managers of garment factories in other Third World regions, such as in Central America and in the homelands of South Africa. Companies based in Hongkong and South Korea have shifted production, for instance, to Lesotho, where today 25 thousand people are employed in the garments' industry.(7) In order to evade the quota-system which limits each Third World country's access to the markets of countries of the North, it is, in particular, the final stage of production of clothing, i.e. stitching and ironing, which is time and again shifted to new 'pastures', to countries where an easily exploitable workforce is at hand.

6.4 Run on Bangladesh: Garments the Principal Export Earner

How to situate Bangladesh's experience within this international context of run and rerun? Since the first factories were founded in 1976, the Bangladeshi garments' sector has developed by leaps and by bounds. In 1984, the number of factories had increased to 177; by 1992 there existed 1100 factories, according to the figures of the Bangladesh Garment Manufacturers and Exporters' Association (8). While some of the factories were set up as joint ventures, most are owned by Bangladeshi entrepreneurs. Yet although the emergence of a class of private entrepreneurs is a new phenomenon for Bangladesh, the development of the garments' sector does not herald a process of independent industrialisation.

First, the garment factories are largely dependent on the import of raw materials. While the local capacity to produce some of the inputs like threads and cartons is stated to have grown somewhat in recent years, 97 percent of the principal raw material, the fabric, continues to be imported from the 'tiger countries'. By and large, the cloth, buttons and other inputs are imported from countries like South Korea and Taiwan. East Asian entrepreneurs 'discovered' Bangladesh in the late seventies, when they were looking for ways to circumvent Western countries' export quota.(9) Thus, the production of trousers and shirts is structurally linked to these countries' textile sector. It has no links to the indigenous textile sector of Bangladesh the history of which long predates that of the new, export-oriented garment sector.

Meanwhile, the contribution of garments to Bangladesh's export earnings has grown at an astounding rate. According to GATT figures, the export of clothing earned Bangladesh a mere 2 million in 1980. Ten years later, in 1990, the figure stood at 612 million US dollars, which signifies a more than three hundred fold increase. And during the next year, the 1 Billion US dollar thresh hold was crossed, the increment over one year thus being about 40 percent. However, it should be kept in mind that these figures do not constitute net earnings, since two-thirds of the dollar earnings do leave the country, to pay for the massive quantity of fabrics and other inputs, imported from newly industrialised, East Asian countries.

Nevertheless, the impact of readymade garments on Bangladesh's overall export earnings has been vast. In the middle of the seventies, jute products like hessian sacks, formed 75 percent of Bangladesh' export income. Today, the garment factories are the country's top earner, providing over half of overall export income.(10) Unfortunately, the change in the composition of Bangladeshi exports has not helped to decrease Bangladesh' external dependence. While the processing of jute is based on the indigenous cultivation of raw jute, this, as said, is not the case for the manufacturing of clothes. The country's previous dependence on jute exports was problematic given falling jute prices on the world market. Yet the relative shift towards garment exports, unfortunately, has not made the Bangladesh economy less fragile.

Thus, the case of Bangladeshi garments both illustrates the international process of run and rerun, and the meagre advantages which this process bears, in particular for the smaller countries of South Asia. As is true for so many other Third World countries, the drive for the setting up of production units has been provided wholly by external factors, by international competitors' search for the cheapest possible labour. The result has been as questionable, as is the transformation of agriculture.(11) The garment sector has significantly enhanced Bangladesh' short-term capacity to earn hard currencies, but at an equally significant cost of heightened external dependence.

6.5 Bangladesh's Garments' Sector: International Relations of Subcontracting

Bangladesh' structure for the production of garments is characterised by subcontracting relations, but these differ sharply from those we have observed for West Bengal. Whereas the Indian state's sector, as indicated before, is dominated by Calcutta's big traders, the *marwaris*, who sell fabric for the production of clothes to small manufacturers, the *ostagars*, - in Bangladesh the industrial manufacturers themselves occupy centre-stage. Domestically, they are not chained to more powerful economic actors. Nevertheless, externally, - in terms of relationships to the world market, we can speak of chains of subcontracting to which Bangladeshi manufacturers are subjected. In terms of the international economy, the position of the manufacturers is at the lower end of the sector's production hierarchy.

First, Hongkong and South-Korea based agents supply Bangladeshi entrepreneurs with inputs. They form an intermediate level between the textile factories in their own countries where the spinning and weaving takes place, - and the Bangladeshi units where the cloth is cut, sewn, ironed and packed into cartons, for exports to the world market. Nor does their role end here. For the same agents have also been instrumental in finding outlets for the finished goods in various countries of the North. As a well-researched essay published by the World Development Movement states, "Garment owners still often rely on the same South Korea- or Hongkong based agent to feed them both the order for shirts for a buyer in Britain, and the fabric from which the shirts are to be made." (12)

Further, most orders for Bangladeshi shirts, trousers and polo's are provided by large retail trading firms located in the United States and Western Europe. These retail trading firms form the top of the production pyramid in the international garments' sector, both in terms of capital and in terms of profits. Companies like Marks and Spencer (United Kingdom) and C & A (the Netherlands) harness capital resources, compared to which the capital of Bangladeshi owners is a pittance. They also earn the lion's share of the profits which are made on the back of the Bangladeshi workforce. According to calculations made by a Canadian professor of economics, Michael Chossudovski, shirts produced in Bangladesh are sold in developed countries for 5 to 10 times their imported price. (13)

The prevailance of low wages is the principal reason for the relocation of garments' production to Bangladesh, as can easily be demonstrated through comparative figures. Whereas the hourly wage of a worker in an American garment factory in 1984 was calculated to be 7,53 Dollars on the average, - that of a Bangladeshi worker was no more than 0,25 Dollars, i.e. roughly 3 percent of the former. Bangladeshi wages also lie far below those in 'tiger' countries like Hongkong and South Korea. They are at the bottom-end of the wages paid in countries of Asia (14). And though the productivity of stitchers in Bangladeshi factories is markedly lower than that registered by most other countries with a garments' sector, the difference is minor compared to the differences that exist in terms of hourly wages. As will be further illustrated below, Bangladesh has been able to make a dent into the international market in clothing, primarily due to the super-exploitation of its labourers.

