Development Compilation
Bangladesh Institute of Professional Studies
https://bips.bd/journal
ISSN: 2072-3334 (Print), ISSN: 2663-1547 (Online)

Volume 19 | Issue 2 | October 20, 2026 | Page: 321-333 | Article |

History of Women's Labour in the Rajshahi Silk Industry

Mohema Islam[1]
1. Department of History, University of Rajshahi, Rajshahi, Bangladesh
Email: himiroz000@gmail.com

HOW TO CITE
Islam, M. (2026). History of women's labour in the Rajshahi silk industry. *Development Compilation*, *19*(2), 321–333. https://bips.bd/journal

ARTICLE HISTORY
Received: 25 July 2026
Revised: 10 August 2026
Accepted: 13 September 2026
Available online: 20 October 2026

© 2026 The Author(s). Published by **Development Compilation**, Bangladesh Institute of Professional Studies. This is an open-access article distributed under the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License, which permits use, distribution and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited. https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/

CC BY 4.0

Abstract

Rajshahi is one of the major centres of Bangladesh's traditional silk industry. The industry has a long-standing historical connection with agriculture, the rural economy, and household-based production in the region. Although women have played an important role at various stages of silk production, their contribution has remained relatively overlooked in historical scholarship. This study aims to examine the historical role of women's labour in the development of the Rajshahi silk industry, the nature of their work, changes in their participation over time, and the impact of their labour on family life and socioeconomic conditions. Women's involvement in silk production developed largely within household-based and rural production systems. Women contributed to various stages of the process, including activities related to mulberry cultivation, silkworm rearing, cocoon production and collection, and silk thread preparation. Since much of this work was carried out at home, it was often not recognised or recorded as a distinct occupation or as paid employment. As a result, although women made an important contribution to silk production and household income, their work was not always adequately reflected in official statistics. The institutional development of the Rajshahi silk industry was shaped by government initiatives during the colonial period, silk development programmes during the Pakistan period, and the activities of the Bangladesh Silk Board and silk research and training institutions after independence. This study draws on government records, publications of the Bangladesh Silk Development Board, research papers, historical and secondary sources, and oral history where relevant. The central argument is that women's labour was not a marginal element in the history of the Rajshahi silk industry; rather, it was an important part of the household-based and rural production system on which the industry depended. The institutionalisation of the silk industry created new forms of employment and economic opportunities for women, while industrial crises and structural changes also affected the stability of their livelihoods. Therefore, a comprehensive history of the Rajshahi silk industry must take into account women's visible and less visible labour, their experiences, and their socioeconomic contributions. The primary objective of this study is to investigate the historical development of women's labour in the Rajshahi silk industry. It focuses on the types of work women performed, their contribution to household and regional economies, changes in women's labour associated with institutional developments in the industry, and the effects of industrial decline on their lives and employment.

Keywords: Rajshahi silk industry, women's labour, silk industry, silk production, rural economy, women's empowerment.

1. Introduction

Among Bangladesh's traditional industries, silk occupies an important place. The Rajshahi region, in particular, has long been known for silkworm rearing, silk production, silk thread processing, and silk textile manufacturing. Silk is one of Rajshahi city's most distinguished and long-established industries. The development of the city is closely associated with the silk trade, and Rajshahi is widely known as the Silk City. The region's geographical conditions and climate have favoured mulberry cultivation, helping to establish a distinct economic and social foundation for sericulture. Rajshahi is therefore regarded as one of the principal centres of the silk industry in Bangladesh. According to information published by the Bangladesh Silk Development Board, silk production has a long history in Bengal, and various initiatives were undertaken during the colonial and postcolonial periods to develop the industry institutionally. The establishment of a separate department for silk development in 1914, followed by the development of silk research, training, and extension centres, contributed to the further organisation of the industry.

The Bengali word resham is believed to have originated from the Persian word of the same meaning.[1] Jawab Kazi Micher referred to the local name for silk as garad. In Hindu mythology, silk is known by the Sanskrit term kaushaya. In English, it is called silk. Although China is widely regarded as the birthplace of silk, no Chinese name for the material became established in this region, nor is one commonly used today. Historians generally agree that silk was first discovered in China.

