THE EXPLOITATION OF WOMEN WORKERS
UNVEILING CAPITALISM IN BANGLADESHI GARMENT INDUSTRIES

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ABSTRACT

The recent series of man-made accidents in Bangladeshi garment industries are highly disturbing to our collective conscience. These accidents point not only to the poor construction of the factory buildings but also to the invisible tie between the insatiable need for cheap clothing on the part of western consumers and the unlimited greed of the local industry owners. As a result, these industry workers are housed in an unhealthy and insecure environment and paid inadequate salaries. Because most of the workers are economically desperate women and the industries are operated by a male dominated capitalist system that denies the rights of women, a systemic exploitation results. Therefore, Bangladeshi female workers, who begin their job in a garment factory without even an appointment letter, tolerate all sorts of violence and oppression in their work place years after years, and in the end, as flimsy buildings collapse, either die or lose limbs and become permanently injured. A powerful systematic collaboration of the industry owners (the local capitalists) – aided by the western large brand companies (the international capitalists) – aims to produce goods at the lowest cost possible, thus cutting corners to maximize profits. Yet, such expansion of capitalism, accompanied by modernism, justifies their actions since garment industries have opened the door for many poor women to improve their economic conditions. Drawing upon the recent tragic events of the deadliest garment industry disasters in Bangladesh, this paper examines how the industry owners perceive, and practice, ‘human rights’? It also investigates whether neo-colonial modernity is merely exploiting women while pretending to improve their economic conditions, and finally, to what extent female workers can overturn the vicious circle of exploitation and thus establish their rights in Bangladeshi garment industries.

Keywords: Garment industries, Women workers, Capitalism, Modernity
1. Introduction

The Bangladeshi garments industries have been producing world-class clothing that is widely popular because of its quality and its cheapness. To produce such standard-quality clothing at such a low price is only possible, however, through the exploitation of its workers, most of whom are women who toil in substandard conditions and live in an inhuman situation, yet consider themselves lucky because they can occasionally put meat on their family's table. The unfair treatment of the core producers of world-class clothing has gone unnoticed until a series of industrial disasters has brought it into public notice at the beginning of the twenty-first century. A conspiracy between the factory owners (local capitalists) and the western large brand companies (international capitalists) to produce cheap goods by cutting corners and ignoring the human rights of workers has allowed them to toil long hour in unsafe buildings. This paper, based on the recent industrial collapse in 2013, seeks to examine how the human rights of the industry workers are exploited. The 2013 industrial collapse is considered to be the deadliest garment-factory accident in the history that has been rooted in an opportunistic structure of capitalism – devoid of humanity – which, standing on the dead bodies of the industry-workers, waves the flag of capitalism in the name of improving the economic condition of the poor women and contributing to the national economic growth.

In relation to the existing situation of the garments industries’ workers in Bangladesh, the exercise of an unequal and unfair distribution of power and wealth raises one of the central questions that does not involve ‘whether’, but ‘in what ways’ a vicious circle is engaged in gaining strength, making capital, and developing shrewd strategies to exploit a group of human beings that are relatively weaker. In Bangladesh, most of the garments industry workers are economically desperate women and the industries are operated by a male-dominated patriarchal capitalist system that denies the rights of women, resulting in systemic exploitation. Muhammad (2011) describes the precarious situation of garments industry workers by stating that “local capitalists, the big retailers and western governments are reaping the benefits of the super-exploitation and repression of the (mostly women) workers” (p. 23).

In this context, it is important to understand how the universalization of capitalism, as part of a neo-liberal agenda accompanied by modernity, has been dehumanizing workers in Bangladeshi garments industries. Capitalism treats industry-workers in Bangladesh as the way a colonial regime treats the people of a colonized country. It is widely known that European colonialism imposed modernity because of the perceived superiority of its life style. Similarly, capitalism imposes its values as it promises wealth and ease. The conflation of modernity and capitalist colonialism gives an impression that both of these concepts, by dint of their power, demonstrate their authority, even in an independent country in a post-colonial era. Based on this analysis, this paper argues that the notion that modernity signifies the establishment of rights and freedoms (Martinelli, 2005) does not apply to the workers of Bangladeshi garment industries because it is constructed by the ideologies of capitalism. Therefore, referring to Guha, Chibber (2013) asserts that “this modernizing project was in turn driven by a deeper structural force, namely, the universalizing drive of capital” (p. 38).

