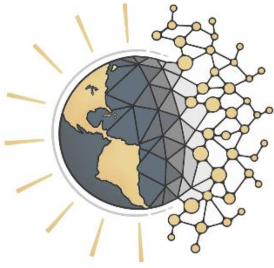

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Theorizing Labor Control in the Global Apparel Industry:
A Case of Bangladesh

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Abstract

This article looks at the Bangladeshi apparel industry and critically draws on the extant literature on labor control to theorize how market and non-market actors control apparel workers and exploit their labor power at the bottom of a global value chain, reinforcing the modern world-system as a capitalist world-economy. My research draws on empirical evidence collected from 20 apparel factories in Dhaka, Bangladesh, and secondary sources to identify a new regime of labor control. I call this regime of labor control social despotism—a regime that deploys legal means, illegal coercion, informal power relations, and structural violence to dominate and exploit workers. Social despotism is created by two reinforcing forms of oppression: instrumental oppression and structural oppression. Market actors organize instrumental oppression to normalize coercion in the factory, creating the forced consent of workers to their exploitation. Market and non-market actors organize structural oppression, limiting workers' collective bargaining power within the factory and marginalizing their existence in social life. Both forms of oppression are present throughout four distinct phases of labor control: searching for the cheapest labor forces and manufacturing sites; recruiting workers; organizing work; and socializing, rewarding, and punishing workers. In short, social despotism constitutes a new regime of labor control within the world's second-largest apparel industry during the current phase of the modern world-system, where social institutions, including the state and family, collaborate with market institutions, such as multinational corporations and manufacturing industries, to exert control over workers both within and beyond factory settings.

Keywords: apparel industry, Bangladesh, Dhaka, instrumental oppression, labor control, RMG factories, social despotism, structural oppression, and sweatshop

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The global apparel industry witnessed the most brutal industrial accident in its recorded history on 24 April 2013. The Rana Plaza, an eight-story building housing several textile factories located in an industrial district of Dhaka, Bangladesh collapsed, killing 1,133 garment workers and injuring 2,500 (Smith 2016). This accident happened because factory authorities ignored prior warnings from building inspectors and didn't address observable cracks in the building's structure. Workers were forced to continue working in unsafe conditions, leading to the tragic and preventable loss of life. Since many reputed Western brands purchased their clothes from these factories, news of the tragedy reached millions globally and made headlines across the world.

Shakila Jahan , 46, a sewing machine operator, experienced extreme levels of exploitation, physical abuse, bullying, and violence during her 25-year career in the industry. She began working for $13/month in 1997, and now works an average of 12 hours a day, 26 days a month, and receives $120/month. In 2021, she estimated that 70 workers on her shop floor could make 1,400 regular shirts or 1,600 pairs of pants in a 12-hour working day, equivalent to 20 shirts or 23 pairs of pants per person per day. If a regular shirt in Western markets costs $30, she generates a value of $600 a day. Over 26 working days, she produces goods valued at $15,600. However, she is compensated only $4.60 (0.008%) daily out of the $600 or $120 monthly against $15,600. Shakila estimated that it only takes four days of work to create enough goods in order to cover her entire month's salary, while still creating profits for factory owners, even after deducting all other costs. In essence, in a month of work, a worker receives no compensation for 22 days of work. Shakila has lost her job three times during her career because she joined protest movements against factory injustices and for higher wages. Now working at her fourth factory, she has stopped attending such protests, but has not given up her desire to see working conditions improve.

Zobeda Jannat, 41, a worker in the finishing section, lives in a slum with her husband and two school-going children. She gets up at 5 am to access a shared kitchen to cook meals for her family for the entire day. She feeds her children, prepares herself, and takes two meals while walking to the factory. During the 50-minute walk from home to the factory, she must work to avoid sexual harassers on the streets. In addition, when her husband or children demand extra attention in the morning, she is forced to walk fast to reach the factory before 8 am. Ms. Jannat works 12 hours a day in the factory, persevering through numerous challenges that include bullies, threats, and other humiliations. After work, she returns home by 8-9 pm, again encountering sexual predators in the streets. She then cleans dishes, takes a shower, listens to her children, and eats dinner before going to bed by 11 pm. Due to the severe injustices she faces at the factory, she attempted to leave her job three times, but her husband forced her to continue working there. She described domestic oppression at home, saying "I give my salary to my husband every month…and he makes all decisions in the family." If she does not give him the money, he "behaves badly" with

her, even threatening to prevent her children from being able to attend school. She lamented, “I wanted to divorce him, but I could not because of my children’s future.”

Together, the three stories described above reveal the internal structure of today’s global apparel industry functioning within the modern world-system: a reliance on the world’s cheapest labor, super-exploitation of workers, death-trap factories, abusive bosses, brutal suppression of workers’ resistance, violation of labor rights, starvation wages, marginalized workers, radical pessimism, patriarchy, and fetid slum lives. These stories frame the central research question of this paper: How do market and non-market actors control apparel workers at the bottom of a global value chain to create surplus values to reinforce the modern world-system as a capitalist world-economy? Three specific and interrelated questions are as follows. How do market actors create and recreate different phases of labor control in the global apparel industry, particularly in the Bangladeshi Ready-Made Garment (RMG) industry? How do market actors control workers who are highly conscious about their rights and benefits and highly reactive to their experiences with oppression, repression, deprivation, and exploitation? How do market and non-market actors produce and reproduce, as well as capitalize on, workers’ vulnerability in a factory, street, slum, family, and broader society? Market actors include marketers (e.g., VF Corporation and Adidas) buyers (e.g., H&M and Walmart), financial regulators (e.g., WB, IMF, and ADB), factory owners, managerial teams, hired thugs, trade union leaders, and coworkers. In contrast, non-market actors include various state agencies (e.g., the ministry of industries and industrial police), politicians, bourgeois intellectuals, media persons, slumlords, street men, friends, and family members.

This article first identifies five regimes of labor control within the existing global literature. These regimes are market despotism (Marx 1995), ideological hegemony (Gramsci 1971), managerial hegemony (Braverman 1974), hegemonic despotism (Burawoy 1983), and global hegemonic despotism (Anner 2015; Bonacich and Appelbaum 2000; Fröbel, Heinrichs, and Kreye 1978; Gereffi and Bair 2010). Critically building on theories associated with these regimes of labor control, this paper explores a new regime that better explains the research questions posed above. I call this social despotism—a regime type that deploys legal means, illegal coercion, informal power relationships, and structural violence to control and exploit workers inside and outside factories. It is a new regime because social forces, e.g., the postcolonial state[1], religion, community, and family, join market entities, e.g., multinational corporations and manufacturing industries, to dominate workers. This regime examines labor control in the following four phases: (1) searching for the cheapest laborers and manufacturing sites, (2) recruiting workers, (3)

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[1] As a postcolonial state, Bangladesh is characterized by weak and unaccountable institutions, a lack of rule of law, pervasive corruption, diverse political regimes such as one-party, socialist, military, and authoritarian democratic systems, a clientelist political culture, unplanned urbanization, widespread poverty, and limited access to quality education and healthcare.

organizing work, and (4) socializing, rewarding, and punishing workers. Two forms of oppression[2] exist in the four phases of labor control: instrumental oppression—organized by market actors, and structural oppression—practiced by market and non-market actors. Instrumental oppression is defined as a system of labor control that normalizes coercion within the factory and creates the forced consent of workers to their exploitation. Structural oppression is practiced and maintained by a system, e.g., oppressive class relations, patriarchy, informality, dispossession, and poverty.

To explore the research problem stated above, I use three sets of empirical data and national and international media reports. I collected empirical evidence in 2017-2018 and 2021-2022 from 20 factories in Dhaka, Bangladesh. The next section highlights the background of the RMG industry, which originated and thrived in postcolonial Bangladesh. The third section discusses the relevant theories of labor control to develop the idea of social despotism. The fourth section presents methodology and data sources. The findings section is divided into four subsections, each describing a distinct phase of labor control. The paper then discusses the results, aiming to strengthen the theory of social despotism. This article concludes with a summary and recommendations to address the instrumental and structural oppression in the Bangladeshi apparel industry.

Background of the Bangladeshi RMG Industry

The Indian Subcontinent, formerly a prominent British colony, effectively entered the modern world-system in the late 18th century, when the British Raj introduced the concept of private property (Amin 2011; Baran 1957). Then the first major commodity was land, arguably a fictitious one, which could be bought and sold. The colonial administration then began to send a colossal amount of ground rent, along with a diverse range of raw materials, to their home, significantly fueling the British capitalist system (Amin 2011; Bagchi 1983; Baran 1957). According to world-systems analysis, England was a core and the Indian Subcontinent a periphery (Arrighi 2007; Wallerstein 2004). After the end of British rule in 1947, Pakistan and India became two independent nations. Bangladesh was then part of Pakistan and known as East Pakistan (1947-1971). Between 1947 and 1971, West Pakistan maintained a colonial relationship with East Pakistan (Khan 2011). Since 1971, Bangladesh has been an independent country.

Due to its colonial and postcolonial legacy, the Bangladeshi state experienced a variety of political regimes, including a one-party or socialist regime, 1971-1975, a clientelistic authoritarian or military regime, 1975-1990, and a vulnerable democratic regime, 1991-present (Khan 2011). During this time, the dominant political system in this country is patron-clientelism, where power,

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[2] I define oppression as the formal or informal exercise of legal or illegal institutional power that serves to dominate, marginalize, or exploit a specific group or social community within a particular spatiotemporal context.

wealth, and resources are mostly distributed along party lines. Previously, Bangladesh's economy relied on foreign aid, but since the early 1990s, it has primarily depended on foreign capital and remittances. Some earlier significant policy reforms toward market liberalization or privatization, prompted and pressured by the World Bank, IMF, and ADB, were undertaken, including the Revised Investment Policy of 1975, the New Industrial Policy of 1982, the Revised Industrial Policy of 1986, and the National Industrial Policy of 1991. These policies genuinely promoted export-oriented industries. The Bangladeshi apparel industry, widely known as the Ready-Made Garment (RMG) industry, is one such prominent example.