6.6 Initial Profile of the Workforce

Before analysing in detail the labouring conditions in the garment factories, I will give a short, general profile of the workforce. Precise estimates of the size of the workforce are difficult to give, but recent trade union- and other sources mention figures ranging from 8 hundred thousand to a million wage-labourers (15). A garment factory's workforce is composed of men, of young and adult women, and of child labourers under 14 years of age. The owners prefer to employ male workers for staff-functions and tasks like cutting, defined as 'skilled'. The stitchers, i.e. the bulk of the workforce, are almost exclusively women. Child labourers are recruited as helpers, for jobs like cutting threads.

The women workers can roughly be divided into three categories in terms of their social background. According to trade union activists interviewed in 1992 (16), the majority, i.e. 60 percent, have entered the factories directly from the rural areas. They belong to or hail from poor peasant families. Out of the remaining 40 percent, half are members of urban, poor families. Many of these women have found their way to Dhaka and other cities as part of an extensive process of migration from villages to urban slums, which is closely related to the massive expulsion of peasants from the soil (17). A third category of women workers are those with a lower middle-class, urban background. Thus, the garments' sector attracts a diversity of women. Interviews of female machine operators confirm that many migrant women prefer the stitching jobs to a job as a domestic servant, which is considered more degrading than a job in a factory.

A survey of one thousand garment workers carried out in 1985 by the Justice and Peace Commission of Bangladesh cited high figures for the educational level of garment workers. According to this report, 55.5 percent had attended school up to levels varying from class 6 up to class 10. 39.8 Percent had passed secondary level examinations. (18) Trade union sources confirm that many of the garment workers with an urban, lower middle class background have at least received a primary education, and that the percentage of educated garment workers is on the increase. Consequently, the average level of education of women workers in the garments' sector is much higher than that of women in Bangladeshi society in general.

While this phenomenon has much to do with the high level of unemployment in Bangladesh, other characteristics of the workforce directly follow from the conscious recruitment policy pursued by garment owners. Both trade union representatives and journalistic sources state that some 80 percent of the women workers are unmarried. (19) As is the case for world market factories in South East Asia and elsewhere, the owners show a marked preference for young women (16 to 20 years'old) as their labourers. One of the reasons is their desire to be assured of a pliant labour force. Another reason is their desire to evade legal regulations about the granting of maternity benefits. When a young woman worker gets pregnant, and this is discovered by the factory management, she risks being dismissed. (20)

6.7 The Exploitation of Garment Workers: Violations of the 1965 Factory Act

In the following sections I will focus on the working day in the garment factories, to start on the length of time women machine operators and other labourers are made to toil by the factory owners. In an earlier Chapter we have seen how Bangladeshi agriculture is under the sway of original capitalist accumulation, as analyzed by Marx for England in earlier centuries in his '*Capital*'. The working conditions in the garment factories of the major cities, Dhaka and

Chittagong, in many ways approximate those Marx referred to when analysing the conditions existing in British industries in the early nineteenth century. According to Marx, as soon as people are "drawn into the whirl pool of an international market dominated by the capitalist mode of production", as soon as the sale of their product for exports becomes the entrepreneurs' principal interest, forced overwork becomes the rule. The search for maximum profits is reflected in a ruthless drive to extend the working day. (21)

Now, Marx conceptualized the latter by using the term 'absolute' surplus value which he distinguished from 'relative' surplus value. (22) An increase in **relative** surplus value is obtained through a proportional change between necessary and surplus labour-time, such as through a speed-up in work-rhythm. In this case the total length of the working day remains the same. An increase in **absolute** surplus value is achieved by extending the number of hours which industrial workers have to toil. In Marx' words, "the production of absolute surplus value turns exclusively upon the length of the working day." (23) Since the extension of the working day was the principal method by which British capitalists in the first half of the 19th century enhanced their profits, Marx gave detailed, numerical accounts of labourers' working time, and looked closely at the specifications regarding labouring time in British factory laws of the given period.

Following Marx' approach, we can best discuss the exploitative practices of contemporary Bangladeshi factory owners, their extraction of absolute surplus value, by providing a factual account of the working time labourers are forced to toil, and by comparing these data with the regulations regarding working hours, enshrined in the law. Central reference point should be the **Factory Act of 1965**, - a law introduced in the period preceding the founding of Bangladesh, which officially remains valid even in 1995. This Act provides, in Clause 2, a definition of a 'factory': "a building or premise in which a number of 10 or more labourers are set to work or have been on any one day in the last 12 month, and in which a specific process of production is being implemented, with or without the use of electricity." (24) Given this definition, the owners of garment units are duty bound to apply the regulations of the Factory Act, since the number of labourers who cut cloth, stitch and do the work of ironing in their premises, generally exceeds, by far, the minimum number cited in the Act.

One of the Clauses of the Factory Act, further, gives a specification of 'working time'. According to Clause 53, the daily working time of factory employees should last no more than 9 hours, including 1 hour of rest. The weekly working time is stated to be maximally 48 hours. The Act further states that a worker may be asked to perform one hour of overwork per day, or several hours more than 48 hours in a week. But the working time may not exceed 10 hours per day, and the maximum number of hours per week is 60. Over a year, the average may not exceed 56 hours per week. Moreover, according to Clause 51, workers should be provided with a weekly holiday. They may not be employed for more than 10 consecutive days without a day of rest. In case the workers are deprived of their weekly holiday, Clause 52 states, they are entitled to an 'indemnity holiday', within a prescribed period of 2 months. (24)

Below we will see that the hallmark of the Bangladeshi garments' sector is that **all** factories are engaged in numerous violations of the cited Factory Act. Violations have been recorded of the prescription regarding rest-time, i.e. its reduction to 15 minutes only. The Clause regarding the weekly holiday is, in spite of trade union protests, not being implemented by the majority of the

factory owners. Both surveys carried out by human rights' organisations in Bangladesh, and trade union sources, have further exposed the extent to which factory owners violate the stipulations regarding the maximum length of the working day and of the working week. To mention here just one instance, according to the investigation of the Commission for Peace and Justice cited earlier, in 52.9 percent of the garment factories the hours of overwork amounted to 21 or more per week. (25) Clearly, the extension of the working day beyond the legal maximum is highly characteristic for the garments' sector. It is as characteristic for today's realities in Bangladesh as it was for the British industries, described over a century ago by Marx.

