

## Women in Informal Labor Market: Bargaining Power Still Hangs in Balance

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### Abstract

*Informal labor sector becomes a pivotal part of Bangladesh economy in term of its contribution to total employment. Due to the overpopulation the formal sector has failed to accommodate a bulging labor force of our country. Therefore the informal sector appears to be the major source of employment especially for women in urban areas as the formal sector is dominated by male. But unfortunately the increased rate of participation of women in this sector is characterized by low and irregular income thus ineffective to ensure women's greater bargaining power at home. Drawing on two surveys conducted in 1998 and 2013, this paper aims to assess the difference between the living standard of women workers in the past and at present. The study found no significant positive change in their living conditions. Based on both quantitative and qualitative study, this paper also explores the decision making power of women over the fertility issues. The study found that these women tend to have more number of children due to the strong influence of their male counterparts. The study further suggests that the government should immediately address the issue by forming new laws and policies for the urban informal women workers to incorporate/ integrate them with the mainstream labor market and thereby pave the way towards women empowerment.*

*Key words: Informal labor sector, Bargaining power, Women empowerment.*

## 1.0 Current Trends of Women's Participation in the Labor Market of Bangladesh

Bangladesh achieved significant economic growth over the last two decades with a GDP growth rate averaging 6 per cent per annum. As a result, the percentage of people below the poverty line has been reduced from 56.6 percent in 1992 to 31.5 per cent in 2010 (BBS 2010). During the period 2006-10, the labor force increased from 49.5 million to 56.7 million people with an average growth rate of 3.39% a year meaning that on an average 1.8 million people enter into the labor market annually. The labor force participation rate was 59.3% in 2010 against 58.5% in 2005-2006 (ILO, 2012).

Women constitute only approximately 36 per cent of Bangladesh's labor force (ILO, 2012). The inequality in employment of women is rampant in all labor force characteristics (See table 1). The unemployment rate is nearly double that of the rate for men, the underemployment rate for women exceeds the rate for men by five per cent and the labor force participation rate of women is only about one-third of men.

Labor market in Bangladesh constitutes of three types of market: formal, rural informal and urban informal (Titumir and Hossain, 2003). A small segment of the total labor force, however, works under the formal labor market framework. Based on a labor force survey conducted in 2010, informal employment in Bangladesh is estimated at about 89% of the total number of jobs in the labor market. It is more prevalent in the rural areas than in urban areas (ADB, 2012). Over the decade and half since the mid 1980s the size of the total labor force increased 1.6 times, averaging a growth rate of 3.6 percent per annum. During this period the female labor force increased from 2.54 million to 10.02 million, implying an average growth rate of 16.7 percent per annum, more than four times faster than the total labor force and more than six times faster than the male labor force (Mahmud, 2003). In the urban areas, improvement in the participation of women in labor force followed an increasing trend. More specifically, it was 1.23 percent and 10.71 percent during 2002-2003 to 2005-2006 and 2005-2006 to 2010 respectively (Labor Force Survey, 2002-2003, 2005-2006 and 2010).

**Table 1: Labor Force Characteristics**

Labor Force Characteristics (%)	Total	Male	Female
Unemployment rate	5.0	4.1	5.7
Underemployment rate	20.31	14.40	34.15
Labor force participation rate	59.2	82.51	35.98

Source: BBS, LFS, 2010 in ILO, 2012

Women are increasingly entering into job market and they are more likely to be under informal sector (ADB, 2012). The annual rate of increase in informal sector, for male, was 4.27 percent from 22.7 million in 1999-2000 to 32.4 million in 2010, whereas female employee has grown from 6.6 million in 1999-2000 to 14.9 million in 2010 with a rate of 12.58 percent per annum (Ali, 2013). They are mainly in ready-made garments and allied sector, tea gardens, NGOs, health care services, food processing industry, export processing zones, services sectors and commercial enterprises and informal sector i.e. construction, agriculture etc. (BILS, 2009). Thus, women are still grossly underrepresented in the world’s board rooms (ILO, 2013). Table 2 shows the number of women in the formal and informal labor sector.