In another context, this apparel industry emerged from the post-World War II relocation of the Western textile sector to developing countries, including Korea, Vietnam, and Bangladesh. This transition was caused by a combination of factors, such as stagflation (inflation and unemployment) in western societies caused by the overaccumulation of capital (Harvey 2003). In addition, urban riots, strong labor unions, labor unrest, and environmental laws impacted the profit margins of Western capitalists during the 1960s and 1970s (Smith 2016). In order to increase profit rates, Western corporations began relocating their plants abroad, where cheap and exploitable labor was available, and the market and state regulations were favorable (Bonacich and Appelbaum 2000; Fröbel et al. 1978; Mises 2014; Smith 2016). The development and growth of the Bangladeshi apparel industry is thus a typical example of how Western capitalists create new outlets to release their overaccumulated capital at home, or of how core regions exploit the cheap labor force of peripheral regions to achieve high profit margins.

The Bangladeshi apparel industry began operations in 1977 when two factories, Reaz Garments and Juwel Garments, opened in Dhaka and managed to export USD40,000 worth of merchandise to France and Germany in that first year (Ahmed, Greenleaf, and Sacks 2014:259). Another factory, Desh Garments, was built in 1978 and partnered with the South Korean manufacturer Daewoo. Since then, this industry, consisting of woven and knitwear sectors, has seen explosive growth in the volume of clothes produced and in its tremendous contribution to Bangladesh's economy. Today, nearly 4,000 apparel factories (in operation) employ more than 3.6 million workers, of whom 53 percent are women (Anner 2020; Moazzem and Radia 2016). Eighty-three percent of the country's total export earnings in 2022 came from this sector, and its contribution to GDP was more than 9 percent, some USD43 billion (Bangladesh Bank 2022). Bangladesh has the second-largest apparel industry in the world today, and the US is the second-largest importer of Bangladeshi apparel. Recently, Bangladesh has explored new trade partners beyond its traditional North American and European markets. These include Australia, Brazil, Chile, China, India, Japan, Korea, Mexico, Russia, South Africa, and Turkey (Akter 2019).

The 2013 Rana Plaza collapse did lead to some positive changes within the industry, particularly relating to safety and security (Bair, Anner, and Blasi 2020). Two major

organizations—Accord (consisting mainly of European buyers) and Alliance (North American buyers)—began working with the industry and the Bangladeshi state to improve fire, structural, and electrical safety in factories. However, they did not address industry-wide practices of worker exploitation, including violations of workers' rights, poverty wages, and violent suppression of workers and labor leaders (Scheper 2017). In the first few months of the Covid-19 pandemic (December 2019- March 2020), three significant crises struck this industry: the supply of raw materials decreased while their prices increased, many buyers canceled orders, and payments to manufacturers were often delayed (Anner 2020). Workers were hit hardest – more than one million workers lost their jobs, of which 80.4% received no severance.

Two types of factories exist in Bangladesh: compliant and non-compliant. A compliant or contracting factory usually, but not always, complies with labor laws and the buyer code of conduct (Baral 2010). It produces goods for foreign buyers. In Bangladesh, nearly 74% of factories (currently in operation) are considered compliant factories (Moazzem and Radia 2016). Subcontracting or non-compliant factories do not follow any labor laws, do not protect labor rights, and do not adhere to the buyer code of conduct. They produce goods for locally compliant factories and foreign buyers. In Bangladesh, nearly 26% of factories (currently in operation) are known as non-compliant factories (Moazzem and Radia 2016). However, both compliant and non-compliant factories can be labeled as sweatshop factories, "a factory or a homework operation that engages in multiple violations of the law, typically the non-payment of minimum or overtime wages and various violations of health and safety regulations" (Bonacich and Appelbaum 2000:3). The RMG factories also meet another international standard for a sweatshop: wages fail to cover a "socially defined" or a "decent" standard of living and workers still fall below the official poverty line (Bonacich and Appelbaum 2000:4).

Theorizing Labor Control

Marx (1995) introduced the most systematic study of labor control under industrial capitalism. Although the next famous Marxist theory of labor control is found in Gramsci's (1971) work, it was Braverman (1974) who renewed Marxist analysis of work under monopoly capitalism and provided an influential theory of labor control, widely known as "Labor Process Theory" or LPT[3]. These three theorists, particularly Braverman, have re-shaped most of the subsequent studies—both theoretical and empirical—of labor control from the late 1970s to date (Burawoy 1983, 1985; Edwards 1979; Friedman 1977; Littler and Salaman 1982; Knights and Willmott 1990). Since the late 1970s, two major theoretical trends of labor control are found under advanced monopoly or neoliberal capitalism: the theory of the New International Division of Labor (Fröbel et al. 1978;

[3] Here, the LPT refers to the processes of managing and controlling work and workers inside a factory.

Mises 2014) and the global value chain approach (Appelbaum and Lichtenstein 2006; Bonacich and Appelbaum 2000; Dunaway 2014; Gereffi and Bair 2010; Hough 2010). In the following, this article reviews five theories of labor control, and then it critically engages with the theories to develop the idea of social despotism.

Market Despotism

Marx argues that capitalism produces an "accumulation of misery, agony of toil, slavery, ignorance, brutality, and mental degradation" and transforms the "workplace into a despotic, degrading, alienating environment" (Gurley 1980:31-61; Marx 1995:451). He (1995:286) shows that a capitalist, as a private legislator, uses "factory code" to exercise their autocratic power over workers. This code refers to a repressive regulation of workers, by which "all punishments naturally resolve themselves into fines and deductions from wages" (Marx 1995:286). Burawoy (1983:588) calls this "market despotism" or the "economic whip of the market." According to Marx, market despotism emerges when workers solely depend on wages. This regime functions in the factory in three ways: it eliminates opportunities for workers to develop specialized skills, knowledge, and bargaining power; it increases the degree of exploitation of workers to sustain competition in the market; and it creates a "dangerous and unwholesome" factory environment by the systematic robbery of space, light, air, and other facilities (Marx 1995:286-290).

Ideological Hegemony

Gramsci argues that capitalists maintain their domination over workers by creating a hegemonic ideology, which generates "consent within the workplace and other spheres of economic life" (Degiuli and Kollmeyer 2007:500). According to Gramsci (1971), hegemony is a cultural, moral, and ideological authority by which capitalists dominate power relations and justify class oppression. He (1971:206-278) also shows that capitalists engage civil society and political society to construct consent in favor of capitalist exploitation and gain consensus over conflicting issues. Due to this hegemony, social classes, including the working class, embrace capitalism over alternative social systems such as social democracy and communism.

Like Gramsci, Harvey (2005:39-63) argues that capitalists employ think-tanks and academia to construct politically and culturally acceptable "common sense" in broader society. According to Harvey (2005:39), this commonsense disguises "real problems under cultural prejudices" and justifies the oppression of workers, dispossession of peasants, or even killing of people all over the world. Drawing on Gramsci, Degiuli and Kollmeyer (2007) also examine how the Italian "temporary help industry" control workers through ideological hegemony. The authors (2007:501-506) show that many corporations have developed "new modes of controlling and influencing the behavior of their workers" by empowering lower-level workers to make decisions

in the company. Because of this, workers "voluntarily regulate their own behavior" and internalize organizational norms and management skills. This replaces the "explicit and bureaucratic" forms of labor control in the firms by creating a "new culture of work"—a prospect of permanent employment among part-time workers.

Managerial Hegemony

Harry Braverman (1974) argues that the modern technical management of work, such as mechanization and automation, dominates employees in the workplace. According to Braverman, "the separation of the conception (management) from the execution (labour) of tasks…provides the driving motive for the modern organisation and control of the labour process" (Knights and Willmott 1990:7). Moreover, Braverman shows that the scientific management of work, known as Taylorism, restricts workers from developing creative skills and forces them to merely learn using the machine to speed up production. This process blocks the path for upward mobility in the workplace and diminishes workers' bargaining power. This idea corresponds to Braverman's thesis on deskilling and management strategy: on the one hand, the "extreme concentration" of knowledge (e.g., scientific, technical, and engineering) in the hands of management, on the other hand, an "awfully inadequate" set of skills (e.g., a particular and repetitious task, specific dexterity, and speed as skill) in the hands of workers (Knights and Willmott 1990:8).

Zhang (2015) examines the recent form of managerial hegemony by taking examples of three Chinese companies: Huawei, Joyea, and Tecsunhomes. He (2015:207) shows that management offers and promises various material incentives, including profit-sharing, on-the-job training, off-the-job programs, a certain degree of job security, several bonuses, upholding workers' dignity, and even sharing leadership with the workers. According to Zhang, this managerial philosophy has built consent and trust between authorities and workers.

Hegemonic Despotism

Burawoy (1983) identifies a crucial form of labor control in advanced capitalist countries based on his fieldwork in two factories in Chicago and Manchester. He (1983:590) discusses the new role of workers in the state-capital-labor relationship: "Workers must be persuaded to cooperate with management. Their interests must be coordinated with those of capital." In other words, workers must abandon their interests on behalf of capital and give consent to be exploited by capital. Due to this new labor-capital relationship, consent prevails over coercion in the workplace. This process is called the "making-out" game: a game that generates consent to its rules of exploitation at the point of production (Burawoy 1985:11-30; Knights and Willmott 1990:19). Burawoy (1983) warns that capitalists can be despotic when workers, who solely depend on wages, are found uncooperative and a threat to capitalist accumulation. In this case, employers would seek

no consent from the state or labor unions to relocate their plants overseas or exercise coercive power over workers to terminate them. Burawoy (1983:588) calls this hegemonic despotism and claims that "anarchy in the market leads to despotism in the factory."