6.8 Violations of the Factory Act: Forced Overwork and Night-Work for Women

In order to get a precise idea regarding the degree of exploitation of the women garment workers, and regarding the extraction of absolute surplus value, the issue of overwork needs to be discussed and analysed in detail. There are, of course, numerous variations in the precise number of hours women are set to stitch. The length of the working day is, in practice, determined by individual owners themselves. A key variable which operates throughout the sector is, one could say, 'seasonal'. When an owner accepts an export order which has to be delivered at short notice, he demands that his labourers sweat as many hours extra, beyond the legal maximum, as is physically possible. Yet even if we ignore this variable, the average working day of women garment workers is far longer than what the Factory Act prescribes. For most of the women it lasts from the early morning until late at night. The emergence of the garments' sector has created a new scene in Bangladeshi society, that of many thousands of women returning to their homes in city slums after 10 or 11 o'clock at night.

As indicated, the owners frequently impose an extension of the working day beyond the legal maximum, and they ignore regulations regarding night work and the payment of overtime. In preparing for a publication on the garment sector, which exposes the most common violations of the Factory Act, Philip Gain interviewed a number of factory owners. One of the things two of the owners admitted, is that overtime in their factory is obligatory. One of the owners, Mohammed Billah, even stated with impunity that in his factory the workers are forced to work 70 hours of overtime per month. (26) The Factory Act of 1965 allows for a maximum of 27 hours of overwork per month. Taken at face value, Mr. Billah's statement implies that the women workers in his enterprise are on the average obliged to toil 43 hours more per month than what is legally permitted. Presuming that a month comprises 26 working days, this owner extracts from his workers about 2 hours of extra labour each day.

Further, the extension of overwork into the night, when forced upon women labourers, is a legal violation in itself. Clause 65 of the Factory Act contains a prohibition on night work for women: "No woman can be set to work outside the period lasting from 7 o'clock in the morning till 8 o'clock in the evening". The government can exempt specific enterprises from this rule, but in such cases the working time cannot last longer than from 5 o'clock in the morning till 8.30 P.M. (27) Yet not only do numerous garment factories force the women stitchers to toil beyond the time-limit of 8 o'clock in the evening. Worse, as both independent researchers and trade union sources confirm, some factories force them to operate sewing machines throughout the night. According to Philip Gain, there exist instances where women workers have to toil 48, 72

or even more hours at one stretch. (28) In such cases, as will be obvious, more labour is extracted than what is physically possible.

This ruthless extraction of labour provides the garment owners with an illegal source of absolute surplus value. The Factory Act of 1965 attempted to put a brake on the exploitation of industrial workers by making, in Clause 58, the following stipulation regarding the payment of overwork - the allowance for overtime work should be double the amount paid for the regular hours of work. (29) Yet garment owners frequently deprive their workers of overtime pay, as has been brought out, amongst others, by a number of factory strikes centred around non-payment of overtime bills.(30) A typical case is the strike in Flint Garments Private Limited, one of the oldest export oriented garment factories located in Dhaka, employing 250 persons, 230 of them women. In December, 1993, workers went on strike demanding payment of three months' outstanding salary, and five months of overtime.(31)

According to leading members of the 'Bangladesh Workers and Employees Federation' (BAGSKAF), irregularities in the payment of overtime take several forms: "First, we are not given any scope to keep an account of overtime. The management holds a register, but in practice payment is made for only a third of the extra hours worked. Second, overtime bills are kept in abeyance for 2 or 3 months, the factories delay the payment in contravention of the law. Third, the average pay-rate for overtime work is 40 to 60 percent, instead of the 200 percent of the regular, hourly wage which the law prescribes." (32) In extending the working day, and by paying an overtime rate well below that stated in the Factory Act, garment owners further increase the rate of exploitation which their workers are subjected to during the normal working hours of the day. Their practices regarding overtime provide a clear instance of the appropriation of absolute surplus value, in the sense in which Marx used this term.

6.9 The System of Fines as a Method to Increase Workers' Exploitation

Two further ways in which factory owners increase their own profits at their workers' expense should be discussed, i.e. the employment of child labour and the use of the punishment system. I'll take the latter method first. The idea of imposing fines on the labourers under various pretexts is not new. In late nineteenth century Russia the same method was used to deprive workers of part of their wages. Rose Glickman has given a pointed description of the system in a book about the position of women workers in pre-revolutionary Russia. According to her, workers were penalized for infringements of factory discipline and for unauthorized holidays, but also for events in their private lives such as marriages and deaths. Women workers were specifically punished, when they needed to briefly interrupt their working-time for nursing their babies. Furthermore, many factories set impossibly high production quotas for full payment of wages and made deductions for the uncompleted work. According to her, the fines system was "the most devious and widespread method for bringing down the workers' real earnings" (33).

Under the factory system in contemporary Bangladesh, fines are imposed on women workers for an equally varied number of reasons. According to trade union activists interviewed in 1992, punishments are meted out, for instance, when a woman stitching clothes makes a production error. "In case one worker makes an error, 4 to 5 hundred workers are penalized; they are not given their payment for overtime" (34) In this way, owners misuse small incidents in order to

achieve their aim of extending the time when the labour power of their workers is freely available to them. For non-payment of over-time means that the labour value created during the given period, is appropriated without any costs. The practice, it hardly needs to be re-stated, goes counter to the rules regarding over-time payment, set by the Factory Act.

Another example cited by trade union sources is that of an owner who cuts a worker's wage for failing to report for duty on a Friday, as demanded by the owner. This is a case of non-compliance with an illegal practice. As mentioned above, the Factory Act dictates that entrepreneurs grant their workers one day of rest per week, but many owners do not respect this basic right. (35) A woman stitcher risks losing two to three working days of pay, if she ignores her owner's instruction to appear on a Friday. Like other examples mentioned above, this case too represents one where the owner heightens the exploitation by illegal means. The fact that workers are obliged to toil on a Friday already implies an increase in the surplus labour-time. The imposition of a fine makes that extraction of surplus labour, its appropriation by the entrepreneur, two-fold.

A third example may be mentioned, - one where the intensification of exploitation is combined with an extension of labouring time. First, the owner of the garment factory decides to speed up production. He exerts pressure in order to achieve an increase in output - more shirts and trousers produced within the same number of working hours. Where previously 50 pieces of clothes were stitched within one hour, he demands that 60 pieces be completed within the same period of time. Thus, he obtains a large output without having to pay anything extra to the workers, i.e. without an increased outlay of variable capital. If the workers fail to fulfill the new target, he imposes a fine, in the form of non-payment of overtime. Thus, the owner 'kills two birds with one stone', for in this case he has obtained both an increase in the amount of clothes turned out by the machine operators in the same working-time, and an unpaid extension of the working day. Increased extraction of relative surplus value is combined with an extra extraction of absolute surplus value.