2. Three lines of questioning

While defining rights, Nyamu-Musembi (2005) points out that “rights are shaped through actual struggles informed by people’s own understandings of what they are justly entitled to” (p. 31). In a capitalist system, because of the commodification of self, it is difficult for a worker to develop an understanding of his/her entitlements and struggle to achieve it. Unfortunately, in the debate of industry workers’ rights, very few of the literature take this perspective into account. Thus, the issue of humanity is rarely directly addressed.

Drawing upon the tragic stories of the deadliest garment industry disasters in Bangladesh, this paper explores three lines of questioning. The first, how do we perceive the term ‘human rights’ after a series of man-made accidents in Bangladeshi garment factories? Secondly, how do modernity and capitalism – in the name of industrial development – victimize the workers in the world’s
second-largest apparel exporter of western brands? Thirdly, in the context of capitalism’s focus on maximizing profit and taking out dividends to shareholders, is it possible for female workers to overturn the vicious circle of exploitation, and if so, how? In order to address these questions, the first section discusses the notion of human rights in relation to the rights of workers, the second examines the concepts of modernity and capitalism and how they affect Bangladeshi workers’ human rights, and finally, the third analyzes the factors that the female workers need to challenge to overthrow their systematic exploitation.

3. Notion of human rights

The term ‘human rights’ encapsulates the fundamental rights of a human being that includes entitlements, dignity, equality, self-consciousness etc. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) begins on a very respectful tone: “Whereas recognition of the inherent dignity and of the equal and inalienable rights of all members of the human family is the foundation of freedom, justice and peace in the world”. These respectful words, such as ‘recognition’, ‘dignity’, ‘equality’, ‘freedom’, ‘justice’ and ‘peace’, unfortunately, do not equally apply to all human beings, especially to those who belong to the working class.

As already mentioned, Bangladesh is widely famous for its cheap labor in the garment sector that actually dehumanizes the garment workers through violating human rights. Literature shows that Bangladeshi garment workers’ cheap wage rate is an important pull factor that draws the global capitalists’ attention. Muhammad (2011) presents a comparative scenario of wage rate that tells us how cheap a Bangladeshi worker’s labor value is. Referring to the Brussels-based International Textile, Garment and Leather Worker Federation in February 2005; Muhammad (2011) writes that “a garment worker in Bangladesh received only 6 cents as wage per hour, compared to 20 cents in India and Pakistan, 30 cents in China, 40 cents in Sri Lanka and 78 cents in Thailand” (Economic & Political Weekly, August 20, 2011, p. 24). After a series of labor dispute resulted by the reluctance of the factory owners on the issue of the minimum wage increase of workers, the government of Bangladesh was able to convince the factory owners to accept the new rate of minimum wage that is $68 per month (The Guardian, November 14, 2013), which is still one of the lowest minimum wages. One does not need to be an economist or a social scientist to understand the fact that people who receive the lowest wage rate have little or no access to his/her entitlements. In fact, the large number of easily available workers has made it easier for capitalist owners to exploit their workforce since they can offer them poor wage and replace them easily, thereby making them as easy prey.