Lee (1995) reconstructs Burawoy's theory by taking a gender lens and drawing on empirical evidence from two factories in Shenzhen and Hongkong. She (1995:378) finds two different labor control regimes: "localist despotism" in Shenzhen and "familial hegemony" in Hongkong. Unlike Burawoy, she shows that though women workers in the Shenzhen plant have ties to their agricultural life and are not entirely dependent on wages, a despotic regime emerges. Despotism exists because of an abundant supply of cheap labor and the state's minimal intervention in the local market system. In the Hongkong plant, familial hegemony prevails because women workers do not have access to secondary supports from employers or the state. Beyond their wages, workers depend on their families and social networks. The management appreciates the contributions of workers' families and creates a family environment on the shop floor. This shop floor environment constructs workers' consent to their exploitation.

The Global Hegemonic Despotism

Neoliberal globalization has created a global hegemonic despotic regime of labor control. Under this regime, labor control can be understood through the lenses of the new international division of labor (NIDL) and the global value chain (GVC)[4] . The NIDL framework examines the reorganization of worldwide manufacturing production and the global labor market in the 1970s (Charnock and Starosta 2016; Fröbel et al. 1978; Mises 2014). It identifies various labor processes in traditional societies. First is the entrance of several hundred million penniless jobseekers, known as the "worldwide industrial reserve army," into new industrial sectors (Fröbel et al. 1978). Second, the adaptation to long working days, high intensity of work, low wages, and physical and verbal assaults. Next is the fragmentation of job sectors: the skilled labor force is replaced by the unskilled or semi-skilled labor force. The fourth is the exploration of young females as "the cheapest, most docile, and most manipulable" workers who are easy to control politically and ideologically (Mises 2014:114-116). The last mechanism is developing an international superstructure (e.g., IMF, GATT/WTO, World Bank, UNIDO, and FAO) to oversee trade between industrial and developing countries. Additionally, the NIDL approach argues that the capital secures "monopoly over knowledge to control each phase of labor process" and teaches the

[4] Along with these two lenses, other explanations exist under this regime. One example is Nair's (2016) study of labor control in neoliberal India. She shows that market fundamentalism under neoliberal capitalism dismantled all forms of workers' resistance in India by removing the democratic capacity of workers to organize themselves for their own interests.

workers various capitalist virtues, including subservience, obedience, punctuality, and diligence (Fröbel et al. 1978:129).

Scholars define the GVC approach as a methodology for studying power relations between global actors and local firms, focusing on six major segments of a global industry: research and development, design, production, distribution, marketing, and sales (Gereffi and Christian 2010; Porter 1985). This framework examines how Western buyers dominate and exploit the local suppliers and workers in the global south countries, maintaining backward and forward linkages to power relationships in a particular global value chain and creating a new "global economic governance" (Bonacich and Appelbaum 2000; Gereffi and Bair 2010; Gereffi and Christian 2010; Gibbon, Bair, and Ponte 2008). In addition to global buyers, other actors participate in GVC, including multilateral agencies, regulatory bodies, NGOs, governments, unions, and trade associations. One study following the GVC approach conducted by Mark Anner (2015:292-293) explores three models of labor control practiced by the top ten global apparel exporters: state labor control regime, market labor control regime, and employer labor control regime. Anner shows that the state labor control regime uses legal and extra-legal means to eliminate potential or actual collective action in the factory. He provides examples from China and Vietnam. The market labor control regime, dominated by marketers or buyers, uses local factory owners to threaten workers with a factory shutdown if workers enter into labor unions and hurt the interests of capital. Thus, firms in low-income countries (e.g., Bangladesh and Indonesia) justify their repressive labor control strategies by arguing that they lack bargaining power with buyers because of the fear of capital flight. Finally, the employer labor control regime is highly repressive because employers use violent means to control workers. Honduras, El Salvador, Guatemala, and Colombia have examples of this regime.

Social Despotism

I draw on Wright's (1978) typologies of capitalism—manufacture, machinofacture, monopoly, and advanced monopoly—to argue that different phases of capitalism created distinct regimes of labor control to govern and exploit workers in advanced industrial countries. First, for example, manufacturing capitalism (1760-1950) created market despotic (coercive) and ideological hegemonic (consensual) regimes to control workers. Second, machinofacture capitalism (1950-1970) adopted a managerial regime (negotiated consent) to govern workers. Third, monopoly capitalism (1970-1990) employed a hegemonic despotic regime (coercive consent) to gain the support of workers for the interests of capital. Fourth, since 1990, advanced monopoly capitalism has shifted its full attention to developing countries (e.g., African, Latin American, and Asian regions) and has been exercising a global hegemonic despotic regime to exploit millions of workers. Bangladesh, as a periphery region of the world-system, became part of this advanced

monopoly capitalism in the early 1990s. Since then, this type of capitalism (or in the form of neoliberalism) has provided capital and industrial prescriptions to Bangladeshi manufacturers and created a new regime of labor control (i.e., social despotism) to govern and exploit workers at the bottom of the global value chain.

Existing approaches to labor control discussed above do not fully explain this new regime for several reasons. First, they fall short of understanding how market institutions (or market actors) need the support of social institutions (non-market actors) to manage, govern, and exploit Bangladeshi apparel workers not only inside but also outside factories. Next, those theories remain unclear about how market and non-market actors create and recreate different phases of labor control in the apparel industry, how they dominate workers who are highly reactive to experiences of oppression and discrimination, and how they exploit workers who are highly conscious of their rights and benefits. Lastly, the extant literature lacks a coherent theoretical framework for analyzing power relations among market/non-market actors and workers at the bottom of the global value chain. Therefore, I propose a new theory of labor control. This theory explores four phases of labor control in the apparel industry: searching for the cheapest laborers and manufacturing sites, recruiting workers, organizing work, and socializing, rewarding, and punishing workers. Each phase is distinct in terms of its role in the process of labor control, but they are interrelated.

Labor control begins when Western capitalists seek to find the cheapest sources of labor, making capital available to manufacturers and providing guidelines to process work and workers. Also, in this phase, local manufacturers develop formal and informal relationships with foreign buyers, international certifiers, raw material suppliers, and state agencies to build factories suitable for effective labor control. Second, factory owners recruit a managerial team capable of gaining control over workers. This executive team recruits workers by following factory owners' guidelines and using their local and personal ties to communities and workers' families. Next, authorities organize the work in a factory to maintain a balanced division of labor, maximizing workers' output and eliminating actual and potential obstacles to profit generation. Finally, the managerial team socializes, rewards, and punishes workers inside factories by deploying various strategies and developing informal relationships with different social actors. These workers are also socialized and punished by police, thugs, labor leaders, coworkers, slumlords, friends, and family members.

Two forms of oppression[5] exist in the four phases of labor control: instrumental oppression—practiced by market actors, and structural oppression—practiced by market and non-market actors. First, instrumental oppression is defined as both formal and informal systems of labor control that normalize coercion on the shop floor and create the forced consent of workers to their exploitation. This oppression increases the profit rate by effectively exploiting workers and reproduces workers' sense of collective vulnerability as a class. It eliminates any form of collective action within the factory despite the persistence of workers' radical common sense against their oppression, what Copeland (2019) calls "radical pessimism." Workers cannot escape this oppression because of their sole dependency on wages and their marginal conditions in social life. At this juncture, workers' entire world is reduced to two options: work or starve.

I define structural oppression as a condition where workers experience various forms of physical assault, threats, bullying, stigma, negligence, and powerlessness in their homes, streets, slums, or broader social arenas. This oppression is structural because it is practiced and maintained not by a person but by a particular configuration of structural violence: e.g., oppressive class relations, patriarchy, informality, dispossession, extreme poverty, exclusion, and corruption. Due to this oppression, workers cannot exercise their agencies in the broader social arena. For example, industrial police, border guards, and thugs prevent workers from protesting their oppression in the streets. Likewise, workers are prevented from exercising their agency in their living places (slums) because slumlords keep them under the constant threat of eviction. Thugs and slumlords also spy on workers, preventing them from giving interviews to local/foreign media or researchers. Street men often sexually harass women workers during their daily commutes from the slum to the factory and back to the slum. Despite their significant financial contribution to the family, women workers often lack decision-making power and experience domestic violence. They also bear the burden of housework, including caring for children, cooking, and washing. These forms of structural oppression make workers vulnerable in broader social arenas and reinforce their vulnerability in the factory.

Both forms of oppression reinforce each other to serve the interest of capital, creating the very regime of labor control: social despotism. I define social despotism as a coercive process of creating surplus values by exploiting workers' labor power inside factories and controlling workers' inside and outside factories. This regime deploys legal means, illegal coercion, informal power relationships, and structural violence to control and exploit workers.

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[5] My study extends the idea of "structural violence"—any structural or impersonal situation in which people cannot achieve capacities to their full potential (Galtung 1969)—by developing two key concepts: instrumental oppression and structural oppression. Moreover, I use Copeland's (2019) idea of "radical pessimism"—a shared desire for radical change combined with the belief that meaningful change is impossible—to understand both forms of oppression.

Methodology and Data Sources

This article uses three sets of empirical data[6] (life histories, interviews, and ethnographic observations) as well as national and global media reports to understand how market and non-market actors dominate and exploit workers in the Bangladeshi RMG industry. Between 2017-2018 and 2021-2022, using purposive and snowball sampling, I collected the life histories of 50 workers, 35 women and 15 men, who live in Dhaka, Bangladesh. At the time of the interviews, these 50 workers were employed in 20 factories that collectively employed a total of 11,200 workers. These workers also had previous experience working in 32 factories in various sites of Dhaka, including Panthapath, Mirpur, and Ashulia. Of 20 factories (Table 1), seven are contracting (compliant) factories and 13 are subcontracting (non-compliant) plants.