**Table 2: Gender Disparity in Formal and Informal Labor Sector**

Labor force characteristics (Aged 15-24) (million)	Male	Female	Male	Female
	2002-03		2010	
Participation in informal labor sector	27.2	7.9	32.4	14.9
Participation in formal labor sector	7.3	2.0	5.5	1.3
Unpaid family worker	3.4	2.7	4.7	9.1

Source: Compiled by the author based on Labor Force Survey, 2010

### 1.1 Factors that Restrain Women to be in Formal Labor Sector

Bangladesh, being a developing country, is densely populated and its population always spills over the existing job opportunities. Due to ever increasing economic crisis, women are now engaging themselves in the informal sector just for sheer survival (Ali, 2013). Thereby this sector is often viewed as a possible solution to the problems of poor in developing countries (Jennings, 1994). Women are now able to supplement their family expenditure which is often insufficient to meet their family needs. Not only that informal labor sector contributes significantly to the Gross Domestic Product (GDP) in many countries. Arguably these invisible informal workers contribute most to the global trade as well. Thus, there is a significant overlap between being a woman, to be in informal labor sector and contributing to the overall country’s economic growth (Chen, 2001).

As a patriarchal society, the key financial responsibilities of the household still lie in the hands of male members in Bangladesh. As a result parents prefer their sons to be educated and skilled whereas keeping their daughters attached to kitchen. Consequently women with less education and skill have no other alternative but to be involved in informal labor sector. This marginalization is again perpetuated by the traditional long-term household and childcare responsibilities of women which create barriers in their way of being

involved in formal labor sector as a full time worker. As a result they prefer informal labor sector to work as a part time worker so that they can make a balance between their inside and outside responsibilities.

Besides these, Bangladesh is a Muslim country where many people strictly follow the purdah system. Most of the people don't expect female members of the household working outside. In many cases, it is a prestige issue for the male members of the household. In such a situation working outside is a great challenge for women. But due to the increasing pressure of household expenditure, men are now allowing women to work outside but for a short period of time and they view their income as the supplementary or extra even if in reality they are the main provider of the household.

Chen (2001) found that being in informal sector and being poor and powerless overlie when workers are especially women. The exploitative nature of informal market treats women as "reserve army of labor" and has confined their economic participation to a subordinate mode of production which serves to depreciate their value at home rather than empowering them (Jennings, 1994). As women are disproportionately affected by discrimination in job sector, they ultimately end up in job insecurity, low earnings, less access to credit, training, health insurance or loans etc., the access of which could pave their way towards empowerment.

Existing literatures so far have focused on the nature of informal labor market and its subsequent problems. For example, Kucera (2008) identified both the advantage and disadvantage of informal labor sector. Rangoobur (2011) identified the factors what keep women away from the formal labor market in Mauritius. Ganu (2012) addressed the necessity of evaluating women's contribution properly which is highly male dominated in Ghana. But this paper, first of all, aims to explore the problems that women face in the urban informal labor sector; secondly attempts to compare their trends of living before 20th century and thereafter and finally strives to find out whether this informal economy in the urban areas has any beneficial impact on their empowerment at home or not. By drawing attention to the current trends of women's participation in informal labor sector, the rest of the study includes conceptualization, methodology and findings followed by conclusions and recommendations.

