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Conformity or Resistence? Women Workers in the Garmet Factories in Bangladesh

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Introduction

Since the 70s the most noticeable feature of economic development in many Asian countries has been the employment of young women in industry. In particular the increase in numbers of women workers in export oriented factories became a long-stay phenomenon in some countries, whereas in others, like Bangladesh women have only recently been linked to the global economy. In Bangladesh, nearly overnight, women entered a highly visible form of employment in factory production, namely in garments. Although the women workers in Bangladesh still constitute a minority, they are visibly acting in spaces not made for them, shaping them and thus indicating the social changes taking place through global processes. They disrupt the „traditional" life and the constructed boundaries between the so-called male and female spheres and increasingly contest the consensus on gender meaning.

Until the emergence of this new form of employment the only course open to women in the cities had been domestic service or home-based production. According to the literature the main reason why women have not participated in the work force is due to Islam, most significantly *purdah* and the model of separate spheres which operates in a conservative fashion, particularly by determining permissible modes of behaviour for women (Kabeer 1991, 133). Especially through *purdah*, as an element of the existing gender order, factory work or any kind of employment outside the home was and is seen, particularly with regard to young and unmarried women, as a violation of these conventions.

Nevertheless the economic transformations in Bangladesh, especially the development of the garment sector, created employment opportunities for women in a relatively short time. More and more women are entering this kind of employment due to economic pressure or as a possibility to migrate to town and make a living. Simultaneously with this development new insecurities and new modes of control have been developed. So far the literature on this well-known phenomenon, the so-called feminization of labour (Standing 1989), focuses mainly on the exploitation of the

workers, often embedded in broader discourses about the relationship between capitalism and patriarchy or the interplay between gender and capital accumulation (see for example Mies 1986; Fuentes and Ehrenreich 1983 or Elson and Pearson 1981), or argues that women are better off with these new employment opportunities (Lim 1990).

The aim of this article is to show that even though cultural concepts of male domination and female subordination are reproduced in the factories through daily practices and strict rules and regulations, they have not gone unchallenged. This does not mean that the exploitation of the mainly female working force is ignored or the highly contradictory effects these forms of wage employment have for women are not taken seriously. Nevertheless in studies so far the concentration on the actual exploitation has left hardly any room for the analysis of the modes of resistance and networking as strategies of the women workers to cope with and reshape the ongoing changes.

Resistance in a broader sense often begins at home by overriding objections from families, delaying marriages or the search for new forms of living arrangements in the city, often through the creation of networks independently of and beyond the household level. But tactics of resistance also exist inside the factories together with attempts of collective action, showing that the workers are indeed active agents not only at home but also in the new setting, in the garment factories. Even though women are preferred as workers because they are said to be docile, this article aims to show that women do resist as part of their daily efforts not only to attain self-esteem and ensure survival, but to create a place for themselves within the current economic and social transformations. Resistance in this sense is not deliberate activism growing from full-fledged political consciousness but is rather, as Gardner (1998, 220) argues, always relative, not absolute, and can be only understood in context.

Thus the everyday practices, strategies and choices of the female workers will show that we need to reformulate the relationship between class, resistance and consciousness and that we have to focus on the workers' logic of action (Lachenmann 1989, 199) to understand their forms of protest. Additionally the reconstruction of the social realities of the workers and its contextualization will highlight the significance of subversive actions and small and local forms of resistance which do not aim to overthrow the system or the existing gender order but to reshape

the structures and create new room for manoeuvre and new public spheres. Of course, it is necessary to analyze the dominant gender constructs which have become symbols of domination and subordination. Still, forms of resistance such as sporadic acts of defiance, individual or as a group, as well as hiding knowledge and creating spaces inside the factories for exchange or making fun and jokes about supervisors and male colleagues were among the most popular stories in the retrospective narratives which I collected in my study[1], thus giving insights into how their activities are socially embedded. These forms of resistance, widely neglected or undervalued in studies of resistance[2], will furthermore provide ways to analyze, as Abu-Lughod (1990, 42) proposed, how power works, especially "gender power (...) one of the more difficult forms of power to analyze". Power in the factories is not implemented exclusively through the relations of production or different organizational techniques, as Marx would argue, but through discursive regulations of the work to perform, female agency and the workers' sense of self (see Ong 1987, 149). Power is not only located in institutions like factories but circulates through networks of social relationships and daily interactions (see Foucault 1977). Thus the interactions between the women workers and the mainly male supervisors and management are in the centre of the following analysis with the aim of giving more insight into how these interactions are used to construct power relations and resistance on the shopfloors.

