

GLOBALIZATION, LABOR STANDARDS, AND WOMEN'S RIGHTS: DILEMMAS OF COLLECTIVE (IN)ACTION IN AN INTERDEPENDENT WORLD

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ABSTRACT

This paper challenges the idea that a "social clause" to enforce global labor standards through international trade agreements serves the interests of women export workers in poor countries. Drawing on fieldwork in Bangladesh and empirical studies, the author argues that exploitative as these jobs appear to Western reformers, for many women workers in the South they represent genuine opportunities. Clearly, these women would wish to better their working conditions; yet having no social safety net, and knowing that jobs in the informal economy, their only alternative, offer far worse prospects, women cannot fight for better conditions. Moreover, global efforts to enforce labor standards through trade sanctions may lead to declining employment or to the transfer of jobs to the informal economy. Lacking measures that also address the conditions of workers in this informal economy, demands for "the social clause" will reinforce, and may exacerbate, social inequalities in the labor market.

KEYWORDS

Globalization, women workers, export garments, Bangladesh, labor standards

JEL Codes: J7, J8, I30

INTRODUCTION

For the most part, it is the wretched of the earth who do the world's tailoring. Made in Bangladesh competes with Made in Honduras, Made in the Philippines, Made in Macao, Made in Any Steamy Reservoir of Third World Unemployment: those places where plentiful labor lacks the leverage to command high pay, and the most pitiful thing about the jobs is how hard it is to get them. (Barry Bearak 2001)

My name is Fatema Akhter. I am a garment worker. ... As garment workers, we live and work under difficult conditions but at least we are managing to earn a living. Now we have heard rumors that in the next two to four years, the garment industry may close down. What

will happen to us? You are perhaps all aware of the situation of women in Bangladesh – women have very few opportunities for employment. We are, however, slowly making some progress. Because of jobs in the garment industry, many Fatemas like me are able to work honorably. 'Garments' is the only option for us. We beg you not to take away these jobs and our right to work with dignity. (People's Health Movement 2002: 41–2)

Both these quotations describe the same phenomenon but from very different standpoints. The first, from a US journalist, comments on the apparent contradiction between what he perceives to be the inhuman working conditions prevailing in garment factories in poorer parts of the world and the fact that so many of the "wretched of the earth" in these parts compete fiercely to work in them. Bearak's view represents an influential strand of discourse in the Western media and helps explain growing support for the "social clause," the enforcement of certain minimum labor standards through international trade agreements, with possible sanctions by the WTO against countries that fail to comply.

The second quotation is from a Bangladeshi woman, one of "the wretched of the earth" who works in the kind of factories Bearak describes, but for whom such employment represents one of her few options for "working with dignity." It was part of her testimony to the thousands of activists who attended the International People's Health Assembly, held in Bangladesh in 2000. It echoes sentiments that are voiced by women workers in the "steamy reservoirs of unemployment" elsewhere in the Third World and helps explain why they, and their supporters, strongly resist the idea that global enforcement of labor standards will serve the interests of workers in the Third World.

This paper is written from the latter standpoint and seeks to challenge the former. It recognizes that the debate about global labor standards is both an extremely complex and highly polarized one, in which accusations of protectionism and double standards clash with claims of exploitation and "social dumping." It recognizes, too, that both many who support, and many who oppose, the global enforcement of labor standards are motivated by the spirit of international solidarity with the interests of workers rather than by protectionist or free trade sentiments. While this paper does not support the view that unregulated global competition serves the interests of the working poor of the world, it is equally skeptical of the idea that they would be better off with global enforcement of labor standards. While its skepticism stems from the protectionist practices that continue to characterize international trade, its critique of protectionism derives from an analysis of the workings of an unequal world order rather than from adherence to neoliberal market principles.

The next section of this paper sketches out the global context in which current debates about standards should be located. I then describe the politics of representation that has shaped the public discourse on, and helped to mobilize public support for, the idea of globally enforced labor standards. Against this background, I go on to explore the experiences of women workers in global garment factories in Bangladesh and elsewhere in order to provide an alternative perspective on the issue of standards. The paper examines their working conditions, explores why they do not protest those aspects they find oppressive, and questions whether campaigning for the global enforcement of standards is the most appropriate response from those concerned with their interests. Finally, it suggests that the spirit of global solidarity would be better served if the international labor movement were to campaign for a universal social floor that would protect the basic needs of all citizens, regardless of their labor market status, instead of a social clause that would only serve the needs of a minority.

THE GLOBALIZATION OF THE ECONOMY AND THE CHANGING DIVISION OF LABOR

The twentieth century began with an international division of labor largely shaped by the practices of colonialism, with the poorer countries exporting primary commodities to the rich while the latter specialized in the production and export of manufactured goods. As the poor countries achieved independence, many embarked on strategies of import-substitution industrialization, building up their manufacturing capacity behind protective barriers. However, since the 1970s, a combination of factors, including rising labor costs in advanced industrialized countries, changes in transport and communications technology, the liberalization of trade, and the deregulation of markets, including financial markets, has effected a radical transformation in the direction and pace of global flows of capital, goods, services, and labor. As a result, many of the protective barriers have fallen. Of the factors cited above, changes in the volume and pattern of trade, and associated changes in the international division of labor, are central to the concerns of this paper.

The volume of trade has increased from around 25 percent of world GNP in 1970 to around 45 percent today (World Bank 1995). Much of this increase is in manufacturing, which accounted for 59 percent of world-merchandise exports in 1984 but reached 74 percent of those exports by the mid-1990s. Developing countries have performed well in this sector: the share of manufactures in their exports tripled between 1970 and 1990 from 20 percent to 60 percent (World Bank 1995). Growth has been most rapid in labor-intensive manufacturing: technological changes allowed for the fragmentation of production processes while international wage differentials encouraged the relocation of labor-intensive production, or stages of

production, from highly paid enclaves of organized labor in the North to a low-paid, less well-organized, and largely female labor force in the South. The decline of the "cut-make-trim" stages of garment manufacturing in the OECD countries in the course of this period and their rise in lower-income regions of the world exemplifies this trend.

Attempts to compete in an increasingly global economy have led many countries to deregulate labor markets with the view to making labor more "flexible" (Guy Standing 1999). Regular, male-dominated, full-time employment, protected by various forms of state regulation, has given way to more diverse and less-protected patterns of work, including outsourcing, contract labor, casual, part-time, and home-based work. The resulting deterioration in employment prospects and working conditions has had the greatest impact on less-skilled members of the labor force in the North, many of whom now find themselves in direct competition for their jobs with workers from the South. These developments have given rise to growing fears of a global race to the welfare bottom.

It is therefore not entirely coincidental that this period has witnessed the rise of a new discourse of "ethics" in international trade. This discourse has helped target public attention to working conditions in precisely those labor-intensive manufacturing industries in which poorer countries have gained what mainstream economists refer to as a "comparative advantage" – and which some have reconstituted as an "unfair advantage." It has also helped to mobilize various constituencies in efforts to address the exploitative conditions under which many of the imports into their countries are produced.