6.10 Using Child Labour as a Method to Reduce Labour Costs

The widespread use of child labour in Bangladeshi garment factories was internationally brought to the fore after the American Senator Harkin, in August 1992, introduced a Bill in the US Congress, known as the 'Child Labour Deterrence Act'. The law called for a ban on imports of goods which are produced in companies where children under 15 years of age are employed. The draft Law created a near panic in Bangladeshi clothing factories, some 400 of which are reported to be primarily dependent on exports to the United States. Garment owners, the Dhaka press and trade union representatives denounced the Harkin Bill as a protective measure. Yet within a few months, some 30 factories had been affected by massive lay-offs. One owner admitted that he had dismissed more than 80 percent of his workforce - 300 children out of a total of 350 employees. (36)

The Harkin Bill can be criticised on various grounds. The law appears to be an attempt to protect the American domestic market against being flooded with cheap goods, produced with under-aged labour. It lacks any provisions to guard against the negative consequences of the ban for all those families in urban slum-areas in the Third World, who for their survival are

dependent on the income contributed by children. The number of people in Bangladesh whose survival is put at stake is large. A quarter of the workers in the garment factories are estimated to be non-adults, and 50 thousand of them have not reached the age fixed by the American law. Yet although the American Bill has been severely criticised in Bangladesh, there is no doubt, that the exploitation these children are subjected to, is very severe, and that factory owners here again engage in various practices which are prohibited by the Factory Act of 1965. The Act sets both an age and a time limit. Only after a child has reached 14 years of age can he/she be employed, for a maximum of 5 hours per day.(37)

The illegal exploitation of the children in garment factories can be measured both in terms of the wages they receive, and in terms of the long hours they are forced to toil. When a young boy or girl of 6 or 7 years old enters a factory, he/she is generally given the position of a 'helper', entrusted, for instance, with the task of cutting threads of clothes, after these have been stitched. This means a place at the lower end of the factory hierarchy. Further, in spite of the very young age of the helpers, no special provisions are made to limit their working time, or to ensure that they can enjoy the yearly holiday which the Factory Act specifically prescribes for children and adolescents (30 days) (38). Whether a child is 14 years or is older or younger, he/she is expected to sweat the same number of hours in the factory as the male and female adults. Thus, cases have been reported where children of 14 years' old are forced to do over-time work amounting to 100 hours per month.(39) The owners neither respect the legal time-limit for child labour, nor limit their hours of toil to the working time the Factory Act has fixed for adults.

The monthly wages paid to child labourers by the factory owners in Bangladesh are such as to justify the term super-exploitation. A helper is paid the paltry sum of 200 to 300 *Taka* per month, i.e. 5 to 7 US Dollars, or a sum equal to the hourly wage of a person employed in the informal sector of the American economy. The money, as indicated above, can be crucial for a family of Dhaka slum dwellers, since adult members of such families are frequently unemployed. Yet the amount does not cover the costs of reproduction of the child labourers themselves, not to speak of the costs of reproduction of other family members. The employment of child labourers in garment factories thus is practiced by the owners so as to increase the amount appropriated as surplus value. The method enables the owners to, even, circumvent the need to pay for necessary labour-time (see below). (40)

6.11 The Payment for the Necessary Labour-Time in Bangladesh's Garments' Sector

Marx' labour theory of value draws a basic distinction between 'necessary' and 'surplus labour-time'. Whereas during both sections of the working day value is created by the workers, the necessary labour-time covers the period when they produce only the value of their own labour power, the value of the means of their subsistence. The additional value, i.e. that value created during the remaining part of the working day, is pocketed by the capitalist owners. In the Chapter above on the household-labour debate which raged during the second feminist wave, the defect of the labour theory has been pointed out. While Marx' distinction is valid, it does not give recognition to that necessary labour which is non waged, and which is performed by women in the home. The reproduction of labour power, as feminists have justly argued, requires more toil than the labour of workers in the factory which Marx terms 'necessary labour'. (41)

Leaving this problem out of consideration for the moment, Marx' theory can be used to show how the owners in the Bangladeshi garments' sector raise the rate of surplus value in a variety of ways. To repeat what has been stated before, Marx expresses the degree of exploitation in the formula $(v):(s)$, in which (s) represents surplus value and (v) necessary value. One way in which the rate of exploitation is enhanced, is for instance by illegally extending the period during which fresh recruits are employed as 'trainees'. According to the regulations of the Factory Act, a woman who is appointed to do stitching should hold the status of a 'probationer' for the maximum period of three months. (42) Yet the Justice and Peace Commission's report revealed that 40.2 percent of the garment workers are made to work as trainees for 4-6 months, while 18.2 percent remain trainees for 6 months or even longer. The average wage of a trainee was calculated to be 300 *Taka*, - a wage well below the costs of reproduction of the women workers' labour power. By paying below-subsistence wages to 'trainees', the owners restrict their costs for (v) and expand the amount of value they appropriate as (s) .

Now, the rate of exploitation becomes all the higher, if we take into consideration the reproductive work of women. This can indirectly be accounted for by presuming that a garment worker's wage should not just suffice for buying her own means of subsistence. It should be enough to help her sustain her whole family through the reproductive work she and other female members of her family perform. As interviews with both individual women and trade union sources confirm, most garment workers' wages are essential for the maintenance of their families, and in many cases it is the only source of survival for urban, poor families. Yet the wages far from cover their needs. The average wage of women machine operators is perhaps 1000 *Taka*, and probably less. (43) It is not even sufficient to buy the food she and other family members are entitled to. (44) Thus, the wage fund of the factory owners does not cover the reproduction costs of the women workers and of those whose working capacity they and female relatives create and/or help restore, through their domestic labour.

Let us, lastly, also look at the payment of the women workers' own necessary labour-time. Here we find that the factory owners make use of the ideology of patriarchy to press down women's wages below their own subsistence-level. As in agriculture and other sectors of the Bangladesh economy, women workers in the garments' sector complain that their wages are not equal to those of their male colleagues. Thus, according to female trade union representatives interviewed, "for the same post and the same skill a man is paid 1500 *Taka*, while a woman receives only 900 *Taka*. Similarly, a male helper is given 500 *Taka* per month, while a female helper gets only 300 *Taka*." (45) The reason which the owners cite to justify this injustice is the inequality between male and female wages in the society at large. The consequence of the policy is that many women workers remain undernourished (46), that the wages of the women workers do not even cover the reproduction costs of their own, individual labour power. In short, by employing child labourers, through illegal extension of training periods, by paying women unequal wages, etc., - the factory owners ensure that they do not need to pay fully for the necessary labour time of their employees.