Muhammad (2011) explains that, the factory owners (local capitalists), in association with governments, are always successful in keeping the wage of the laborers very low. Therefore, it was not clear whether – by increasing the minimum wage in 2013 – the government was actually eager to secure their own position in the forthcoming national election in January 2014. From the past, this has been observed that, not only the governments of different regimes, but the international buyers and retailers (international capitalists) are also part of the process of maintaining a ‘high profit low wage’ policy. As a result, workers laboring 12 hours or more per day hardly have the luxury to consider their own wellbeing and entitlements, let alone know where to find the implications of the weighty words of the UDHR. After the industrial collapse, it has become evident that neither the owners nor the buyers were willing to admit their responsibilities. In addition, there is no adequate evidence of the government’s pressure to make these two groups responsible for the disasters. Moreover, rather than making sure that the deceased’s family were compensated for their loss the government has made it more difficult through bureaucratic tactics, such as asking for a DNA report of the dead worker before granting them a small amount. Such deprivation of rights of the garment industry workers clearly reflects Arendt’s (1951) idea that, “the calamity of the rightless is not that they are deprived of life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness, or of equality before the law and freedom of opinion...but that they no longer belong to any community whatsoever” (p. 295).
From this discussion, one may notice two important points concerning labor standards in the Bangladeshi garment industries: firstly, workers are not even allowed to think of their rights and wellbeing, and secondly, owners and buyers are the only ones who determine the fate of the workers. Thus the industry workers become a socially excluded group as Kabeer (2000) explains: “the garment industry has historically made its profits through exploiting the labor of excluded sections of society, whether in the First world or in the Third” (p. 403). In a developing country like Bangladesh, the extent of sufferings of the industry workers is much higher than most places in the world because of the loopholes and inconsistencies in human right policies. In this country, the governments are powerful enough to ignore the human rights of its industry workers who contribute to the national economy, and the international buyers play a dominant role in assisting the national governments to do so. As a result, a worker’s labor standard, living, education, health and overall wellbeing do not draw attention of these powerful and super powerful groups.

In fact, as Kabeer (2000) says, “in a world that is characterized by highly uneven development, building an inter-national system that is committed to universal human rights is extremely difficult to reconcile with one that also respects the rights of others to decide things for themselves” (p. 399). The notion of workers’ human rights, therefore, is constructed by the notions that are highly influenced by a class-based system, stemmed from a conflation of modernization and capitalism, which is discussed in the next section.

4. Some thoughts on modernism and capitalism
The positive experience of modernity lies in the spirit of Enlightenment – evolved through the Renaissance and the Reformation – that led to ever-expanding discoveries, innovations and experimentations in every field of social life (Pathak, 2006). Thus, eventually, economic, political, and social transformations took place and these transformations, as Martinelli (2005) argues, “both influence and are influenced by transformations in the cultural sphere” (p. 15).

The vital aspects of modernism are the increase in social mobility, the development of science and technology, industrialization, the liberation of women, the establishment of individualism etc. (Martinelli, 2005). For instance, according to Pathak (2006), “we see modernity in Rammohun Roy when he fought against orthodox pandits, and pleaded for a ban of the practice of sati” (p. 14). Although Pathak (2006) emphasizes that modernity offers us the choice and the freedom to select from varied possibilities, and thus the modern age “becomes more rational, efficient and productive” (p. 18), he also shows that ‘modernity’ is not always innocent, in terms of its efficiency and productivity, as it often presents stories of “pain, anguish and sufferings” (Pathak, 2006, p. 36). The consequences of the sufferings of working class cannot be quickly compared to the outcomes of positive experiences that are occurred by modernism.

The outcomes of the positive experiences of modernism glorify the ‘enlightenment’, while the consequences of negative experiences work like a slow poison in the entire system. The emergence of garment industries in Bangladesh in the 80s and 90s was treated as a revolution to expand the scope of employment, particularly for women, which did not let anyone imagine the adverse consequences that would occur after a mere three decades. Modernism, in fact, teaches one to be rational which “amounts to the calculation of rules” (Sayer, 1991, p. 114). More specifically, the rationality is concerned with a laborer’s working hour, the number of items s/he produces and the amount of wage s/he is paid. Ironically, rationality overlooks the worker’s human rights because, in this system, bourgeoisies are more powerful than the working class. According to Giddens, a dramatic increase of the state’s surveillance capabilities and capitalist enterprise are the possible results of modernity (Pathak, 2006), which may cause the growth of a totalitarian power. Such a totalitarian power creates an illusion that makes one forget the consequences that modernism might bring into our life and focus simply on the product even though it is produced by the sweatshop workers who are exploited by the capitalist enterprise.
It is said that women are liberated in modern times. True, today the poor village farmer’s young daughter in Bangladesh does not go to serve as a domestic worker in a city, as she has the option to work in a garment industry that may bring her more freedom. At this point, it is important to note that, because of the limitation of the scope, this paper does not intend to debate whether the traditional practices of domestic work or modern forms of garment industry work ensure more freedom. However, unfortunately, modernism does not disclose the secret that she has to pay an extremely high price to purchase her ‘freedom’, if there is any, and that high price begins with a job in the garment industry without an appointment letter and might end with either being permanently injured or exhaling the last breath under the collapsed factory. These are common stories of the working class (proletariat) in the garment industries in Bangladesh that raise concerns with the outcome of modernity in relation to the wellbeing of the poor people.