Uniting these constituencies is the view that certain minimum labor standards should be observed in the production of goods and services imported into their countries, regardless of whether the goods were purchased by importing companies or directly produced by them. Most equate this minimum with the International Labor Organization's (ILO) "core" standards – freedom of association, the right to collective bargaining, abolition of child labor, and elimination of discrimination at work – which have received widespread endorsement at the international level and are seen to constitute a shared global morality.¹ A variety of strategies have been adopted to promote these standards, including consumer boycotts, public "naming and shaming" campaigns, the "social labeling" of goods, company codes of conduct, fair trade agreements, and collaborative efforts that bring together companies, trade unions, and NGOs to promote and monitor compliance with agreed-upon standards. In addition, however, there is growing pressure from these groups to link global labor standards to international trade agreements in the form of a "social clause." The distinguishing feature of this clause is its demand that the WTO, with its power to impose sanctions, should oversee the global harmonization of labor standards in place of (or along with) the ILO,

which is the international body so far entrusted with this responsibility, but one that has traditionally exercised a supportive and supervisory role rather than a compulsion-based one.

In an earlier era, when debates about labor standards were carried out within the context of national economies, divisions were fairly straightforward (Alice Amsden 1994). Employers and right-of-center economists opposed them on the grounds they distorted market forces, inhibiting employment and income, while the labor unions and their left-of-center allies were supporting them, arguing they would improve the motivation and physical capacity of workers and hence their productivity. However, in the closing decades of the twentieth century, when the debate over labor standards moved to the global level, the divisions have become far less clear-cut.

Support for the social clause comes from northern governments as well as from consumer groups, student activists, northern trade unions and their networks, and progressive academics, including feminists, many, but not all, based in the North (Nilufer Cagatay 1996, 2001; Andrew Ross 1997a; Rohini Hensman 2000; Ronaldo Munck 2002). Given the threat to northern jobs by the changing international division of labor, there is inevitably a strong element of self-interest in some of the trade union support for the social clause. However, there are other, disinterested reasons for this support, including moral outrage at the apparent indifference of some of the world's wealthiest corporations to the exploitative conditions under which they employ, directly or indirectly, some of the world's poorest workers. For these groups, the global enforcement of labor standards appears to offer a "win-win" solution for workers around the world: workers in the North stand to benefit from standards that would increase the price of exports from late-industrializing countries and reduce their attractiveness as low-cost production sites for northern investors. Workers in the South would benefit from higher wages and better working conditions which in turn would lead to increases in aggregate demand and employment (Steve Charnowitz 1987; John Cavanagh 1997).

Using an alternative version of the win-win scenario, right-wing economists oppose the idea of the global labor standards. They argue that global free trade allows countries to specialize in those activities in which they have a comparative advantage and to reap mutual gains through exchange. For poorer countries with vast supplies of unskilled labor, their ability to compete in international trade lies in the production of those goods and services that make intensive use of such labor. The imposition of global standards would undermine the basis of their comparative advantage by increasing the cost of labor.

While governments of most developing countries also subscribe to this argument, their opposition to compulsory labor standards is further bolstered by what Eddie Lee has described as the "deep fault line of

mistrust" that divides them from the advanced industrial countries (1997: 177). They have expressed their belief that the international trading system is already tilted in favor of rich countries and that attempts to link labor standards to trade agreements are simply a "new form of conditionality" which will further entrench the interests of the North (Nicola Bullard 2001). According to the late Julius Nyerere (1998), the first chairman of the South Centre, a permanent intergovernmental organization of developing countries set up in Geneva in 1996, demands for global labor standards were merely attempts to use the language of workers' rights to disguise the protectionist tendencies of the world's wealthier countries.

These accusations are not entirely groundless. The rich countries of the world have a long history of preaching the virtues of fair trade, but practicing protectionism when it has suited them (Oxfam International 2002). The United States, for instance, has been a leading champion of free trade, using its influence within the international financial institutions to press for the opening up of the world's economies to international capital and taking steps to penalize countries found to be operating barriers to its exports. It has also been at the forefront of moves to link labor standards with trade agreements at bilateral, regional, as well as multilateral level. Yet it initially resisted the idea of an International Trade Organization in 1948 precisely because of the explicit link the ITO made between labor standards and trade (Ajit Singh and Ann Zammit 2000). It has currently ratified only two of the eight conventions that make up the ILO core labor standards, the poorest track record among OECD countries, and among the poorest in the world. And it continues to resort to subsidies and controls when these are considered necessary to protect its own workers from international competition.

The most recent example of this was the decision of the Bush administration, ostensibly dedicated champions of free trade, to support the 2002 Farm Bill, which would provide subsidies of more than \$180 billion for US farmers in the coming decade. Although this decision both compromises the ability of the US to challenge the even higher levels of agricultural protection that prevail in Europe and undercuts the ability of farmers in developing countries to compete against cheap American imports, such objections cut little ice with US politicians. According to the *London Times*, Tom Harkin, the Democratic senator who drew up the bill, said, "This isn't a German farm Bill or a Chinese farm Bill or a French farm Bill. It is an American farm Bill for American farmers. Let those other countries worry about their own farmers" (Bronwen Maddox 2002).

It is this long experience with the double standards that rich countries practice in international trade, combined with fears about the implications of attempts to link labor standards to trade agreements for export competitiveness and employment in the South, that explains why resistance to the social clause goes beyond governments of developing countries to

many trade unions, nongovernmental organizations, and women's networks, as well as progressive academics, including economists critical of neoliberal theory as well as feminists (Amsden 1994; Nyerere 1998; Kaushik Basu 1999; Pranab Bardhan 2000; Naila Kabeer 2000; Jayati Ghosh 2001). Singh and Zammit (2000: xv) have forcibly argued that

attempts to enforce labor standards through trade sanctions are likely to cause economic harm to most export developing countries, at least in the short to medium term, while doing little or nothing to improve their labor standards. Indeed, under wholly plausible circumstances, this approach could be seriously counterproductive and reduce standards overall.

Trade unionists and labor organizations have also raised questions about the social clause, most consistently in the Indian context but also in other developing countries (J. John and A. M. Chenoy 1996; *Women Working Worldwide* 1996). A number of southern-based NGO networks have criticized the social clause as well. As Martin Khor of the Third World Network points out, there is a strong case for improving standards at work in the North as well as in the South, but "linking labor standards to trade sanctions is not justified and could well lead to a lowering of workers' welfare instead of improving it" (Third World Network 1994). He suggests two conditions that might help dilute the opposition to the social clause from developing countries; these conditions also summarize the nature of these countries' concerns. The first – that the introduction of the core labor standards not be used as the thin end of the wedge to impose a whole range of other standards that did not command such consensus – reflects concerns about equal representation. Whatever the limitations of the "core" labor standards, they are the only ones that command some agreement within the international community, because they are seen to be valid, regardless of levels of development. The developing countries fear that once supporters obtain agreement to a social clause tied to core labor standards, other "substantive" labor standards, which do not command an international consensus but are supported by many in the anti-sweatshop campaign, will be pushed through the back door to further protectionist interests (see also Bardhan 2000).

The second condition – that the introduction of the social clause not result in net job losses in developing countries – expresses concerns about development. Here, countries fear that attempts to implement labor standards, particularly substantive ones, will raise the costs of labor to levels where poor countries lose their competitive edge in global markets. Many have attempted to estimate the likely employment effects associated with the introduction of labor standards but these efforts have proved inconclusive. It is difficult to disentangle changes in competitiveness and employment caused by changes in the costs of labor from the other changes

that occur in an economy (OECD 1996), but ultimately it is likely that the benefits of linking labor standards to trade agreements will vary for different countries. Amsden (1994) suggests that the link will be least effective in larger wage-led economies like India's, which has large domestic markets and relatively insignificant export sectors. On the other hand, in smaller developing countries – like Bangladesh, which increasingly relies on international trade to expand access to markets – higher real wages in the export sector may increase domestic demand, but not to the extent of offsetting the fall in international demand for highly price-elastic goods like clothing. Instead, rising costs in the export sectors would hurt such countries' competitiveness and most certainly reduce their long-term growth.