## 1.2 Conceptualizing Informal Labor Sector and Women Empowerment

According to World Bank Group, the 'informal sector' covers a wide range of labor market activities that combine two groups of different nature. On the one hand, the informal sector is formed by the coping behavior of individuals and families in economic environment where earning opportunities are scarce. On the other hand, the informal sector is a product of rational behavior of entrepreneurs that desire to escape state regulations. The terminology "informal sector" was first introduced by The International Labor Organization (ILO) in 1972 which describes this sector as the activities that are not recognized, recorded, protected or regulated by the public authorities (ILO, 1972). Recently ILO identified the following few characteristics of informal sectors: ease of entry; lack of formal educational qualification; low wages; forced overtime; denial of basic rights; little job security; short-term work contract; very little capital; family ownership of enterprises; enterprises distribute products directly to consumers and no fixed hours of operation (ILO, 2012a). Participants in the informal economy are often defined as those 'who do not have employment security, work security and social security (National Commission for Enterprises in the Unorganized Sector, 2007). Thus, the informal economy is a free-entry sector that prospective workers enter only as a last resort (Fields, 2005). Based on the above mentioned definitions, present study studied those women who work as domestic workers, having no job security and are less paid and deprived of basic human rights.

Kabeer (2001) defines empowerment as 'the expansion in people's ability to make strategic life choices in a context where this ability was previously denied to them.' UNDP attempts to empower women by broadening opportunities for them (UNDP Gender Equality Strategy 2008-2011). In fact, the term empowerment has been defined by many in different ways. Empowerment has been defined as to infuse people with power (Narayana, 2002, World Development Report, 2002/2000) which means access to resources, as expansion in individual's agency (Kishore, 2002). It is also referred to as power of decision making i.e. autonomy (Jejeebhoy, 2001). The present study is going to measure women's empowerment by their decision making power over the fertility issue.

## 2.0 Theoretical Underpinning

Currently Bargaining theory is predominant in the analysis of any social issue. For example, Lake (2010) assessed the bargaining theory to give a rationalist

analysis of Iraq War. Pollak (2005) used the theory to identify the determinants of bargaining power in marriage. Bargaining theory is also best suited in the job market analysis. For example, Rogerson (2005) found that workers wages are best determined through bargaining while Manzini (2005) explored the sources of this bargaining power in wage negotiations. The current study attempts to use bargaining theory to explore the relationship between women's labour market participation and their bargaining power at home.

Based on Radical feminism which sees inequality in gender in every sector of the society (Ritzer, 1993), the current study assumes that a labor market with unequal earnings for men and women produces gender inequality in power in the household. According to Karl Marx, a person's ownership status is positively attached to his/her socio-economic position (Schaefer, 2002). Thus, women's lower earnings lead to subordinate status of women and subsequently less power to get their own way at home. Liberal feminism secures equal access to women on education, equal pay, and better working condition like men through the reformation of law and customs that excludes women to have equal opportunity in the economic, social and political sphere. Bargaining power theory thereby suggests that women's bargaining capacity would be strengthened by empowering them (Rasul, 2002). Women are unequal to men, oppressed by men, and treated differently than that of men (Ritzer, 1993). Consequently, they are becoming isolated from the wage labor market, losing bargaining power both at home and outside and ultimately lacking opportunity cost of savings and skills.

### **3.0 Methodology and Limitations of the Study**

#### **3.1 The Research Locale**

The research is conducted in three different slums in Dhaka city of Bangladesh where women workers involved in informal labor sector are available. One slum is in Motijheel area and another two are in Malibagh area of Dhaka City. Each slum is composed of sixty families on an average. Most of the respondents are climate refugees working as domestic workers in the city. They illegally stay in footpath and in few other places beside the railways, which are non-rented, year after year.

#### **3.2 The Research Methods**

The study is a composition of qualitative and quantitative analysis. For the quantitative analysis, the study conducted a survey where 60 women were

selected purposively. All of them were working as domestic workers. Based on a structured and semi-structured questionnaire, the study attempted to find out the level of participation of women in decision making over the fertility issues. For making a comparative analysis of the living condition of workers at present and past, the collected data has been compared with the data already collected by the author in 1998. The study also made an extensive literature review to distill themes related to the study.

Three focus group discussions (FGDs) were conducted in three different slums to supplement the data of survey. FGD of Motijheel area consisted of 4 members and another two FGD of Malibagh area consisted of 6 members and 5 members respectively. Observation is instrumental to have a deeper characterization of the subject. Observations were, thereby, made to capture the daily activities of the respondents.