I now turn to the second factor – capitalism – which is linked with the development of modernity. History shows that capitalism emerged as a result of the industrial revolution that made large scale production possible through the installation of gigantic plants and the division of labor. The entire system of capitalism runs in a cyclical order: wider use of capital, more production, more profits. The workers receive either a wage or a salary (which is too low), and owners gain the greater share as profits. This system, although apparently indicates that workers are free to decide issues relating to their wellbeing, actually turns the workers as the subjects of material coercion because their freedom is regulated by the dominance of bourgeoisie who are stronger than the workers in terms of power, authority and capital (Sayer, 1991).

According to Marx, capitalism is the main driving force of the modern world. Referring to Marx, Sayer (1991) writes that capitalism is “the general light tingeing all other colors and modifying them in its specific quality, a special ether determining the specific gravity of everything found in it, the economic power that dominates everything in modern society” (p. 12). In fact, in the present world, the economic power cannot be separated from the concept of modernism. Hence, Sayer (1991) argues that “capitalism is modernity, and modernity capitalism” (p. 12), which is described by Martinelli (2005) as follows: “capitalism is a mode of production based on technical instrumentality and on the maximization of economic rationality for successful competition in the market” (p. 15). This denotes that economic rationality is maximized through the usurpation of material means of production. Sayer (1991), referring to Weber, also asserts that the modern western capitalist mechanism comprises of “the appropriation of all physical means of production- land, apparatus, machinery, tools, etc.” (p. 94).

In the case of Bangladeshi garment industries, one of the main reasons of such appropriation, I imagine, is the weaker governments and their failure to bring harmony out of dissonance since the independence. The recent catastrophes implicate the existence of an invisible colonial power in an “independent” country. This invisible power comes from neo-liberal policy that constructs the government’s actions with its own ideological-political dimension intending “to dismantle old industries, expand the domain of private capital and smash workers’ strongholds” (Muhammad, 2011). In fact, capitalism – the missing link between colonialism and imperialism – never comes anywhere with good intentions. In the name of neo-liberal policy, capitalism victimizes a developing country like Bangladesh by privatizing state-owned enterprises or downsizing industrial units – sometimes through the Structural Adjustment Program, sometimes the ‘development strategies’ of the World Bank and/or the International Monetary Fund. Such apparently ‘development initiatives’ – originated in the West – impose their own values and norms that underestimate local practices, create tensions between modernism and traditions, and ultimately weaken the strength of the governments of developing countries.
4.1 Unveiling capitalism in Bangladeshi garment industries

Centeno & Cohen (2010) claim that “the global capitalist system is governed by a set of rules based on those established in large parts of Western Europe and North America to manage and regulate their domestic markets in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries” (p. 17). The foundation of global capitalism, i.e., the set of rules, is built on property that creates two groups: ‘haves’ and ‘have-nots’. Since “bourgeois power and proletarian powerlessness are founded in relations to property” (Sayer, 1991, p. 69), bourgeois agency implants capitalist ideals in the political culture of a country (Chibber, 2013).

In Bangladesh, investors decide how much of their income to save and how to invest their savings to make more money so that their businesses can continue to grow. Capitalists are only concerned with the ‘income-savings-investment’ trio, while the issues relating to the rights and wellbeing of the worker remain unaddressed. Power lies with the bourgeoisie who controls the working class in order to control the system. As part of the local bourgeoisie, the garment factory owners in Bangladesh demonstrate their power and authority through grabbing wetlands, lakes, even without environmental clearance, in order to build factories as well as the headquarter of Bangladesh Garment Manufacturers and Exporters Association (BGMEA) (Muhammad, 2011). While “one prime minister, Sheikh Hasina laid the foundation stone of the BGMEA building on 28 November 1998; another prime minister, Khaleda Zia inaugurated this complex on 8 October 2006” (Muhammad, 2011, p. 26). This is how the governments become a vital part of the capitalist system. Thus, naturally, the human rights of industry workers are laid either under the boot of capitalists or amidst the debris of the collapsed garment factories.