The exact time and manner in which sericulture began in Bangladesh cannot be established with certainty. Nevertheless, the history of the silk industry in Bangladesh is closely connected with the history of undivided India.[2] Sericulture expanded considerably in undivided Bengal during the Mughal period. According to historians, the silk industry of Bengal, known as Bengal silk, was an important indicator of the region's socioeconomic standing during Mughal rule.

The Bangladesh Silk Research and Training Institute, located in Rajshahi, has a long and significant institutional history.[3] The institute was established in Rajshahi in 1962 under the name Silk cum Lac Research Institute and Silk Technological Institute. Following the establishment of the Bangladesh Silk Board in 1978, it came under the Board's authority and was subsequently renamed the Bangladesh Silk Research and Training Institute. In 2003, following a legal change, the institute was placed outside the jurisdiction of the Bangladesh Silk Board. Today, the institute plays an important role in technological innovation, research, training, and the development of skilled personnel for the silk sector.

However, economic and policy changes during the 1990s, competition from imported silk yarn, a reduction in government support, and the closure of the Rajshahi Silk Factory brought the industry into a period of crisis.[4] The Rajshahi Silk Factory is reported to have closed on 30 November 2002, as noted in various research publications and news reports. The crisis affected workers and silk growers, and women's employment was no exception. After remaining closed for fifteen years, the Rajshahi Silk Factory resumed trial textile production on a power loom on 22 November 2017. Subsequently, trial operations involving five additional power looms were inaugurated on 27 July 2018. Formal textile production at the factory began on 10 January 2021.

2. The History of the Discovery of Silk

Although there is some disagreement over the exact year and date, there is little doubt that the use of silk originated in China. Silk is believed to have emerged in China as early as the beginning of the third millennium BCE.[5] At that time, Huangdi was the emperor of China. His fourteen-year-old wife, Xi Ling Shi, is traditionally credited with discovering silk.

An interesting story is associated with Xi Ling Shi's discovery. One afternoon, while drinking tea in the palace garden, Xi Ling Shi noticed a small yellowish cocoon hanging from a tree. She picked it up and examined it. As she handled the cocoon, it accidentally fell into her cup of hot tea, and a fine thread began to unravel from it. Her curiosity eventually led to the discovery of silk fibre. The cocoon was subsequently studied, and the process of rearing silkworms and processing silk developed within the royal palace. For hundreds of years, silk production remained a closely guarded craft under imperial control. Only members of the royal family and specially honoured guests were permitted to wear silk garments.

3. Literature Review:

The Rajshahi silk industry is an important part of Bangladesh's traditional silk sector. Its history, institutional development, sericulture, production processes, economic difficulties, and workers' rights have been discussed in various government publications and academic studies. However, most existing studies have focused primarily on the broader economic and institutional dimensions of the industry. Comparatively little attention has been given to the historical role of women's labour in the Rajshahi silk industry, the gender-based division of work, and changes in women's employment over time. A review of the existing literature is therefore necessary to identify women's labour history as a distinct area of research.

The historical and administrative information published by the Bangladesh Silk Development Board provides an important official source for understanding the institutional development of the silk industry in Rajshahi and other parts of Bangladesh.[6] According to this source, a separate department for silk development was established in 1914. After 1947, silk-related activities in East Pakistan were administered under the Department of Industries and Commerce. In 1960–61, these activities were placed under the East Pakistan Industrial Development Corporation for Small and Cottage Industries (EPISC). During this period, various facilities and institutional arrangements were developed, including silk seed farms, silk extension and demonstration centres, systems for purchasing cocoons produced by silk growers, the Rajshahi Silk Factory, and the Silk Research and Training Institute. Subsequently, the Bangladesh Silk Board was established on 28 December 1977. This official account provides an important basis for understanding the long-term institutional development of the Rajshahi silk industry.

Information published by the Bangladesh Silk Development Board on the history of the Rajshahi Silk Factory also provides valuable insights into the industry's production structure.[7] According to the official account, the factory was established in 1959–60 under the Ministry of Industries and operated under the control of the Small and Cottage Industries Corporation. It began functioning as a model factory in 1961. One of its principal objectives was to purchase cocoons from silk growers, process them into yarn suitable for use on power looms, manufacture silk textiles, and market the finished products. In this way, an institutional link was established between rural sericulture, silk yarn production, weaving, and marketing.