### **3.3 Limitations of the Research**

It is already mentioned that people now a days show little interest to give interview. In this busy and stressful life, people get tired and wish to take rest during their short leisure period. Government and different NGOs have given them hopes for a better life several times which were ultimately proved bogus to them. As a result these hopeless people no more believe that their interview can bring any change in their miserable living condition. When designing the research outline, the researchers' intention was to collect data from minimum 100 respondents. But it was found impossible later on. Besides while taking interview from one, a number of respondents joined up and started participating which ultimately influenced the response of the original respondent. As a result filling up questionnaire individually and maintaining serial number became very difficult. Because of these reasons, many incomplete questionnaires were excluded during data entry. However, the combination of survey, FGD and observation helped to overcome some of the shortcomings as mentioned above.

### **4.0 Research Findings: Nature of Informal Labor Market in Bangladesh**

Women studied in this paper remained concentrated in "invisible" areas of informal work, such as domestic workers, which offer unstable employment status, low, irregular or no remuneration, little or no access to social security or protection, and limited ability to be organized to ensure their human rights. Almost 100 per cent respondents reported that their job nature does not permit weekly holidays. Because their work includes washing clothes and utensils, sweeping, mopping, cooking etc., those are indispensable as regular

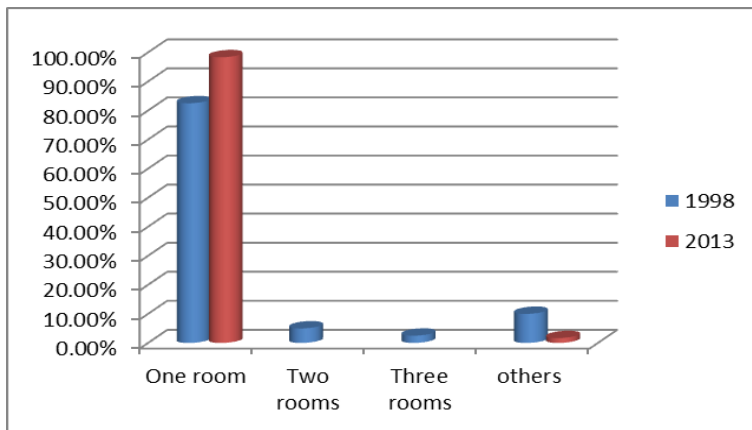
activities for every household. They also reported that they don't have any maternity leave. They usually lose their job during pregnancy period. Facilities like bonus, yearly increments etc. depend fully on the mercy of the employer. More so, they are always in fear of being terminated from job in anytime for any silly mistake. Even if they remain absent for 2/3 days for sickness like fever or cold, they become doubtful about getting back their work. This shaky employment status does not give them any feeling of job satisfaction.

#### 4.1 Living Conditions of Women Workers involved in Informal Labor Market

According to 1991 survey, slums are settlements of poor housing (i. e. shacks or jhupris, katcha flimsy structures, semi pucca flimsy structures and so on); very high population density (over 300 population per acre), high room crowding (3 or more adult per room), poor sewerage and drainage conditions, inadequate water supply; irregular or no clearance of garbage, little or no paved roads, insufficient or no street lighting and little or no access to gas facility. The above characteristics are summarized as under the following three aspects: a. predominantly poor housing, b. very high housing and population density and c. poor sewerage, drainage and other infrastructural facilities (CUS, 1996).

Survey conducted in 1998 found that out of 40 women workers involved in informal labor sector, 33 dwellings of women consisted of a single room followed by 2 dwellings consisting of 2 rooms and 1 in a house of three rooms. Rest of the 4 respondents was staying in employer's house as they were working as housemaids (Unpublished thesis paper of the author, 1998) (See figure 2).