I collected the life histories from 13 slums while visiting workers' homes[7] during off days. We talked about a wide range of topics, including how managerial teams search for and recruit workers, the environment and organization of work within the factory, remunerations, rewards and benefits, socializing and punishing methods, labor rights, workers' participation in labor movements, and workers' family life. The interviewed workers range in age between 18-47 years. They started working between the ages of 12 and 17 and changed their workplace between 2 and 6 times. In addition to visiting homes, I spoke with many workers while walking with them in the streets, observed the recruiting process of workers in front of or inside factories, and participated in protests in the streets.

I visited five (5) factories[8] to collect data from managers, supervisors, and HR officers and observe workers at work on the shop floor. I then interviewed eight (8) people, including three factory managers, three supervisors, and two HR officers. I also interviewed 12 people from different professions, including two media persons, two bureaucrats, two politicians, two scholar-activists, two labor leaders, a slumlord, and a thug. I deployed purposive and snowball sampling methods to identify and interview 20 people. We talked about various issues related to the RMG industry, including buyers' formal and informal relationships with a complaint or non-compliant factory, the role of factory owners and managerial teams in the industry, the nexus between firm

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[6] Two research assistants worked with me during this project to gather empirical data and process it afterwards. Additionally, all respondents' names, who participated in this empirical study, are kept anonymous to protect human subjects.

[7] Since it is strictly prohibited to enter an apparel factory to interview a worker, I interviewed all of them at their home. I also spoke with workers when they were on streets or at factory gates.

[8] I was granted access to only five (5) factories for interviews with factory authorities, despite approaching eleven (11). I relied on personal connections among workers or factory authorities to interview individuals in lower-, middle-, or upper-management positions.

owners and the state, and the engagement of labor leaders, politicians and workers in labor management.

In this paper, I use my ethnographic observations while working in 13 working-class territories (slums), 5 factories, and a few public offices and streets. I closely observed the work environment in the factories, work management by the authorities, workers' movements in the factories and streets, safety and security in the streets, and workers' struggles in everyday life. The article also relies on national and international media reports to understand labor control strategies in the Bangladeshi apparel industry.

Finally, Table 1 presents additional data relevant to the primary arguments made in subsequent sections. Specifically, it details the types of factories, total number of factory workers and interviewees, gender categories, age at work, and frequency of workplace changes, and examines how these factors relate to labor control strategies in the RMG industry.

Social Despotism in the Bangladeshi Apparel Industry: Findings

This section provides evidence of how social despotism is a powerful regime of labor control in the Bangladeshi RMG industry. I divide this discussion into four subsections, corresponding to the four phases of labor control.

Exploring the Cheapest Laborers and Manufacturing Sites

After 1970, western capitalists began hunting for the cheapest labor in the global south when their manufacturing plants faced severe challenges with strict labor and environmental laws, labor movements, urban unrest, overaccumulation of capital, and lower profit rates (Harvey 2003; Smith 2016). Some 155 years ago, Marx (1867) also observed this reality:

"In order to oppose their workers, the employers either bring in workers from abroad or else transfer manufacture to countries where there is a cheap labor force. Given this state of affairs, if the working class wishes to continue its struggle with some chance of success, the national organisations must become international" (quoted in Smith 2016:39).

Table 1: General Characteristics of the Factories and Participants							
Number and Type of Factories		**Number of Workers**	**Number of Participants**	**Gender (Male and Female)**	**Age of the Participants**	**Starting Age at Work**	**Times of Changing Factories**
Contracting Factories (CF)	CF1	1,100	3	F2, M1	26, 34, 35	14, 14, 16	3, 5, 6
	CF2	800	3	F2, M1	20, 21, 33	13, 13, 15	2, 5, 5
	CF3	600	3	F1, M2	25, 29, 47	13, 14, 15	4, 4, 5
	CF4	600	2	F2	21, 28	13, 14	2, 6
	CF5	550	2	F2	31, 39	14, 15	4, 5
	CF6	500	3	F1, M2	23, 30, 44	12, 13, 15	3, 4, 4
	CF7	400	2	F2	26, 29	13, 15	4, 6
Subcontracting Factories (SCF)	SCF1	900	3	F1, M2	25, 27, 35	13, 13, 16	4, 5, 6
	SCF2	750	3	F2, M1	22, 25, 29	12, 15, 17	3, 4, 4
	SCF3	600	2	F2	20, 31	13, 16	2, 4
	SCF4	550	3	F3	19, 32, 46	13, 15, 16	2, 4, 5
	SCF5	550	3	F1, M2	26, 29, 33	13, 14, 16	3, 4, 4
	SCF6	500	3	F3	18, 26, 40	12, 12, 14	2, 5, 6
	SCF7	500	3	F3	23, 30, 36	13, 15, 16	3, 4, 5
	SCF8	400	3	F2, M1	19, 23, 37	13, 16, 17	2, 5, 6
	SCF9	400	2	F2	25, 30	13, 15	4, 6
	SCF10	450	2	M2	20, 36	12, 14	3, 5
	SCF11	400	2	F2	21, 30	14, 15	4, 5
	SCF12	350	2	F2	26, 47	13, 14	3, 6
	SCF13	300	1	M1	41	13	4
	n= 20	N= 11,200	n= 50	n= F35, M15	Age= 18-47	Age=12-17	Av=4

Source (Table 1): Author's Fieldwork in Dhaka, Bangladesh, 2017-2018 & 2021-2022

The appearance of the Bangladeshi RMG industry in the late 1970s was the direct result of the globalization of production (Smith 2016). This globalization has provided guidelines to control workers and maintain high rates of labor exploitation in developing countries, including Bangladesh (Harvey 2005; Copeland and Labuski 2013; Smith 2016). Labor control in the RMG industry begins with global buyers who provide capital to local manufacturers. In particular, they determine “what is to be produced, where, by whom, and at what price” (Fernandez-Stark, Frederick, and Gereffi 2011:7). An exploitative relationship between the north and south immediately develops, with northern capitalists dictating prices and wages to southern workers (see also Burawoy 1983:592). Smith (2016:12) accurately observes this reality in the Bangladeshi RMG industry: “capital-labor relation has become a relation between Northern capital and Southern labor.”

My interviews with Sifat Chowdhury, 54, a manager of a noncompliant factory and Khalil Ahmed, 41, an assistant manager of a compliant factory, revealed that western buyers, international certifiers, and the Bangladeshi state provide guidelines to factory owners to build and manage factories. Buyers and their local buying houses often suggest to factory owners how to influence the state to create business-friendly rules, earn tax breaks, access cheap labor, handle labor unrest, and secure the profit-generating system (see also Norfield 2011; Smith 2016). Buyers also urge the state to secure a permanent supply of cheap labor, guarantee union-free industry, uninterrupted delivery of goods, and special security for the industry. Once a relationship between buyers and suppliers is developed, local manufacturers mobilize their resources to build factories and initiate production.

Over 2,000 suppliers run nearly 4,000 factories in Bangladesh (Anner 2020). These suppliers maintain an informal relationship with more than 18 government organizations that approve building factories and are responsible for monitoring them (Imran 2020). This informal relationship allows factory owners to violate various laws, deprive workers of their rights, and exploit and punish workers. A well-known labor leader, Joly Talukdar, told a reporter that the Department of Inspection for Factories and Establishments (DIEF) “directly” serves the purpose of factory owners (Imran 2020). My participant, Keya Khatun, 62, a retired worker and a labor leader, also confirmed that the informal relationships between factory owners and state agencies create and maintain the unsafe, abusive, and exploitative factory environment in the RMG industry.

