

# The Power to Choose

Bangladeshi Women and Labour Market  
Decisions in London and Dhaka

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London • New York

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## Preface and acknowledgements

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The idea for this book came about in response to an apparent paradox relating to the work patterns of two groups of Bangladeshi women workers living several thousand miles apart. The first group came to my attention when I visited Bangladesh in 1984 after an absence of three years. I was struck then by the sight of thousands of young women moving briskly around on the streets of Dhaka. In a city, and a country, where women had been conspicuous by their absence in the public domain, this was not merely a new phenomenon, but a remarkable one. I was told that they worked in the new garment factories which had sprung into existence almost overnight in response to incentives put in place by the government in 1982 to promote export-oriented manufacturing.

Very soon after this, as a result of my involvement in a campaign which I describe in Chapter 1 of the book, I heard about another group of Bangladeshi women also working in the clothing industry, but this time in the East End of London. However, they had been incorporated into a very different form of employment in the industry. While much of the clothing industry in the UK is dominated by female labour, Bangladeshi women were largely absent from its factories and small, outdoor units. They worked instead as home-based machinists, paid on a piecework basis. At a time when research based on official statistics in the UK had declared that manufacturing homework was a 'relative rarity', an anachronism from the last century, these women represented a rising trend in the British garment industry of subcontracting out the machining stages of production to home-based outworkers.

It was not the fact that Bangladeshi women took up different forms of paid work in the garment industries in these two contexts

that was puzzling – they were, after all, located in different labour markets in different parts of the world – but rather the counter-intuitive forms that their work had taken in the two contexts. In Bangladesh, a country where strong norms of *purdah*, or female seclusion, had always confined women to the precincts of the home and where female participation in public forms of employment had historically been low, the apparent ease with which women appeared to have abandoned old norms in response to new opportunities went against the grain of what has been presented in the development literature as one of the least negotiable patriarchies in the world. By contrast, in Britain, a secular country accustomed to the presence of women in the public arena, and with a tradition of female factory employment going back over a hundred years, particularly in the clothing industry, Bangladeshi women were largely found working from home, in apparent conformity with *purdah* norms.

A reading of the literature on the international division of labour in the garment industry suggested that this paradoxical set of labour market outcomes could be explained at a number of different levels. There was an explanation at the global level which stressed the extensive geographical restructuring of textile and garment manufacturing since the late 1960s and the very different patterns of employment it gave rise to in different parts of the world. There was an explanation at the national level, which explored the local organisation of the garment industry in different countries and the demand for different categories of labour which this generated. And finally, there was a third, micro-level set of explanations which relates to the lives and circumstances of individual workers and their motivations for taking up particular forms of employment in different contexts.

It is this third level of analysis which forms the main substance of this book. The book can be seen as drawing on two different kinds of explanatory narratives which have a bearing directly, or indirectly, on the labour market outcomes outlined above. The first set of narratives are those related in the third person: in other words, they are narratives *about* the women workers in question. Some of these are populist in origin, the accounts of journalists, trade unionists, feminist activists and employers, a range of people

who had, or claimed to have, some form of first- or second-hand knowledge of the workers. Others are more academic and take the form of theories about the behaviour of social actors in general, of whom the women workers described above represent particular examples. The various rationales put forward for women's labour market behaviour within these diverse narratives constitute one kind of explanation for our paradox. In addition to these third-person narratives, however, there are also first-person narratives, those told *by* women workers everywhere about themselves. Such narratives contain the workers' own accounts of their behaviour, of the motivations which led them to seek paid work and to opt for one form of employment rather than another. Such narratives offer an alternative set of explanations for our paradox which may or may not converge with the first set.

### Objectives

I have attempted to bring together both sets of narratives in order to achieve a number of objectives. The first objective is a straightforward empirical one. It is to find out the reasons for the paradoxical labour market choices made by Bangladeshi women in the contexts of Britain and Bangladesh. The second objective is more theoretical in nature and seeks to compare the 'fit' between the accounts of their labour market behaviour, and its implications, provided by Bangladeshi women workers in the two contexts and the theoretical accounts of women's labour market behaviour put forward in the social science literature.

Finally, I had a third and more political objective for undertaking this research and for adopting the particular methodology which has guided it. The two sets of narratives I have outlined above embody, implicitly or explicitly, models of the human actor, either in a general abstract sense, or more concretely, in the shape of Third World women workers. They also contain explicit or implicit claims about what these workers' interests might be and how they might best be served in the context of the rapid expansion and growing interdependence of international trade. However, these views do not always converge, and indeed may be in conflict. The

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## Weak winners, powerful losers: the politics of protectionism in international trade

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Finally, returning to the concerns outlined in the first chapter, the analysis in this book offers one set of answers as to why many of those in the northern labour movement, who supported quotas on the import of clothing from Bangladesh on the grounds of the exploitative conditions which prevailed within the industry, remained silent on the equally exploitative conditions which prevailed for many in the British clothing industry. Women workers in Bangladesh were seen to be a legitimate focus for concern because their poverty made them vulnerable to exploitation by ruthless employers. Bangladeshi women in Britain, on the other hand, were seen to be expressing their cultural preferences by opting to work from home, even if the conditions of work were equally exploitative. While there is an element of truth in both explanations, I have sought to demonstrate why they offered very partial versions of the reality of women's lives in both contexts. In this chapter, I want to turn to the third and final objective of the book which was to consider how ethical standards in international trade might look when the perspectives of working people, particularly working women in the Third World, are taken into account.

