

**Research Article**

## **Subordination of Women Between Patriarchy and Imperialism: Can They Speak?**

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### **ABSTRACT**

This paper addresses how Gayatri Spivak's theory about the possibility of the subaltern to speak helps understand the ideas and discourse about poor Bengali women and the ideas and discourse used by poor women in Bangladesh in Spivak's text. This study is based on ground-level experiences of 'gender and the globalization process of garments production.' Five apparel factories were selected through snowball sampling, located in different parts of Dhaka. The respondents in this study were from different professional levels in the garment factories and other stakeholders. This study finds the traumatic experiences of women workers at the workplaces, justifying Gayatri Spivak's analysis of the possibility of the subaltern to speak.

**Keywords:** Subordination, Patriarchy, Gender discrimination, Imperialism

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### **INTRODUCTION**

Women in Bangladesh are one of the most vulnerable, discriminated, and exploited groups, even though they constitute almost half of the country's total population. A lifelong dependency-childhood on the father, youth on the husband, and elderly on the son-makes Bangladeshi women subjugated. Women in Bangladesh experience neglect and various forms of discrimination and violence systematically from birth. These practices are tacitly condoned and legitimized through laws and customs in the name of cultural practices that blatantly discriminate against women. Ironically, women are trying to adjust to this discrimination without resistance.

Women have very low bargaining power due to the patriarchal culture and Islamic rules. Even though women in rural areas contribute to their family's income, important decisions remain with the husband. They are always oppressed and subordinated (Ridwan and Susanti, 2019). In Bangladesh, men dominate, oppress, and exploit women, accepted by social institutions because of their patriarchal structure. In the family, women are considered passive dependents and property of their husbands. Women are also excluded from economic and political power through patriarchy (Hossen, 2020). Patriarchy leads to gender inequality and the subordination of women to the extent that females do not have control over their sexuality. Radical feminists define patriarchy as a social system in which men appropriate all social roles and keep women in subordinate positions (Kambarami, 2006). Sexual violence against women is considered a gender-specific human rights violation, perpetuating women's subordination and patriarchal structures throughout all levels of society (Banarjee, 2020). The battle for women's suffrage in the English Parliament in 1866 marked the earliest recorded legal battle for equality between men and women. Since then, the issue of gender equality has grown to become a global concern. While it is generally agreed that human rights apply to all human beings, women's fundamental rights and freedom have been limited by patriarchal practices and traditions. The situation is worse in many African societies where colonial legacies and patriarchal culture assign superior roles to men and subordinate roles to women (Jaiyeola, 2020). Women's exclusion from ownership of a means of production (land) and subsistence (wage or other forms of income) gives rise to two forms of domestic patriarchy: premodern and modern. Women's exclusion from agricultural landownership, along with small landownership, leads to patriarchal exploitation of labor in rural households and creates premodern domestic patriarchy (Kocobicak, 2022). Patriarchal culture manifests gender inequality not only in a family environment but also in an educational environment, work environment, etc. Domestic violence experienced by women is a form of gender inequality (Oktavia et. al., 2022). Women are neither secure in domestic places nor in public places. They are ill-treated by husbands and in-laws, sometimes in their own houses, where they are assaulted by their own parents and close relatives. Women are not secure in streets and workplaces, where they are vulnerable and fall prey to police, antisocial individuals, moneylenders, male colleagues, bosses, and are subjected to innumerable indignities, perhaps in higher frequency than in most civilized societies (Singh, 2021).