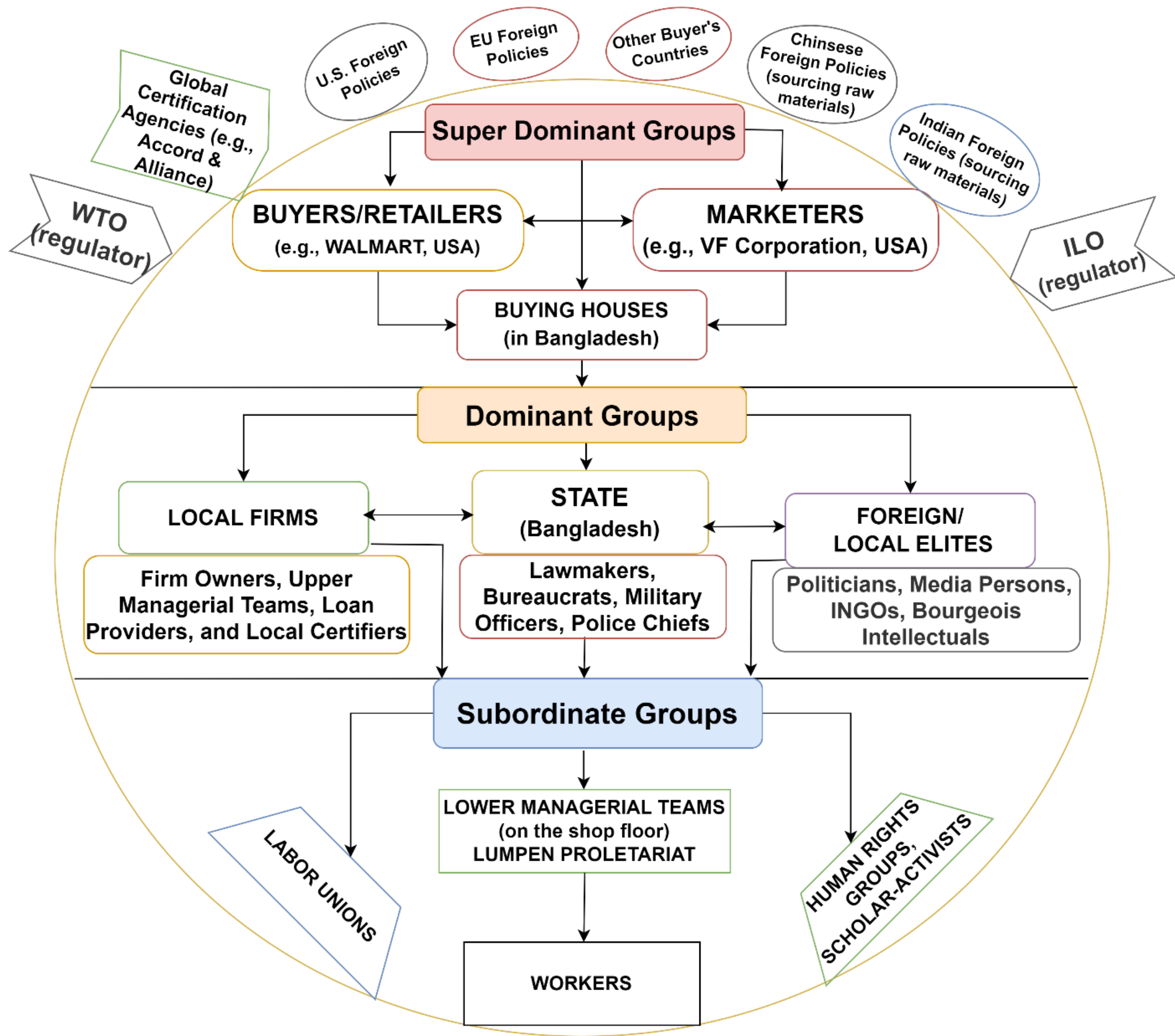
Western buyers work with both compliant and noncompliant factories, and compliant factories also place orders with noncompliant factories. Foreign buyers and local compliant firms know that subcontracting factories violate all labor and environmental laws. However, they place orders to those factories because their products are the cheapest. These factories have extremely poor physical environments: congested machinery, absence of fire exits and ventilation, limited or

no dining space and first-aid facilities, and an insufficient number of bathrooms. Marx (1995) calls this factory environment a "systematic robbery" of space, light, air, and other facilities. Rebeka Sultana, 35, an operator in the sewing section, worked 16 years in four noncompliant factories. The owners of those factories repeatedly violated building codes and labor laws. They would bribe the safety and security team to avoid inspections and hide their factory locations from buyers, reporters, and researchers (see also Brooks 2007; Dannecker 2002).

Most factories have an informal expert team that uses political, economic, and cultural capital to lobby buyers or local buying houses for orders. This lobbying system creates unequal competition among factory owners, and no mutual agreements exist among suppliers for the proportional distribution of buyers' orders. According to Mr. Chowdhury, the resulting competition among suppliers "annihilates the bargaining power of suppliers and empowers buyers." It is also responsible for the world's second-lowest wages and the most exploitative and oppressive labor control strategies in the RMG industry.

Finally, the relationship between Bangladeshi suppliers and marketers, buyers, trade regulating agencies, global certifiers, foreign states, raw materials suppliers, and local state agencies can be understood by the idea of social despotism. Under this regime, I identify two major groups that dominate power relations and influence labor control strategies in the value chain of the Bangladeshi apparel industry. First is the super dominant group, including the marketers (e.g., VF Corporation), retailers (e.g., Walmart), regulators or certifiers (e.g., WTO and ILO), foreign states (e.g., the US and the UK), and raw materials suppliers (e.g., China and India). Second is the dominant group, including local manufacturers, upper managerial teams, state agencies, local certifiers, loan providers, and INGOs. In this value chain, the subordinate group includes lower managerial teams, unionists, workers, and local human rights organizations. In short, the power relations (both formal and informal) that influence labor control strategies in the RMG industry can be understood by the following diagram (Figure 1).

Figure 1: Power Relations in the Global Value Chain of the Bangladeshi Apparel Industry



Source (Figure 1): Author's Fieldwork in Dhaka, Bangladesh, 2017-2018 & 2021-2022

Recruiting Workers

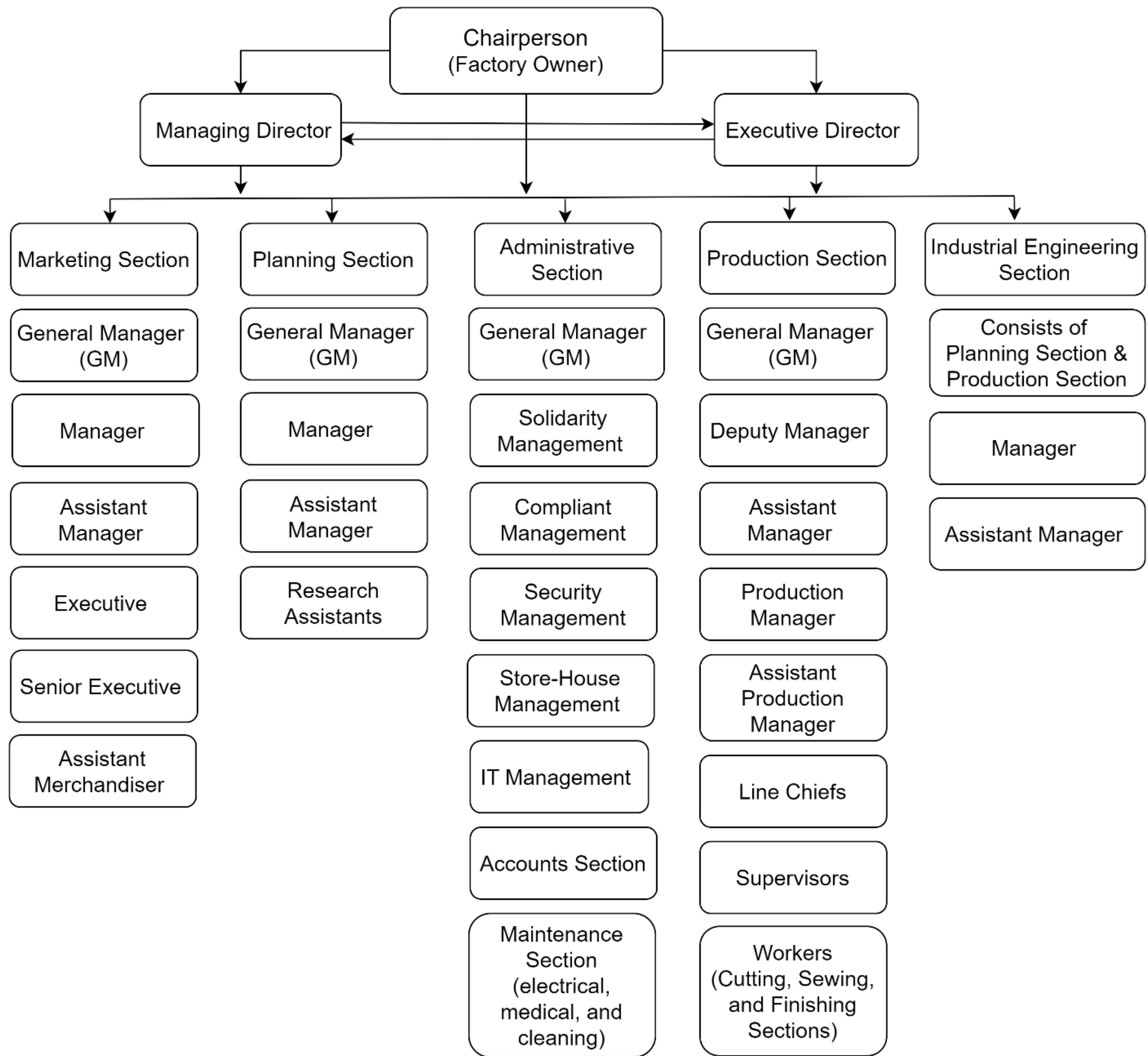
My interviews with Mr. Chowdhury, Mr. Ahmed, and several workers revealed how formal and informal hiring practices are closely connected with labor control. An owner of a complaint factory, known as the chairperson, recruits a few directors (e.g., managing and executive) who are usually from their family networks. This directorate board usually recruits five managerial teams under five sections (Figure 2). The sections include marketing, planning, administrative, production, and industrial engineering (IE). The marketing, planning, and IE sections deal with global buyers, local buying houses, local firms, international certifiers, buyers' countries, and states of raw materials suppliers. The administrative section deals with the local state, police, HR

officials, and security persons, to name a few. The production section directly works with workers. Under this section, a managerial team, consisting of a general manager (GM), deputy manager (DM), assistant manager (AM), production manager (PM), assistant production manager (APM), line chiefs, and supervisors, controls and oppresses workers in a factory.

The directorate board of a factory follows a formal process, including a public job advertisement, to recruit upper managerial teams (GM, DM, and AM) under each section. While hiring these teams, the directorate board also considers informal aspects, including the political identity of a potential employee, their connections to the factory owner, affiliations to the state agencies, administrative work experience, attachments to the industry or local communities, and personal reputation. These upper managerial teams recruit lower managerial team members such as PM, APM, supervisors, line chiefs, trainers, experts, and other HR officials. They also follow formal and informal processes to recruit these employees, including job advertisements, personal networks, loyalty, and efficiency in handling workers. These recruiting practices are crucial to a factory's success because these people organize, control, and oppress hundreds or thousands of workers in a factory.