THE POLITICS OF REPRESENTATION IN INTERNATIONAL TRADE

Unraveling all of the strands of arguments that advocacy groups (themselves internally diverse) use to support or reject efforts to link labor standards to trade agreements is beyond the scope of this paper. Instead, I will confine myself to questioning the view that globally enforced labor standards are in the interests of all workers, particularly those who have been unable to fight for such standards themselves. While such views may be sincere, I believe they are based on an ahistorical and uncontextualized understanding of what is at stake. An important factor in this understanding is the politics of representation that supporters have deployed to make the case for global labor standards. Much of the success of this advocacy with the wider public of student activists and consumer groups has rested on portrayals of 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" (Andrew Ross 1997b: 10).

That many of the export industries in the South produce consumer goods, such as garments, shoes, carpets, footballs, and the like, has worked to the advantage of this form of advocacy because consumer purchasing power can be a powerful weapon. Moreover, that a significant proportion of workers in these factories is women allows such advocacy to both feed on, and feed into, widespread preconceptions about poor, Third World women as helpless victims of the global free-trade economy: "undifferentiated, homogenous, faceless and voiceless" (Diane Wolf 1992). Such portrayals help to both provoke and to justify action by the northern public on behalf of these women workers who are unable to act on their own behalf.

As one of the world's poorest countries, with one of its lowest standards of living, it is not surprising that Bangladesh has featured frequently in these campaigns. A classic example of this politics of representation can be found

in a contribution by Elinor Spielberg (1997), a member of UNITE, the American garment workers' union, to a collection of essays for the anti-sweatshop movement in the United States. Spielberg begins her account, based on what seems to have been a brief and cursory visit to Bangladesh, 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). I found no evidence for this saying in my own research on garment workers or in the work of researchers and activists who have been working in the urban slums of Bangladesh for many years. As in many other countries in the world, particularly in sexually conservative societies like Bangladesh, prostitution remains possibly the most socially stigmatized of occupations, despite campaigns by women's organizations, including those of sex workers, to promote their rights and recognition.

However, even more extraordinary than this claim is Spielberg's detailed description of the condition of the *feet* of a young girl she encountered, a description she links, improbably, to working conditions in the girl's 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)

The relevance of this horrified description to working conditions in the garment industry is extremely tenuous: the kind of malnutrition she describes is widespread among poorer children, particularly girls, in Bangladesh, but it reflects economic deprivation and gender discrimination from birth in an underdeveloped and patriarchal society rather than the effects of a few years' work in the garment industry. Its inclusion in her account helps to establish her credentials as a caring moral being but it reduces the young girl to the status of "the other," deserving of sympathy, but also a living testimony to the dehumanizing conditions that Spielberg's union claims to be campaigning against.

The tactics used by the National Labor Coalition, another organization extremely active in the anti-sweatshop movement in the US, make for

equally disturbing reading (see Kitty Krupat 1997). Its leading activist presents as a virtue the fact that he is "not a professional – not a trained organizer, economist or academic" and that his organization relies instead on "human stories ... anecdotal examples and accessible language" to win consumer support (cited in Krupat 1997: 74). The NLC considers young workers from Third World factories its best asset and has frequently flown these workers 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" (cited in Krupat 1997: 74). Yet, as Krupat's essay goes on to reveal, the NLC does not deal in simple, spontaneous, and unmediated truths but rather on what she describes as an "intensive educational technique" (p. 75) 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 its 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: 75)

One could view this "intensive educational technique" as yielding "the truth" as NLC clearly believes it does. Alternatively, of course, it can be viewed as a way of ensuring that the workers in question produce the "correct" story in their testimonies.²

The politics of representation can, in other words, slip very easily into a politics of misrepresentation if the activist decides there is little mileage to be gained in presenting nuanced, balanced, and differentiated accounts of ground-level realities in low-income countries – narratives that distinguish between situations in which working conditions are products of poverty and underdevelopment and those that entail the flagrant violation of basic human rights. Yet such distinctions are imperative if poor workers in the South are not to be penalized for their poverty or for the poverty of their country. As Fiona Wilson (1991) points out in her study of women garment workers in Mexico, there is no dearth of literature on the "exploitation and vulnerability of labor in situations of rampant capitalist growth where little

or no protection is forthcoming from the State, or any other body" (p. 15). However, she goes on to caution:

... when discussing particular instances in the Third World, a more complex view is required if the significance of informalization processes is to be unearthed and distinguished in terms of implications for relations of class and gender. The separate experiences of workers and capitalists and of women and men need to be reviewed in the light of the specific historical conditions (*what was life like before?*) [italics added]. ... The present general tendencies towards informalization and disenfranchisement unleash feelings of concern, at least for those broadly on the "left." Workers' rights are being trampled upon; former victories won by the working class through class struggles have not been permanent. These defeats must be opposed. ...

But when one moves to the local level and has a view from below, then the same feelings are not necessarily engendered. It is true one can depict the gross exploitation of labor. Nevertheless, new working classes are emerging composed of people who had never been given a chance of joining the old "male" proletariat that had earlier led the confrontation with capital. The new working classes have not been passive but have engaged in struggles of their own.

In the rest of this paper, I will explore this view from below and ask, "what was life like before?" for women workers in a number of developing countries. This question helps shed a somewhat different light on what these jobs might mean to the workers and to provide somewhat different grounds for opposing the idea of compulsory labor standards to those usually expressed in international forums. I draw mainly on research from Bangladesh, partly because it features so frequently in the horror stories of the anti-sweatshop campaign and partly because of my own long-term research on garment workers there that began in 1988 (see Kabeer 2000). However, I will also cite findings from research elsewhere in the world in order to suggest that the arguments made here are not exceptional to Bangladesh but have a wider relevance.

THE SIGNIFICANCE OF EXPORT-ORIENTED GARMENT MANUFACTURING IN BANGLADESH

Bangladesh is officially classified by the UN as among the forty-eight "least-developed countries" of the world. It is a largely agrarian society and agriculture still provides employment for the majority of its workforce. The export of jute and jute products used to be its main source of its foreign exchange earnings but has fallen drastically in the face of declining world prices. However, since the 1980s, the country has seen the

emergence and rapid expansion in export-oriented garment manufacturing in response to a new industrial policy that sought to liberalize the economy in response to pressure from the international financial institutions. The industry was also helped by the imposition of quotas by a number of developed countries on garment exports from the more successful garment-exporting countries in the South under the "anti-surge" provision of the Multi-Fibre Agreement (MFA).³ The quota regime associated with the MFA has served to regulate world trade in garments, providing favored access to northern markets for some of the poorer developing countries, including Bangladesh.

Bangladesh is also among the world's more patriarchal societies. It belongs to a regional belt stretching across northern Africa, the Middle East, Pakistan, and the northern plains of India which is characterized by patrilineal principles of descent, patriarchal structures of family organization, the practice of female seclusion, and a marked preference for sons over daughters (Naila Kabeer 2003a). Women have not only been discriminated against in access to education and employment, a common pattern in many other parts of the world, but also in access to basic life-preserving resources such as health and food to the extent that this region (unlike other parts of the developed and developing world) has been characterized by higher levels of mortality among women and girls than among men and boys.

