

Made in Bangladesh

Global Housing Graduation Studio:
Architecture of Transition in the Bangladesh Delta
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01

INTRODUCTION

*Humanitarianism, despite the lack of one clear definition of the word, throughout the research will refer to the international, particularly Western, crisis respond to emergencies, focusing on the needs of people affected by conflict, insecurity, natural disasters, epidemics, and famines. The term will be used to describe the aid (e.g. architecture, health, human rights) brought by foreigners to a place that requires support. The primary goal of humanitarianism is often to address an immediate need, which is distinct from a long-term application of aid like development and promoting rules of peace and security. However, this factor of humanitarianism will be questioned as to reveal the increasing necessity of using it to restore durable solutions. The goal is to decrease dependency by providing temporary on-site help that will remain helpful when departing, or left independent.

*DBL is amongst the largest manufacturers and exporters of knit garments in Bangladesh. The main markets are in Europe, the United States, and Canada. DBL is one of Bangladesh's top knitting businesses, known for exclusively producing top-notch clothing for its customers. Over the years, world-famous apparel companies such as Hugo Boss, H&M, Walmart, Kmart, The North Face, G-Star, Zara, Puma, Ralph Lauren, and many more have benefited from DBL's reputation for high-quality products and solid commercial relationships (Retrieved from the DBL website).

Figure 1
Protest against Rana Plaza Collapse. Relatives of Rana Plaza's workers demand justice. Savar, Dhaka, Bangladesh. 24th October 2013.
Image: Taslima Akhter.

Bangladesh's economy relies heavily on the ready-made garments (RMG) industry, which essentially benefits western consumers (Fauzia Erfan Ahmed, 2004). Following significant labor union protests that exposed the harsh realities of the sector, and intense global media coverage that highlighted the exploitative nature of the fast fashion industry, various humanitarian* initiatives emerged, advocating for human rights and improved working conditions (figure 1). As part of this movement, the British International Investment (BII) loaned the Dulal Brothers Limited group (DBL)* 43 million pounds to open and fund the development of Jinat Textile Mill in Sherpur in 2023, with the discourse of empowering female workers, providing safer working conditions, and establishing durable machinery ("British International Investment Agrees \$52 Million Loan to DBL Group", 2023).

Although initiatives as such appear to be benevolent forces for the good of the local people, who truly benefits from them – and in this case, who truly benefits from the functioning of Jinat Textile Mills?



Currently, garment workers live in overcrowded, unhygienic adjacent to the factories where they work (figure 3). These areas often lack basic sanitation, clean water, and essential services, exposing workers and their families to health risks and daily hardships, both in their place of work and housing (Zaman, 2024).

Investments like those of the BII act as catalysts for economic dependency and perpetuate systems of inequality and exploitation—remnants of colonial* rule masked under a guise of aid. As stated, this pattern is not new, and essentially the case of the garment sector highlights the cyclical nature of these interventions - offering aid but ultimately reinforcing dependency and benefitting from the system (figure 2). The exploitation, health risks, and environmental damage that Western investors are now aiming to address in Bangladesh's textile industry are, in fact, issues they originally contributed to and even caused, driven by the demands of Western consumers. As long as this system continues to serve their interests, there is little incentive for them to genuinely disrupt it.



Figure 2
Informal settlements around Jinat Textile Mills in Sherpur, Bangladesh (Retrieved from Google Maps, 2024).

*The term colonialism refers to a practice or policy where a powerful country establishes control over a foreign territory, exploiting it for economic, political, and cultural gain. This domination often involves the settlement of the colonizing country's people in the colonized area, extraction of resources, imposition of the colonizer's cultural norms, and the suppression of local populations and their cultures. Throughout the research, the terms colonialism and modern colonialism will be used. Modern colonialism refers the continued economic, political, and cultural dominance of former colonial powers over less developed or formerly colonized countries, even after official independence. Also referred to as neocolonialism, it tends to manifest in more subtle ways, such as through economic dependency, silent exploitation, and cultural influence.