It has been observed that the capitalist development is not an abrupt phenomenon in a world governed by capitalism, and therefore we see instances of “the risk and vulnerability that preceded Spectrum, Smart, Tazreen and Rana” (Muhammad, 2013). Such vulnerability and risks are in fact a historical process. The etymology of the term ‘sweatshop’ reminds us of the poor, dangerous, and inhuman working environment in the industries which had existed in the past, albeit originated in Europe during the mid-nineteenth century, after the industrial revolution. The devastating factory fire that took place a hundred year ago in the USA carries the legacy of risk and vulnerabilities of European industrial sector. This event has drawn the attention of the south Florida based online magazine saltyeggs that shows that “one of the most well-known factory fires in the United States was the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory fire in New York in 1911” (McMillan, 2013). The difference between the disaster of Triangle Shirtwaist (in the USA) in 1911 and Tazreen (in Bangladesh) in 2012 was: in the former, doors were kept locked in a similar way [as in the case of Tazreen Fashions factory] because they wanted to prevent union organizers from getting into the building while in the latter the abusive production manager did not allow workers to get out in the beginning when the fire was caught. However, the similarity between these two incidents is the death of more than a hundred workers in both cases.

Yet, it is hardly realized that the emergence of garment industries in Bangladesh happened not to economically empower the poverty stricken rural women but to fulfill the desire of the expansion of capitalism. Kabeer’s (2011) study clearly shows that the garment industries in Bangladesh “emerged in response to opportunities thrown up by economic liberalization and established its ability to compete globally through the employment of a flexible, non-unionized and largely female labor force” (p. 332). Some may view it a wave of modernization, however, the consequence of such modernization has not been much beneficial for the working class.

As a result of the expansion of global capitalism and inequality, Centeno & Cohen (2010) note that, “many of the gaps between countries in basic welfare measures have actually shrunk since 1960s” (p. 156). However, during that time, Bangladesh was unaffected by these crises. Although, before 1971, Bangladesh had been going through a critical period of protests against discriminations and struggle for independence, it was able to ensure workers’ welfare as best as it
could. In an interview published in the Saltyeggs, Muhammad (2013) explains that the differences in pre and post capitalist regimes in regards to the garment workers’ situation:

In older industries, workers had their houses, quarters. And now with modernization and more development, we have factories which don’t have any space, no shelters... Owners don’t have any responsibility to provide housing, or medical facilities or anything... In the seventies, workers of big factories had medical facilities and they had job security, they had appointment letters too. Now after so many big disasters and they had job security, they don’t have any job security, they don’t have appointment letters... And they end up with all this fire and death (Saltyeggs, January 10, 2013).

At this point, it is necessary to take a brief look at the historical background preceding the economic liberalization era. A newly independent country, Bangladesh, inherited a significant number of strongly unionized large industrial enterprises in 1971 – including jute, textile, steel, sugar etc. – which were nationalized in 1972 (Muhammad, 2011). Unfortunately, as Muhammad (2011) writes: after the liberation, all governments took over these trade unions, “they even resorted to violence and killings to gain control and install corrupt persons in the trade union leadership” (p. 23). To some extent, this situation is similar to Ngugi’s *Petals of Blood*, a portrayal of a post-colonial nation, where an anxious political and economic frustration emerged because of the post-independence corrupt practices of politicians in Kenya. This novel demonstrates that people forget the high ideals of revolt very quickly. During the early 80s, the World Bank’s privatization project created a favorable environment for the government of Bangladesh to turn the trade unions into the tools of the ruling party making them alienated from the general workers in the context of corrupt practices of the union leaders and mistrust among workers against the leaders in the industrial sector (Muhammad, 2011). Gradually, the privatization of resources facilitated the growth of capitalism in the industrial sector of Bangladesh that abolished the traditional practices that safeguarded the welfare of workers.