Over the past decade, Bangladesh has seen important improvements in its situation. In 1991 it moved from military rule to a fragile and somewhat dysfunctional democracy. Poverty has decreased, particularly in recent decades, and national food security has improved. Nevertheless, around half of its population still continues to live below the poverty line, failing to meet a very minimum definition of its basic needs. And while decades of impoverishment and landlessness drove many women from poorer families to seek work, cultural restrictions on their mobility, as well as the barriers they faced in the marketplace, historically confined them to the hidden, worst paid and most exploitative margins of the informal economy. There they worked as petty traders, domestic servants, sex workers, and casual wage laborers.

Given this history of female invisibility in the public domain, one of the most remarkable aspects of the rise of export-oriented garment manufacturing in the early 1980s was the almost overnight creation of a first generation of female factory workers. Most, but not all, of the women who work in the industry come from poor families and have migrated from the poorer rural districts of Bangladesh in search of work. The reasons this workforce is predominantly female corroborate findings from elsewhere that women's disadvantaged position in the labor market is a "comparative advantage" (Kabeer 2000). Employers in Bangladesh put less emphasis on women's "nimble fingers" – indeed many considered male labor to be

more productive – and more on the docility that comes with disadvantage. Women workers were aware of why employers preferred them. As one woman put it:

You see, as women, one of our wings is broken. We don't have the nerve that a man has, because we know we have a broken wing. A man can sleep anywhere, he can just lie down on the street and go to sleep. A woman cannot do that. She has to think about her body, about her security. So the garment factory owner prefers to hire women because men are smarter about their opportunities, you train them and they move on. Even when he compares a small boy and an older girl, he will think, 'She's only a girl, she can't wander too far away'. (Kabeer 2000: 72)

There are now 3,480 export garment factories in Bangladesh, employing around 1.8 million workers, of whom around 1.5 million are women. The industry is made up of a number of different segments (Naila Kabeer and Simeen Mahmud 2003). The largest factories, often employing several thousand workers and dealing directly with international buyers, are to be found in the country's two export processing zones (EPZs), large industrial estates set up by the government as enclaves in which the trade and customs regime of a country do not apply. However, these account for less than 10 percent of the total employment in the industry (personal communication, Ananya Rahman). While the government has prohibited trade unions in the EPZs, both wages and working conditions are far superior to those in the rest of the export industry and indeed in the rest of the economy (Naila Kabeer and Simeen Mahmud, forthcoming).

The rest of the export industry is in factories scattered across the main urban areas of the country. Around 30 percent of these deal directly with buyers (author's interview with employers, 2003). These vary in size, but generally employ between 300 and 500 workers. While unions are legally permitted here, employers strongly resist them using a combination of strong-arm tactics to intimidate organizers or bribes to buy them off. However, working conditions are generally good, reflecting a combination of pressure from international buyers, themselves under pressure from northern consumer groups and labor organizations, as well as rising awareness among employers themselves. The rest of the industry is made up of smaller factories and workshops, operating mainly on orders subcontracted to them by larger factories that would otherwise not meet buyers' deadlines. This segment of the industry merges imperceptibly into the informal economy: it features low pay and poor working conditions, and is generally ignored by the trade union movement which has always preferred to focus on the formal sector employees.

PROBLEMATIZING WOMEN'S WORK: THE NEGATIVE ASPECTS OF GARMENT EMPLOYMENT

A number of studies have been carried out into the situation of women workers in the export garment industry. One such study, currently being written up, was carried out by Simeen Mahmud and myself in 2001 and sought to compare wages, working conditions, and attitudes among women working in the export-oriented garment industry and a sample of women from the same low-income neighborhoods, but working in a variety of mainly informal jobs for the domestic market. We will be citing from some of the preliminary analysis coming out of this study (Kabeer and Mahmud 2003; Kabeer and Mahmud, forthcoming).

These studies suggest that the level of wages is not the most significant source of dissatisfaction for workers in the industry. Wages are generally higher in the garment industry than those prevailing in alternative forms of waged labor available to women, both in urban areas and in rural (Kabeer and Mahmud, forthcoming) and gender differentials are generally lower (Debapriya Bhattacharya and Mustafizur Rahman 2001). A more frequent source of dissatisfaction related to irregularity in monthly payments. While employers are not legally obliged to pay monthly wages on the same day each month, there is a legal limit to delays in payment that many employers violate regularly. Wages are often delayed, perhaps by two or three months, sometimes held back deliberately to ensure the worker does not leave, sometimes because employers themselves face delays in payments from buyers. Overtime is also a source of dissatisfaction for some workers, but not always for the same reasons. For married women, the problem is mandatory overtime: given a choice, many prefer to go home to attend to their domestic responsibilities. Unmarried women, on the other hand, often welcome overtime as a means of supplementing their wages. Their problem is that employers seldom show overtime on their time cards, with a resulting lack of clarity regarding the rate of remuneration and the suspicion that they may not be getting their due.

On issues of health and safety, fire hazards in the industry have generated considerable attention in national and international media. However, the workers themselves do not frequently articulate this concern. This may reflect the fact that many employers have started to take more safety precautions; it may reflect that fires are not an everyday occurrence in the factories and hence not a part of workers' everyday consciousness; or it may reflect the fact that such fires are simply one more hazard in contexts where hazards of various kinds are endemic (Geoff Wood and Sarah Salway 2000; Kabeer 2003a). The issue of toilets is a frequent source of complaints, particularly in relation to restrictions imposed on the number of toilet breaks workers are permitted to take. Garment workers view these restrictive practices, together with the long hours of work in confined

spaces, as taking a toll on their health in the long run. This concern is one of the reasons for high labor turnover in the industry: while exact estimates of turnover are not available, it is worth noting that the average number of years spent in the garment industry by the workers in our survey was five years.

A small percentage of women workers had experienced, while others had heard reports of, incidents of sexual harassment within the factory. However, many more experienced, or heard of such harassment, and in some cases, rape, on the streets on their way to and from work (Protima Paul-Majumder and Anwara Begum 2000; Kabeer and Mahmud 2003). Moreover, studies on child labor in Dhaka's urban slums have found that many parents preferred garment employment for their daughters because they believed the girls would face less sexual harassment there than in other occupations open to them (Emily Delap 1998) and that working mothers saw work in local garment factories as a safer option for their young daughters to leaving them home on their own (Naila Kabeer 2003b). Petra Dannecker (2002) also noted incidents of sexual harassment on the factory floor, but cautioned against the tendency of the local community to perceive women as sexually passive. Some women engaged in romantic liaisons with men they had met on the factory floor, others found husbands there, and still others used their sexuality to promote their own interests within the workplace. Such behavior in a culture that is particularly repressive of female sexuality explains the public perception of garment workers as "loose women" and the unwelcome attention they receive from men on the streets (Kabeer 2000).

Childcare emerged as a central concern for many of the workers. While many women leave the factory at marriage or the birth of a child – another reason for high labor turnover – they often return when children grow older. While a number of studies continue to stereotype women workers in the garment industry as "young unmarried women," the statistical evidence suggests that a high proportion (between 40 and 50 percent) are, or were, married and a significant number of them have children. Most of these women have to make their own arrangements for childcare; some leave young children with their families in the countryside while others rely on older siblings or neighbors.

The other factor that emerges routinely as a source of dissatisfaction in studies is the lack of respect supervisors show for their women workers. As Dannecker (2002: 135) notes in her study: "all the interviewed women articulated their insecurity and their helplessness with regard to the way the supervisors addressed them, talked to them and treated them." Such disrespect has a gendered dimension; managers and supervisors are far more cautious toward male workers, who have the potential to be far more disruptive. It is significant, for instance, that management behavior featured as a reason for job satisfaction or dissatisfaction for women

workers in the industry far more frequently than for men (Salma Chaudhuri Zohir and Pratima Paul-Majumder 1996).