The same official source provides information about the subsequent crisis of the Rajshahi Silk Factory.[7] After operating at a loss for an extended period, the factory was declared closed on 30 November 2002. Its employees were subsequently released from service through a golden handshake scheme. The official account identifies several factors associated with the closure, including the failure to meet production targets, unsold finished products, a shortage of working capital, and financial difficulties.

The study Impact Assessment of Structural Adjustment Policy on Rajshahi Silk by Mahmud Hossain Riazi and Mohammad Selim Reza is particularly relevant to an analysis of the economic and policy changes affecting the Rajshahi silk industry.[8] Published in 2011 in volume 13, issue 1 of Bangladesh Economic Studies, the study examined the effects of structural adjustment policies during the 1990s on silk production and related activities in Rajshahi District. It discusses policy changes such as the withdrawal of customs duties on imported silk

yarn, reductions in excess staffing at the Bangladesh Silk Board, the closure of the Rajshahi Silk Factory, and the withdrawal of government grants and subsidies for silk-related activities. The study also examines the effects of these changes on employment, occupational structures, and women's empowerment.

Jannatun Fardus's 2022 study, Socio-Economic Status and Determinants of the Participation of the Farmers in Sericulture: A Study in Rajshahi District, examines the socioeconomic conditions of silk growers and the factors influencing their participation in sericulture.[9] The study collected data from 90 silk growers through interviews and structured questionnaires. Its findings suggest that sericulture can create income-generating opportunities and provide family employment for small and marginal landholders. At the same time, limited access to credit, inadequate training and extension services, and problems relating to market prices were identified as major challenges faced by silk growers.

Although Fardus's study does not focus directly on women's labour, it helps explain the economic structure of household-based sericulture and its role in employment generation. It is therefore indirectly relevant to understanding the household production system within which women's labour needs to be examined.

Information on the textile traditions of Bangladesh published by Global InCH is particularly relevant to understanding the historical division of labour between women and men.[10] It notes that silk textiles were traditionally produced in northern Bangladesh, including Rajshahi, Rangpur, and Dinajpur, and that silk production was often a family-based occupation. In traditional production systems, women were involved in cocoon production and silk reeling, while weaving was generally carried out by male weavers. This account indicates a gender-based division of labour in traditional silk production in northern Bangladesh. It also suggests that women's work should be understood not only as factory-based wage labour but also as part of household production and other productive activities.

The study Empirical Study on Extant Silk Industries Worker's Rights and Safety in Silk City Rajshahi, Bangladesh, by Zelina Sultana, Md. Meftahul Hassan, and Tanvina Anu Ahmed, is also relevant to an understanding of workers' rights and working conditions in the contemporary silk industry.[11] The study discusses the participation of both women and men in Rajshahi's silk sector and examines issues relating to wages, welfare facilities, workplace safety, leave, retirement, and other employment benefits. Drawing on both primary and secondary sources, the authors analyse workers' rights and actual working conditions within the industry.

A review of these studies reveals scope for a more sustained historical analysis centred specifically on women's labour in the Rajshahi silk industry. In particular, further investigation is needed into the stages of silk production in which women participated, the transition from household-based production to institutional and factory-based employment, the development of gender-based divisions of labour, and the effects of economic and policy changes on women's work and livelihoods. Adopting a long-term historical perspective, the present study seeks to examine the changing nature of women's labour, their experiences, and their contribution to the Rajshahi silk industry.

4. Methodology

This study adopts a historical and qualitative research approach. It examines the development, changes, and continuity of women's labour in the Rajshahi silk industry as a long-term historical process. Both primary and secondary sources have been used to collect and analyse data. To assess the historical reliability of the information, evidence from different sources has been compared and cross-checked.

4.1 Primary Sources:

The primary sources used in this study include government records, publications of the Bangladesh Silk Development Board, historical reports, statistical records, and interviews conducted in the field. Particular attention has been given to oral interviews with women workers associated with the Rajshahi silk industry, silk growers, and other relevant individuals. These interviews have been used to gather information about their working lives, types of labour, working conditions, wages, family responsibilities, and experiences of change within the industry.

Oral history is an important method in this research because much of women's labour has not been adequately documented in official or institutional records. The memories, personal experiences, and family histories of older women workers and silk growers have therefore been used to reconstruct different aspects of women's labour in the past. However, recognising the limitations of personal memory, oral testimonies have been cross-checked against other primary and secondary sources wherever possible.