6.12 Denial of Women's Rights: Violations of the Factory Act

I will now proceed beyond issues of class exploitation, and specifically highlight the patriarchal domination over garment women workers. The factory owners in the garments'

sector, to start with, are engaged in widespread violations of those women's rights which have been enshrined in laws. Some of these have already been mentioned, such as the violation of the prohibition on night work for women workers, but many more can and have been pointed out by trade union activists and researchers. Thus, the Factory Rules issued in 1979 within the framework of the Factory Act contain a specific provision on toilet facilities. According to these rules, there should be separate toilets for men and women in factory premises, with at least one toilet for every 25 workers.(47) To my knowledge there are no quantitative data on the numbers and sexual differentiation of toilets in factories. Yet that the rule is violated by many factory owners is widely acknowledged.

Other legal provisions are concerned with women's reproductive tasks, and seek to establish the responsibility of factory owners employing women with small children. Clause 87 of the 1965 Factory Act stipulates the following regarding childcare - where-ever more than 50 women are employed in a factory, "childcare facilities should be provided for children less than 6 years of age." The rooms are to be run by experienced and well-trained women; they should be spacious, clean, should have ample light and be ventilated; and they should be well-equipped with necessary conveniences like beds and toys, and with arrangements for washing children's clothes. Factory owners are also responsible for providing meals in the childcare centres during working hours. (48) Philip Gain, during his investigation, could not discover even one garment factory running a childcare centre (49). The chief tactic used by the owners to circumvent this and other legal regulations, is to, primarily, recruit unmarried women as labourers.

The evasion of payments for reproductive tasks is most apparent in relation to pregnancy and childbirth. A law dating from 1939, which officially is still in force, contains details regarding women workers' maternity benefits. They are entitled to 6 weeks' leave before delivery, and to another six weeks' leave after the delivery of a baby. During this period the woman is also entitled to her regular wage, if she has been employed in the given factory for at least 9 months. (50) Moreover, the law prohibits the dismissal of any woman worker during her maternity leave, whatever the pretext. The owners' disregard for this law takes various forms. They either dismiss a woman worker when it is discovered that she is pregnant, or do so when she applies for maternity leave. (51). Thus, pregnant women are ever at risk of losing their jobs, and are forced to hide the fact of their pregnancy.

The logic of the garment owners is thus to reject any responsibility for the costs of child bearing and child rearing. They prefer to recruit women as the cheapest labourers, but refuse to draw the consequences of this policy. They want to exploit children as the cheapest possible labour power, but want them readily supplied. As long as children are only future labour power, the responsibility for raising them lies with women, who in this capacity are defined as non-workers. The owners' attitude is in tune with prevailing patriarchal ideology which relegates the responsibility for reproductive tasks to women alone. The use of this ideology enables the owners to maximise their profits. And although legal regulations, such as the 1939 law on maternity benefits and the Factory Act, do stipulate owners' responsibility, - in practice the manufacturers have the Bangladeshi state on their side, for government authorities fail to enforce the legal regulations regarding women's rights in this industrial sector, where women's employment is most massive.

6.13 The Sexual Division of Labour

and the Status of Women as 'Semi-Skilled' Workers

In the previous Chapter it has been argued, on the basis of evidence drawn from garment production in the informal sector in West Bengal, that the sexual division of labour is not perennially fixed, but is rather determined by social factors, in particular by the 'need' to enforce male dominance. In one geographic area, i.e. Moheshkhali/Santoshpur, male dominance was structured via men's monopoly over machines, while in Dumdum/Paikpara no such male monopoly existed and many women were found to be operators of sewing machines. In the latter area, the division of labour was organised along the lines of work that is performed inside, versus work that is performed outside the home. This contrasted again with the situation in Moheshkhali/Santoshpur where men, just like women, were found to engage in production of clothes within the confines of their own homes. (52) Yet a sector-wise sexual division of labour existed in both geographic areas.

The literature on the history of factory-work by women brings out the fact that a sexual division of labour does not just exist in the informal sector, but has been a feature of factory-based production too, ever since the Industrial Revolution. (53) Where both employment of women outside the home and their involvement in machine-work were found to be beneficial to capital accumulation, other mechanisms were devised to ensure women's subordination to men. One way to ensure such subordination is to use skill-distinctions against women workers. Thus, various feminist authors, including Anne Phillips and Barbara Taylor, have forcefully argued that the categorisation of a specific industrial job in industry is intimately linked to the gender doing the work. Male workers have often struggled to retain their dominance within a factory's sexual hierarchy, by insisting that their own work be defined as 'skilled' and women's work as 'semi'- or 'unskilled'. (54)

One instance that has been cited in the literature is precisely that of the clothing industry. Throughout this century, machining in the clothing trade in Britain has been done by people of both sexes. As immigrant males were forced to take on jobs behind machines, usually done by women as semi-skilled workers, Phillips and Taylor state, "they fought to preserve their masculinity by re-defining (their) machining as skilled labour". (55) Moreover, the lack of recognition for the skills involved in factory-work performed by (young) women, is related to the fact that these skills have been obtained informally, through training from mothers and other female relatives. This counts, for instance, for the manual dexterity required for industrial sewing of clothes. As Diana Elson and Ruth Pearson argue, "since industrial sewing of clothing closely resembles sewing with a domestic sewing machine, girls who have learnt such sewing at home already have the manual dexterity and capacity for spatial assessment required."(56)

Against this background we should briefly look at the division of labour in Bangladesh's garment factories. At first sight, a breakdown of patriarchal authority appears to have occurred. The bulk of the workforce of the Bangladeshi factories are young women of 16 to 20 years old, and the majority of them are unmarried. They are neither subject to a husband's nor to a father's authority on the work floor, but to the impersonal authority of the factory-owner and his representatives. Where the machine operators are married women, the transfer of authority to the factory owner often leads to violent reactions by disgruntled husbands. Thus, the maltreatment of Sufiya (see interview below) appears to be related, at least partially, to her husband's inability to enforce his dominance in day-to-day life. Nevertheless, a hierarchy does exist in the garment

factories too, and male authority is far from absent. Thus, staff-functions and jobs defined as 'skilled' are generally occupied by men, whereas the work performed by the female stitchers is defined as 'semi-skilled'.