### Women workers in London and Dhaka: ten years on

In the ten years that have passed since the fieldwork for this study was carried out, the changes associated with the restructuring of the international clothing industry have not been reversed. The UK clothing industry has continued to decline. The recession at the end of the 1990s saw an estimated loss of 500 jobs a week (*Guardian*, 2 December 1998). According to the Transport and General Workers Union, around 25,000 jobs had been lost in 1998 alone and a further 60,000 jobs were expected to be lost over the next two years. By the end of 1998, there were only 215,000 people still employed in the clothing industry in the UK, with around 140,000 in the machining sector where jobs were most vulnerable to overseas competition. However, data on jobs in the underground economy remain sparse. According to one estimate, there were around half a million homeworkers in Britain (Shaw, 1997) while another suggested 1 million.<sup>1</sup> In addition, it was estimated that around 20,000 people were working in around 1000 sweatshops in London (*Observer*, 23 June 1996).

For the Bangladeshi community in East London, some things have changed. An increasing percentage of the community is now born, brought up and educated in the UK and has a greater ability and self-confidence in communicating with the wider society than their parents. Racism has by no means vanished from the streets of the East End but the threat of physical attack that persisted through much of the 1980s has decreased. As Reverend Ken Leech, a local historian and anti-racist campaigner in the area for more than 40 years, observed, 'The Bangladeshis have succeeded where the Jews failed. They have broken through the barrier on the no-go area of Bethnal Green' (*Independent on Sunday*, 24 May 1998).

Another indicator of the improved situation in the community relates to the educational performance of girls within the community. Ninety-seven per cent of students in the Mulberry School for Girls located in Tower Hamlets were from the Bangladeshi community and references to the school had cropped up frequently

1. *Home Truths*, National Group on Homeworking, 1994.

during the interviews with the homeworkers, many of whose daughters attended it. It was generally regarded as one of the 'sink' schools which typify deprived inner city areas. However, its GCSE results are now proving to be consistently higher than other schools in the area, with 38 per cent of pupils gaining 5 A–C grade GCSEs in 1997 compared to 26 per cent for the borough as a whole. In a survey of *all* English state schools carried out by the *Sunday Observer* (December 6 1998), it came second in terms of its average GCSE points scores. The calculation controlled for the fact that English was a second language for the Bangladeshi girls who made up the overwhelming majority of the student body and that 74 per cent of the children came from families claiming benefits. Whatever else the *Observer* survey suggests – and there were queries raised about its sampling procedures by Tower Hamlets Council – the results do show that this generation of Bangladeshi girls are far better equipped to deal with the wider society than their mothers were.

However, other aspects of community life have not changed. Men and women from ethnic minority groups continue to have lower rates of economic activity than those from white households, with the difference particularly glaring among Bangladeshis. Although most estimates do not capture the extent of unofficial economic activity among the Bangladeshi community, they do testify to the resilience of racial segmentation within mainstream forms of employment. We have already noted the continued low rates of economic activity among men, but more particularly among women, in the community compared to other ethnic groups. According to the latest Labour Force Survey carried out in early 1997, 31 per cent of Bangladeshi and Pakistani households were classified as 'workless' (*The Asian Age*, 15 August 1998). In other words, they had no employed members. The equivalent estimate for white households was 17 per cent. Unemployment is around 17 per cent in general for the Tower Hamlets area but rises to 38 per cent among young Bangladeshis (*Independent on Sunday*, 24 May 1998). Not surprisingly, many of the unemployed youth have sought alternative forms of inclusion, some 'reverting' to Islam, others turning to drugs and gang identities. As Gaffar Choudhury, a Bangladeshi journalist cited in the latter article, put it, 'Today in Tower Hamlets all people care about is the hijab or heroin'.

In Bangladesh, by contrast, the export-oriented clothing industry has flourished. It has grown from around 700 factories, employing anything between 80,000 and 250,000 women workers, in the mid-1980s to around 2400 factories in 1995–96, employing around 1.2 million workers, still overwhelmingly women. These estimates do not, of course, include the additional 5 million people who according to one estimate in 1991, have benefited indirectly from work as a result of the industry (*Daily Ittefaq*, 25 November 1991, cited in Jackson, 1992, p. 24). In addition, the industry's contribution to the country's export earnings has grown from less than 1 per cent in 1982 to around 64 per cent today.

However, its growth trajectory remains circumscribed by the operational pattern of the MFA (Bhattacharya, 1995). The outcry against quotas on clothing imports from Bangladesh led to them being lifted by Britain and France in 1986 and the European market has remained quota free since then. However, almost all items of ready-made garments exported to the US remain governed by quotas as do exports into Canada. According to a cautious estimate by the Overseas Development Institute in 1992, a lowering of trade barriers would boost Bangladesh's overall export earnings by 13 per cent (Page et al., 1992).

### **The current face of protectionism: the issue of child labour**

The other trend which has not been reversed is the growth of protectionist sentiment in the north. Protectionist lobbies have benefited enormously from public support as a result of their growing sophistication in linking their demands to genuine humanitarian concerns. The issue of child labour is perhaps the issue par excellence in this strategy. Bangladesh found this out in 1993 when Senator Harkin of Iowa introduced his Child Labour Deterrence Bill into the US Senate, the stated aim of which was the prevention of imports into the US of any foreign products made partly or wholly with child labour. It is worth providing a brief summary of what unfolded in Bangladesh in the wake of this Bill because it captures in microcosm the politics of protectionism currently being played out on the international stage. The following account is

drawn largely from Bissell and Sobhan (1996) and Bhattacharya (1995).

Humanitarian concerns with children's welfare explain why the Harkin Bill had wide-ranging support among a cross-section of the American public. However, it also benefited from less altruistic forms of support. The Child Labour Coalition (CLC), a Washington based consumer coalition, which was extremely active in its support of the Harkin Bill, included the International League of Garment Workers among its members and worked closely with the American-Asian Free Labour Institute (AAFLI), an international affiliate of the AFL-CIO, the largest labour union in the United States.

The efforts of these organisations were considerably boosted by an NBC Dateline programme which painted what many in Bangladesh saw as a 'highly unbalanced and sensationalised account' of the situation of children in the garment industry (Bissell and Sobhan, 1996). The programme had an immediate effect on US consumers and buyers, bolstering the CLC's calls for a boycott of Bangladeshi garments in the country. The programme's other message was clearly spelt out for its viewers by a prominent American labour unionist who declared that 'for every child working in a Bangladesh garment factory, there is an adult American out of a job'.