4.2 Secondary Sources:

The secondary sources include research papers, books, theses, government websites and publications, newspaper reports, and institutional publications on the silk industry. Studies dealing with the history of the Rajshahi silk industry, economic and policy changes, the socioeconomic conditions of silk growers, and the rights and working conditions of silk industry workers have been used to establish the research context and support the analysis.

5. Analysis

5.1 Women's Entry into Silk Production and Their Historical Role:

An understanding of the history of women's labour in the Rajshahi silk industry requires an examination of the overall structure of silk production and its roots in household-based and rural economic systems. Silk is widely recognised as a valuable textile, and silk sarees have long held a prominent place in women's clothing and cultural practices across generations. Silk production is a multi-stage process that begins with mulberry cultivation and the provision of food for silkworms. It subsequently involves silkworm rearing, cocoon production, cocoon collection and processing, silk reeling, and, ultimately, the manufacture of silk textiles. Women in Rajshahi and the wider northern region of Bangladesh have historically played an important role at various stages of this production process.12

In rural Rajshahi, sericulture remained closely associated with family-based and home-centred production systems for an extended period. Within these arrangements, women participated in silkworm rearing, mulberry leaf collection, feeding silkworms, maintaining suitable rearing conditions, collecting cocoons, and performing other labour-intensive tasks related to silk production, alongside their domestic responsibilities. Silkworm rearing, in particular, required regular attention, careful supervision, and consistent maintenance, making it possible to integrate the activity into the household environment. This characteristic created opportunities for women to participate extensively in sericulture. Accounts of traditional textile production in northern Bangladesh also suggest that women played a significant role in cocoon production and silk reeling, whereas men were comparatively more involved in weaving silk fabrics.

Nevertheless, women's labour was rarely recognised as an independent occupation or as a distinct form of wage-earning employment. Their contributions were frequently regarded as domestic responsibilities or family assistance rather than productive economic activity. Consequently, the actual economic value of women's labour in silk production was inadequately represented in formal employment records and labour statistics. Yet women's work, extending from mulberry leaf collection and silkworm care to cocoon production, was indispensable to the initial stages of the production process. Women's entry into the Rajshahi silk industry should therefore be understood not merely as an expansion of employment opportunities, but also as part of a broader historical process involving household production, the rural economy, and the gendered division of labour.

Women's historical participation acquired new dimensions as the Rajshahi silk industry developed institutionally. Alongside household-based sericulture and cocoon production, opportunities gradually emerged for women to participate in training programmes, silk processing, reeling, weaving, and the

manufacture of silk products. Over time, women's labour thus extended beyond the domestic sphere and became increasingly connected with broader economic activities. This transition represents an important aspect of the history of women's labour in the Rajshahi silk industry and offers valuable insights into women's economic participation and empowerment.

5.2 Home-Based Women's Labour

As a labour-intensive rural cottage industry, sericulture has considerable socioeconomic significance. It has frequently been regarded as a potential source of employment for rural people, including women and those with limited access to formal employment. Its relatively low initial investment requirements have also made it an accessible economic activity for households with limited financial resources.

One of the most distinctive features of women's labour in the Rajshahi silk industry was its home-based character. Many women reared silkworms within their own households rather than working at separate industrial establishments. As a result, their contributions were not always recognised as formal employment, despite their direct involvement in productive activities.

This arrangement offered certain practical advantages, as women could combine sericulture with their domestic responsibilities. However, it also created difficulties in recognising and valuing their labour. When their work was unpaid or when the income generated through their efforts was recorded solely as household income, their individual economic contributions became less visible in official statistics and conventional assessments of employment.

It would therefore be misleading to regard women's participation in household-based sericulture merely as family assistance. Their labour constituted an essential component of the silk production process. Although much of this work took place within the household, it contributed directly to production, household livelihoods, and the continuity of the rural silk economy.

5.3 Gender-Based Division of Labour:

A distinct gender-based division of labour was evident in several activities associated with silk production. 13Although people from different social backgrounds participated in the industry, women and men were not necessarily involved in the same tasks to the same extent. The relationship between women and silk was reflected not only in the cultural significance of silk garments but also in women's substantial contribution to the production process.

Women were generally more involved in silkworm rearing, cocoon production, and silk reeling, while men were comparatively more prominent in weaving and loom-based activities. This pattern of participation reflected the organisation of production within rural households and the distribution of productive responsibilities between women and men.