The forms of resistance which have been observed or described in the narratives of the workers will show that resistance grows out of the contradictions and exploitation the workers are facing and that the workers are, though this has often been neglected in studies so far, conscious of their situations at home as well as in the factories.

Forms and Strategies of Resistance

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[1] The empirical data was collected mainly in Dhaka, the capital of Bangladesh, during my one year field trip in 1995/96. The data consists of interviews with garment workers with a biographical perspective in different social arenas and observations in different settings. The quotes included in this article are taken out of the transcripts of the interviews. The names of the workers have been changed to preserve their anonymity.

[2] The exception is of course Scott (1976) in his pioneering study about the moral economy of the peasants in Southeast Asia. He stresses different forms of rebellion, which can be seen as defensive reactions, to the threats to their subsistence economy and ethics.

With regard to the empirical data I would like to distinguish two forms of resistance frequently described by the women workers interviewed. The first form of resistance consists of individual forms of conduct on the shopfloors which goes against the rules and regulations set by the management or expectations concerning the workload of the women workers. Sometimes these individual acts of resistance, which may, depending on the situation, be defensive or active but are usually subtle, lead to collective actions, the second form of resistance which will be discussed.

The construction of certain gender characteristics plays a significant role in the bargaining processes between men and women in the households as well as in the factories. Showing strong emotions like crying is perceived as "typical" female behaviour, indicating a lack of self-control and threatens the social order, especially in the factories, where the labour discipline is enforced by strong rules and regulations. Emotions thus disturb the organizational techniques the male supervisors have to control and implement. Since the supervisors are the binding link between the management and the workers, and therefore under pressure, some of the workers used their ascribed weakness to undermine the organizational control built up. Redefining the supposed female attributes as an instrument of resistance by following expected behaviour patterns but exaggerating them to an extreme extent or using them to justify their "failure" to fulfill certain tasks can be seen as a tactic of subversive rebellion (see Honegger and Heintz 1984, 39; Rosa 1989, 208). Whereas Kang (1988, 108) interprets such reactions as apathy or escape, which make the workers able to bear the working conditions, I would interpret these reactions as a possibility of female agency to create spaces for manoeuvre and thus as one form of resistance which can slide into protest.

Such "female" behaviour does not explicitly question the power relations between men and women; on the contrary, responding in such a way seems to indicate that the women accept their defined weakness, which often forces the men and supervisors to be generous, to fulfill their ascribed gender "role" as well, for example by being protective, caring and polite. Nevertheless with the growth and the institutionalization of the garment sector the anonymity between workers and supervisors has increased, leading to reactions which are a violation of the norms and values regulating male-female interactions and/or patron-client relations. Whereas for instance some workers had the experience that supervisors do not dare to beat women when they do not fulfill

the task or protest against the irregularities in payment, and thus concluded that it is easier for women to offer resistance, a lot of workers report that being a woman is no longer a protection against acts of violence.

The treatment the women workers experience, like for example being physically attacked or verbally abused by men, leads not only to resignation but to the questioning of the constructed and enacted gender system. Above all, the women thus experience themselves as individuals through the work and through the interactions, which results in individual acts of resistance, but also in new configurations of morality and identity on their own terms. This means when the male staff does not uphold the proper relations between men and women or fathers and daughters this correspondingly frees the women workers from doing so.

Occasionally women workers complained and resisted by using the dominant discourse about female purity and proper male-female behaviour - which is officially put forward in the factories as well as outside - especially when they feel that male superiors try to use the hierarchy within the factories, or their personal dependence to approach them in an "immoral" way. Using the discourses and the rules set as a frame of reference allows women to feminize the discourses about morality and use them against men who not accept the boundaries. This strategy of course only works if the male management responds accordingly, which is not always the case, as the interviews reveal. Therefore some women say that they try either to avoid situations like for example being alone with the supervisor or they attempt to move in groups inside and outside the factories. Being in a group gives the feeling of strength and also security. Furthermore the groups are the spaces created to gossip about the supervisor for example or make fun of a male colleague who is in love with one of the workers. The women workers loved to tell stories of men who failed to successfully approach a women or behaved ridiculously because they were in love. These interactions were frequently observed. Abu-Lughod (1990, 45) calls this form of resistance "sexually irreverent discourses". The separate spheres created in the factories allow women to develop their own spaces which the modes of control established in the factories cannot reach, giving women to a certain degree more autonomy (Lachenmann 1997, 42). It has to be added that these spaces are not only created inside but outside as well. Gossiping between neighbours about men in the factory or men in the neighbourhood was a common kind of relaxation during their spare time.