Given that the Bangladesh garment industry exported nearly half of its products to the US, this unwelcome publicity threatened to jeopardise the entire industry. Employers reacted immediately by laying off child workers en masse, presumably the effect intended by the Bill. However, it quickly became clear to development organisations within Bangladesh that the instant dismissal of children from the garment factories did not end child labour, but merely pushed it into far more hazardous and exploitative forms of work. Concern with the fate of retrenched children led UNICEF and a number of local non-governmental agencies to call for some kind of 'holding' operation until a more satisfactory alternative to immediate dismissal could be worked out. A National Child Labour Working Group (NCLWG), bringing together the Bangladesh Garment Manufacturers and Exporters Association, UNICEF, the International Labour Organisation, government representatives, trade

unions and local non-governmental organisations, was set up under the auspices of the Department of Labour in order to develop 'a measured response for the phased abolition of all forms of child labour'. A protracted process of negotiation was begun to work out what such a response might be.

AAFLI and CLC sought to play an active role in influencing the outcome of these negotiations. AAFLI flew a former garment worker from Bangladesh to the US to testify on child labour before a Senate Committee (see testimony of Nazma Akhter in US Senate (1994)). An AAFLI representative now arrived in Bangladesh seeking to open up a field office in Dhaka in order to play a more direct role in the negotiating process. AAFLI's initial goal was to try and take over the monitoring cell of the NCLWG, a role which would have given it strategic access to the garment factories. However, this was resisted by local NGOs who felt it was inappropriate for a foreign organisation with no clear cut status or history within the country to be exercising such a function.

After prolonged negotiation, a draft Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) was prepared for signature by the BGMEA, AAFLI, UNICEF, the Centre for Development Research, Bangladesh and the American-Bangladesh Economic Forum. However, the Extraordinary General Meeting of the BGMEA convened to consider the agreement refused to endorse it, objecting in particular to a provision which would allow factory inspection by an NGO, a role for which the US Embassy were promoting AAFLI. For obvious reasons, the industry was not willing to be monitored by an agency whose track record had already shown it to have interests other than the prosperity of the local industry at heart. In reaction to the BGMEA's decision, AAFLI and CLC announced that they were going ahead with a call for a boycott of Bangladesh garments in US markets.

As Bissell and Sobhan pointed out, the CLC may have had a genuine commitment to the abolition of child labour, but it was poorly informed about prevailing economic conditions in Bangladesh and the implications of their actions. A successful boycott would not simply have led to the widespread sacking of the remaining children, but would have also threatened the jobs of the one million women who were employed by the garment industry,

depriving them of their livelihoods and possibly increasing the likelihood of even more children being sent out to work. Furthermore, what both AAFLI and CLC failed to appreciate was that BGMEA members were, in fact, under no obligation to sign the MOU. Indeed, the first instinct of the garment employers to dismiss all their child workers would have secured compliance with the Harkin Bill and averted the threat of a boycott. They had been dissuaded from doing so by UNICEF who were concerned to prevent the children who were sacked from simply disappearing into the ranks of the 'nowhere children' who eke out a living on the margins of the urban economy.

The attempts by AAFLI and the CLC to shape the course of negotiations roused the ire of several national and international organisations within Bangladesh who questioned the credentials of 'outsiders', with little knowledge or understanding of local conditions, to be in a position to determine what constituted the best interests of children in Bangladesh. There was particular mistrust of AAFLI. Like the American Institute for Free Labour Development (AIFLD), another international affiliate of the AFL-CIO, it had been created in the 'Cold War' years as part of the American government's fight against communism. Both were widely believed in their respective regions of operation to have strong links with the CIA. Many in Bangladesh were well aware of the subversive role played by AIFLD in anti-communist operations in Central America and few believed AAFLI to have the interests of Bangladesh's garment workers at heart. The Field Director of Save the Children Fund (UK) was quoted in the local papers as asking: 'Who are they, where do they come from and where do they get their funding from . . . Their agenda is not entirely clear to me and I don't know what UNICEF is doing with an organisation like AAFLI'. The Country Representative of Oxfam also questioned AAFLI's motives: 'This is naked protectionism. If it was really about helping children then they wouldn't have pushed the children out on the streets. . . . It is very clear now that whatever the BGMEA does here, there is a whole lobby in the US which doesn't want Bangladeshi garments' (*Daily Star*, 24 May 1995).

The position of most NGOs in Bangladesh on the issue of child labour was far less black-and-white than the position adopted by

the American child rights lobby (Bhattacharya, 1995). The Shishu Adhikar Forum, a coalition of 70 Bangladeshi NGOs for children's rights, was critical of the conditions which gave rise to child labour and of the government for not enforcing child labour laws. However, they proposed the gradual, rather than drastic, elimination of child labour and accepted the possibility of allowing children in light work until better options had been made available.

The BGMEA did agree to return to the negotiating table, but on condition that AAFLI was excluded. The negotiations were resumed between the BGMEA, the ILO and UNICEF. However, the memorandum which was finally signed was not, in fact, the one that had met with the unanimous approval of all three signatories. Their preferred version would have permitted some light, part-time regulated factory work for children in the 12–14 age group along with school attendance. This would have eliminated the need to compensate them for loss of livelihood. However, this time, the draft MOU was rejected by Western buyers on the basis of what they referred to as 'the perceptions of the Western consuming public' who, it was claimed, would not be able to comprehend the merits of a solution which combined work and study and would be satisfied only with the complete elimination of all child labour from the factories. The version that was finally signed in 1995 stated as its intention the removal of all children under the age of fourteen from BGMEA factories and their placement in education programmes run by two Bangladeshi NGOs with a track record in this field. Stipends of 300 takas a month were provided to those child workers attending school programmes in recognition of the loss of income involved. On the basis of the 10,000 children still remaining in the factories at this time, this entailed a monthly expenditure of \$50,000 a month on stipends alone. The ILO was made responsible for the verification component of the MOU.