The example of Bangladeshi garments illustrates well how the patriarchal division of labour is enforced through definitions of skill. Many of the women stitchers, like the 'skilled' male spinners in nineteenth century Britain (57), hail from rural areas, and they do require some on-the-job training in order to do the sewing of shirts and trousers for export purposes. Nonetheless, factory owners prefer female operatives precisely because of their 'natural' dexterity and patience, which, feminist authors believe, women have not inherited but obtained through their socialisation. By defining their work as 'semi-skilled', the owners make sure that the workforce is disciplined, and that their wages remain far below those of the average male employee. Moreover, since most trade union initiatives in the Bangladeshi garments' sector are dominated by men, the pay-scales set by the owners and the government have so far gone unchallenged, as has the hierarchical, sexual division of labour in the industry. (58) Trade unions have questioned the wage-rates, but not the categorisation of jobs.

6.14 Patriarchal Violence against Women Workers: Sexual Exploitation and the Dowry System

There are two broader issues of women's inequality which need to be specifically addressed, - forms of oppression which garment workers share with many other women in Bangladesh. One is that of physical harassments and sexual violence. Women workers are regularly insulted and abused, while on their way to and from the factory. Although they need to travel late at night because of the long working hours, the owners refuse to make any arrangements for their transport and safety. Thus, garment women, like all other women in Bangladesh, face numerous risks of violence in the streets, including beatings, acid throwing and rape. A typical case is that of Rehana, a young worker raped in the night of September 30, 1993, when she was on her way from the factory to her home.(59)

Sexual oppression inside the factory can take the form of sexual harassments by male supervisors, and, worse, the attempt by owners to turn women into prostitutes. The latter practice is not unique to the Bangladeshi garments' sector, but appears to be organized in a specific manner. A garment owner generally does not use the factory premises for sexual exploitation, but will try to lure a girl, he considers beautiful, into accompanying him to a hotel. The girl is called to the owner-manager's office and offered sweets and money, in exchange for an agreement to be prostituted. In case she refuses, the woman worker, reportedly, will be dismissed from her job.(60) Her refusal to be prostituted is punished, it is treated as an act of insubordination, of indiscipline.

Another issue affecting women is that of dowry marriages. In the next Chapter I will separately discuss the transformation of the payment system around arranged marriages in Bangladesh. (61) As will be mentioned, the traditional bride-price, which obliged the family of the bridegroom to provide money and/or goods as a kind of insurance for the bride, in recent decades has increasingly been replaced by the dowry-system, which forces a daughter's parents to pay exceedingly high sums of money, if they wish to marry her off. This system is creating havoc in the rural areas, as it contributes to pauperisation and to the peasants' eviction from their soil. The

system is also causing an escalation of violence against women, including 'dowry deaths', in reaction to the failure of brides to fulfill their husbands unending demands for the payment of dowry.

Although most trade union publications and written reports about labouring conditions in the garments' sector ignore this, the dowry system in many ways affects the lives of women employed in the factories. First, the unmarried status of some women workers is related to the fact that their families have not been able to muster the necessary resources to find them a marriage partner. Further, peasants interviewed in Bangladeshi villages state that they send their daughters to work in the garments' sector in order to earn the dowry-money themselves, and the existence of this practice is confirmed by some women unionists.(62) Thus, the key reason why these girls break with a tradition which for centuries has excluded women from working outside the home, lies in patriarchy - the need to fulfill the demands of a system which leads to their renewed enslavement in the home.

Moreover, while women workers who are married contribute crucially to their family's income, they are not freed from the tyranny of the dowry system either. After surrendering the wage to their husband, they sometimes continue to be harassed, with the demand that they bring additional money as dowry from their parents' home (see the story below). In such cases, the agonies of a woman worker know no ends. Clearly, garment workers invariably have to face a double structure of oppression: the capitalist exploitation of their labour is interwoven with the patriarchal oppression that pervades the entire fabric of Bangladesh's society. While as workers they face conditions which distinguish them from female peasants and from women belonging to the urban middle class, - as women they are subject to comparable injustices.

6.15 Factory-Exploitation and Violence in the Home: Agonies of the Garment Worker Sufiya

In the lives of many women garment workers in Bangladesh **stiff exploitation in the factory and patriarchal oppression at home** are closely intertwined. This is well exemplified by the story of Sufiya, a worker interviewed by Philip Gain.(63) Sufiya became a factory labourer under the pressure of her husband's incessant demand for dowry-money. She was married off to Shahabuddin, a truck driver, when she was only 7 years' old. When she was 11 years' old, she moved to his home. Five years later, at 16, she gave birth to her first child. From then on, her husband constantly harassed her, insisting she bring money from her father who was not a wealthy person. Because he never was satisfied with what she brought, Sufiya ultimately decided to enlist for a job. In 1983, she entered a factory called 'Emakulet Garments', located in Mirpur.

The owner of the factory used standard methods of exploitation, described above, to exploit his workforce. Sufiya's first job was to assist a machine operator, for which she was paid a wage of 260 *Taka* per month. She had to continue working as a 'trainee', after her 3 months' probation period was over. The workers of Imakulet Garments did not know that, according to the law, they automatically had the right to be appointed as permanent workers after three months' labour in the factory. There were various other violations of the Factory Act. Over-time was forced, it lasted until 10 o'clock at night. Eight to ten days per month, the workers had to toil all through

the night. Sufiya's payment for over-time work was only symbolic, i.e. one *Taka* per hour. Machine operators were paid a wage-rate for over-time that was no more than their normal hourly rate. Thus, none received what was their due according to the law.

Her job in Emakulet Garments neither gave Sufiya economic independence, nor freed her from her husband's violent behaviour. She would rise daily at 4 o'clock to prepare breakfast and lunch for her husband, her child and herself, and would leave home by 6 or 6.30 in the morning, only to return after 10 o'clock at night. While she was left no time to nurse her own child, her earnings did not even suffice for sustenance. Sufiya would do embroidery of *punjabis*, sitting under the light of a streetlamp, to earn some extra income. Yet all the money so arduously gathered was snatched by her husband who always kept an eye on her. Whenever she spoke to another man, he would mercilessly beat her. If she did not serve a meal he deemed proper, she again would have to face his fists.