By and large it can be concluded that the factory work opened the door to new discourses on gender, not only in public, but also among the women. The women workers, confronted with a legible gender order specific to the working process, and produced and reproduced through the practices and interactions in the factories were forced to rethink existing norms and values. The gender order in the factories not only violates the relations between men and women which the women are familiar with and which they attempted to reproduce in the factories, but forced the women to negotiate and develop a "new" identity and new logic of action in this new setting. However this did not replace "old" gender identities, but added new ones which often led to ambivalence and contradictions.

Through the factory work alternative discourses about gender relations and female identity are developing in which women participate and express the different images of female experience and behaviour. One important arena for generating the alternative discourses are the networks which developed through the new living and working relations.

Networking

In contrast to other concepts and approaches focusing on labour relations and organization building, the type of approach used here allows to include other important organizational forms, like networks, which mediate the actions taken by specific individuals and social groups (see for example Long 1984, 175). The rising consciousness was very often transported and organized in the various kinds of networks the women have built up to cope with their living and working situations, which shows that they are not a "manipulated mass" as claimed by for instance Hossain et al. (1988, 133), even though they have not yet resorted to strikes or performed other forms of collective action on a bigger scale. The spirit of rebellion observable in the factories as well as at home was often mediated through the networks created. These networks, based on personal connections, were important for the organization of a place to live in the city and for the organization of a job as well as for security inside and outside the factories. The networks transfer knowledge and know-how, attitudes and information between the spheres of private and public life, thus showing that the two obviously overlap and act upon each other.

Collective actions in various forms against a male supervisor who beats a helper for instance or against a landlord demanding too much money were often based on these networks. A female worker for example who organizes a job for a neighbor also intervenes, often together with colleagues who are neighbours as well, if the newcomer gets treated badly. Hazara, a married garment worker violently assaulted by her husband, was for example protected by other women she worked with when her husband threw her out of the house. They not only gave her shelter but accompanied her when she returned to her house to pick up her goods. Lipsy reported that her sister, a garment worker too, went together with colleagues from the factory she worked at to her factory to claim the money Lipsy did not receive when she was dismissed. Since the work lives of the women are embedded in their social lives, the networks link the different life worlds of the women, i.e. they go on in the home, in the neighborhood, among factory colleagues and fellow migrants. The workers' logic of action is not restricted to one of the spheres they have to act in; on the contrary, as the following quote will show, it imbued their everyday lives and practices.

"After we were successful with our protest in the factory I was very proud of myself and the others. I told my neighbours about the success and tried to motivate them to do more things together. My father was not very happy about my sudden engagement and the meetings we started to organize in the evenings. Before he did not like when I am out in the evenings and I always followed his advice. That changed, I became more self-confident. I started discussing with him and finally he agreed. Now I am moving around very freely" (Jona, senior operator).

The spirit of rebellion which developed at home does not fall away when the women go to the factory, nor vice versa. As Jona describes, the success she experienced in the factory did not evaporate as she left the factory gates. Borzeix and Maruani (1988, 251) describe a similar phenomenon in an article about strikes organized by women workers in a firm in France. The title of the article, "When a Strike Comes Marching Home", expresses the observations made in Dhaka rather well. But a strike does not only march home; the converse was also observed. Successful networking in the every day world, for example between neighbours, was often transferred to the factories, as the following quote will exemplify.

"As you can see I share my room with two other workers, we are very close. Once we had a problem with our landlord. He tried to increase our rent even though we neither have electricity nor enough space for cooking. We talked with our neighbours and together we went to his house telling him that we will not pay more than we do already. He was surprised about our unity, I

think, and promised not to ask for more. Shortly after that incident we had a problem in the factory. Our supervisor cut the overtime money of my room-mate because she came some minutes late. He is doing that all the time, sometimes even without any reason. Thus we decided during lunch break not to accept that any longer. We went to the line chief and put our complaint. He was very angry that we dared to approach him. Nevertheless he talked with our supervisor. Things have not changed but somehow we do not feel so helpless any longer" (Roushan, operator).

Much has been written about the transfers from home to the world of work. But the emphasis was always on the transfer of qualities the women learn within the family and that are appreciated by employers, like docility. The examples above throw light upon other dimensions and qualities of transfers taking place. Experiences of unity, fights for independence or dignity inside the factories influence the negotiating processes at home as well as vice versa. The bargaining power acquired during conflicts either in the factories or at home are exported into the other life worlds of the women workers, enhancing their room for manoeuvre. Networks play an important role within these processes and are more important than the age of the women or their marital status. Networks represent the ground on which women's individual discontent can be converted into collective actions.