### Who decides the best interests of the child?

Debates about child labour crystallise the complexities of ethical concerns in international trade in a far more emotionally loaded way than more general debates about labour standards. As Stalker

(1996) put it, child labour 'fuses many issues and ideas – political, economic and humanitarian – into a set of powerful and disturbing images that dramatise and personalise subjects that might otherwise seem technical and remote'. The photograph of a little Honduran boy apparently asleep through exhaustion while stitching tennis balls on the cover of UNICEF's 1997 report on the state of the world's children; the title – 'By the sweat and toil of children' – given to the US Department's 1994 report on the use of child labour in American imports; televised images of children hunched over machines in dimly lit factories and sweatshops in far-off places in the world, illustrate poignantly and powerfully why there is such a widespread and gut-level reaction to the idea of children being put to work. Not only do children symbolise innocence and vulnerability for many, but because they are also seen as too young to make choices for themselves, their interests are seen to be a collective social responsibility and hence open to definition by a variety of different social groups.<sup>2</sup>

However, despite its potency as a rallying cry for action by child rights campaigners, there is no clear cut consensus on what should be done about child labour. There appears to be a wide gulf between those whose interest in the issue has been shaped by the images brought to them by the television or by various activist campaigns and those whose commitment is influenced by an understanding of ground level realities. Indeed, it was its proximity to ground level realities which led to the horrified attempts by the UNICEF office in Bangladesh to seek to halt the overnight dismissal of all children from the garment factories. To understand the reasons for UNICEF's response, and the response of most of the local NGOs and trade unions, to the consequences of the Harkin Bill, we would have to understand who these children were, why they were in the factories and the options available to them outside factory work.

2. There is a certain analogy in the double-edged paternalism adopted by northern trade unions towards women and children in the south. As far as the ICFTU is concerned, women workers in the south constitute an 'underclass of international capital' forced to work in appalling conditions by the TNCs. Depictions of this kind have allowed trade unions in the north to assume responsibility for the welfare of women and children in the south in ways that often coincide with their own self-interests.

Estimates as to the incidence of child labour in the garment industry have varied widely between 200,000, before the glare of publicity was focused on the industry, to around 10,000 in 1995, when a team acting on behalf of the signatories to the MOU carried out its own survey. Children worked mainly as 'helpers', running errands, cutting threads, hand-stitching, ironing, sewing on buttons and other finishing work. The vast majority, not surprisingly, came from poorer families. Some of their fathers were unemployed, others worked in casual daily labour and yet others had abandoned their families (Paul-Majumder and Chowdhury, 1993). Mothers tended to work in badly paid domestic service or else in the garment industry, often in the same factory as the child. Around 80 per cent of child labourers were found to have a relative in the same factory. Indeed, employers claimed that it raised the productivity of the mother if she did not have to worry about leaving her children to fend for themselves. Many of these women had to leave the factories when their children were dismissed since there was no one at home to look after them.

Consequently, it was possible to distinguish between two categories of children in the factories. At the younger end were those who had come into the industry because there was no one to look after them at home. Accompanying working mothers or siblings to the factories, they had drifted into casual labour, working as helpers and packers (Bissell and Sobhan, 1996). At the older end were the 'hard-core' child labourers who had been driven into employment by the poverty of their families. Most had been in some form of informal sector employment prior to their entry into the factories and were to return to these jobs when they were ejected from the factories.

What were these other jobs? A UNICEF/ILO survey carried out in 1994 found children in urban Bangladesh to be working in around 300 different occupations (cited in Stalker, 1996). In Dhaka alone, it was estimated that anywhere between 200,000 and 1 million children, mainly girls, worked in domestic service. While the glare of publicity focused largely on child labour in the garment industry, where children tended to be around 12–14 years old, children as young as 6 and 7 worked as domestic servants. Girls also worked in waste collection, making up around a third of the

100,000 children working in this occupation in Dhaka. The other main alternatives for girls were prostitution and begging. Boys worked in petty trade and small informal factories, brick-breaking and rickshaw pulling. Children working full time in urban areas earned around 797 takas a month as self-employed workers and around 492 in informal factories. According to Rahman (1992), female domestics aged less than ten received food and lodging, but no salary; those aged 10–12 earned around 100 takas a month, while those aged 13–15 earned 200 takas. Prostitution paid between as much as 1,500 daily for girls working independently to nothing for those working for pimps.

On financial grounds alone, therefore, the garment factories paid relatively well at around 700–800 a month. However, it was a preferred option for children for other reasons as well, some of which we have touched on in the course of the book. There was the question of working hours. Working hours were undeniably long in the garment factories. Although the standard working day reported in interviews with children was eight hours long, overtime meant that many children sometimes worked up to 12–14 hours a day (UNICEF, 1996). However, working hours were even longer in some of the other occupations. Children in domestic service were worst off in this respect, working longer hours than in any other occupation, seven days a week, often from 6 am to midnight with little break.