The recruiting process for workers is entirely different. The lower managerial team recruits workers by following their employers' guidelines and also their personal ties to the industry and communities. Prospective workers physically gather in front of a factory. Then, the lower managerial team comes to the gate and asks a few questions to select workers from the gathering. Once they find a group of workers who fulfill their initial hiring criteria, they take those people inside the factory. Those workers are then asked to show their skills. If the hiring authority likes someone's work, they get the job. This hiring practice of workers is mainly for the cutting, sewing, dyeing, washing, and finishing sections. The authority also employs apprentice workers (also known as "helpers") from this gathering. They recruit all new workers on a specific day of each week or month. Another hiring practice is that the existing workers bring new workers from within their personal networks. The recruiting authority mostly hires workers from the factory owner's local areas to minimize labor unrest in the factory (see also Dannecker 2002; Paul-Majumder and Begum 2006). Samia Tanni, 37, an operator in a subcontracting factory, revealed that "99 percent of workers in her factory came from the local area of the factory owners." Many of the managerial team members also came from the same area.

Figure 2: Organizational Structure of Employers and Employees in a Compliant Factory



Source (Figure 2): Author's Fieldwork in Dhaka, Bangladesh, 2017-2018 & 2021-2022

Age is an important factor in hiring and controlling workers. Recruiting women and men workers under 18 is always profitable to the factory because they are incredibly low-paid, easily manageable, and reluctant to participate in protest movements. According to the Bangladesh Labor Act 2006, hiring a worker below 14 is illegal in the formal sector. However, my interviews show that 42 percent of workers (21 of 50) started working in a factory before the age of 14, and the other 58 percent did so at the age of 14-17. Sifat Ara, 40, a sewing machine operator in a subcontracting factory, revealed that recruiting authorities follow specific strategies to hire

underage workers. In many cases, supervisors tell their current workers to bring their underage family members to work as helpers. They put those freshman workers on temporary payroll and pay way below regular workers. Also, existing workers often request that their supervisors hire their underage daughters or family friends. The third strategy is for factories to recruit underage workers directly from the factory gate. In all cases, these girls and boys collected false birth certificates to show the hiring authorities that they were above 18. Ms. Ara began working at the age of 12 as a helper in a factory. She reported, "I brought my daughter to the factory four years ago when she was 13 years old; now she is 17." Although they work in the same section and do the same work, her daughter is paid 30 percent less than her (see also Kabeer 1991; Kibria 1995). Ms. Ara also mentioned: "I have never seen any freshman worker attend a protest against factory owners. I also advised my daughter not to take to the street for any protest movements." Family members or senior workers also advise underage workers not to risk their jobs by attending a protest movement.

Recruiting underage workers in order to make a higher profit rate has been a strategy in place since the inception of this industry. A survey of 3,000 households in Dhaka slums revealed that most girls (and 13 percent of boys) below 14 are employed in the apparel industry (Overseas Development Institute 2016). Maria Quattri, one of the authors of the Overseas Development Institute report, told NPR that these underage workers mainly work for "subcontractors in informal garment factories that produce a part of the product that is then sold to formal businesses. And the formal businesses export the product" (NPR 2016).

Finally, factories recruit a group of employees called thugs—what Marx identified as "lumpen proletariat." According to Habib Hosen, 38, a worker in the finishing section of a subcontracting factory, thugs are not regular workers but work both inside and outside a factory. Some of their tasks include spying on managerial teams and trade union leaders inside factories, threatening disobedient workers in factories, streets, and slums, crushing labor unions, and tackling external gang threats to a factory.

Organizing the Work

The authorities organize work in a factory by creating and maintaining a balanced division of labor, developing an effective strategy of labor control. This organizing principle of work is designed to maximize output from workers, eliminate obstacles to work, and increase profit rates (see also Braverman 1974). A balanced form of division of labor in an apparel factory has a primary and a secondary dimension. The primary dimension refers to the major sections of work in the factory, including marking, cutting, sewing, and finishing sections. All workers are organized under these broad sections. The secondary dimension refers to the further segmentation of work under each section. For example, a worker in a sewing section does only one small part of the total sewing

work: either sewing only one pocket, attaching a zipper, or fitting buttons for a pair of jeans. No two people do the same job in any section. This form of division of labor automatically keeps workers busy and ensures that they reach their hourly or daily output target. It gives workers no break when the work is in progress (see also Bonacich and Appelbaum 2000:179). Additionally, supervisors, floor in-charges, and line chiefs monitor workers' production output every single moment. This vigilant supervision also ensures that workers meet production targets.

Diya Najnin, 21, works in the finishing section of a compliant factory and folds shirts or pants. The daily target for their group of nine is completing 2,000 individual packages of shirts or pants in eight hours. Because of this work arrangement, Ms. Najnin reported, "no worker finds any scope to get even a glass of water or go to the bathroom." She also mentioned: "sometimes I feel like I am in a prison cell and am a criminal without human rights."

Another dimension of labor control is offering workers different wage grades (grade 1-grade 7) based on the types of work and workers' skills or informal connections to employers. A wage board determines minimum wages[9] for workers in the RMG industry. A senior district judge leads this board, joined by representatives from employers and workers and approved by the Law Ministry and the Ministry of Labor and Employment. The country's first wage board for this industry was formed in 1984, and $7.67 was set for monthly salaries for the freshman workers in the 7th grade. In 1994, the minimum wage in the 7th grade was $12.57, followed by $21.87 in 2006, $37.5 in 2010, $66.25 in 2013, and since 2018, it has been $96 (in contrast, it has been $217 for the 1st grade). However, in the past few years, the value of the Bangladeshi currency has decreased compared to the US dollar (USD 1=BDT122), causing a decline in value (or wages) from $96 to $65 and from $217 to $150. This is the world's second-lowest minimum wage after Sri Lanka, what scholars call "starvation wages" or "poverty wages." The living wage calculation by Asia Floor Wage Alliance[10] shows that $66.25 wage in 2013 covered 20% percent (after adjusting the price inflation) of living cost for a family of four—a garment worker, one adult, and two children and $96 in 2018 covered 22% of the living cost for such a family. A study explores this extreme form of unequal practice of profit sharing in the RMG industry: buyers and factory owners withdraw up to 65 percent and 31 percent of profit respectively from this industry, but workers receive only four percent of the profit (Salam and McLean 2014:3-4).

My interviews with a production manager, Nizam Molla, 45, a labor leader, Faizul Hasan, 40, and a worker, Hasina Banu, 27, revealed that the division of labor refers to various forms of power distribution in the factory. First, there is a vertical dimension of power where the upper managerial team exercises power over the lower managerial team and workers, and the lower

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[9] Minimum wages refer to "the lowest amount of remuneration given to a worker in a specific sector by employers" (Ovi 2019).

[10] This calculation can be found here: https://asia.floorwage.org/our-work/#top

managerial team exercises power over workers. Next, there is also an informal way of practicing power in the factory. For example, a member of the managerial team, who is somehow closer to a factory owner, can exercise more power than other managerial team members. Similarly, a lumpen proletariat can even exercise power over a managerial team or workers if a factory owner empowers them. According to Mr. Molla, "sometimes we receive threats from our junior staff members or even from workers who maintain a close connection with the owner of the factory." Those with connections to ownership, regardless of their formal position in the hierarchy, serve as informal sources of power and control within the factory. Mr. Hasan revealed that a few labor leaders secretly maintain a good relationship with the authority and provide information about tensions among workers. Though these labor leaders are senior workers in the factory, most workers do not trust them because they serve the owner's purpose more than they help workers. Ms. Banu experienced physical abuse and threats on multiple occasions from her co-workers. She describes this as a "common incident" on the shop floor.

Third, there is a gender dimension to how power is practiced unequally within the factory (Ahmed 2004; Ahmed 2018; Brooks 2007; Dannecker 2002; Feldman 2009; Kabeer 1991; Kibria 1995; Lee 1995; Mises 2014; Paul-Majumder and Begum 2006). Men usually dominate both groups of the managerial team. Also, male workers dominate the marking, cutting, washing, dyeing, and ironing sections. However, women workers dominate the sewing and finishing sections. During financial crises, such as the COVID-19 pandemic, workers in the sewing and finishing sections are disproportionately affected. They often experience irregular wage payments and accumulate unpaid working hours. Due to this gendered organization of work, male workers receive higher wages than women workers. Fajila Khatun, 26, an operator in the sewing section, revealed that the authority mostly hires women for the sewing and finishing sections. She recounts: "supervisors want an obedient woman but a strong worker in the factory. They want a woman worker who can handle a sewing machine like a strong man." She left her job twice earlier because of this unrealistic demand for production targets and low pay. She used to weep every day after returning home from work. However, her needy family cannot allow her to stay home, nor can she find a new job in another sector.

Controlling leave for medical conditions or maternity purposes is another way of organizing work and controlling labor. For example, Jamila Begum, 34, a worker in the finishing section, took maternity leave and medical leave last year. In total, she got 110 days of maternity leave and 14 days of medical leave. She reported that "my pregnancy leave was paid, but my supervisor gave me TK15,000 ($180) instead of TK30,000." The reason is that "my supervisor discouraged me from having a baby." She was very unhappy with that 50 percent of paid leave, but she could not protest this due to the fear of job loss. Another labor control strategy is giving workers a lunch break at different times across different floors and sections. This limits the chances

of workers from one floor or section meeting with workers from other floors or sections, thus minimizing the possibility of labor movements forming within the factory.

Socializing, Rewarding, and Punishing Workers

Market and non-market actors deploy various socializing, disciplining, and punishing measures inside and outside factories. In addition to the managerial team, various entities such as the mass media, co-workers, labor leaders, police, thugs, slumlords, friends, and family members participate in socializing, disciplining, and punishing workers. The following discussion is divided into two subsections.