Many acts of resistance, collective action and networking escape notice because scholars all too often have defined women as passive beings and resistance only as unionization (Ward 1990, 15). But as pointed out earlier, the logic of female agency is based on the intersection of more complex forms of shared loyalties and actions based on their involvement in the different spheres they try to combine. The trends and activities analyzed above cannot be summarized into one single pattern but have to be viewed as conflicting, unstable and uneven processes, often contradictory, but containing elements of consciousness perceived and developed by the women through their gender, their position in the family and factory and the public image they experience in their everyday lives. These experiences also influence unionization; not the formal unions, as will be shown, but the informal union introduced further on after a short discussion of collective actions.

Collective Actions

The participation of the women workers in collective actions is, despite the networks which have been created, individualized and fragmented, as well as polarized between women of different age groups and positions. Nevertheless some strategies have been developed. It is necessary to mention that the organization of the work process as well as the payment structure in the factories make collective activities generally very difficult. For example the salaries paid in the factories are negotiated individually. Thus a collective action, like for example obtaining an increase in salaries is not only difficult to organize but was neither perceived nor articulated by the workers as manageable in a group. Individual strategies such as for example leaving the working place to start in a new factory with a higher negotiated salary, can be characterized as the most widespread strategy. The individualization of the salary structure can be evaluated as a divide and rule strategy chosen by the management against possible collective actions. It creates an atmosphere of suspicion since the workers mistrust each other, knowing for example that some women earn more for the same tasks. Open talks about salaries hardly ever took place. On the contrary, the women accused each other of flirting with the supervisor to increase their salaries. This strategy was perceived by the majority of women as more promising than putting a demand forward together. In other areas nevertheless collective actions were organized.

Generally it can be argued that the collective activities described in the retrospective narratives can be characterized as being short-term and sporadic, and directed against a specific incident which took place. The most frequently activity was the stopping of the sewing machines, to protest against a delay in payment. An important role is played by the senior operators in the organization of such a collective action. They are normally the ones who take the initiative, convince the others to follow them and then talk with the management. The social hierarchy within the factory not only between management and workers but also between the workers is very distinct in these cases. The hierarchy between the workers influences the possible development of a collective identity, conventionally said to be necessary for collective actions. But especially senior operators who have worked in a factory for a long time often articulated a strong identification with the factory, among other things because they are more likely to have their demands fulfilled than the other workers (see Safa 1995, 69). This of course has to be seen as another reason why collective actions have hardly ever occurred up to the present. Some female workers, especially when they either came from the same area of origin as the respective owner, or admired the owner because he was for example a famous soccer player, identified themselves

much more with him than their colleagues. Thus it is not astonishing that some owners preferred workers who came from the same area of origin, so as to build up patrimonial structures of the kind known in family enterprises in Bangladesh as elsewhere, even though this tendency is nowadays decreasing (see Feldman 1992). In these cases the women articulated their unwillingness to support the other workers in cases of collective actions or blamed the management for the problems they face, thus excusing the owner.

Furthermore the overall situation discourages workers from organizing protests. First of all, the high unemployment rate in Bangladesh and the increasing supply of young women migrating to the capital seeking wage employment exacerbates the competition on the labour market. Nearly all the women articulated their fear that getting a job is not as easy any more as it was some years ago. Besides the fear of losing their job and not getting a new one generally it can be observed that protests inside the factories are easily suppressed. The management tend to offer separate deals to the so-called leaders or dismiss them. Such strategies chosen by the management to prevent strikes or organization-building in their factories were reported by the majority of workers interviewed and are also well known in other countries (see for example Wilson 1991; Maenner 1988) and are, at least in Bangladesh, very successful.

The fact that most of the protest was suppressed from the beginning, sometimes by just closing the factory, of course influenced the possible participation of the workers. Unity and solidarity, the basis for collective activities, are difficult to build up. The organization of the work process and the salary structure as well as the strategies implemented by the management to atomize the workers and the social stratification between them certainly have a negative influence on the development of a "we-group" feeling as well as an identification with the work performed. The women are new to the setting, neither used to working together with people they do not know nor having had experience with any kind of collective action. Additionally the negative experiences most of the women interviewed had had with collective actions furthermore explain why individual forms of resistance still dominate the logic of the female agency.

Nevertheless not all protests fail, as the following example will show.