There is thus little doubt that while working conditions are not as dire as anti-sweatshop campaigners claim, they nonetheless leave much room for improvements. Why, then, do women workers endure these conditions with apparently little protest? And why do those who claim to have the workers' interests at heart resist the idea of using internationally enforced sanctions to improve their labor standards? The answer to the first question helps to frame the answer to the second; part of the explanation relates to the more positive aspects of factory employment, aspects to which anti-sweatshop advocates sometimes give short shrift. Yet these positive features must be factored into any attempt to understand the perspectives of women workers on their jobs. A second part of the explanation relates to the weak organizational capacity of women workers and the causes for it. Finally, the last part of the explanation relates to whether alternatives to factory employment exist and the importance of an "exit" option to empower workers to take action on their own behalf. Taken together, these factors indicate that addressing the interests of the working poor requires different strategic priorities than those contained in current versions of the social clause.

EVALUATING WOMEN'S WORK: "WHAT LIFE WAS LIKE BEFORE"

My own research, and that conducted by others in Bangladesh, suggests that along with the many grievances the garment workers expressed, they had also made significant gains. Women valued the satisfaction of a "proper" job in contrast to the casualized forms of employment that had previously been their only options. Their ability to earn on a regular basis gave them a sense of self-reliance, of standing on their own feet. They also valued their access to new social networks on the factory floor, which replaced their previous isolation within the home; the greater voice they exercised in household decision-making because of the value of their economic contribution; their enhanced sense of self-worth; and, in some cases, greater personal freedom and autonomy (Nazli Kibria 1995; Zohir and Paul-Majumder 1996; Sajeda Amin, Ian Diamond, Ruchira T. Naved, and Margaret Newby 1998; Margaret Newby 1998; Kabeer 2000; Paul-Majumder and Begum 2000; Dannecker 2002; Kabeer and Mahmud, forthcoming).

Some women used their newly found earning power to renegotiate their relations within marriage, others to leave abusive marriages, and others to help their parents, a possibility generally denied to women once they were married (Kabeer 2000). Yet others used their earnings to postpone the age of marriage and enjoy a longer period of freedom from the responsibilities

that came with marriage and children (Amin *et al.* 1998). A UNICEF-supported study on working children in urban slums found that jobs in the garment factories were "coveted" because they were considered "prestigious and well-paid" in comparison to the unsavory alternatives, such as domestic service and prostitution (Najma Chawla 1996). Finally, a national consultation exercise carried out by the NGO Working Group of the World Bank found that garment factories and NGOs were the only formal institutions unanimously considered to have had a positive influence in the lives of the urban poor (Rashed un Nabi, Dipankara Datta, Subrata Chakrabarty, Masuma Begum, and Nasima Jahan Chaudhury 1999).

These findings do not square easily with the one-dimensional portraits of export-oriented factories as "showcases of horror for the labor abuses sanctioned by the global free trade economy" promoted by many in the anti-sweatshop campaign. The complexity of ground-level realities from the perspective of women workers is better captured by Dannecker's conclusion to her study:

... women workers do not romanticize their jobs, marriages or other aspects of their lives. They are aware of the exploitation that employment is poorly paid, that they are treated badly inside the factories and unfairly in many different ways. Nevertheless, they are also certain that it has given them material and personal benefits, an aspect often neglected in the literature. (2002: 255)

This paradox of broadly positive subjective evaluations of work within a context of objectively negative conditions working the workplace is by no means unique to Bangladesh. It is evident in the lives of women workers in export manufacturing in a number of other parts of the world. Diane Wolf's ethnographic study of women garment workers in Java documents their awareness of the exploitative conditions under which they work, but it points also to the "material and personal benefits that few would give up" (1992: 256). In Turkey, where, like Bangladesh, there are cultural restrictions on women's work in the public domain, a study of female clothing workers found that many women no longer defined their work purely in terms of their familial roles, to be abandoned when they got married or had children, but as a more permanent way of life (Ayda Eraydin and Asuman Erendil 1999). The overwhelming majority had made their own decision to enter factory work for reasons that varied from wanting to make use of their skills to seeking to escape the control exercised by family and neighbors.

Delia Davin (2001) notes the thousands of young, single women who are migrating from the countryside to live and work in the export-processing zones of southern China. Here, too, wages are low by international standards, the working conditions oppressive, and the assembly-line jobs

ranked low in the occupational hierarchy for urban women. However, they are fiercely competed for by young rural women, many of whom had previously worked as unpaid laborers on family farms, but now have the opportunity to earn more cash in one month than they, or even the men in their home villages, could make in a year. As Davin points out,

we cannot dismiss as meaningless the voices of the many young women who affirm a sense of achievement and pride in the lives they make for themselves as factory workers ... And hardship may be a price worth paying if the cash they earn allows them to change something they disliked in their past or that they wish to avoid in their future. (2001: 16)

Virginia Guzman and Rosalba Todaro (2001) arrived at similar conclusions in their research on working women in Latin America. They note that while labor-market deregulation has brought women into the paid workforce in increasing numbers, the jobs are largely casual and insecure. Nevertheless, they observe:

Even in precarious conditions, unstable labor relations, and with meager social protection, there are many cases where access to insecure work can represent an improvement for women with respect to their previous situation. For instance, women that were expelled from the rural areas because of lack of land or because of agricultural restructuring had no option other than migrating to cities. There again the only alternative available was to work as domestic helpers. Now, women in rural areas have the alternative of working as temporary laborers for export agriculture. The existence of alternatives has even improved the working conditions of domestic helpers. ... Women now have the right to choose their destiny as individuals not only as family members. (2001: 18–19)

And, finally, if we go back in history to the early phase of the industrialization in Europe, we find similar assessments about the experience of industrialization for women workers in the northern context. As Nancy Fraser (1997) points out, feminist scholars who equate the emergence of capitalist employment in Europe with “wage slavery” miss the contradictory and gender-specific implications of such employment in the lives of workers:

To be sure, it was painfully experienced in just that way by some early-nineteenth century proletarianized (male) artisans and yeoman farmers who were losing not only tangible property in tools and in land but also prior control over their work. But their response was contextually specific and gendered. Consider, by way of contrast, the very different

experience of young single women who left farms – with open-ended work hours, pervasive parental supervision, and little autonomous personal life – for mill towns, where intense supervision in the mill was combined with relative freedom from supervision outside it, as well as the increased autonomy of personal life conferred by cash earnings. From their perspective, the employment contract was a liberation. (1997: 230)

Then, as now, factory employment was just one sphere in the totality of women workers' lives. Other spheres included the consumer market, to which their wages bought them entry, but also the domestic sphere, where they were expected to perform the unpaid work of social reproduction. In this arena particularly, itself permeated by power and inequality, women's wages functioned "as a resource and a leverage" (Fraser 1997: 230), helping them to challenge the model of the male breadwinner and transform the nature of the patriarchal contract within the home.

My research with women workers in the Bangladesh garment industry suggests that, in a different time and a different place, another group of newly proletarianized young women have been attempting to effect a similar transformation. These have always been precarious jobs, but now the very future of the industry is uncertain: many factories are likely to close down with the planned phase out of the MFA by the end of 2004 and the accession of China into the WTO and several thousand women are likely to lose their jobs, plunging their families back into poverty. However, the challenge that the women's experience of factory employment has posed for deeply entrenched prejudices regarding their economic capabilities may have a lasting effect on gender relations in Bangladesh.