In addition, there was the question of the dignity and respect associated with different kinds of jobs. Working children are vulnerable to physical, psychological and sexual abuse by the adults they work for. Once again, domestic servants reported the worst conditions with child domestics often locked up in the house by their employer when the family went out. In her interviews with seventy-one female children in domestic service, with an average age of eleven, Blanchet (1996) found that 25 per cent had been sexually harassed by employers, with seven girls reporting rape. Child domestics also had more immediate and daily reminders of their socially subordinate position than most other working children:

While admitting that there is a wide range of attitudes among employers, child domestic servants are undoubtedly one of the most abused categories

of children. This is not only the researcher's appreciation, but it is also what the children think. In the sample as a whole, half of the girls and a third of the boys considered themselves to be physically abused by their employers. They are slapped, beaten with a bamboo stick, or with an iron tool in a way that they feel is incommensurate with their 'mistakes'. They compare their treatment with the way parents punish their own children, and they feel a class apart. They remark that, for them, punishment is never followed by gestures of affection as parents commonly dispense to their own children. (Blanchet, 1996, p. 118)

In contrast to these forms of work, the garment factories were perceived by children, by parents and even by the local trade union movement as a relatively safe and regulated environment. For young girls in particular, the likelihood of sexual harassment was far lower on the factory floor where they worked alongside hundreds of other women, including members of their own family, than it was in most other forms of employment available to them (Delap, 1998). Finally, the study by the ILO/ACPR found not only that children working in the garment industry earned higher wages than their counterparts working elsewhere, but that they were better fed and had a more diverse diet as well as having more spent on their health (Paul-Majumder and Chowdhury, 1993).

It was against this background of the options available to working children that the groundswell of protest against the dismissal of children from the garment factories has to be understood. Such concerns have drawn accusations of complacency from advocates of labour standards like Charnovitz (1995): 'It is said for example that if an 11-year-old girl were not working in a rug factory, she might be out on the street, homeless, and working as a prostitute. This defence of the increasing use of child labor is not immoral; but it is complacent' (p. 176). However, it is both misleading, as well as indicative of the polarised nature of the debate, to suggest that such concern amounts to complacency towards child labour. Very few who express such concern would argue that children working in factories was an ideal outcome. However, until better alternatives have been put in place, putting children out on the streets is hardly conducive to their welfare by any stretch of the imagination.

Even the phased elimination allowed for in the MOU, with

provisions for part time school attendance and the payment of stipends, failed to soften the blow for children most in need. Of the 200,000 children estimated to have been working in the garment factories at the time of the Harkin Bill, only 10,000 children were enrolled in the non-formal education programmes set up under the MOU. Many of these children combined school attendance with some form of waged work, obviously outside the factories, but by 1998, their numbers had dropped to 5000 (Bissell, 1999). Families found they could not survive without the child's earnings. The MOU scheme also failed to capture the unknown thousands of children who had been retrenched in the immediate wake of the American boycott as well as immediately after the signing of the MOU<sup>3</sup> by employers seeking to limit their involvement in the MOU.

The negotiations over the MOU were, as we noted above, very revealing of the stakes of various national and international actors in the question of child labour, stakes which had moral, economic, political and social dimensions. However, as in the debates about the MFA quotas documented in Chapter 1, conspicuously missing from the international debates, once again, were the voices of the primary stake-holders, this time the children working in the factories. Yet if politically expedient or morally naïve universalisations are to be challenged, these voices are critical. As one UNICEF publication in Dhaka pointed out:

What seems a straightforward social or moral issue for an adult in the United States or Europe looks very different through the eyes of a working child in Asia, Africa or Latin America. A young girl working in a factory in Bangladesh, for example, has her own distinctive view. She may not want to be forbidden to stitch shirts if her only alternative is destitution or even prostitution . . . Rather than waiting for deliverance from exploitation, she is more frightened of finding herself on the street, and out of work. (Stalker, 1996, p. 4)

However, the perspectives of working children were not sought out by those who campaigned on their behalf with the American consumer. When American public opinion was being galvanised by

the CLC against the use of child labour in Bangladesh factories, the American consumer was not told of the thousands of Bangladeshi children who lobbied the government for their jobs to be protected. Nor were they provided with a copy of the petition published by child workers in a local newspaper: 'If you find child workers in any hazardous/heavy work, you can bring them back to light work and you can even stop new recruitment of young workers in the garment industry, but don't throw away on the streets those of us who are already involved in some kind of light work'. Nor were they informed that the vast majority of children sacked from the industry did not go onto the MOU schooling scheme, but joined the ranks of the thousands of others who fend for themselves in far more hazardous and exploitative forms of employment: breaking bricks, pulling rickshaws, sorting rubbish, selling their bodies or just begging. Instead, the intervention of the CLC was presented for American public consumption as the triumph of consumer conscience over employer's greed (Ross, 1997).

In the end, the Harkin Bill foundered on the resistance of the free trade lobby within the US Senate. Those who had campaigned for the end to the use of child labour in the garment industry generally lost interest in the fate of the children once their goal had been achieved. They did not seek to find out how the dismissed children had fared nor to take up the cause of those other children working in far more hazardous and exploitative forms of work than those in the garment factory. Such work was outside the sectors which threatened northern jobs and, hence, appeared not to attract the same level of moral outrage at the international level. It was literally, as Bissell and Sobhan put it, a case of out of sight, out of mind.

An interesting exception to this was AAFLI. It changed its name to the Solidarity Centre and, with USAID funding, helped to set up the Bangladesh Independent Garment Workers Union (BIGWU) in 1996. The new union is led largely by women, many of them former garment workers, including the woman who had testified against child labour in the American Senate. An early activity by the Solidarity Centre and BIGWU was to try and raise funds from individuals in Dhaka to set up its own schools for the sacked children, cast aside, as its leaflets put it, by ruthless employers. No

3. Over 40,000, according to Bhattacharya (1995).

mention is made in these leaflets of AAFLI's own role in engineering these sackings.

BIGWU has played a constructive role in the area of workers' rights. With generous funds from USAID channelled through the Solidarity Centre, it has been able to hire the services of the Bangladesh Association of Women Lawyers who provide legal education to the workers and help them to take their complaints against management to court. However, these are expensive activities, not ones that can be afforded by some of the other activist organisations in the city, and it is not clear how BIGWU will manage if AAFLI pulls out. Its membership funds are not sufficient and till now, AAFLI has been reluctant to let BIGWU seek funds anywhere else. In the meanwhile, BIGWU can correctly portray itself as independent of political parties, unlike most of the other trade unions, which are wings of the main parties in Bangladesh. However, it is widely seen as being under the tutelage of AAFLI and regarded with some suspicion by other NGOs and trade unions in the country. Nevertheless, it is worth bearing in mind that, just as women workers have been able to carve out areas of autonomy for themselves, despite the disciplining efforts of the employers, so too BIGWU may end up championing the genuine interests of women workers in Bangladesh, regardless of what AAFLI's intentions might be.