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

### **Gayatri Spivak's theory of Subaltern Subject**

Gayatri Spivak critiques Western scholarship on the subject. In the chapter "Can the Subaltern Speak," Spivak frames her analysis by problematizing the Western subject,

singling out Michel Foucault and Gilles Deleuze's conversation, which emphasizes the most important contribution of French poststructuralist theory. Spivak argues that it is impossible for contemporary French intellectuals to imagine the kind of power and desire that would inhabit the unnamed subject of the Other of Europe (p. 280). She believes that this scholarship systematically ignores the question of ideology and its implication in intellectual and economic history (p. 271). Spivak asserts that Western intellectual production reinforces the logic of Western economic expansion, ignoring the international division of labor. For Spivak, contemporary political economy divides the world into two groups: the first and third world, namely capitalist and the field of investment. Capitalist world invests their capital for production in third-world nations where labor is cheap, and after the production of goods, it returns to the first world for consumption. Through subcontracting chains, multinational companies are freer to resist workers' struggles (p. 288). This case is doubly effaced for women. Spivak states, "...both as an object of colonialist historiography and as a subject of insurgency, the ideological construction of gender keeps the male dominant. If, in the context of colonial production, the subaltern has no history and cannot speak, the subaltern as a female is even more deeply in shadow" (p. 287-88).

This subordination of women in third-world countries is conjoined by patriarchy and imperialism. Their positional vulnerability makes them more silent than men. Spivak says, "Between patriarchy and imperialism, subject-constitution and object-formation, the figure of a woman disappears, not in the pristine nothingness, but into a violent shuttling, which is the displaced figuration of a 'third-world woman' caught between tradition and modernization" (p. 306). Referring to the story of Sati of Bengali women, a social sanction of sacrificing the life of a widow through burning with her departed husband, she says that there is no significance of Sati. This is only a practice of the society that forces helpless women to sacrifice their lives, but there is no room for women to resist this malpractice. In her words, "...the proper noun Sati, with no significance other than the ritual burning of the helpless widow as a sacrificial offering who can then be saved. There is no space from which the sexed subaltern subject can speak" (p. 307). Spivak's argument about the possibility of the subaltern to speak is ambiguous. Though she concludes that the subaltern as female cannot be heard or read (p. 308), at the end of her chapter, she refers to the case of Bhuvanewari Bhaduri's suicide, which conveys a message about her virginity and simultaneously silence resistance against social practice. Spivak describes the reason why Bhuvanewari had chosen her menstruation period for committing suicide. She says, 'Bhuvanewari had known that her death would be diagnosed as the outcome of illegitimate passion. She had, therefore, waited for the onset of menstruation' (p. 307). Bhuvanewari's strategy, waiting for menstruation to escape false blame for an illicit relationship, is a

manifestation of exploring the truth. Therefore, there is scope to rethink Spivak's conclusion about the impossibility of the subaltern to speak.

## **METHODOLOGY AND DATA ANALYSIS**

This study adopts a qualitative approach to achieve the objective of this research. The data were collected through face-to-face in-depth interviews from 32 respondents, including both women and men from different areas of the readymade garments industry in Bangladesh. The respondents included garments workers, garments owners, administrative officers, managers, labor experts, and other professionals who provided valuable data. A detailed table of respondents is included in the appendix of this paper. The interviews were recorded using a tape recorder for further data analysis. The note-taking process was also adopted where recording of the interviews was not allowed. The data analysis process started right after finishing the first interview. The raw data of the recorded interviews were transcribed, coded, and categorized according to the characteristics of the data. The researcher subsequently analyzed the categories and obtained two major themes of the study, which are discussed in the findings and discussion section of this study.

## **FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION**

### **The Situation of Women in Bangladesh: Lifelong Subjugation and Vulnerability**

Bangladesh's traditional society is deeply patriarchal, with males holding higher values and establishing gender roles. Men are considered heads of households, with decision-making powers and economic control vested in them, and considered potential providers for family maintenance (ADB, 2001, p. 4). Patriarchal society favors male children, granting them preferential treatment, education, and better nutrition, while assuming that girls will be responsible for the family at maturity (Zaman, 1999, p. 41). Parents fear their daughters' safety in school, as chastity and reputation determine their value. Patriarchal society believes girls' ultimate destiny is to be good house wives and financially secure. As potential groom (economically solvent) is considered more valuable than her education, parents try to search a potential groom when her daughter reaches at fourteen or fifteen and finally do it without her consent.