The division of labour was not determined solely by physical requirements or technical skills. It was also shaped by prevailing social expectations, household responsibilities, and established perceptions of women's appropriate roles. Activities that could be undertaken within or near the home were more readily assigned to women, enabling them to participate in silk production while continuing to perform domestic work. Consequently, the organisation of the silk industry simultaneously created economic opportunities for women and reinforced the tendency to confine their productive activities to the domestic sphere.

The cultural association between silk and women's clothing further strengthened the symbolic relationship between women and the industry. Nevertheless, this cultural connection should be distinguished from the material conditions of production. Women's contribution to sericulture depended primarily on their labour, practical knowledge, and sustained involvement in production rather than on the cultural significance of silk garments alone.

Thus, the gendered division of labour in the Rajshahi silk industry provides an important perspective on how economic activities, household responsibilities, and social expectations interacted to shape women's working lives.

5.4 The Extent of Women's Labour:

Various news reports and research publications have highlighted the substantial participation of women in the silk industry.14 Sericulture is a labour-intensive activity, and women have historically constituted an important part of its workforce. One account states that women represented approximately 60 per cent of the total workforce engaged in the silk industry. It further suggests that many of the technologies and tools used in sericulture could be operated by women and that silkworm rearing was widely undertaken by women in countries such as China, Japan, and India, as well as Bangladesh. According to the same account, 5,824 families in Bangladesh were engaged in silkworm rearing in 1992.

These figures suggest that women's labour was not a marginal element of silk production. Rather, women's participation formed a substantial part of the industry's productive foundation, particularly in activities associated with silkworm rearing and cocoon production. Their involvement was important not only for individual household livelihoods but also for sustaining the wider sericulture economy.

However, the figures must be interpreted in relation to their historical context and the nature of the original sources. The reported proportion of female workers should not be treated as a definitive measure of women's participation in every segment of the Rajshahi silk industry unless the geographical coverage, occupational categories, and methodology of the original study are established. Similarly, the figure of 5,824 silkworm-rearing households refers to 1992 and cannot be used to represent the present situation.

Accordingly, these statistics are best understood as historical indicators of the scale of women's participation in sericulture rather than as comprehensive or contemporary official labour estimates. Their significance lies in demonstrating the importance of women's productive activities and the need for further research into the extent, organisation, and economic value of their labour.

5.5 The Silk Industry and Women's Economic Empowerment:

The silk industry created opportunities for women to participate in income-generating activities and contribute to household livelihoods. For women from rural and low-income households, sericulture could provide an additional source of income while allowing them to remain within their familiar domestic and community environments.

Women's participation in productive work can potentially strengthen their position within the household, particularly when their earnings contribute to family expenditure and economic security. Their involvement in silk production could also reduce certain production costs and increase household income. However, participation in productive work did not necessarily mean that women exercised independent control over the income generated through their labour. The extent to which their earnings translated into greater decision-making power depended on household arrangements, control over resources, and prevailing social relations.

Development initiatives also sought to promote women's economic self-reliance through sericulture. One account describes a silk project in Charghat, Rajshahi, implemented through a joint initiative involving the International Labour Organization (ILO), the Department of Women's Affairs, and the Bangladesh Silk Board, with the aim of assisting rural women with limited formal education. The account presents the project as a successful effort to promote women's participation in silk-related economic activities. The precise institutional arrangements, implementation period, and reported outcomes, however, require verification against the original project documentation.

Despite their contribution to production, women working in the silk industry have continued to face problems relating to wages and payment regularity. A news report published in 2023 described the experiences of women workers at the Rajshahi Silk Factory. Munni Begum, who worked in the factory's bobbin-making section and lived in Beldarpara, stated that she received Tk 300 per day but had not been paid for eight months.

Parul Begum, a worker in the printing section, similarly reported that she and her colleagues had gone eight months without receiving their wages. She described the difficulties of sustaining their families under such circumstances, explaining that they sometimes had food to eat and sometimes did not. She also alleged that workers who raised questions about their wages were told to leave.

The report further stated that some workers received a daily wage of Tk 300, while those operating looms and weaving fabric were paid Tk 50 per yard. According to the report, these workers could earn a maximum of approximately Tk 7,000 per month through their weaving activities. 16 These accounts illustrate the precarious nature of employment in the factory and the difficulties workers faced when wages were delayed or income remained insufficient.