Figure 2: Housing Conditions of Women Workers in Informal Labor Sector

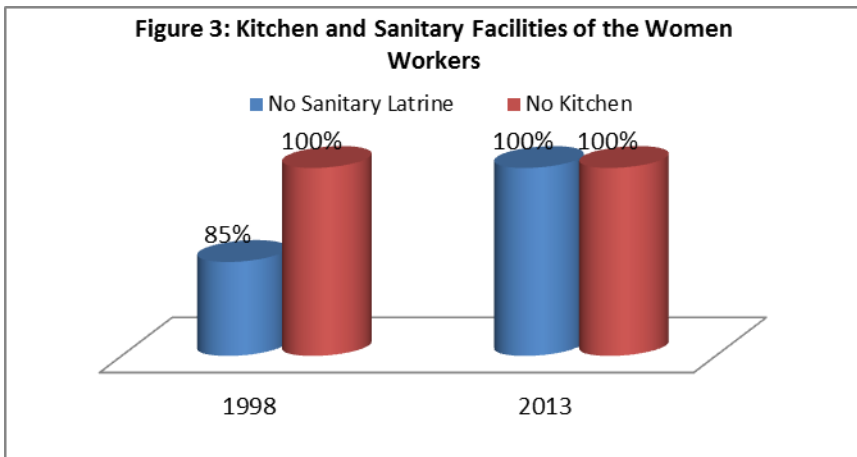


Source: Field Survey, 1998 and 2013



The survey of 2013 finds no improvement of housing conditions of the workers rather the situation is worsening. The workers migrate in huge number towards Dhaka city due to the climate change and its consequent joblessness in their local areas. They take place in the street side or beside the railways as their permanent settlement. When police withdraws them occasionally, they become scattered for the time being, shift themselves in the slums of other areas and come back to the previous place after short period. They take it sportingly. The survey finds that 98 per cent respondents are living in one room. Each room consists of 4 to 5 members. Rest of the 2 percent doesn't have a room even. They share the room of other families. About 100 per cent people were observed having no kitchen and sanitary facilities in the current survey while a minimum amount reported having private latrine in 1998 (See figure 3).

Hundreds of workers are staying on footpath in Motijheel area of Dhaka city. They make a sort of room with plastic and sticks. Each room consists of one family. As a result couple with 3/4 children also manage to accommodate themselves in such a congested room. They cook just beside their plastic and bamboo room with high risk. Just a little wind is sufficient to bring a loss of any family member in any time. They don't have any sanitation facilities as because they stay on footpath. Children do their toilet in the street beside their house which is highly unhygienic. Men and women cover a long distance to get into a jungle before sunrise or after sunset. One respondent with heart disease said that she works in a house just to get the toilet facilities. Street side dwellers of Malibag area reflect the same scenario.



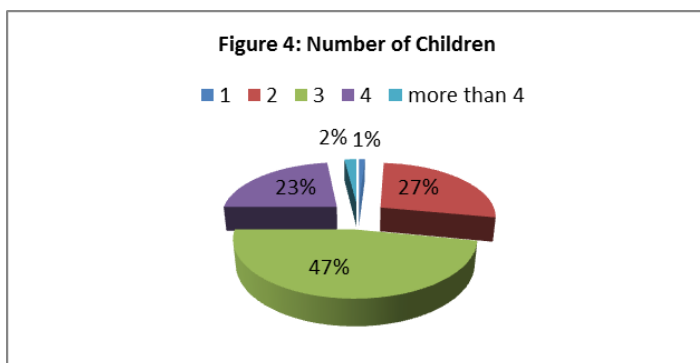
Source: Field Survey, 1998 & 2013

Respondents of the slum of Khilgaon railways are living in a single room made up of bamboo. But these rooms are bigger than the room of Motijheel slum. Here people can place a bed inside the room. As usual, these people also don't have kitchen and sanitation facilities.