TRANSLATING NEEDS INTO RIGHTS: VOICE AND ORGANIZATION

Understanding the possibilities that access to waged work has opened up for women in contexts in which they had previously very little choice helps explain why they do not view their jobs in the unequivocally negative light that anti-sweatshop campaigners do. Indeed, studies show that many enter factory employment *against* the wishes of senior family members, including husbands and fathers: Paul-Majumder and Begum (2000) found that 37 percent of 589 workers interviewed in their 1997 survey had taken up jobs in the garment industry despite family opposition, while Kabeer (2000) documents the processes of bargaining, negotiation, and defiance which women resorted to in the face of family opposition. Simply highlighting their problems, and ignoring their gains, erases the possibility that there may have been a calculus of choice involved and that women⁴ may consider

these jobs worth defending. At the same time, however, many aspects of their working conditions clearly violate the workers' sense of justice, so, on their own, the positive aspects of their work do not fully explain the absence of protest within the factories. Like most countries, Bangladesh has various commitments to labor standards in place within its national legislation, including the right to form trade unions; while the export processing zones are the exception to this, they account for a very small minority of workers in this sector. It has also ratified seven of the eight ILO conventions pertaining to core labor standards. Although these various commitments are generally not observed in practice, they provide a supportive legal framework for workers' struggles to improve their conditions at work. Garment workers have been known to take their employers to court, usually with the backing of a non-governmental organization, and, more importantly, to win. As a lawyer working with garment workers observed, the courts generally believed the workers over their employers: "the judges are sympathetic to the workers in most of the cases, that is our fortune" (cited in Dannecker 2000: 244). Nearly all the cases she had taken up on behalf of workers had ended positively since the threat of legal notice was often sufficient to persuade employers to settle out of court.

However, such action has generally been on an individualized and sporadic basis rather than as part of a wider collective struggle. This failure to organize collectively can be partly attributed to the active hostility of employers within the industry to trade union activity (Shamsul I. Khan 2002). However, employers' efforts to repress union activity has been made far easier by the failure of the trade unions themselves to take women workers' concerns seriously. Trade unionism is more than a hundred years old in South Asia, and most garment workers are aware of the unions' existence. However, few are members. This is not a purely gender-specific phenomenon. Less than 5 percent of male workers, most of them located in public sector employment in the formal economy, belong to trade unions.

These low membership rates reflect what the unions represent in the context of South Asia generally. Many have strong links with the major political parties and act as the industrial appendage of their political parties rather than as representatives of workers' interests (see Sharit K. Bhowmik 1998 for a description of the Indian context). It is not accidental that trade unions are a largely formal sector phenomenon in a region where the overwhelming majority of workers are in the informal sector. Jan Breman has described the attitudes of Indian trade unions towards such workers as one of "indifference, rising almost to enmity" underpinned by the "fear that pressure from below would lead to gradual erosion of the rights gained during a long struggle by the protected labor" (1996: 247). For women workers, the majority of whom are in the informal sector, such exclusionary behavior takes a markedly gendered form: not only are most male trade unionists largely indifferent to their needs and priorities as workers, but

they also tend to reproduce the norms and behavior that treat women as a subordinate category and marginalize their needs and priorities as women (Bhowmik 1998; Dannecker 2002).

More responsive to the needs and rights of women workers are various nongovernmental organizations, some of which work directly with them. In Bangladesh, these include Nari Uddug Kendra which provides safe low-cost residential facilities for working women; Uthsao and Phulki which seek to promote childcare facilities for women both within the community as well as located within factories; and Ain-o-Shalish Kendro and the Bangladesh Women's Lawyers' Association which provide legal support to workers. In addition, new kinds of labor organizations are emerging that base themselves within the community and offer a much wider range of support services, including legal literacy, than do the traditional trade unions. The Bangladesh Independent Garment Workers' Union, founded and funded by USAID, is the best-resourced example in Bangladesh, but there are others, such as Kormojibi Nari, affiliated to left-wing parties that have come to realize the significance of gender in their work. Growing cooperation among these different groups is evident in the emergence of coalitions such as the Bangladesh Garment Workers' Protection Alliance that seek to ensure that women workers' voices are heard in national and international forums at a time when the future of the industry is becoming increasingly uncertain.

Such organizations bring with them the recognition that women workers' exercise of agency in the workplace is unlikely to take the form of the heroic mass struggles that make up trade union lore (Sujata Gothoskar 1997). Engaged in unceasing, individual struggles on a daily basis to combine their domestic chores and wage labor, and to negotiate their way in a world hostile to the idea of women working for pay, their agency in the workplace takes a lower key and less confrontational form. Today's garment workers take many more enterprise-based collective actions than they did in the early years of the industry, including sporadic "downing of tools," collective bargaining with management, and a willingness to take their grievances to court (interview with Shireen Akhter of Kormojibi Nari 1999). Yet mass collective action through the trade union movement remains a remote possibility.

Research on women's experiences with trade unions in other parts of the world suggests that the situation in Bangladesh is by no means exceptional (Sheila Rowbotham and Swasti Mitter 1994; Amrita Chhachhi and Renee Pittin 1996). It is part of a problem that exists wherever unions, as champions of the organized sector workers, have acquired male-biased culture and procedures that are out of tune with the lives and priorities of working women (Swasti Mitter 1994). In such contexts, alternative forms of organizations have championed women's needs and priorities through forms of collective action that are not necessarily rooted in trade unionism

and do not necessarily adopt the confrontational tactics often associated with traditional trade unionism.

In her account of the Central American Network of Women in Solidarity with Maquila Workers, Jennifer Bickham Mendez (2002) discusses the failure of trade unionism to support the needs and rights of women workers in terms that echo the situation in Bangladesh. Here, too, women's organizations have opted for an incremental accretion of rights at work, what the Network call a strategy of "radical reformism" or "self-contained radicalism," which acknowledges institutional constraints and seeks to work for change within them. Rather than seeking to seize the state or overthrow the capitalist system, radical reformism starts from the current realities of the lives of women workers with a view to a strategy of gradual improvement, given the existing political and economic conditions: as one of its workers said, "We are asking for the minimum. We are not even questioning the exploitation of workers. If the goal of the code of ethics were to dismantle the system of capitalism, we would be fried" (cited in Mendez 2002: 133). Such a negotiating stance clearly has its limitations, but it reflects a perspective, grounded in present reality of women's lives, that distinguishes between what is desirable and what is possible in situations of extreme poverty.

TRANSLATING RIGHTS INTO ACTION: VOICE AND EXIT

The hostility of employers to trade unions, combined with the male-dominated culture of the trade union movement, goes some way towards explaining the low levels of organization among women workers in the export factories in Bangladesh. Upholding the right to organize through trade sanctions may not rectify these deeply entrenched biases within the trade union movement, but it would open the way for alternative forms of organization to flourish. However, it would not necessarily translate into mass activism on the part of women garment workers for reasons that relate to the critical tradeoff that the wage workers, particularly female wage workers, face in an underdeveloped, labor-abundant economy: the tradeoff between access to employment and conditions of employment. The predominantly male workforce in Bangladesh's formal economy, most of whom are employed by the public sector, has not faced this tradeoff in quite the same way. Male workers were able to improve their standards at work *and* retain their jobs because of the protection provided by state employment, by barriers to trade, and by their own ability to exclude less privileged workers, male as well as female. While trade liberalization and the ongoing "de-nationalization" of state-owned industries are changing this situation, the fact that the minimum wage in these sectors is more than double the country's per capita GNP, and several multiples of the wages in the informal economy, is evidence of their success.