Violence against women, including domestic violence, workplace violence, sexual harassment, forced prostitution, trafficking, and Fatwa (judgment by locals in religion), is a severe form of subordination (ADB, 2001, p. 5; Zaman, 1999, p. 37).

Women's participation in economic activities is crucial for empowerment, but gender, activity type, and residence vary. Most middle and upper-class women aim to become

good housewives, preferring to stay home (Friedan, 1963). Historically and culturally it is believed that domestic chores are the sole responsibility of women. Due to the Purdah restriction, participation of women in wage earning activities outside the home spheres remains quite narrow. In practice, purdah has, until recently, largely resulted in the absence of women's voices from debates and analyses of social and economic change and, when incorporated, their voices have been awkwardly and often incorrectly characterized (Feldman, 2001, p. 1100). Historical records of women's lives and negotiations make it challenging to imagine them suddenly challenging patriarchal regulation and securing wage employment in the emerging export sector.

### **Women Oppression in Work Place: Can they Resist?**

Lower-class women in rural areas assist male partners in post-harvesting activities without visible economic return. Recently, women and adolescent girls are engaged in agricultural, construction, shrimp processing, and garment industries, particularly landless women from hardcore poor groups (ADB, 2001, p. 11). Women laborers in capitalist countries earn low wages and work tirelessly, receiving little in return, while first world countries invest in third world countries to reduce production costs. Multinational corporations subcontract with local producers and western consumers, leading to lower prices for local producers and contributing to first world diseases through command-based economic production (2001, p. 114). They employ various strategies, including informalization, casualization, and feminization, to tackle labor challenges and meet survival challenges (Ali et. al., 2023; Sarker, 2007; Steans, 2000; Sassen, 2004; Elson, 1989). The new strategy has denied workers rights to regular payment, permanent contracts, job security, safe environments, and freedom of association, affecting working class women and affecting urban life. One worker says;

“I have three children. My husband used to work in the garments now he cannot do work for sickness. I earn 7500 taka per month from where I pay 4500 taka for house rent. How will I survive with rest of the money for a month?”

#RMG 02; Age: ( 20-30) Education: Primary; Marital Status: Married; Children: 03; Religion: Muslim.

Casualization of the workforce is a gender issue, with temporary workers receiving lower wages and lacking labor standards, while male workers seek other employment opportunities and voice against discrimination. Employers are increasingly employing women to streamline factory operations, a strategy that is a key strategy for providing low wages. They can't make any protest for their exploitation as men workers do. One of my interviewees says;

“We are docile, submissive and active. We are less collective and unionized. Bosses always give over target but we (women workers) never protest in fear of losing jobs. Male workers protest it because they don’t have fear of losing jobs. They have lot of scopes for work outside garments. If they lose their jobs here they can shift in another place that we cannot do. If we lose our job we have to keep hungry for want of food”.

#RMG QC 15; Age: 30+; Education: High School; Marital Status: Married; Children: 03; Religion: Hindu.

Female workers receive significantly lower wages than males for the same job, but many view this as normal. Employers arbitrarily set differential wages without resistance. Employers object to wage disparities, stating equal pay for male and female workers in the same job is ideal, but continue the practice without prior notice. Another manager responded by saying, ‘We are doing a great favour to these women by giving them jobs, because they are illiterate, lower caste women living in the slums, and some are even prostitutes.’ On top of that, he asserted that ‘women here are very easy to manage; we can get more women with lower salary, while the men demand more’ (RMG Manager 11). From this dialogue it is clear that women workers are always getting lower wages and facing discrimination but they are unable to make any protest because of their positional vulnerability.

Workplace harassment, often targeting women factory workers, is a prevalent issue characterized by high job insecurity, low pay, poor working conditions, and unequal power relations. Dina Siddique says, women are likely to be victims of sexual harassment because they lack power, occupy insecure positions or are socialized into suffering in silence (Siddique, 2003, p. 17). The study reveals male supervisors physically assault female workers, using abusive language, and granting privileges to handsome and sexually attractive workers. One worker expressed her views in this way;

“If you have big ‘Buk’ (breast) you don’t need anything, you will get job, and more salary, even leave. Once I asked for leave to my boss but refused. Then my colleague told me that ‘give me your form I will manage your leave’. I replied her, is he your ‘Vatar’ (husband) that he will agree if you request him? O ma! (Surprise) truly she could manage him because she had good relation with him as she is more beautiful than me”.