"In my present factory we did not get paid regularly. They say that they cannot pay because the foreigners are not paying for the products. We do not believe that. Therefore we selected one experienced worker to represent us. We discussed during lunch break and then that woman took the initiative. After lunch break we met spontaneously in front of the factory and protested. We announced that we will stop working if they do not pay us immediately. The owner agreed. We enjoyed it that the rally was a victory and we know now that we can do something if we come together" (Josna, operator).

Positive experiences with any kind of collective actions are the first step not only to having demands fulfilled but for the recognition that acting as a group can lead to changes and increases the bargaining power.

In the literature different theoretical as well as more practical reasons and explanations are given why the collective actions of women employed in world market factories relatively seldom take place. The reasons I have explored above, according to the narratives of the women workers, are to date, amazingly, hardly ever discussed. Lenz and Rott (1984, 12) for example argue that the permanent rotation of the women working in these factories reduces resistance, collective actions as well as organization building. The fact that most of the women are only working until they marry or give birth to the first child led, for example according to Tilly (1986, 33) in her historical analysis of working class women, to a lack of opportunities to develop solidarity on or off the job and a relatively brief commitment. Others state that the women workers in the export oriented factories have not developed an identity as workers yet, because employment is perceived as short term. The reasons given for the "lack of" consciousness and the "failure" to develop a common identity are mainly seen in the sexual division of labour within the family and the fact that women's most important reference point is the primary family (Castro 1993, 12; Safa 1986; 69).

No doubt the ways in which individuals take up collective identities linking them to others in workplaces are difficult to work out and the aspects given in the literature quoted above certainly influence the development of collective identities and thus collective actions. But as my empirical data shows, women participate in alternative discourses or develop networks even though it is not always a voluntary choice in the first place but a result of transformation processes in different areas.

Nevertheless it seems important to highlight that most of the approaches trying to explain why women do not protest or do not develop organizations which put their claims forward overlook the fact that women's collective actions may take other forms of political action, like passive resistance, not comparable to those of men. Even though women's loyalties are divided, enough evidence is given that women workers are not per se docile, but protest as individuals or as a collective against the different forms of exploitation, at home as well as in the factories. It has to be taken into account that self-interest is always linked to the interests of others in ways affected by the perception of a common purpose and shared identities (Folbre 1994, 69), which need time to develop. Thus it is not astonishing that the women workers in Thailand and Sri Lanka for example, having longer experiences with this kind of employment, show not only a higher awareness of their situation but are also more involved in collective actions (Heyzer and Kean 1988, 7). Most of the women workers in Bangladesh are in employment the first time in their lives, and find themselves in a new environment characterized by new modes of control and surveillance and with people they are not related to. Furthermore they are not only newcomers to the labour market and the factories but also to the city. Especially at the beginning the women are torn between the new neighbourhoods or the relatives they have to stay with and the colleagues they have to work with in the factories. The development of a common purpose which would make collective actions more likely through the organization of work and the social embeddedness of the labour relations was therefore only observed occasionally and was very sporadic. There was a rising consciousness amongst female workers about the exploitation in the garment factories which had not yet been translated into collective actions.

Unions and the Construction of the "Women Workers"

Historically working class women have played an important role in labour movements worldwide. Nevertheless the relationships between women and the institutionalized unions have always been problematic (Heyzer 1986; Cook 1984; Cook, Lorwin and Daniels 1992; Cunnison and Stageman 1995). Women's participation has in almost all been cases short-term and sporadic rather than one which in the long-term became institutionalized so as to sustain women's participation in the shaping of new social formations.

In Bangladesh the trade unions[3] have just recently started to discover the garment workers and the space the garment industry could provide to build organizational strength. But the participation of the female workers up to now is very low. The reasons given on the side of the representatives are the "classical" ones, like the lack of education or the rural background of the female workers. Thus the incentives to reflect on strategies to mobilize the female workers are not very great, and the professed attempts are therefore mainly lip-services. Furthermore most of the unions are affiliated to political parties and thus the interests of their political alliances are often more important than those of the workers. Hossain et al. (1990, 90) quote one young women who worked in a federation office, who stated that the women workers are expected to lend their voices and add their votes to any general demands being made, even though these are often political rather than aimed at expressing the actual and concrete work-related demands of the workers. This experience was shared by those workers interviewed who were in contact with unions. Specific problems of the female workers, like for example going home late at night or being abused in the factories were hardly ever on the list of demands. This explains the frustrations some women articulated, especially after having experiences with unions. They could not see how the demands of the unions relate to their situation and their experiences inside and outside the factory. Their work realities and their day to day experiences in the factories were simply not reflected in the meetings and the speeches of the representatives. The framework of the unions' work is the labour law, which has at this stage no relevance for the workers as it is too far away from their work experiences. But that does not mean that the workers are unaware of their specific situation, nor that they are not talking to each other about the work place situation.