The rest of the workforce, however, has always been denied access to formal employment by various forms of social closure, including the restrictive practices of organized workers themselves. For these nonunionized workers, there is a stark tradeoff between exclusion from work and exploitation at work. Women workers are particularly cautious about taking action because they fear losing jobs in a society that offers women very few economic opportunities (Dannecker 2002; Kabeer and Mahmud 2003). After women's long history of exclusion from paid work in the public domain, the garment industry has provided them with their first large-scale opportunity to enter a relatively formal form of employment. In an era when the male breadwinner model is breaking down under the pressures of poverty, households are increasingly looking to women's economic contributions as an essential component of their livelihoods. And for women themselves, whatever problems they face within the garment industry, the options outside are far bleaker. They are reluctant to jeopardize the concrete gains they have made in the present for the uncertain gains in the future that struggles in the workplace might bring. They know well that for every woman who is prepared to fight, many others are prepared to take her place on acquiescent terms.

This reality suggests a major flaw in how labor standards are being posed in current debates. The focus is almost entirely on the traded sectors of national economies, which are either conflated in the public imagination with the whole economy of the country or else treated in isolation from the rest of the economy. Anti-sweatshop activists constantly compare the wages women earn in these industries with the prices their products sell for in richer countries or, alternatively, with the wages earned by workers in the equivalent sector in richer countries. Yet, while these comparisons may be useful for campaigning purposes, neither of these prices influence the labor-market decisions of women workers in Bangladesh. Instead, it is wages and conditions that prevail in the alternative forms of employment available to them, together with the prospect of having no job at all, that exercise the greatest influence. In other words, it is the conditions that prevail in the wider economy, particularly in the informal economy in which the vast majority of women workers are concentrated, rather than those in the export sector, that help to shape their "exit" options and to determine what they are prepared to risk their jobs for.

Similar considerations operate elsewhere in the world. They explain the cautious approach adopted by the Central Network of Women in Central America discussed earlier. They are also evident in Hart's discussion of the failure of trade unions in South Africa to organize women working in the garment sector to press for higher wages and better working conditions. This failure reflected not only the opposition of the employers, but also "broader processes of labor force formation and the desperate search by

huge numbers of dispossessed people for a modicum of economic and social security" (Gillian Hart 1995; cited in Shahra Razavi 1999: 678).

As long as there is an untapped pool of female labor available and willing to take up employment in export-oriented manufacturing, or a large informal economy in which wages and conditions are far worse than those that prevailed in the export sector, the ability of workers employed in these sectors to collectively bargain for improvements in their own situation is likely to be limited. Nor will linking global labor standards to trade agreements help them very much. As Jayati Ghosh (2000) puts it,

One important reason why progressive elements in the South have tended to oppose labor-standards-based trade sanctions, is because typically the worst labor conditions are to be found not in exporting industries but in a range of traditional and service sector activities. Thus, in most developing countries, exporting industries are able to survive and profit from low wages and terrible working conditions simply because the other job alternatives for workers are even worse or are non-existent . . . Quite often, workers themselves see the expansion of employment in export-related activities as a positive enlargement of employment choice, and therefore welcome it, even though it implies conditions, which are in themselves unsatisfactory and certainly much worse than those prevailing in developed countries.

SOCIAL POLICIES FOR THE POOR IN POOR COUNTRIES: GENDER PERSPECTIVES

Perspectives "from below" of the kind discussed in this paper offer a different and a more gendered standpoint from which to view the concerns raised in global debates about labor standards. When those who support the social clause express fears about the "race to the welfare bottom," they serve to remind us that workers in different parts of the world are inserted into this race on very different terms. In the poorer countries of the world, socially protected full-time employment only ever applied to a very small proportion of the total labor force, mainly those who worked in formal, usually public sector, employment, and made up at most 10 percent of the workforce. It applied to an even smaller proportion of working women in these countries, the vast majority of whom were to be found in the informal economy, which provided little or no protection of any kind. These latter are likely to have different livelihood priorities from those who have enjoyed, and are now seeking to defend, relatively high levels of social protection.

Similarly, when those who oppose the social clause express concerns about the possible negative implications for employment, the "view from

below" reminds us that it is women workers who stand to lose most, should these fears be realized, because they are most likely to be found in industries, or sectors of industries, that are vulnerable to social clause sanctions. And finally, while both sides to the debate refer to the ILO's core labor standards as representing the international consensus, the view from below reminds us that the ILO's tripartite structure of government, business, and organized labor has so far excluded any participation by women workers, particularly those in the informal economy. It may well be that, if they were heard, they would consider the right to organize and to engage in collective bargaining to be meaningless rights in the absence of the right to work or to alternative means of survival.

As noted above, the logic of the analysis in this paper points to the need to move away from the narrow preoccupation with labor standards in the globally traded sector to a consideration of working conditions in the wider economy. These ultimately determine the willingness of workers, all workers, to stand up for their rights. Some of the strategies adopted as part of the anti-sweatshop movement clearly have a role to play in the struggle to improve workers' rights. The development of codes of conduct by companies allows them to be held accountable by their shareholders and the public at large. Initiatives that bring unions, NGOs, and companies together to ensure compliance with agreed codes of conduct help to strengthen the norm and practice of corporate social responsibility. Attempts to enforce the social clause through trade agreements are also likely to improve the labor standards of some workers in some economies.

However, all of these strategies are partial in their focus. As Women Working Worldwide (a UK-based NGO working with labor organizations around the world) points out, most women workers engage in undocumented and often unremunerated work in domestic, agricultural, and industrial sectors, beyond the reach of existing national as well as international regulation. Even within the export industries, women's participation is often carried out within the home or in small workshops at the end of a companies' subcontracting chain so that they are more likely to be employed on a part-time, casual, or temporary basis than men.

The social clause, on the other hand, is targeted to paid work, and moreover, to paid work in the formal economy. It is highly unlikely that the global labor standards it seeks to promote can be enforced beyond the boundaries of the formal economy, given the massive amount of resources, both financial and administrative, that would be required. As a result, the implementation of the social clause could very well lead to even greater differentials in pay and working condition between workers in the formal and informal economy and, by extension, to greater differentials between male and female workers (Women Working Worldwide 1996; see also Angela Hale 1996).

If the struggle for decent conditions at work has become increasingly interdependent at the global level, so that lower labor standards in one country threaten labor standards in all, it is even more interdependent at the local level. As long as an informal economy exists in which workers have no rights at all, it will dampen the willingness of those who have managed to enter the better-paid export sector to fight for improvements in their labor standards. The struggle for labor standards needs to be broadened and made more inclusive by transforming itself into a struggle for a universal "social floor," so that all workers, men as well as women, urban as well as rural, formal as well as informal, in work and without it, are able to organize for their other rights without fear of jeopardizing their means of survival.

For the poor in general, the institution of a social floor that guaranteed access to the basic means of survival could enable them to engage as citizens in wider struggles for social justice in their society. For poor women in particular, it could provide the basis from which they could challenge their dual subordination within the home and at work. It would give them the leverage to challenge the patriarchal contract within the family, a leverage that they have otherwise had to acquire through participation in paid work in highly discriminatory labor markets. And it would promote their leverage vis-à-vis their employers in the workplace by providing them with resources to fall back on should their struggle for rights at work threaten to jeopardize their jobs.