A report published by the Bangladesh Sangbad Sangstha (BSS) on 15 March 2026 described the contemporary condition of the Rajshahi Silk Factory. According to the report, 41 workers and weavers were involved in production using 19 looms. However, the report did not specify their current wages or daily remuneration.

The available evidence also indicates that the Rajshahi Silk Factory began operations in 1961. Nevertheless, reliable documentary evidence establishing the exact wages paid to women when they first entered factory employment has not been identified in the material examined for this study. A report based on workers' accounts indicates that a daily wage of Tk 300 was paid to certain workers following the factory's reopening in 2018. 18 This information provides a limited indication of later wage arrangements, but it does not establish a continuous wage history from the factory's early years.

On the basis of the available reports, it can be stated that some daily-wage workers at the Rajshahi Silk Factory received Tk 300 per day in 2023. However, the available BSS report published in March 2026 does not provide sufficient information to establish whether this rate remained unchanged. The historical development of women's wages in the Rajshahi silk industry therefore remains an important area for further investigation through factory records, wage registers, government documents, and interviews with former and current workers.

5.6 The Institutional Silk Industry and the Changing Role of Women:

The establishment of the Rajshahi Silk Factory marked an important stage in the transition from household-based silk production towards a more organised industrial system. Following the commencement of the factory's operations in 1961, a more formal relationship developed between sericulture, silk processing, and industrial manufacturing.

After independence, the establishment of the Bangladesh Silk Board further strengthened the institutional framework for the development of the silk sector. Government involvement in training, research, the expansion of sericulture, and the organisation of production became increasingly important to the industry's development.

These institutional changes created new opportunities for women's participation in training programmes and organised production. Various development organisations also sought to involve rural women from

economically disadvantaged backgrounds in silkworm rearing, silk production, and weaving. According to information attributed to the International Sericultural Commission, several non-governmental organisations began initiatives during the 1980s to involve rural women in sericulture and weaving, with technical assistance from the Bangladesh Silk Board. 19 The specific programmes and their outcomes should be established through the relevant institutional publications before this claim is treated as definitive historical evidence.

An account of the factory's institutional history also records a visit by Begum Rowshan Ershad, then First Lady of Bangladesh, on 19 March 1989. During the visit, the chairman of the Bangladesh Silk Board and the manager of the Rajshahi Silk Factory reportedly accompanied her through the factory's different departments. She spoke with women workers about increasing production and expressed satisfaction with the factory's production and general conditions.

The account further states that she emphasised the need to improve the quality and designs of the factory's products. She also recommended that arrangements be made for organisations such as Biman Bangladesh Airlines and the Bangladesh Shipping Corporation to procure fabric regularly from the Rajshahi Silk Factory according to their requirements.

This visit provides a historical illustration of the attention given to industrial production, product quality, and institutional marketing. The reported interaction with women workers also indicates that female labour formed part of the factory's productive environment. Nevertheless, the visit alone does not establish the extent of women's employment, their wage levels, or the long-term impact of institutional initiatives on their working conditions. Such questions require corroboration through contemporary factory records and official reports.

The institutional development of the silk industry should therefore be examined not only in terms of production capacity and administrative expansion but also in relation to the opportunities it created for women, the nature of their employment, and the recognition afforded to their labour.

5.7 The Hidden History of Women's Labour:

One of the most significant historical characteristics of women's labour in the Rajshahi silk industry is its relative invisibility in conventional historical accounts. A woman might have spent several hours each day tending silkworms, producing cocoons, or assisting in silk reeling, yet historical records might not have identified her as a worker.

Several factors contributed to this invisibility, including patriarchal household structures, the prevalence of unpaid family labour, and the tendency to classify women's productive activities as extensions of domestic responsibilities. When production took place within the household, the distinction between domestic work and economically productive labour became particularly difficult to establish in official records.

This lack of recognition has important implications for the historical study of the silk industry. An account centred exclusively on factories, commercial production, institutional development, and trade would fail to capture the full extent of women's contribution. A more comprehensive history must also examine the household and village-level activities that sustained the industry and the women whose labour often remained undocumented.

