**A note from Jeffrey Sachs (excerpt from *The End of Poverty: Economic Possibilities for Our Time*, 2005 pp. 11-12)**

Over the years I have visited garment factories all over the developing world. I have grown familiar with the cavernous halls where hundreds of young women sit at sewing machines, and men at cutting tables, where the fabrics move along production lines and the familiar labels of GAP, Polo, Yves Saint Laurent, Wal-Mart, J.C. Penny, and others are attached as the clothing reaches the final stages of production. There is nothing glamorous about this work. The women often walk two hours each morning in long quiet files to get to work. Arriving at seven or seven-thirty, they may be in their seats for most of the following twelve hours. They often work with almost no break at all or perhaps a very short lunch break, with little chance to go to the lavatory. Leering bosses lean over them posing a threat of sexual harassment. After a long, difficult, tedious day, the young women trudge back home, when they are again sometimes threatened with physical assault. These sweatshop jobs are the targets of public protest in developed countries; those protests have helped to improve the safety and quality of the working conditions. The rich-world protesters, however, should support increased numbers of such jobs, albeit under safer working conditions, by protesting the trade protectionism in their own countries that keeps out garment exports from countries such as Bangladesh. These young women already have a foothold in the modern economy that is a critical, measurable step up from the villages of Malawi (and more relevant for the women, a measureable step up from the villages of Bangladesh where most of them were born). The sweatshops are the first rung on the ladder out of extreme poverty. They give lie to the Kissinger state department’s forecast that Bangladesh is condemned to extreme poverty.

On one visit to Bangladesh, I picked up an English-language morning newspaper, where I found an extensive insert of interviews with young women working in the garment sector. These stories were poignant, fascinating, and eye-opening. One by one, they recounted the arduous hours, the lack of labour rights, and the harassment. What was most striking and unexpected about the stories was the repeated affirmation that this work was the greatest opportunity that these women could ever have imagined, and that their employment had changed their lives.

Nearly all of the women interviewed had grown up in the countryside, extraordinarily poor, illiterate and unschooled, and vulnerable to chronic hunger and hardship in a domineering, patriarchal society. Had they (and their forebearers of the 1970s and 1980s) stayed in the villages, they would have been forced into a marriage arranged by their fathers, and by seventeen or eighteen, forced to conceive a child. Their trek to the cities to take jobs has given these young women a chance for personal liberation of unprecedented dimension and opportunity.

The Bangladeshi women told how they were able to save some small surplus from their meager pay, manage their own income, have their own rooms, choose when and whom to date and marry, choose to have children when they felt ready, and use their savings to improve their living conditions and especially to go back to school to enhance their literacy and job-market skills. As hard as it is, this life is a step on the way to economic opportunity that was unimaginable in the countryside in generations past.

Some rich-country protesters have argued that Dhaka’s apparel firms should either pay far higher wage rates or be closed, but closing such factories as a result of wages forced above worker productivity would be little more than a ticket for these women back to rural misery. For these young women, these factories offer not only opportunities for personal freedom, but also the first rung on the ladder of rising skills and income for themselves and, within a few years, for their children. Virtually every poor country that has developed successfully has gone through these first stages of industrialization. These Bangladeshi women share the experience of many generations of immigrants to New York City’s garment district and a hundred other places where their migration to toil in garment factories was a step on the path to a future of urban affluence in succeeding generations.

Not only is the garment sector fueling Bangladesh’s economic growth of more than 5 percent per year in recent years, but it is also raising the consciousness and power of women in a society that was long brazenly biased against women’s chances in life. As part of a more general and dramatic process of change throughout Bangladeshi society, this change and others give Bangladesh the opportunity in the next few years to put itself on a secure path of long-term economic growth. The countryside that these women have left is also changing quickly, in part because of the income remittances and ideas that the young women send back to their rural communities, and in part because of the increased travel and temporary migration between rural and urban areas, as families diversify their economic bases between rural agriculture and urban manufacturers and services.