#### **'Officialising' strategies in international trade: protectionism with a human face**

I have gone into some detail into the campaign around child labour in the garment industry of Bangladesh, not only because it echoes some of the issues raised for me by the labour movement's support for MFA quotas on Bangladesh garment exports in 1985, but also because it captures even more potently what is at stake in current controversies over labour standards. As Amsden (1994) points out, there was a time when the question of labour standards was fairly straightforward. Employers and right-of-centre social scientists, especially mainstream economists, were against them, while labour unions and their left-of-centre allies were for them. The first

group argued that the premature introduction of labour standards would introduce economic distortions in the market place, inhibiting employment and income. The second maintained that they would improve the motivation and physical capacity of workers and hence their productivity.

However, as the twentieth century draws to a close, the labour standards issue has become a great deal 'murkier' (Amsden, *op. cit.*). While conservatives remain opposed to them, there has emerged a geographical division between some 'neo-institutionalists' or 'internationalist' labour advocates in the north, particularly in the United States, and much of the south, not simply southern governments but also many southern trade unions and non-governmental organisations. Interestingly, the United States government has played a leading role on *both* sides of the divide. It has acted as the world's most vigorous champion of free trade, taking sanctions against countries which operate trade barriers and using its influence within the international financial institutions to press for the opening up of the world's economies to international capital. And it has simultaneously led attempts, supported by the American labour movement, to link trade to labour standards, thereby seeking to protect American jobs from competition with low-wage labour elsewhere.<sup>4</sup>

A common strategy used by advocates for global labour standards has been to present it in 'win-win' terms. The first Director of ILO spelt this out during a debate on international economic policy during the 1930 conference:

What a strange idea ... to find a contradiction between the 'labour protectionism' of the International Labour Office and the theory of free or freer trade for which the League (of Nations) stands. You talk of labour protectionism. Yet surely the attempt at nationalist labour protectionism is

4. As far back as 1953, it sought to include the proviso that unfair labour standards would nullify or impair benefits from free trade to the international agreement on this matter. In 1960 a Working Party of GATT was set up, primarily at the behest of the United States, to look at ways of avoiding 'market disruption' believed to be caused by imports from the newly industrialising low-wage economies, a concept which was steamrollered through the Working Party even before it had been defined (Jackson, 1992). The MFA was one of the effects of this concern.

in contradiction with the attempt to secure common labour standards which we are pursuing here'. (cited in Charnowitz, 1987, p. 581)

In 1986, the American delegation to the Preparatory Committee of GATT argued that consideration of ways of dealing with workers' rights issues in the GATT was essential 'so as to ensure that expanded trade benefits workers in all countries' (Charnowitz, 1987). Northern labour advocates have also supported this win-win view, seeing no contradiction between their purported commitment to international labour solidarity and their demands for tougher labour standards for the south (Amsden, 1994). They argue that such standards would benefit labour in both north and south. Workers in the north would benefit from standards which increased the price of exports from late-industrialising countries and which reduced their attractiveness as low-cost production sites for northern investors. Workers in the south would benefit from higher wages and better working conditions which would in turn lead to increases in aggregate demand and employment. A version of this argument was made by Cavanagh (1997) during a conference organised in New York in 1996 in connection with the 'No Sweat' campaign against sweatshops launched by UNITE, the American garment workers union and the National Labor Committee. He pointed out that a war on sweatshops in the apparel trade had been declared by the American unions because of the growing recognition 'that their own interests now lie in helping workers elsewhere. As long as sweatshops exist in El Salvador or Indonesia, US firms will use their ability to source production there to bargain down US wages and working conditions to sweatshop levels' (p. 40).

The politics of representation has come to the foreground in the promotion of this win-win advocacy because consumer conscience is now seen as the most powerful weapon available to the northern labour movement. As Charnowitz suggests (1995), the American public is solidly behind the idea of restricting the import of goods which use child labour, an assertion which is backed up by surveys, such as that carried out by Washington's Marymount University which found that 78 per cent of polled consumers declared that they would be willing to pay more for clothes which

had not entailed sweated labour (cited in Ross, 1997, p. 29). One of the successes attributed to this strategy of 'banking on consumer conscience' by UNITE activists is the campaign against child labour in the Bangladesh garment industry where the Child Labor Coalition is given credit for 'upwards of 25,000 children' being moved out of the garment industry and into schools. Such accounts, inaccurate though they might be, help to persuade consumers of the humanitarian payoff to their support for trade boycotts. Yet Bissell (1999) has estimated that the actual numbers of children initially enrolled was no more than 10,000 (dropping to 5,000 within the year), while UNICEF's own maximum estimates are 8,200.<sup>5</sup>

Boycotts are, by their very nature, blunt instruments. Their success rests on their ability to portray Third World factories as 'showcases of horrors for the labor abuses sanctioned by the global free trade economy, where child labor, wage slavery, and employer cruelty are legion' (Ross, 1997, p. 10). There is little mileage in presenting nuanced, balanced and differentiated accounts of ground-level realities in low-income countries, distinguishing between situations where the problems are largely poverty and underdevelopment and those which entail the flagrant violation of basic human rights. Certainly, the CLC's threat to organise a boycott of Bangladeshi garments was taken seriously by the BGMEA because both parties knew how easily a single unfavourable exposé could sway American public opinion against Bangladeshi garments. What remains unclear is how American consumers would have reacted if they had been better informed of the wider context in which the employment of children or women occurred and the consequences of their boycott on the lives of thousands of poor families.