Socializing and Disciplining Workers. In the sewing section of a non-compliant factory, a senior operator, Jorina Alam, 37, revealed that factory authorities used to deny their responsibility for the low wages paid to workers. She described the authority's narratives to the workers:

"We [the authority] are not paying you [workers] less, we are not stealing your wages, we are not demanding overtime work; buyers are making a profit on us, and we are helpless to them; we cannot bargain with them because they can leave us anytime; if they leave us, you will lose your job, we will lose our business, and the country will suffer a lot."

By this narrative, the authority simultaneously creates a sense of collective interest and collective vulnerability to control workers in the factory. My interviews with managers, supervisors, labor leaders, media persons, state officials, activists, slumlords, and politicians reflect both senses. These thoughts directly guide the socialization processes of factory workers.

When buyers visit factories, managerial teams socialize and discipline workers in order to create a false image of worker satisfaction. The authorities announce the buyers' visiting date ahead of time, and they coach workers on how to smile and speak positively about the factory and management when responding to questions (see also Dannecker 2002; Brooks 2007). The authority also instructs workers to tell buyers that they are happy with their jobs and wages, that their wages are regularly paid, and that their families are totally dependent on their income. Mamun Biswas, 18, reported that when an inspection team visits the factory, the owner, the GM, and other vital people join them. The buyers walk from floor to floor and talk to workers. The authority always warns workers not to speak too much to buyers if they are called. According to Mr. Biswas, "during the inspection day, the authority grants child workers a forced leave without pay to hide them from buyers." Moreover, if any worker tells the truth to the inspection team, they are fired immediately without any severance.

Factory owners also closely monitor and control access to the factory. The managerial team warns workers that they are not allowed to go outside once they are in the factory. The gateman maintains this rule very strictly. Close-circuit cameras constantly monitor workers' movements

and activities inside a factory and its vicinity. Bringing a mobile phone to the factory is strictly prohibited. Also, the entry of news reporters and researchers to a factory is highly restricted. The authorities instruct workers to share no information with media persons or researchers if they visit their houses in slums.

Bullying is another strong mode of disciplining workers in the factory. All the workers I interviewed experienced bullying by the lower or upper managerial teams. Mistakes do not go unnoticed and are always punished: if supervisors find any fault (i.e., alter) in any product, they have been known to throw that product (a shirt or a pair of pants) toward that worker's face and demand unpaid overtime work or simply cut the worker's hours. In this context, supervisors never hesitate to humiliate a worker in front of their co-workers. A supervisor's bullying of a worker warns other workers on the shop floor. Supervisors react aggressively because the upper administration also bullies them if workers fail to reach the production target. The failure of workers to reach production targets is considered a failure of the supervisor. Workers have become used to working and surviving under this systemic terror—an oppressive system normalized on the shop floor. Ms. Hannan called it "institutionalized terrorism." She reported that "we are the most unfortunate people who have no way to avoid bullying and quitting the job. We came to Dhaka for this job after losing everything in the village." Injuries from verbal assaults create a sense of worthlessness that does not end in the factory.

Workers are constantly socialized by their family members to consent to exploitation in the factory. Lipi Rahman, 20, a helper in a subcontracting factory, revealed that her parents often advised her to obey seniors, respect colleagues, and avoid conflicts in the factory. Accordingly, she never protested against her abusive supervisors. Instead, she blamed herself for her own fate of working in this sector: "Our creator has determined our fate; we cannot change it…He wants me to live and survive with this struggle." She tolerates all injustices in the workplace in fear of losing her job and tries to make her family happy with her income. Comparable evidence has been observed among apparel workers in other developing countries (Brooks 2007; Feldman 2009; Karides 2015; Plankey-Videla 2012).

Sexual harassment of women workers by male members of the managerial team is an abusive form of controlling workers in the factory. Paton (2020) cited a research report of Labour Behind the Label in her NYT piece: "80 percent of garment workers in Bangladesh say they have experienced or witnessed sexual violence and harassment on the job." My interviews with women workers revealed similar realities. Sadia Islam, 26, a worker in the sewing section, used to work very hard in the factory to avoid sexual harassment by her male bosses. But she experienced sexual assault twice: as a freshman worker seven years ago, and recently, when she applied for promotion from the 5th grade to the 4th grade. She also witnessed at least 10 cases of sexual harassment by male supervisors and co-workers over the years. She further revealed that "the authority never

informed police about these incidents; they themselves resolved the cases." Ms. Islam's account demonstrates that young police officials usually engage in sexual harassment of young women workers in public spaces such as streets and slums. Thugs also regularly harass women workers in the streets. According to Ms. Islam, although many women workers wear burka[11] or hijab[12] when they walk from home to factory and factory to house, they cannot avoid sexual harassment.

Police are also involved in the coercive socialization process of workers. They often threaten workers to prevent them from joining protest movements in the factory or street. Nadia Nahar, 32, a worker in the finishing section, received dozens of threats from the police when she tried to attend protest movements. Hired thugs spy on workers to prevent them from organizing or attending protest movements in the factory and street. Slumlords play a big role in socializing and disciplining workers by monitoring them at their homes to make sure they do not give interviews to local or foreign media and researchers. They restrict unknown persons from entering slums. They also deepen workers' vulnerability in factories and society by regularly increasing rent for housing.

Rewarding and Punishing Workers. My interviews with Shakil Haque, 53, a manager of a compliant factory, Farid Akter, 39, a supervisor of a non-compliant factory, and some workers revealed a wide range of strategies for rewarding and punishing the managerial team and workers. The factory owners set various goals for the managerial team to achieve, including the effective management of work and workers. The administrators who successfully organize and control workers are rewarded by factory owners, but those who fail are punished with delayed promotions or withheld bonuses. Likewise, obedient and productive workers are rewarded by the managerial team, while disobedient workers and "troublemakers," e.g., labor leaders, are punished.

There are various rules for rewarding workers who exceed their production targets, which vary markedly from factory to factory. If workers in a contracting factory can produce beyond their daily target level, they are offered extra benefits. These can include rewards such as adding 10 hours of payment to their monthly salary, two extra days of annual leave, five additional days of pregnancy leave, and a twenty percent increase of one major bonus. In subcontracting factories, workers do not receive extra benefits for their over-performance, but they receive their wages regularly (while most workers receive payments irregularly). This unpaid extra work gives productive workers hope that they will get promoted.

The promotion of workers in a factory is another kind of reward that reinforces labor control strategies. When helpers in contracting factories are found to be skillful, obedient, and productive, they are offered the position of operator. Operators, in turn, can be promoted to the

[11] An outer garment that covers almost the entire body, including the face and head, worn by a Muslim woman.

[12] A garment covering the hair, neck, and ears, but not the entire face or body.

position of supervisor. In subcontracting factories, this kind of promotion is rare. Most qualified workers remain in the same position for 5-10 years. Despite workers' continuous requests for a promotion, the authorities make verbal promises to them while taking no real action. If workers lose their patience, authorities ask them to leave the factory.

Rewards and punishments are also used to encourage workers to arrive early and to work extra hours. If a worker enters the factory even a minute late (8:01am) for three days a month, their salary is withheld for those days, and they lose TK400 ($3.5) for such an absence. Fear of losing even a dollar for late entry makes workers anxious at home and on their way from home to the factory. Another source of reward or means of punishment for workers is the authority's control over granting overtime work. In contracting factories, overtime work is not frequent except during winter. Only obedient and expert workers are given the opportunity to work overtime and earn additional money. In a subcontracting factory, overtime work can be both a punishment (if it is unpaid) and a reward. Before the Rana Plaza incident in 2013, coercive and unpaid overtime work (3-4 hours) was normal. After 2013, some factories began paying workers for overtime work. Now, needy workers move from factory to factory, searching for the opportunity to get overtime work. They do so because their regular salary never covers even 25 percent of their living costs. For them, overtime means a reward, i.e., "some extra money." Shaila Monira, 27, an operator in a subcontracting factory, has been working overtime for nearly a decade because she cannot pay the house rent and send her children to school without this money. However, she warned that overtime has severe mental and physical health costs, including stress, trauma, insomnia, fatigue, restlessness, and constant fear of developing unknown diseases.

Another respondent, Ayesha Parvin, 22, a helper in a subcontracting factory, revealed that she works overtime to support her family. However, she feels dishonored and worthless when supervisors threaten her and force her to finish the work she could not do during a typical workday. She recounted: "If my supervisor finds any errors in my work, I must do that work without any pay after my regular office hours. If I resist that, he tells me not to come back to the factory tomorrow." According to Ms. Parvin, some supervisors behave like "ferocious animals." They behave this way for two reasons: they want overproduction from workers to show their performance to their bosses, and they steal hours from workers to increase their income.

Punishing workers for their involvement in protest movements is the worst form of labor control by factory owners. A report by Transparency International, Bangladesh (TIB) shows that workers organized protest movements in different areas of Dhaka in 2019 to raise their wages. Then factory owners filed 35 lawsuits against 5,000 workers and fired 10,000 from 168 factories (The Daily Sun 2019). However, there is no legal provision for filing a case against factory owners when they violate criminal, labor, or environmental laws. This free-pass allows factory owners to exercise coercive power over workers and violently dismantle protest movements. Smith

(2016:10) put it this way: "union activists are routinely blacklisted, beaten up, and subject to arbitrary arrest" in the Bangladeshi RMG industry. This violence exists in this industry because an "incestuous" relationship exists "between factory owners, politicians, and police chiefs in Bangladesh" (Smith 2016:10). A labor leader, Kamrul Sheikh, 41, informed that "factory owners are always ready to take violent action against protesters." They request the state to deploy industrial police and even border guards to dismantle protest movements. Rehana Sarkar, 33, was brutally beaten by a police officer while protesting with her co-workers for a pay raise. She said that "This country has some police officers who act like terrorists."