Thus the women did not, as stated by Luchum (1995, 181), "think that trade union matters concern only men" or that the women "do not identify themselves as workers, or develop trade union consciousness" (Elson 1983, 51). At least for the garment sector in Bangladesh the way the unions are organized is the cause of the observable lack of interest from female workers. The strategies chosen by the unions and the persons mediating between the organization and the workers are the main reasons, according to the empirical data, why the female workers do not

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[3] Mondal (1992, 3) points out that the trade union structure in Bangladesh is over 100 years old and has always revolved around personalities having strong links with political parties. Before Independence in 1971 the trade unions were very aggressive and a strong mistrust between employers and workers existed because the "employers were mostly non-locals". The nationalization of the major industries after Independence resulted in the limitation of trade union roles.

join these organizations. The unions are working mainly with male staff, often inexperienced in factory work, who are too far away from the life realities of the female workers. The women who had contact with unions could not relate to the organizers, could not see any common interest between them and the men representing the unions. In addition in the factories most of the men the women have contact with are in higher positions, mainly supervising them. The way the federation representatives treated them was for most of the women very similar to the authoritarian and patriarchal treatment they experience in the factories. But whereas the women have to accept such behaviour in their factories due to the work hierarchy, in their free time they do not have to cope with these behaviour patterns. The women workers would never dare, in encounters with trade union representatives to criticize their treatment, since the norms regulating male-female behaviour and the hierarchy between them and the unions officials would not allow a complaint or an open questioning of the representative's knowledge. Instead they normally simply do not appear again, which is their way of expressing refusal. The ignorance they show by not attending these meetings further can be analyzed within the discourses on "popular modes of political actions" (Bayart 1986; Scott 1976). The paternalistic modes of interactions adopted by the representatives of the federations when meeting the female workers reflect their image of and their attitude towards the female workers whom they want, at least verbally, to organize; and in general, these attitudes mirror the gender relations in union processes.

The trade unions in Bangladesh have mainly acted effectively to advance male interests, either those of the male workers or the male representatives of the unions and federations. This does not seem a specific Bangladeshi phenomenon as case studies of other countries reveal (see for example Luchum 1995, 180; Maenner 1988; 257). Furthermore, as various studies amplify, most trade unions' higher positions are monopolized by men, not only in Asian countries, but practically worldwide (Charles 1993, 75). After the analysis of the empirical material collected in Dhaka I would not follow Luchum's (1995, 181) interpretation that women are unwilling to take up the challenging position of union leaders. Quite the opposite, as the case study which will be introduced below will show.

The organizations, their strategies and policies are the main reason given by the workers why they do not engage in union actively. Furthermore the issues taken up by the unions do not mirror the problems the women workers articulated nor do the unions and federations give women the

space to bring their issues onto the agendas. It has to be asked why generally in the literature about women and trade unions examining the women's side of things, means that so-called constraints like the double burden, their marital status or their rural background (see for example Ariffin 1988, 251; Rohini 1994, 281; Luchum 1995, 181) are in the focus, whereas the unions, their strategies and their aims are seldom analyzed to explain the observed reluctance of women to join these formal organizations. 'Ignorance' and 'reluctance' can first of all also be discussed as strategies of women to express their lack of interest in these organizations, and thus do not necessarily have anything to do with their time problems or a so-called lack of identity as workers. Secondly, concentrating more on the interactions instead of analyzing the two actors independently of each other, i.e. either the unions or the workers, would allow greater insight into the different actors' logics of action, thus explaining the problematic relationship between the two. The informal union introduced in the following part is a good example of a different but feasible way of organizing the workers according to their realities and their logic of action.

The Bangladesh Independent Garment Workers Union (BIGU)

This union was founded in 1994 by four female garment workers who worked together and had had very negative experiences with different federations. Frustrated with the work of these federations they decided to build up their own union. With the help of an international agency[4] they approached, they started their work in 1994 with a general convention. At this meeting the constitution of the organization was ratified and the executive committee elected. The executive committee consists of 15 workers. All the members of the committee have to have worked for at least five years in a garment factory in Bangladesh and 10 out of the 15 positions must be held by women. "The latter is a policy decision by BIGU to offer affirmative action to women workers since they make up at least 85% of the workers in the garment industry. Further, at least one of the positions of President and General Secretary must be filled by a female" (BIGU 1995, 6). The aim of the organization is not only to improve the terms and conditions of employment for workers but furthermore to offer various forms of support asked for by the members. In contrast to the formal unions this organization takes care of the everyday needs of the workers. To this