Today, after so many ‘accidents’ in the garment factories in Bangladesh, the major buyers of readymade clothes dare to decline their responsibilities, except for a few who have come with token compensations. The news titled “U.S. Retailers Decline to Aid Factory Victims in Bangladesh” (November 22, 2013), published in *The New York Times* reminds us of the silent but brutal form of exploitations that capitalism produces in Bangladesh.

### 4.2 Victims of global chain of profit and the BGMEA

Apart from the literature and recent news reports on industrial disasters in Bangladesh, I was curious to know how the BGMEA (Bangladesh Garments Manufacturers and Exporters Association) – an umbrella of the native garment owners – views human rights issue regarding the workers in Bangladesh. The huge list of regular activities of the BGMEA indicates that it is “committed to protect the interests of its members and their employees by implementing legitimate rights and privileges for garments workers” (BGMEA website). In the context of industrial collapses, this is a powerful claim that needs to be critically investigated to understand: a) how the database of the death workers is maintained in regards to their gender and age, b) how the number of injured workers are recorded, c) in what ways the BGMEA has played, and has been playing, a role in compensating the deceased’s family and the injured, d) what kind of mechanisms are available within the BGMEA to ensure workers’ participation in decision-making on issues concerning their wage, skill development, security, etc., and e) to what extent the BGMEA advocates the workers’ human rights issue to the governments.

According to the BGMEA website, in order to address industrial disasters, significant steps that they undertake are: conducting TOT (Training of Trainers) on fire safety program, expressing shock and concern about the industrial collapses, marching through the street with such slogans as “Save garment sector, Save the country” and submitting memoranda to the prime minister of the country demanding security for their industry. In addition, to find the causes of industrial collapses,
they launched “a deep and detailed investigation to find the perpetrators and demand punishment” (BGMEA website). Also, the Alliance for Bangladesh Worker Safety (founded by a group of North American apparel companies and retailers and brands) recently opened its office in Dhaka to supervise efforts in improving safety standards in the garment industry – not the safety of the life of a factory worker – and the opening ceremony was graced by the presence of development partners, garment factory leaders and government officials (BGMEA website).

Unfortunately, none of these activities clearly reflects the BGMEA’s commitment to protect the interests of factory workers by implementing legitimate rights and privileges for them. A research on the BGMEA website may easily frustrate one, as there is no database that records at least the actual number of workers who died in the industrial collapse – let alone the gender and age data. Furthermore, their website does not include data on the exact number of workers who are no longer employed because of their injury that is caused by the negligence of the local and international capitalists and the workers’ status of receiving proper treatment after the industrial collapses.

4.3 78% of the foreign exchange earners, empty purses and inconsistencies in death tolls
There are 5700 garment factories (2011-2012) in Bangladesh and the readymade garment sector alone earned about 78% of the foreign exchange earning of the country, with the labor force of 4.0 million workers, of whom 3.20 million are women (BGMEA website, 2013). Although the workers significantly contribute to the increase of national revenue, the existing capitalist system silently turns into a savagery where the human rights of such a huge work force have been non-existent and thus violated with impunity. Because of being part of the capitalist power structure, no factory owner faces any legal consequences at the hands of the governments in Bangladesh, and thus, untimely deaths of workers keep occurring due to the greed of the management (Muhammad, 2011). Ironically, there is always discrepancy in the official death toll from the factory fire, and thus the exact number of dead workers remains unknown. For example, after the Rana Plaza disaster in Bangladesh on April 24, 2013, the army had declared the end of rescue operations in May 2013 after making “heroic efforts” to recover 1,115 bodies from the collapse (UNB connect, December 28, 2013). However, street children, while collecting garbage and used rods from the debris of the Rana Plaza, found human bones and broken skulls, even after seven months of the disaster (The Daily Prothom Alo, December 29, 2013). It is unacceptable that the country’s 78% foreign exchange earning industry has no mechanism to record the exact number of the workers who died due to industrial collapses.