The authorities also deploy hired thugs who use informal violence to disorganize protest movements. These thugs patrol factories, streets, and slums to detect any clues indicating imminent labor unrest. Nasima Gafur, 32, an operator in a subcontracting factory, revealed that workers involved in protest movements are fired and blacklisted. They never get a job in any factory. Workers who have some connection with the administration dominate their co-workers. Lablu Miya, 30, a worker in a contracting factory, received a monetary offer from his supervisor to collect information about workers' positions for a protest movement. He collected information not only from his factory but also from another factory. Aggrieved workers from one factory often contact workers of other factories to organize protest movements; thus, factory authorities try to prevent protests from spreading by targeting organizers at neighboring factories. Mr. Miya also threatened many of his co-workers when they did not share information with him.

Discussion

Three stories narrated at the beginning of this article help make the central arguments on social despotism. The Rana Plaza collapse explored an ideal example of social despotism responsible for killing over 1,100 workers and injuring over 2,500 laborers. While killing the workers by the owner of the factory is an example of instrumental oppression, workers' inability to avoid joining the work on that day is an example of structural oppression. Shakila Jahan's (46) story illustrated how she experienced instrumental oppression while working for 22 days as a machine operator without any compensation and generated a value of $15,600 in 26 working days to receive $96 as her monthly salary. Her intention to engage in aggressive street protests to address injustice within the industry exemplifies structural oppression or aligns with Copeland's (2019) idea of radical pessimism. Zobeda Jannat's story also described the typical life of a woman working under social despotism. She experienced all coercive socialization and punishment systems inside factories, including physical violence, bullying, threats, sexual assaults, and insults. She also experienced violence in the street (by police), slum (by thugs), and home (by her husband). Due to these instrumental and structural oppressions, she made multiple attempts to quit her job and divorce her husband, but failed.

In the first phase of labor control, we find that global buyers built an exploitative power relationship with local firms and local manufacturers deployed extreme measures to control workers. Two administrators, Mr. Chowdhury and Mr. Ahmed, shared their experiences of how the northern capital formally and informally exploits southern workers, taking advantage of instrumental oppression inside a factory and structural oppression outside a factory. Their stories also revealed that buyers directly contribute to creating these forms of oppression by offering workers the world's lowest wages. Three more stories also provided examples of instrumental and structural oppression. Ms. Talukdar's statement showed how various state agencies directly serve the interests of the factory owners by outright denying workers' rights. Ms. Khatun explored how an informal relationship between firms and 18 state agencies creates and maintains an abusive and unregulated factory environment to dominate workers. Ms. Sultana's story showed that two factory owners repeatedly violated labor and environmental laws to oppress workers and exploit their labor power. This phase further explored how labor control strategies are reinforced by the power relations among the super dominant group (e.g., buyers), dominant group (e.g., local firms), and subordinate group (e.g., workers).

In the second phase, the stories of Mr. Chowdhury and Mr. Ahmed further revealed the formal and informal recruiting processes of the upper managerial team and the lower administrative team, who effectively control and exploit workers through instrumental oppression. Several workers' stories also explored the processes of recruiting workers through exploiting informal networks and kinship ties maintained between employers and workers and between existing and prospective workers. Structural oppression makes it almost impossible for adults to remain jobless in the family and forces teenagers to also seek work in the factories. Manufacturers take advantage of this system. While all interviewed workers started their work between the ages of 12 and 17, Ms. Ara's story added an ideal case to this practice by showing how daughters (below 14) in workers' family experience structural oppression. Mr. Hosen's story showed how a group of employees called lumpen proletariats (or thugs) reinforce instrumental and structural oppression in this industry by helping maintain an extremely exploitative and repressive factory environment.

In the third phase, two dimensions of a balanced division of labor—primary and secondary—ensure an extremely exploitative and abusive work environment by organizing and controlling workers. Ms. Najnin's story described prison-like conditions in the factory, where maximizing a worker's output and generating a higher profit rate for the factory came at the expense of the workers' rights and lives. This is an example of instrumental oppression where workers are forced to work under a system called self-exploitation. The stories of Mr. Molla (a production manager), Mr. Hasan (a labor leader), and Ms. Banu (a worker) provided evidence of how the division of labor demonstrates the unequal distribution of power in the factory. They showed that the upper managerial team maintains exploitative power relations with the lower

administrative team and workers. The lower managerial team also maintains oppressive and exploitative power relations with workers. A thug can even exercise power over a managerial team or workers. These actors, the upper and lower managerial teams and thugs, directly reinforce the practice of instrumental oppression in the factory.

Across the industry, women workers are more severely affected than their male counterparts by instrumental and structural oppression. Within factories, they suffer from sexual harassment, threats, and verbal and physical assault, as well as monetary punishments such as wage discrimination, withheld wages, and forced overtime. Outside the factory, their structural oppression includes the lack of other employment opportunities, violence and harassment in the streets from police and street thugs, and violence and discrimination within the family. All the stories of women workers, including those of Ms. Khatun and Ms. Begum, depicted the cruel realities of social despotism in the RMG industry.

In the final phase, additional examples of instrumental oppression were presented, focusing on how social actors socialize, reward, and punish workers. Ms. Alam's statement revealed that the factory authority blamed buyers for paying a low wage to workers and warned them about capital flight if they demanded a high wage. Factory owners and workers considered this logic a matter of collective interest and vulnerability. Moreover, Ms. Alam and Mr. Biswas detailed how the managerial team used to socialize and discipline workers on the shop floor to give consent to exploitation. Ms. Monira's story showed how she experienced stress, trauma, insomnia, fatigue, and restlessness because of doing overtime work. Since no mistake in the factory goes unnoticed, workers are regularly bullied and forced to make up that work during overtime. This is why Ms. Parvin called her supervisor a "ferocious animal." Ms. Gafur's story revealed that workers who organize other workers are regularly threatened and blacklisted in this industry. Bullying, spying, torture, and threats make workers so vulnerable inside factories that they develop a "sense of worthlessness." This coercive socialization process seeks forced consent from workers to factory owners' exploitation, which Ms. Hannan called "institutionalized terrorism."

One prominent example of structural oppression in the last phase is that family members played a crucial role in socializing RMG workers. Parents, husbands, siblings, and even children often warn women workers not to get involved in any conflict or protest movement in the factory or the street. They even create a sense that working in a highly exploitative factory is a divine punishment for their misdeeds. Thus, a worker learns to tolerate bullies, insults, threats, sexual harassment, or even physical assault inside and outside a factory. Ms. Nahar's story showed another example of structural oppression by revealing how police and thugs harass women workers in the streets and slums, serving the interest of factory owners. Mr. Sheikh and Ms. Sarkar also showed how they became victims of police violence by joining peaceful protest movements. Since

workers have no legal right to complain against factory owners, the factory authority uses violence to dismantle any protest movement.

Finally, a notable example of both instrumental and structural oppression is evident in the actions of factory owners, who filed 35 lawsuits against 5,000 workers and dismissed 10,000 workers from 168 factories for participating in a protest movement to demand higher wages. This evidence demonstrates the vulnerability of workers within both market and social contexts. Overall, the preceding analysis indicates that a new labor control regime, referred to as social despotism, is present in the RMG industry. This regime perpetuates an abusive and exploitative capitalist system at the lower end of the global value chain and further consolidates the dominance of capitalism globally.

Conclusion and Recommendation

This paper has contributed to the global labor control literature by detecting five regimes of labor control: market despotism, ideological hegemony, managerial hegemony, hegemonic despotism, and global hegemonic despotism. However, its major contribution is to frame the idea of social despotism— a new regime of labor control to dominate firms and exploit workers in the Bangladeshi RMG industry. This regime functions in the four phases of labor control: searching for the cheapest labor force, hiring workers, organizing work, and socializing, rewarding, and punishing workers. Two forms of oppression are found in those four phases: instrumental and structural. While instrumental oppression normalizes coercion and demands forced consent of workers to their own exploitation, structural oppression marginalize workers' social existence and undermines their agencies. The interaction between these two forms of oppression constitute the very regime of labor control. The central function of this regime is to reinforce the modern world-system as a capitalist world-economy.

The RMG industry, the world's second-largest apparel industry, is the backbone of the Bangladeshi economy, absorbing more than four million workers and earning more than 85 percent of the country's foreign currency. However, this industry is a historical part of the highly oppressive global apparel industry functioning in the modern world-system. Hence the industry has the social despotic regime of labor control—a regime type created and sustained because of the formal and informal practices of labor control by buyers, certifiers, loan providers, states of the global north and south, manufacturers, co-workers, police, thugs, slumlords, and family members. Under this regime, workers work hard but fail to escape extreme poverty or create a sense of dignity in the factory or broader social life. This regime also maintains the worst form of injustice in the industry, where workers fail to make 22 percent of their living cost by their income since they receive only 4 percent of the industry's total profit share. Exploiting child labor is a gross violation of labor law and labor rights in this industry. Moreover, any collective action

against the interest of capital is highly punishable. Although all workers are the victims of instrumental and structural oppression, women bear most of the burden—they are the lowest-paid, malnourished, dishonored, socially stigmatized, and victims of sexual, police and domestic violence.

I conclude this article by offering some guidelines to fight social despotism. First, the state, manufacturers, and buyers must work together to raise the minimum wages for workers to $300 monthly so workers can cover their minimum living costs. Second, improving working conditions in the industry is crucial to avoid fatal casualties like the Rana Plaza collapse and protect workers' health and well-being. Next, the international and national authorities must hold global buyers and manufacturers accountable for violating labor laws. Fourth, workers must have the right to take legal action against their employers or manufacturers. Fifth, recruiting child labor (below 18 years) must be stopped in the industry. Lastly, it is vital to allow workers to unionize to protect their rights and benefits.

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