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[4] An American union operating internationally is supporting this organization.

end two female lawyers are employed, and evening schools for the workers have been established as well as schools for children who work in factories but whose parents agree to send them to school where they get one meal per day. Furthermore the organization realized that medical help is also needed, and therefore medical clinics have been established. While at the beginning only workers could consult the nurses, nowadays due to strong demand, the members their families can also get treatment. In this way a kind of health insurance system has been built up. None of the services are free, besides the information the workers can get about the legal rights situation. At the moment the organization is running three centres in three areas where a lot of garment factories are located. The centres are open in the evenings as well as on Fridays, normally the day when the workers do not have to work. The Friday meetings are normally used for big gatherings and through songs, dances and short plays a feeling of collectivity is generated. Most of the workers who come for the first time enjoy these activities.

The cultural programme was very popular with the women interviewed and preserved "a sense of human identity and dignity, and of cultural creativity" (Mies 1988, 141) often lost in the modern factories through the organization of the work processes and the treatment the women experience. The organization has its own song, which most of the workers learn immediately. Sketches performed by the organizers and role-plays of interactions between supervisors and workers are intentionally used to raise the awareness of the workers and to offer possibilities and alternatives as regards how to react in such situations. These gatherings held in the mornings and end with a shared lunch.

In contrast to the representatives of the other trade unions and federation the women involved in BIGU all have work experience, which makes a difference. The workers who come for the first time are very interested in where the organizers have worked, what kind of problems they had and why they joined this union. Talks about the different factories, comparisons between them and exchanges about the conditions are very important within the organizational process. Even though there are quite a number of factories in each area, the women workers were well informed about them, which is related to the high turnover rate as well as to the interactions in the factories as well as outside. Besides the services and the information the union offices thus offered a space for exchange and mutual help, for instance to find a better paid job or work in a factory with a better working atmosphere. In these centres informal networks have developed into a more

formal organization which provide the space for the official recognition of the problems discussed by the workers.

Whereas the work in the factory often isolates the workers, especially the newcomers who are not acquainted with the organization of the work and the relations in the factories, in the union offices a space is provided to build up social relations and to socialize. This aspect is very important for most of the workers who come regularly, as the narratives show. Often the union office is the only place where they start to talk with others about their experiences and specific problems. Nevertheless this does not mean that the centres are harmonious units, where everybody likes everybody else. Sometime just the opposite was observed. Fights, arguments and gossip accompanied the daily interactions. Often the older women accused younger ones of flirting inside and outside the factories or in the union centres. Some older women for example claimed that such a behaviour had led to their divorces. Nonetheless I would argue that these conflicts reflect the ambivalence the women experience and are a testimonial to the social changes taking place. The union centres are new arenas capturing the disruption and conflicts of the women workers in this transition process.

The union "allows" the women who become members to choose which kind of activities they think are important for their lives and their futures. Political activism was never the primary goal and is rather rare so far. It is accepted that some of the women attending the evening school are neither interested in the collective activities which the union tries to build up in the factories nor in the labour law. The women therefore do not feel they are under pressure but perceive the activities offered as an opportunity to either change their working situation and working lives or for their personal development.

The Creation of New Public Spheres

Even though the organization has around 16,000 members it has to be added that a high percentage is not actively involved in the work of the union or only attends the centres to consult the nurse or one of the lawyers. Nevertheless these workers can be activated if necessary and are the basis for building up unions in several factories. At present BIGU is not registered as a federation. The government office in charge causes problems and discovers irregularities whenever they hand in an application form. The fact that the union is a threat to some of the

factory owners is revealed by an incident which took place while I was conducting my field research. In November 1996, shortly after a group of "BIGU" workers who had been illegally suspended won their case in court, the owner being sentenced to pay each of them a certain amount of money in compensation, the following incident occurred. A group of young men, armed with pistols and molotov cocktails, attacked one of the centres and physically abused the officers, the lawyer and members of the organization. The lawyer was forced to rip off her *sari* and the men told her that next time they will set her on fire. They fired shots, destroyed files, broke windows and set the furniture on fire. They also poured petrol all over the lawyer's office but the lit match landed far away. During the attack 120 workers were present. The young men themselves said that the purpose of their attack was to stop the work of the union. The union officials contacted the authorities as before, since this was not the first incident. Despite the damage, the office reopened the next evening to show that they were not willing to give up. The fact that the lawyer was forced to rid off her *sari* was perceived by the majority of workers as well as the lawyer herself as the most brutal act, showing that in these labour disputes men know exactly how they can insult and threaten women. To stand with only a blouse and a petticoat in front of a group of people certainly is one of the worst intimidations for a woman, especially a woman with a university degree which gives her a high status in society. The assumption that the men intended to show the lawyer as well as the other women how vulnerable they are can be drawn.