Dissatisfied with her low wage which failed to increase, Sufiya applied for and got a job in 'Sahela Garments'. Here the labouring conditions were so oppressive that she could sustain for only one and a half month. In Sahela Garments the working time virtually knew no limits. "You can say that the working time lasted all day and all night. The rest period granted to the workers was from 4 o'clock at night until 10 o'clock in the morning. Meal-times were one hour around lunch, and another hour in the evening." In this case, the owner did not hesitate to stretch the working time beyond the workers' physical capacity. Sufiya fell ill, and then decided to leave the factory. Since the managing director wanted to withhold her her wage, she mobilised some boys from her neighbourhood and caught the factory-accountant by the collar of his shirt. This is how she succeeded in making him pay.

In the course of 1987 and 1988, her husband's ill treatment became unbearable. She barely escaped death. In 1987, he tried to kill her by throwing kerosine over her body while she was asleep. She was saved by her daughter who woke her up by crying loudly. The next year in August, he almost cut her throat with a blade. This time her neighbours saved her. A month later, her husband who was joined by other in laws, beat her up in the house, then dragged her onto the street, only to continue the violence in public. She went to a police-station to demand justice, but was told that a case would only be taken up if she paid a bribe. "Without money we won't move". Even the 'law enforcers' were not willing to help. One day, her husband picked her up from the street, shackled her with ropes and detained her. As her desire to stay with her husband waned, Sufiya started thinking of a divorce.

Sufiya's agonies continued after she got an appointment in a factory named 'Babylon Garments'. The wage she received here, she felt, was reasonable, i.e. 1200 Taka per month, and yet from her narration it is evident that Babylon's owner, too, used inhuman methods to increase the rate of exploitation. Thus, the owner would not allow his workers the use of the toilet for more than 2 minutes. Another method to increase surplus labour time, Sufiya mentions, was the imposition of a fine. If a worker arrived five minutes late in the factory, her wage for over-time work was cut. Meanwhile, her husband's behaviour did not improve. He wasted whatever money she brought in by drinking, and continued beating her on flimsy grounds. Being caught between the factory owner's oppression and her husband's, Sufiya decided to leave her job. Her husband responded with abandoning her...

Sufiya's life-story demonstrates that the participation of Bangladeshi women in factory production, in itself does not necessarily lead to greater freedom. While the experience of the women garment workers has led to a 'recomposition' of patriarchy (64), the road these women have to travel to reach their own liberation remains long. Sufiya has once more tried her luck by taking a job in 'Sparrow Apparels', in 1987, - a job she lost after quarrelling over the introduction of the piece-rate system in the factory. (64) Today she is free from her husband's tyranny, but feels unhappy as long as her children remain under her former husband's control. Her only consolation is that she is not alone. "In the villages of Bangladesh, there are thousands of Sufiyas searching for the road towards their own liberation amidst intolerable oppression."

(Abridged and translated interview, published in Philip Gain (1990), pp.57-60)

6.16 Evolution of the Trade Union Movement

Lastly, a short note on the evolution of the trade union movement in the garment sector. On December, 27, 1990, a fire erupted in a factory named 'Saraka', located on the outskirts of the capital Dhaka. The fire which was caused by the non-observance of safety standards as laid down in official regulations, killed at least 25 women and children, and wounded many more. News of the carnage spread like wildfire to other garment factories. Within days, the city saw an explosion of women workers' anger, as thousands of garment labourers marched through the streets demanding proper compensation for the victims of the Saraka incident. The spontaneous outburst, moreover, led to the founding of the first, broad based trade union movement. Until 1990, owners' intimidation had been a major impediment to trade union initiatives. Workers were physically threatened if they uttered any words of protest. Where workers were found to have enlisted as members of a union, they would be dismissed *en masse*. Yet this time, the use of musclemen was ineffective in stemming women workers' resolve to get organised. (65)

Since early 1991, several strategies have been tried out by trade unions to recruit members and promote the setting up of factory-level workers' committees. One, attempted in 1991, has been to build the broadest possible solidarity around one concrete workers' strike. On March 19, the 800 workers of 'Comtrade Apparels', a factory owned by a company called 'Beximco', were locked out by the management. The workers reacted with a 13-days sit-in-strike in front of the factory gate, combined with other actions to muster public sympathy. The management was compelled to re-open the factory and re-instate trade union activists who had been dismissed. Yet within half a year's time, the offensive against the workers was resumed. On October 21, 1991, the management declared a second lock-out. The workers in turn encircled the offices of the Garment Owners' Association. They held torchlight processions, and their representative union, then called the 'Unity Council', called for a general strike, which it claimed was successful in 80 percent of Dhaka's garment factories.(66)

Nevertheless, the movement subsequently faced a temporary set-back, partly because of government-sponsored repression. Armed police guards were stationed at factory gates in order to break the movement. When the lock-out continued, and the movement fizzled out, the union whose leadership mainly hailed from Comtrade Apparels, was forced to rethink its strategy. In the next phase, it tried to re-launch strikes by linking up with (largely male) workers in other industrial sectors. Employees in jute- and textile-mills faced the threat of massive retrenchments,

as a consequence of conditions set by the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund for the provision of structural adjustment loans. The joint Action Councils set up for the workers of the jute- and textile sectors, in 1991 and 1992 launched nationwide protests like road- and railway blockades and general strikes, opposing both the proposed retrenchment policy and the privatisation of factories. Trade unions in the garments' sector tried to 'hook onto' these struggles, by combining the agitation around common demands - like the demand regarding a national minimum wage - with that around the garment workers' own demands.