Oral history is therefore an important methodological resource for reconstructing women's experiences in the Rajshahi silk industry. Interviews with former and current women workers, silk-rearing households, and other participants in the production process may reveal information about working practices, remuneration, family responsibilities, and changes in employment that is absent from official documentation. 20 Such testimony should be examined critically and compared with available records to establish chronology and assess the reliability of individual accounts.

The nature of women's labour in the silk industry has also changed over time. Earlier generations of women were often involved primarily in household-based sericulture and cocoon production. In subsequent periods,

some women gained opportunities to participate in training programmes, factory employment, weaving, and small-scale entrepreneurial activities.

At the same time, the occupational aspirations and employment choices of younger generations have evolved. Some women may seek opportunities outside the silk industry as alternative forms of employment become available. These developments suggest that women's relationship with sericulture cannot be understood as a static historical phenomenon.

The changing participation of women should therefore be examined in the context of broader transformations in rural society, household livelihoods, employment opportunities, and women's professional aspirations. Rather than interpreting these changes solely as evidence of industrial decline, it is necessary to consider how they reflect the changing economic and social circumstances of women in Rajshahi and the surrounding region.

5.8 Benefits and Limitations for Women and Child Workers:

Women constitute a substantial segment of the workforce in many labour-intensive industrial sectors, and a significant proportion of them are employed in low-skilled or temporary positions. 21 Research on women workers in industrial establishments associated with the Bangladesh Small and Cottage Industries Corporation (BSCIC) has examined issues relating to maternity benefits, workplace facilities, and childcare arrangements. However, such findings must be distinguished from evidence specifically relating to the Rajshahi silk industry.

One account reports that women workers in the industrial establishments under consideration were generally between 13 and 22 years of age, with some being married, pregnant, or mothers. It further suggests that maternity leave and related benefits varied across establishments and that approximately 85 per cent of the women surveyed had access to maternity leave and benefits. The reported value of these benefits ranged from approximately one-third to two-thirds of their wages or income. 22 These figures should be interpreted in accordance with the original study's sample, geographical coverage, survey period, and definitions of maternity benefits. They cannot automatically be generalised to women working in the Rajshahi silk industry.

The same account identifies inadequate workplace facilities as a significant concern. Women workers reportedly lacked sufficient private spaces and appropriate facilities for personal needs. In addition, the absence of adequate childcare arrangements created difficulties for women seeking to return to employment after childbirth. Some were unable to resume their jobs because they had no suitable arrangements for caring for their children.

These issues demonstrate that the availability of maternity benefits alone does not necessarily ensure a supportive working environment. Appropriate sanitation and privacy facilities, access to childcare, protection during pregnancy, and opportunities to return to work are also important components of women's employment security.

For women employed in the silk industry, these concerns should be examined alongside wage regularity, job security, occupational conditions, and access to social protection. However, conclusions about the prevalence of such problems among Rajshahi silk workers require industry-specific evidence. Further fieldwork and documentary research would help establish whether, and to what extent, these broader industrial concerns are reflected in the experiences of women working in the Rajshahi silk sector.

6. Conclusion

The history of the Rajshahi silk industry is closely intertwined with the history of women's labour. For generations, women have contributed to silkworm rearing, cocoon production, silk reeling, and various forms of household-based production. Their work has been particularly significant within rural household economies, where family labour constituted an important foundation of sericulture.

Despite its economic importance, much of this labour remained home-based, unpaid, or insufficiently recognised as productive employment. Women's contributions were frequently absorbed into the broader category of household work, limiting their visibility in formal labour statistics and historical accounts.

Consequently, a history of the Rajshahi silk industry that focuses exclusively on factories, commercial production, and trade would provide an incomplete understanding of the industry's development.

The establishment of the Rajshahi Silk Factory in 1961 and the subsequent development of institutional support through the Bangladesh Silk Board created a more organised framework for silk production. These developments also opened up new possibilities for women's participation in training programmes and industrial activities. Initiatives undertaken by government agencies and development organisations further sought to involve rural women in sericulture and related forms of production.

Nevertheless, the industry encountered significant difficulties during the late twentieth century and the early years of the twenty-first century. Economic and policy changes, competition from imported silk yarn, reduced institutional support, and the closure of the Rajshahi Silk Factory in 2002 contributed to the sector's crisis. These developments had implications for industrial workers and rural silk-rearing households, including women whose livelihoods depended on the industry. The precise effects on women's employment, income, and working conditions, however, require further investigation through historical records and first-hand testimony.