Despite these incidents, the union insists it is not political. It is even stated in the constitution that the organization neither belongs to any political party nor intends to become politically engaged. This proclamation has to be seen in the context of the trade union movement in Bangladesh described above and the experiences of the women who founded the organization. It shows furthermore that the women constituting the union define politics as formal politics only. While the union itself states that it does not act politically the responses show that the other parties involved do not share this self-perception. The reactions for example of the employers as well as the services offered by the organization indicate social change leading to a "politicization" of the workers. The consequences are difficult to evaluate at this stage but the new room for manoeuvre created is differently used by the workers. Politics do not only take place in public spheres but create new public spheres, as this example shows; nor can they be separated from the different life worlds of the women involved (Lachenmann 1995, 10).

The union, until now unique in Bangladesh, is of course not only a success; trial and error accompanied the work and the organizational process. But since not only the union is unique but also indeed the challenge to create an organizational basis for the women workers as such, more time and space to reflect upon the problems of the workers as well as the organization is needed.

One further aspect has to be mentioned in connection with the union centres. That is that the centres are not only functionally used but also make it possible for women to create spaces for themselves. Meeting men is one example of a use not originally intended by the organization, another is that women can meet, drink tea and sit around without being under surveillance. This was perceived by some of the women interviewed as the most important incentive for them to stop by at the centres regularly. Women have hardly anywhere in Dhaka a place where they can meet. Tea shops and restaurants are not the right places for women to go and to walk around or meet in a park is neither good for their reputation nor safe. At home most of the workers have hardly enough space for themselves and no privacy, either family members are around or neighbours are stopping by. Thus the centres became much more than a union office; they are also a meeting place for exchanging information, building up social relations, chatting or relaxation.

Deconstructing the Myth of Women's Docility

Women are employed in the export-oriented factories especially in the so-called developing countries because they are said to be docile. Nevertheless in nearly all factories strict rules and regulations to control and discipline women workers accompany the work processes, close supervision and a variety of punishments seem to be needed for a smooth production process. The questions arise whether women are docile because of the modes of control established, and of what would happen if these systems of control and discipline had not been introduced.

Women's docility is all too often discussed and seen only in contrast to the so-called male "non-docility" (see Humphrey 1985, 226) in relation to assembly line and like jobs. Men undoubtedly do tend to resist, for example they respond angrily or aggressively to verbal abuses or physical force. Nonetheless it has to be taken into account first of all that forms of discipline for men and women are quite different and so are their forms of resistance. Secondly the fact that men and women respond differently to rules and regulations does not mean that women are per se more docile or obedient. I have intended to show in this article that women have a different logic of action related to their different life realities and experiences. The rationality of women thus is different from that of male workers; nevertheless, the women have also developed their own strategies of action and resistance. They use their so-called weaknesses to increase their room for manoeuvre, they create their own spaces in the factories or in the union offices for instance to make jokes about the male supervisors, they simply disappear when they find a better paid job and they build up networks for exchanging information about strategies during salary negotiations and to seek and build up other forms of security through greater reliance on themselves.

Thus women's struggles and their forms of resistance should not be judged in purely instrumental terms but rather in terms of the way the struggle itself develops women's capacities for autonomy, not only as regards their working lives, but also other realities of life. Furthermore it should be taken into consideration that breaking with various forms of dependency does not only mean greater autonomy but also giving up various forms of security which generally accompany conformity.

The forms of resistance, the collective actions and the case study have shown that there is not one strategy but several. That women have to overcome different forms of constraints, but are able to reshape structures even though it takes more time and space to cope with the variuos new environments and thus to develop new potentials and opportunities. I have also intended to show that women are not passive victims or "occupants of predestined roles" (Kabeer 1991, 159), as often stated particularly in studies of women and trade unions, but active agents whose modes of resistance are embedded in their specific rationalities of action, which are often overlooked or neglected. As long as women and their organizations are not part of the overall hierarchical and male dominated political system, it seems that they are the only ones creating new public spheres

and thus maybe initiating further social changes. Alliances with other women's organizations or NGOs could be a further step in this process.

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