The 2006 factory disaster in Chittagong also carries a crucial evidence of the conspiracy of the capitalist industry owners. After three days of a factory fire in Chittagong on 23 February 2006, Anu Muhammad, an anti-capitalist and a Professor of Economics in Bangladesh, personally visited the factory and managed to take a quick look in different areas up to the third floor, where he found hundreds of ladies handbags here and there. No one had been allowed to enter after the fire broke out since the factory was strictly guarded by police and Rapid Action Battalion (RAB), a special force of the government to prevent crimes, yet those purses were found empty. Muhammad (2011) writes that the workers did not have much worth looting. The only thing important to them was their ID card, which was the only proof of their identity and therefore their document needed to claim compensation if identified and counted as dead and injured. These empty purses bear witness of the fact that the owners had every reason to take those cards away both to avoid paying compensation and to safeguard their own interests by hiding the number of victims held against them (Muhammad, 2011). Hence, it is not unlikely that the post-2013 advocacy campaigns of the BGMEA are more concerned to their own safety since most of the garment owners are either the Members of Parliament or the ministers or the police officers or the media owners (Muhammad, 2013), all of whom belong to a capitalist group and hold enough power to throw a vulnerable worker out of the framework of human rights and justice.
5. Can female workers overturn the vicious circle of exploitation?
A female worker in a Bangladeshi garment industry – poverty stricken and malnourished – dreams simply to feed a four to five members family, manage the rent of her tiny house, send a small amount of money to the poor parents in the village, ensure little arrangement for her children’s education, and thus lead a simple life with peace. Yet, it is extremely difficult for her to go through a cruel system that is created by the local capitalists in collaboration with the international capitalists to maximize the profit. As a result, her little dreams do not come true, rather she is constantly chased by insurmountable stress and fear of losing her job.

In spite of living in a frustrating atmosphere, women workers’ recent revolts have shown a sign that “these workers have the potential to break this vicious chain of exploitation, and create a network of resistance, locally as well as globally” (Muhammad, 2011). Muhammad (2011) observes that twenty years ago, workers of the garment industries in Indonesia and Malaysia were exploited because of capitalist promotion of industries in those countries. Once the workers became organized and began demanding wage increases and profit sharing; the international profiteers looked around for other countries where human being can be considered as commodity. In Bangladesh, politics without ethics accompanied by internal corruption had invited the international capitalists to ‘develop the garment industries’. Today, the exploited workers have realized that the pious words and false commitments of the industry owners are actually the tools of continuing the exploitation of workers, and economic empowerment cannot exist if human rights are ignored. The female workers, after their toils and suffering for a long period, have come to the street as they want a change. Their protests demonstrate their realization that the capitalist model of industry promotion needs to be challenged in order to ensure human rights of the workers, and this needs to be overthrown from within a country like Bangladesh. However, this is not just a responsibility of an individual female worker; rather every human being must come forward.

A list of factors that Muhammad (2011) presents in relation to the causes of the deprivation of human rights of the industry workers affects a female worker’s life much more adversely than a male worker – in terms of physical and psychological aspects. Some of these factors include: “non-payment of wage arrears and compensation for overtime work, absence of job security, lack of workplace security, lack of holidays including weekly ones, verbal and physical abuse, including sexual harassment and rape by management or by hired goons” (p. 26). The post-2013 protests indicate that the female workers are looking for ways to revolt against repression.

6. Conclusion
Although population explosion, malnutrition, poverty, natural disaster etc. are considered the major problems for Bangladesh, we rarely investigate how exploitation is caused by capitalism that has been silently destroying the industrial sector in the name of promoting industrialization, putting the country into debts in the name of freeing it from debts, institutionalizing corruption in the name of eliminating corruption, and thus giving birth to many other problems. This paper has addressed how exploitation and human rights abuse have been taking place as a result of the joint conspiracy of the local and international capitalists. Drawing upon the recent tragic events of the deadliest garment industry disasters in Bangladesh, this paper has examined how the industry owners view the concept of ‘human rights’. It has also investigated whether neo-colonial modernity is the cause of exploitation of women workers or has improved their economic conditions. Finally, it has illustrated how female workers have come to the street to claim their rights as they have the capabilities to overturn the vicious circle of exploitation in order to establish their rights in the industries which have been built by their labor. It is the moral responsibility of any conscious human being to stand beside them to end the exploitation of women workers.
References