Yet the likelihood of such information reaching them is remote. Although organisations like the CLS claim that 'the simple truth' is their greatest weapon in the war against sweatshops (Krupat, 1997, p. 51), the 'truth' that reaches the consumers of the West is a highly partial one, tailored to stir their moral outrage. A graphic

5. The UNICEF estimate comes from a pamphlet brought out by UNICEF, in April, 1997 with assistance from the BGMEA and the ILO in Bangladesh.

example of this monochromatic approach to the truth is to be found in a contribution by Spielberg, a member of UNITE, on the question of child labour in the Bangladesh garment industry. She begins with the extraordinary claim that 'there's a saying among the girls in the slums of Bangladesh: if you are lucky, you'll be a prostitute – if you're unlucky, you'll be a garment worker' (p. 113). She then goes on to describe a young girl she encountered during a visit to Bangladesh who had been sold into a brothel when she was 11 and had ended up in a garment factory by the age of 13:

the foreman came on to her all the time. No doubt he could sniff out her background. But that wouldn't have made a difference. No, not for a pretty one like that in a garment factory. Just threaten to fire them and they're yours. A girl in the labor force means that she's unprotected: either her family has abandoned her, or the family men are too poor and desperate themselves to make trouble. (p. 112)

However, the most extraordinary aspect of Spielberg's account is the following detailed description of the condition of the *feet* of another young garment girl, a description she includes on the basis of some tenuous connection with working conditions in the garment factory:

Whatever early malnutrition had started doing to her chances of marriage, the garment trade had finished off. The mind cannot register, in the first few seconds, that these appendages are attached to a creature that walks upright on the ground. They have flattened and spread out to such a degree they seem more suited to one that propels itself in the water. Like fins. Like flounders, but curved in toward each other: bottom fish that got trapped, and grew, inside a kidney-shaped pan. The mind tries to grasp hold of something more noble, something scientific perhaps, to explain why a child, a child who is now admiring her new plastic bangles and smoothing the hem of her best dress, has been cursed with feet like that on which to toil. Compensation: now that's a scientific word. The bones of her feet were too weak to support the weight of the body, so they accommodated the floor. (p. 114)

First of all, I found absolutely no support for Spielberg's claim that prostitution was considered preferable to factory work among

researchers and activists who have been working in the urban slums of Bangladesh. Indeed, the claim was greeted with incredulity. Research conducted in the urban slums in recent years has explicitly made the point that the garment industry is considered to be among the more respectable options open to young girls and women to the extent that many are willing to pay a bribe for the possibility of such a job (Islam, 1998). Interviews carried out during a UNICEF-supported study on working children, including sex workers, also reiterated the finding that jobs in the garment factories were 'coveted' because they were considered 'prestigious and well-paid' (Chalwa, 1996). A more recent study found that most parents preferred their daughters to be in garment factories precisely because they were *less* likely to be sexually harassed than in other occupations open to girls (Delap, 1998).

As far as Spielberg's horrified fascination with the state of the young garment worker's feet, its relevance to her account may be tenuous but it does have the effect of establishing her own credentials as a caring moral being, at the same time reducing the young girl to the status of 'the other', deserving of sympathy perhaps, but also a living testimony to the dehumanising conditions that American workers are battling to combat. This interweaving of fact and fiction is characteristic of a great deal of the populist discourse around labour standards and indeed, a leading NLC activist makes a virtue of the fact that 'he (was) not a professional – not a trained organizer, economist or academic' (cited in Krupat, p. 74) and that the NLC relied instead on 'human stories . . . anecdotal examples and accessible language' to win consumer support. Young workers from Third World factories are considered by the NLC to be its best asset and are frequently flown over to testify in their campaigns: 'We wanted the most authentic, direct, virtually naïve workers we could find. We had faith that these young kids would simply tell the truth and that would be more damaging than anything an academic could say.' Yet, as the essay goes on to reveal, the NLC does not deal in simple, spontaneous and unmediated truths but rather on what is described as 'intensive educational techniques' to ensure that their 'authentic, direct, virtually naïve' workers make 'eloquent witnesses':

They stay in our apartment. We're together constantly, talking and learning from one another. In my opinion, it's filthy and rude to bring a young worker up from Central America and just say, 'Here's a speech. Go ahead'. She'd say, 'We're oppressed'. What does that mean? No one ever asked her to define it. Why? How? Name it. We do that. We really press them to be specific. 'They yell at us'. 'What do they say'. 'How?' They call us chicken heads, we're born of whores'. 'They hit us'. 'Well how do they hit you?' 'They hit us on the head'. 'How?' 'With their knuckles'. We make them write it down and practice their delivery till it's polished. They're so elevated by the fact that someone has given them their own voice and the chance to speak for all their co-workers, they dig inside themselves and they're unstoppable. (cited in Krupat, 1997, p. 75)

One could view these 'intensive educational techniques' as yielding 'the truth', as the National Labor Committee clearly believes they do, or as a way of ensuring that the workers in question produce the 'correct' story in their testimonies. Moreover, 'the facts' produced by the NLC have been disputed by journalists writing in the *Los Angeles Times* ('Stitching together a crusade') and the *New York Times* ('Hondurans in "Sweatshops" see opportunity') who suggest that many of the workers in the very factories that the NLC targeted evaluated their jobs rather differently to the one-dimensional picture the NLC sought to project (see footnote 18 in Krupat, 1997). This, of course, has also been the gist of many of the testimonies of the women workers interviewed for this book.

### **Deconstructing 'win-win': counter-claims in the labour standards debate**

While recognising the genuine nature of the concern expressed by many about the exploitative conditions facing Third World workers, we can also see powerful evidence of an 'officialising' strategy at work in the positive sum gains claimed for labour standards by northern governments and trade unions. The chequered history of attempts to link trade and labour standards suggests that these 'win-win' arguments have not been entirely successful. There are a number of reasons why this might be the case.