In more recent years, efforts to revive the Rajshahi silk industry have highlighted the importance of restoring productive capacity and improving the sector's long-term sustainability. Such initiatives should also address the specific concerns of women workers and silk-rearing households. Fair and timely wages, access to training, appropriate technological support, secure employment, and the protection of labour rights are essential to ensuring that women benefit meaningfully from the industry's development.

Ultimately, the history of women's labour in the Rajshahi silk industry is not simply the history of a traditional manufacturing sector. It is also a history of women's productive contributions, rural livelihoods, household economies, gender-based divisions of labour, and the pursuit of economic empowerment. Recognising this broader historical significance requires a research approach that brings together government documents, factory records, institutional publications, contemporary newspaper reports, and oral testimony from women workers and sericulture households.

By combining these sources and critically examining the relationship between household production, institutional development, and women's employment, it becomes possible to construct a more comprehensive and gender-sensitive account of the Rajshahi silk industry. Such an approach would not only acknowledge women's historically significant contributions but also provide a stronger foundation for understanding the challenges and opportunities that continue to shape their participation in the sector.

7. References

The History of Rajshahi: Silk and Indigo. 1965.

Bangladesh Silk Board. The Silk Industry in Economic Development. 1992.

Bangladesh Silk Research and Training Institute (BSRTI). Bangladesh Silk Research and Training Institute. Rajshahi, 2020.

Bangladesh Sericulture Development Board. "History and Current Status of the Silk Factory." Official website of the Bangladesh Sericulture Development Board.

Hifzur Rahman. "Crisis in the Silk Industry." Robbar, 4th year, no. 32, 4 April 1982, Dhaka, p. 16.

Bangladesh Sericulture Development Board. "History and Functions." Government of the People's Republic of Bangladesh.

Bangladesh Sericulture Development Board. "History and Current Status of the Silk Factory." Government of the People's Republic of Bangladesh.

Riazi, Mahmud Hossain & Reza, Mohammad Selim. "Impact Assessment of Structural Adjustment Policy on Rajshahi Silk." Bangladesh Economic Studies, 13(1), 2011, pp. 213–230.

Fardus, Jannatun. Socio-Economic Status and Determinants of the Participation of the Farmers in Sericulture: A Study in Rajshahi District. MS Thesis, Department of Development and Poverty Studies, Sher-e-Bangla Agricultural University, Dhaka, 2022.

Global InCH—International Journal of Intangible Cultural Heritage. "Weaving of Bangladesh—Silk Textiles."

Sultana, Zelina, Md. Meftahul Hassan & Tanvina Anu Ahmed. "Empirical Study on Extant Silk Industries Worker's Rights and Safety in Silk City Rajshahi, Bangladesh." 2023.

Asia InCH, "Weaving of Bangladesh," Encyclopedia of Intangible Cultural Heritage, "Silk Textiles" section.

Islam, Monowara. "Sericulture: An Accessible Means of Livelihood for Women." In Souvenir: National Sericulture Conference 1993. Bangladesh Silk Board, Ministry of Textiles, p. 81.

Islam, Monowara. "Sericulture: An Accessible Means of Livelihood for Women." In Souvenir: National Sericulture Conference 1993. Bangladesh Silk Board, Ministry of Textiles, p. 82.

Sheikh, Suman. Daily Sunshine, 7 April 2023, Rajshahi.

Rahman, Rimon. Ajker Patrika, 6 April 2023, Rajshahi.

Bangladesh Sangbad Sangstha (BSS), "Cloth produced from silk yarn sold at own showroom in Rajshahi," BSS News, Rajshahi, 15 March 2026.

Azad, Abul Kalam Muhammad. Prothom Alo, 27 May 2025.

Bangladesh Silk Board. Rajshahi, 1989.

Shantana R. Halder, Women in Sericulture: A Case of BRAC, Research Reports (1999): Economic Studies, Vol. XIV, BRAC, August 1999, pp. 93–112.

Kishore Goswami, 'Impact of Globalization of Silk Industry in Northwest India: An Assessment from Gender Perspective' (2006), Fourth International Conference on Globalization and Sectoral Development.

Rajshahi University Law Review, Vol. XII, December 2021, p. 277.