## 4.2 Limited Influence of Informal Labor Market on Women's Decision Making

Women are vulnerable among the vulnerable. Gender-based social, economic, religious and cultural constructs marginalize women across all community, groups irrespective of class, caste, economic standing, status, ethnicity, age, and so on. Women all over the world are paid less than men for equal work. Women have less skill and have fewer opportunities to develop skills and thereby have fewer decision making possibilities both at home and in public sphere (Ariyabandu, 2009). This scenario is absolutely reflected in the present study. Though women are working hard and trying to contribute to their family based on their capability, they still hold subordinate status in their household. They can't make any decision individually. Their husbands hold the maximum authority at home which is well accepted to them. In fact, they are trapped within the traditional stereotypes. Wife beating is a common phenomenon among them. While they are working hard even during their child bearing time, their husbands are beating them, getting married twice, losing money by gambling and so on. Despite all these, they accept the reality, consider themselves as less than men and try hard to earn more to impress their husbands.

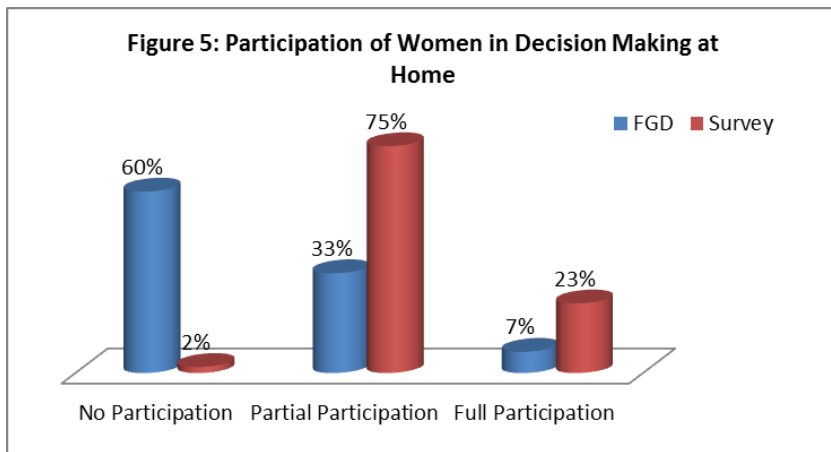
Regarding fertility issues, the study finds that around 47 percent women have three children followed by 27 per cent with two. This 27 per cent is young enough and are planning to carry more in future. Another large portion of respondents has four children (See figure 4). For the expectation of son, few respondents took more than 4 children. One respondent took 7 children not because of the expectation of a son, rather to have more than one son.



Source: Field Survey, 2013

The respondents reported that they are less likely to use any contraceptive method due to their poverty. They don't want to spend a single penny for the temporary methods. When they find their family size getting too big and expenditure becomes unmanageable, they go for permanent methods. Women can't play any role in this regard. Their husbands agree with them only when the situation goes beyond control. This ultimately indicates full dependency of women on their husbands for decisions about child bearing issues.

As their husbands agreed with them though late, 75 per cent respondents reported that they are partially involved in decision making. About 23 percent people think themselves independent in decision making followed by 2 per cent reporting no participation (See figure 5).



Source: Field Survey, 2013

But survey data grossly contradicts with the result of focus group discussion (FGD). Respondents, who agree with their husbands about not using any contraceptive by considering it as a sin, reported that they have full participation in decision making. This is due to the fact that they never felt the necessity to bargain with their husbands in this regard. Again respondents, who reported partial participation, are happy with the fact that finally their husbands agreed with them. By converting FGD findings into percentage, it is found that out of 15 respondents, 60 percent of them don't have any bargaining power to establish their decisions at home, 33 per cent respondents have partial participation and a negligible portion have full participation (See figure 6).

But both survey and FGD show a negligible percentage in full participation. Being a minority at home and having limited bargaining power over the family matters, women are still trying to gain partial control over the

family issues by contributing to their family based on their limited capability. They have the fear of reporting bad about their husbands lest it brings yet another hurdle in their family life.