First of all, the actual benefits of linking trade and labour

standards have by no means been empirically established and are likely to differ for different countries. As Amsden (1994) points out, in larger wage-led economies like India, a link between wages and productivity, one of the examples of the labour standards package frequently promoted, is unlikely to be particularly effective. Such countries have large domestic markets and their export sector is not particularly significant. On the other hand, the overwhelming number of developing countries are small (measured by population or GDP) and increasingly rely on international trade to gain access to wider markets and reap some of the benefits of scale economies. While linking wage increases to productivity gains in their export sectors may increase domestic demand, it would be unlikely to offset the fall in demand from the price-sensitive, rest-of-the-world. Instead, rising costs in the export sectors would hurt their profitability and most certainly reduce their long-term growth. Singapore, for instance, experimented briefly with a high wage policy in the 1980s in an attempt to shift output towards more capital and technology intensive industries, but had to abandon it in the face of decreasing international competitiveness.

A second point, one that is not often highlighted in debates about labour standards, is that trade restrictions have costs for consumers, particularly poorer consumers, in the countries imposing restrictions. It forces them to switch from cheaper imported products to the more expensive domestic versions. The National Consumer Council in Britain pointed out that by restricting the availability of low-cost clothing, the poorest sections of the British population, particularly those who are single parents, were hit hardest by the MFA. It acted as a regressive tax on these sections since they spent a greater proportion of their income on clothing than the better-off: the average British consumer was spending around 7 per cent of their disposable income on clothing and footwear while low-income, single parents spent 12 per cent (National Consumer Council, 1990). According to Silberston (1989), the abolition of the MFA would have led to a 5 per cent reduction in shop prices, while the total cost of the MFA to British consumers was reckoned to be around a billion pounds a year at 1988 prices. In other words, the average British consumer was spending £44 a year extra on its clothes bill in order to keep Third

World imports out. Trade restrictions in textiles and clothing were estimated to cost rich countries around \$22 billion a year (Trella and Whalley, 1990).

Furthermore, restrictions on competition with cheaper foreign goods removed incentives to improve efficiency within domestic industries and to move into higher quality and more skill intensive forms of production where richer countries would have a more obvious competitive advantage. Indeed, the only way that the UK and the US have been able to continue to compete on labour costs has been through the super-exploitation of their ethnic minorities. The lowering of labour costs through social exclusion has constituted the basis of their comparative advantage. In 1996, the *Observer* (23 June) carried a photograph of a dress with the accompanying headline: '£45 buys this pretty summer dress from Next. The woman who made it earned £1 an hour. In Hong Kong or Bangladesh? No, in the East End of London.' The article pointed out that while Oxfam's recently launched clothes code campaign sought to raise public awareness about the exploitative working conditions in overseas garment factories that supplied the high street outlets in the UK, in Britain itself, machinists were being paid as little as £1 an hour to work in conditions that did not meet basic health and safety regulations: old machinery, overcrowding, blocked fire escapes, lack of ventilation, men and women often sharing a single toilet, few written contracts; compulsory overtime and dismissal if absenteeism exceeds three days, even for illness.

It is popular among those commenting on such conditions in the London rag trade to liken it to Third World conditions and indeed an ex-clothing factory owner is cited in the *Observer* article saying, 'This government has created a Third World economy in manufacturing in the UK in order to keep our prices competitive with the Far East.' These commentators have yet to come to terms with the fact that what they refer to as 'sweatshops' in the Third World are often models of modernity compared to those found in the underground economies of New York, Los Angeles or London: orderly, well-ventilated, spacious and equipped with up-to-date machinery and paying wages which, while deemed extortionate by Western standards are not necessarily so from the perspective of those who earn them. Moreover, as we noted in Chapter 6, these so-called

'Third World' conditions have always been a part of the clothing trade in the East End, able to flourish because of the industry's capacity to capitalise on the vulnerability of those who are excluded from the wider labour markets. Only the profile of the work force changes over time. The brief reference in the *Observer* article to the identities of those who were working in these East End sweatshops in 1996 will not come as a surprise: Turkish and Kurdish refugees, Greek Cypriot and Asian immigrants, overwhelmingly female.

However, possibly the main reason why there has been little progress on attempts to institutionalise labour standards in international trade rules, is the suspicion on the part of many in the south, and some in the north, as to the real reasons for such advocacy.<sup>6</sup> The south has seen too many examples of how powerful countries seek to impose rules, define them selectively and then to bend or break them when it suits their interests. Indeed, the history of the textile and garment industry is quintessentially a history of such behaviour. Britain was able to nurture its own textile and garment industry at the start of the industrial revolution through an elaborate system of protectionism: as we saw, the textile industry of Bangladesh was at the receiving end of Britain's transition from a strategy of colonial plunder to colonial protectionism. In time, the US put in place its own protectionist system to promote import substitution and developed an effective system of tariffs and embargoes over the nineteenth century (Ross, 1997). It was subsequently able to use its political power to impose voluntary restraints on Japan's textile export trade in the 1940s.

6. Ethical concerns have always been somewhat selectively applied by governments as far as their trade relations are concerned. Legislation passed in the US in 1890 to ban imports of foreign goods made by convict labour, and extended in 1930 to also cover 'forced' and 'indentured' labour, nevertheless made exceptions for those items where domestic production fell short of consumer demand. Consequently the US government was able to rule against the request of the United Mine Workers of America to ban the import of low-sulphur coal from South Africa where it was produced by indentured labour under penal sanctions because it was calculated that domestic sources were insufficient to meet American needs. The British Parliament also promoted this selective version of ethics when, in 1897, it prohibited the import of goods produced in foreign prisons, gaols, houses of correction and penitentiaries – unless that type of good was not manufactured in the UK. South Africa passed similar 'ethical' legislation in 1913, legislation which remained on its books right through the apartheid era.