#RMG Worker 05; Age: 35+; Education: Primary; Marital Status: Divorced; Children: 02; Religion: Muslim.

Workers also reported that manager sometimes calls smart workers in the night, make gossip and sex with them but workers never disclose it to others for shame and fear of losing job. Their harassments are more acute in the street. Young or not so young, married or unmarried, pretty or not so pretty, smart or not so smart, all women of reproductive age told me that when they get off from work, every single night they fear men will stop them on the dark roads and take away their 'Izzat'. One worker explained her experience in this way;

“Once when all my colleagues left me, as my home at the end of the way, as soon I reached in a dark place one male suddenly came, touched my breast I shouted and pushed him. I saved my Izzat (saving from rape) by the help of Allah. Though I have not enough strength, I was able to drop him on the ground and as soon as I ran away. After that event every day I feel fear when I cross this place. My heart throbs. I can hear my heart beat in my ears. I walk very fast so that no one can inflict any harm on me”.

# RMG Worker 06 Age: (25-30) Education: High School; Marital Status: Unmarried; Children: 0; Religion: Muslim.

Fear of being sexualized further in public discourse or fear losing jobs deters women workers from speaking out on the issue (CPD, 2004, p. 8). Victim pretends that the situation is not happening nor has no effect. She tries to ignore the harassment by blaming her own fate. During field visit of my own research, one garment worker says;

“Factory is like a prison yet I work here because I don't have any alternative. I can't make any resistance against their (senior boss, manager of the factory) misbehavior because I don't want to lose my jobs. I have always thought of my children. I have worked in a factory even when I did not like because I need money to survive. If I make any protest or claim more wages, they will sack me. Then what I will do? How I will feed our children if we loss job?” Another interviewee says, “Please don't report my speech to newspapers. If you publish it I will lose my job”.

# RMG Worker 08; Age: (25-35) Education: Primary; Marital Status: Unmarried; Children: 0; Religion: Muslim.

Workers' testimonies reveal women's inability to protest injustices due to their vulnerable social position. Gradually, they have become more vocal, organized, and aware of their rights, using diverse resistance strategies (Khan, 2005, p. 224). Labor organization

leaders negotiate with factory owners, sharing traumatic experiences. However, direct communication is limited, and no one is interested in discussing the issue with the factory owner. As they are selected by the management to speak, they don't share their experiences, which can be negative for the employer. I became ensured from the interviewees that in every garment there are some pre-selected workers to speak to others who speak only in favor of the factory management, not in favor of workers. I ask them why they play such paradoxical roles and I got their responses in this way;

“We are asked by the authority not to say any negative things about the factory. They tell us that if we tell negative things factory will be closed and then we will loss our job. If we don't care their words and express our experience, we become fired from job. We don't tell any negatives to others. When Babura (visitors) come and ask us our problems, we tell them we are fine because we don't want to loss our jobs”.

#RMG Worker 01; Age: (18-25) Education: HSC; Marital Status: Married; Children: 02; Religion: Muslim.

As garment worker always in fear of losing their jobs, for the security of the workers and getting more reliable information I collected their home address during my visits of the factories and later I visited their homes in off day to hear from them.

## CONCLUSION

The preceding discussion leads to the conclusion that the combined effects of both patriarchy and imperialism render women's positions invisible, as their voices remain unrepresented in dominant power discourses. They are akin to voiceless victims in society, much like the ritual burning of sati in India. In recent years, there has been a noticeable shift, with women attempting to protest, albeit on a limited scale. They are raising their voices, albeit through unconventional means. However, their silent protests often go unrepresented. Therefore, it would be unfair to claim that women, as subalterns, cannot speak. They can speak in different, albeit less effective, ways, which often remain unnoticed.

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