## **5.0 Conclusion and Recommendations**

The informal sector is an inexorable economic feature of most developing countries, contributing notably to employment creation, and income generation. Its growth also reflects both the inability of the formal labor sector to absorb all of the urban labor supply and the special dynamism of occupations. Recent years have witnessed greater participation of women in labor-market and their contributions to the development process. In the context of constant growing economic need of the family women are now compelled to work outside in spite of the traditional gender roles and social obstructions. Unfortunately mostly illiterate and without any marketable skill these women are concentrated in the vast part-time urban informal sector. But it is already mentioned above that this sector is not under the labor law and thereby confronted with innumerable problems.

Women's over-representation in the informal labor market has not shown any major change in their living condition and bargaining power as well. With very low and irregular incomes along with the absence of any extra-benefits, holidays, women have to carry heavy loads of work to support themselves and their families. But due to poor income they have less say in decision-making level at home. On top of it most women do not have control over their earnings since their husbands deal with the cash transactions no matter their husbands earn or not. As a result they become poorest of the poor and remain hostages to patriarchal ideologies.

The vulnerable condition of informal women workforce is also reflected through their unchanged dilapidated housing conditions. Their shanty dwellings are just the bare minimum to provide the function of sleeping and storage of some necessary daily items. Being the unskilled and uneducated labor force in Bangladesh, these women are also not free from domestic violence. Beating, shouting, scolding, using slangs, kicking, punching by their husbands are regular happenings of their life. They take these very normally and even never think of reporting these cases to the police either out of fear or lack of consciousness. Their horizon of understanding is still dependent and regulated by men. They are unaware of themselves. Mere survival is the greatest challenge to them.

Over population is one of the major obstacles towards the development of Bangladesh. Large family size is still a very big problem among workers. Due to the superstitious attitude many of these women and their husbands are not adopting family planning methods. On the other hand, many also cannot afford contraceptives due to poverty. To keep the population under control, Government should immediately look into this issue seriously and distribute contraceptives free to them. Not only that, a strict monitoring policy should be there to monitor whether these are reaching to the target population or not.

As Rasul (2002) proved that bargaining power of wives affects fertility, women empowerment can play a very important role in this regard. While Bangladesh seems to be on track to achieve some of the MDGs such as universal primary education and gender parity, these floating people may be not under any policy due to their unstable nomadic life.

Recently Government took steps to amend the Bangladesh Labor Law 2006 to ensure adequate rights for workers especially after the Rana Plaza and Tazreen Garments tragedies. The National Parliament recently passed Bangladesh Labor Law (Amendment) bill 2013. But the new law did not clarify the issue of workers in informal sector. Moreover, safety and hygiene at workplace, and rights of women workers, had been curtailed due to deficiency in the Labour Law-2006. Thus simply having access to the labor market cannot be the only solution of their problem. Economic security is obviously a priority for informal women workers however without education, skill development, social awareness, legal framework, job security, human rights, training and advocacy must be ensured in order to reduce gender disparity in the labor-market and enhancing their bargaining power.

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#### End Notes

i Radical feminists see the primary goal of feminism as freeing women from the imposition of so-called “male values”, and creating an alternative culture based on “female values” (Willis, 1984).

ii Liberal feminists argue that our society holds the false belief that women are, by nature, less intellectually and physically capable than men, it tends to discriminate against women in the academy, the forum, and the marketplace. Liberal feminists believe that “female subordination is rooted in a set of customary and legal constraints that blocks women’s entrance to and success in the so-called public world” and they work hard to emphasize the equality of men and women through political and legal reform (Rosemarie, 1989).

iii Building on the United Nations (UN) global conferences of the 1990s, the United Nations Millennium Declaration 2000 marked a strong commitment to the right to development, to peace and security, to gender equality, to eradication of many dimensions of poverty and to sustainable human development. Embedded in that Declaration, which was adopted by 147 Heads of State and 189 States, were what have become known as the eight Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) (Bangladesh Progress Report, 2012).

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