More recently, a third approach has been used, in particular by a union named the 'National Garment Workers' Federation'. In 1993, it combined public campaigns around elementary demands of all garment workers, with support to strikes in individual factories. Thus, it held processions of workers in Dhaka city around the demand that May Day be observed as a holiday in the garments' sector, and has similarly campaigned for the payment of a bonus, which workers are entitled to in other industrial sectors of Bangladesh. Besides this, the Federation has supported plant-level women workers' struggles, many of which have centred around illegal closures, non-payment of salaries and/or over-time pay. In a number of such instances, the Federation was able to sign an agreement with the factory management, in which the workers' demands were granted, either wholly or partly. In the case of Flint Garments, the management was made to agree to the payment of salaries and over-time dues, after police personnel called in by the management had failed to break a physical blockade of the factory gates by women workers . (67)

The trade union movement in the Bangladeshi garments' sector over the last three years has scored progress which earlier was unthinkable, and which far exceeds what has been achieved among women garment workers in West Bengal (68). Whereas previously, garment owners had succeeded in imposing a virtual ban on organising activities in the sector, some unions now have struck roots and are, to an extent, able to defend women workers' rights. What is more, an awakening has taken place among a workforce of women who formerly lacked experience with trade union practices. On the other hand, the movement's strength to date does not suffice to put a serious break on the ruthless exploitation prevalent in the sector: membership is limited to a small minority of the workers, and the movement is split into too many small trade-union factions to be fully effective. Moreover, since most unions are dominated by men, they tend to see the labourers as part of a homogeneously exploited class only. Though some do raise the issue of the responsibility of the owners for payment of women's reproductive role, the different aspects of patriarchal oppression are not systematically posed.

6.17 Women's Factory Work in Bangladesh and the Thesis of the German Feminist School

The experience of garment women workers provides the occasion to, once more, assess the relevance of the thesis put forward by the German feminist School of Mies, Bennholdt-Thomsen and von Werlhof. In Chapter Five I have argued that the conditions of the home workers who produce clothes in and around West Bengal's city of Calcutta can only in a sociological sense be equated with the labour of the western housewife. The thesis on housewifisation fails to capture the economic mechanism of these home workers' exploitation. With regard to the factory work in the garments' sector in Bangladesh, it can similarly be stated that the thesis of the German feminist School brings out no more than a part of the conditions prevailing here.

The German feminist School's essential critique of Marxist economic theory is that its scope is too restricted, that it limits its analysis to the contradiction between wage-labour and capital, while ignoring work which is non-waged. (69) Here the thesis of the German feminist School helps to lay bare the non-waged, necessary labour which is performed by women garment workers on top of their prolonged hours of factory-work. Thus, married women (who form a minority of the workforce) before leaving their huts at dawn have to prepare the meals for their husbands, children and themselves, and again are faced with household chores after returning home late at night. Moreover, the creation and maintenance of the labouring strength of unmarried, young women also involves necessary labour which is non-waged.

Nevertheless, the exploitation of women garment workers can only be fully grasped if we bring out both the 'original' accumulation **and** the capitalist accumulation they are subjected to. Thus, as many young girls are forced to seek factory employment in order to earn a dowry which, at the time of their future marriage, is transferred to the bridegroom's family, they are subjected to a process of original accumulation by men. (70) Yet it is true, at the same time, that the factory-regime, which takes advantage of the patriarchal relations existing in the society at large, imposes upon women work-rules, which are devised to maximise surplus labour. To analyse the violations of the Factory Act about the working day and the working week, it was crucial to refer to Marx's central thesis - under the sway of international competition, entrepreneurs in labour-intensive industries endeavour to appropriate a maximum amount of surplus labour-time at any cost.

Since the 1970s, world market factories, i.e. factories which are part of a global division of labour and produce commodities exported to the developed countries of the North, have sprung up in various parts of the Third World. Whether the companies produce the most 'advanced' electronic goods, such as chips, or turn out dresses for mass consumption, - their management invariably prefers to employ young, migrant women, who they expect to be docile and 'naturally fit' for the painstaking tasks that are said to require 'nimble fingers'. (71) An analysis of this significant trend in the world economy, to be effective, needs to draw on both feminist concepts like patriarchy and the sexual division of labour, and on an extended version of Marx' labour theory of value. The thesis of the German feminist school, which defines women's labour as necessary labour only, fails to address the conditions of exploitation women in world market factories are subjected to.

6.18 Summary:

Marx' Theory of the Working Day Remains Valid

In this Chapter I have tried to explain the contemporary validity of Marx' theory of the working day, basing myself on a concrete analysis of the sector of ready-made garments' production in Bangladesh. Devised to lay bare the economic exploitation in factories in 19th Century Britain, Marx' theory stated that capital accumulation is made possible by the appropriation of 'surplus value', of value which waged workers produce on top of what is needed for their own sustenance. As Marx illustrated with ample facts drawn from official sources, British entrepreneurs achieved their result, amongst others, through almost limitless prolongation of the working day, i.e. through appropriation of, what he called, 'absolute' surplus value.

The owners of garment factories that have mushroomed since the 1970s in Bangladesh' main cities, Dhaka and Chittagong, use methods that are strikingly similar to those of their 19th century British counterparts. They enhance their profits by imposing fines for non-attendance on weekly holidays, thus appropriating the fruits of several days of their labourers' toil. They force their employees to do lengthy hours of over-work, without observing the legal regulations concerning over-time. And, above all, they uniformly violate what is stated in the country's Factory Act regarding working time. Ruthless extension of the working day is, once again, the favourite method of extracting surplus value. It is far more characteristic for the garments' sector than for any other sector of the Bangladeshi economy.

Yet while Marx' theory of the working day is clearly applicable, it is necessary, also, to be aware of structural differences between 19th Century British industries and those in contemporary Bangladesh. For unlike owners of the former, Bangladeshi garment owners are at the lower end of an international chain of subcontract-relations extending from production units in Bangladesh, via intermediaries, to retail trading companies in countries of the North. As stated in the first part of the present Chapter, garment production has been relocated to, and re-relocated within, the Third World, in order to tap cheap sources of wage-labour. While local entrepreneurs do obtain a part of the surplus value created, they do not get the major share. Thus, whereas the extraction of surplus value is organized by Bangladeshi owners, its fruits are overwhelmingly reaped by companies in the North.

Lastly, whereas Marx' theory of the working day helps us understand the mechanism of economic exploitation, it does not conclusively explain why more than four-fifth of the garment workers are women. Nor does it lay bare the various ways in which women's subordination, in the factory and in the family, is organized. To grasp, for instance, the hierarchical structure of labour relations in the factory, with women restricted to doing semi- and unskilled work, we need to refer to feminist analyses regarding the sexual division of labour. And as the paragraphs on the influence of the dowry-system show, women workers are not just subjected to capitalist exploitation, i.e. the extraction of the surplus value which they create, but also to a process of original accumulation by men. In short, as in the case of the garments' sector in West Bengal, India, a combination of Marxist and feminist concepts is needed to devise a theoretical framework that explains women workers' daily realities.