The demand for a "social" floor should consequently be seen as both the object of struggle but also as an important precondition for strengthening the capacity for struggle. An international labor movement that mobilized around the global promotion for workers' rights, rather than the selective enforcement of labor standards, would give strategic and simultaneous importance to a global campaign for a universal social floor. It would also lend legitimacy to local efforts to strengthen the capacity of workers to engage in collective action on their own behalf, regardless of whether they belonged to the formal or the informal economy, or produced for domestic or global markets.

BEYOND LABOR STANDARDS: INTERNATIONAL SOLIDARITY IN THE CONTEXT OF GLOBAL INEQUALITY

The arguments for a universalist approach to social security at the global level are the contemporary version of the arguments that gave rise to the universalist approaches to social policy at the national level in an earlier era of capitalism and to the "de-commodification" of labor (Gosta Esping-Andersen 1990). European welfare states undertook to make access to a basic real income a matter of right rather than a gift, welfare, or charity, thereby rescuing workers from their status as commodities, to be bought

and sold in the marketplace, into citizens with the right to have rights. The New Deal did the same for American workers. Today, as globalization and the threat of capital flight undermines the capacity of the more affluent countries of the world to continue to protect their workers, they, too, face a version of the tradeoff between exploitation and exclusion: "the more [they] do to improve the material situation of the poorest among the workers, the scarcer the jobs become, and the more people there are who are deprived of the privilege of having one" (Philippe Van Parijs 1996: 63).

The idea of a social floor has been taken up in Europe as a campaign for a basic citizenship income (Standing 1999). It argues the principle that every adult citizen within the EU should be automatically and unconditionally entitled to a level of income that allows them a basic modicum of security in their lives. Such an income can be phased in gradually, starting with a partial basic income, and increased to a full basic income, or it can be phased in partially to those whose need is greatest and then spread to achieve universal coverage.

Redistributive cash transfers of this kind are unlikely to be practical in the context of the poorer economies of the world, but the principle of a universal social floor, which covers the minimum basic needs of food, health, and shelter, could be operationalized by building on, and improving, existing systems of social security, including employment guarantee schemes, food-for-work programs, public food distribution systems, micro-finance services, and low-cost health insurance schemes. A commitment to basic universal services, particularly in the fields of health and education, has existed in most developing countries and would have existed in many more if they had not been dismantled under pressure from international financial institutions, which are dominated of course by many of the same richer countries that are now leading the demand for global labor standards (Judith Tendler 2000; Stephen Devereux 2002).

If the rights of labor are to be defended today, social policies will clearly have to defend the principle of universalism at both national and global levels. However, any proposal for inclusive social policies comes up against the barriers posed by the unequal distribution of resources within and across nations. Clearly, some of the costs of instituting a minimum social floor could – and should – be financed through domestic resources. However, as R. Beattie (2000) points out, in countries where large numbers of people cannot afford to contribute to their own social security, these resources have to be provided through the public budget. The extremely low tax to GDP ratio that prevails in a number of countries, including Bangladesh, reflects their failure to take collective responsibility for dealing with consequences of poverty and inequality within their own citizenship.

At the same time, however, the level of per capita GNPs in these countries indicates the limits to redistributive policies within national contexts. The

per capita GNP in Bangladesh, for instance, was \$370 in 1999 compared to \$32,000 in the United States. The shockingly low ratio of development assistance to GNP in the richer countries is indicative of their failure to seriously address the issue of global inequality. The US, for instance, allocated 0.10 percent of its GNP to development assistance in 1999, of which a minute 0.16 percent went to the least developed countries in the world. The United States is not alone in the meagerness of its contribution to global equity. The wealthier nations of the world in general perform badly in their attempts to address global inequality, with the seven wealthiest countries (the G7) performing proportionately worst (Nancy Birdsall and David Roodman 2003).

In a global economy that is becoming increasingly interdependent and increasingly unequal, a struggle for some degree of redistribution from North to South, from rich to poor, from capital to labor, and from more to less privileged forms of labor can be the only basis on which claims to international solidarity on workers' rights can have any moral force. Such redistribution, moreover, has to be a matter of right rather than gift, welfare, charity, or "aid." It requires measures of the kind proposed by the Brandt Commission at the end of the 1970s, which recommended that countries be taxed on a sliding scale related to national income in order to generate revenue for a global social fund. The Brandt Report was overtaken by the debt crisis in the developing world, the ascendance of neoliberal ideologies within the international community, and the turn to market forces as the solution to social need. By the end of the 1990s, as the failure of unregulated markets to meet social need have become manifestly clear to many in the developed and developing world, proposals for a system of global taxation are once again resurfacing in the global agenda. However, they continue to founder on the rocks of neoliberal resistance. Draft documents for the UN Conference on Financing for Development in Monterey in 2002 called for an international tax organization to develop a system of transfers from richest to poorest countries in an efficient and coherent manner. This resolution was dropped from the final document because a number of the governments, led by the United States, were opposed to considering any type of redistributive measure (Lourdes Benería 2003). They emphasized instead the importance of fostering markets to help poorer countries: in particular, they extolled the virtues of free trade.

In other words, "*plus ça change. ...*" (Benería 2003: 165). Powerful countries continue to preach the value of free trade when faced with demands for global redistribution by poorer countries but practice protectionism to placate powerful political lobbies at home. The late Julius Nyerere, a life-long socialist and one of Africa's most respected elder statesmen, had some blunt words to say on this matter in a speech he delivered shortly before he died. Let me end this article with his

observations because they provide a pithy summary of some of my main points:

Under the relentless pressure of unfettered globalization, the world is becoming one huge free market. That is what the developed countries want. And to avoid trouble from their own workers while facilitating the process of globalization, they now have this idea of demanding universal levels of social standards based on their own capacities to meet them. And this means that by a legally binding treaty, economic sanctions would be applied against any country which fails to enforce such standards internally.

Yet the idea that the rich countries should be legally bound to help the poor ones to meet those social standards is rejected. Proposals for an international tax of any kind, for any purpose, are dismissed as absurd. Indeed, the poor countries come under immense pressure even to cut back on domestic redistributive taxation. Under international conditionalities, it is made increasingly difficult for these countries to tax their own rich in order to improve the social standards of their own poor. (Nyerere 1998: 2)

His conclusion resonates with the conclusion of this paper. The only basis on which global labor standards are likely to be either possible or compatible with the principles of justice, given the present unequal international order, is if they are linked to, and conditional on, a holistic, deliberate, and consistent program to meet the basic needs and promote the human dignity of women and men wherever they are located in the world. In the absence of such a program, the social clause will end up as merely one more weapon with which the powerful countries of the world can continue to dominate the less powerful.

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ARTICLES

NOTES

- ¹ It should be noted that not all of the eight conventions have received the same degree of support internationally. Ninety-five countries have ratified all eight conventions and a further thirty-five (including Bangladesh) have ratified seven of the eight. The US, which has ratified only two of these conventions, is on the "less support" end of the spectrum, along with a handful of mainly developing countries.
- ² Some of the facts produced by the NLC were subsequently disputed by journalists writing in the *Los Angeles Times* ("Stitching Together a Crusade") and the *New York Times* ("Hondurans in 'Sweatshops' See Opportunity"), who suggested that many workers in the very factories the NLC had targeted perceived their jobs rather differently than the evaluations provided by the NLC.
- ³ The Multi-Fibre Agreement of 1974 was put in place in the interests of "orderly trade" between developed and developing countries in garments and textiles. The anti-surge clause allowed quotas to be imposed when exports from any developing country to a developed country exceeds 6 percent a year.
- ⁴ Such as Fatema Akhter in the opening quote.

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