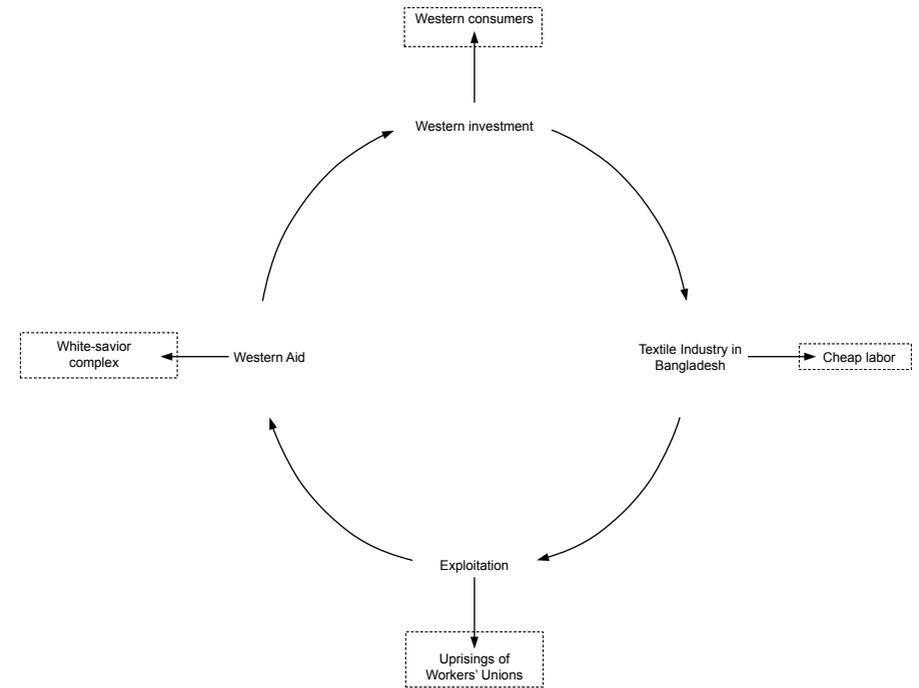


Figure 3
Cyclical nature of humanitarian aid as system of dependency.

To understand the origins of these dynamics, it is important to examine Bangladesh's heritage in weaving and fabric crafting, and how these traditions evolved under colonial rule. Before transforming into an exploitative industry driven by fast fashion, textile artistry in Bangladesh dates to the Mughal Empire and was both a source of cultural pride and economic vitality (Dasgupta, 2000). The art of Jamdani weaving and Dhaka muslin* production by Bangladeshi artisans was highly valued not only in the Mughal Empire but later in Europe and Great Britain as well (figures 4 and 5). However, under colonial rule and modern commercial pressures, this traditional craft was nearly wiped out. With the rise of British dominance in the 18th and 19th centuries, the demand for cheap, easily produced cotton undermined this delicate art, eventually driving the plant used for muslin to extinction by the early 20th century (Fauzia Erfan Ahmed, 2004). The establishment of institutions like the Bangladesh University of Textiles in 1921 under British rule, aimed at training women to work efficiently within industrial pressure, further solidified this shift (Sarker, 2018). The gradual erasure of this tradition reflects how colonial powers historically reshaped local economies to meet their own needs—a pattern that persists today in the form of fast fashion.



Figure 4
Marie-Antoinette in a Dhaka Muslin Dress, Elisabeth Vigée Le Brun, 1783.



Figure 5
Empress Nur Jahan, holding a portrait of Emperor Jahangir, Bishandas, circa 1627.

* Jamdani is a handwoven fabric from Dhaka, known for its lightweight, sheer quality and intricate patterns, often featuring floral or geometric designs. This traditional textile is made using a pit loom, with artisans creating motifs through supplementary threads. Jamdani sarees are particularly celebrated and recognized by UNESCO for their craftsmanship.

Dhaka Muslin is a fine, lightweight cotton fabric historically produced in Dhaka, renowned for its softness and sheer quality. Made from exceptionally fine threads, it was highly prized in the 16th to 18th centuries and sought after by royalty. Dhaka Muslin played a significant role in international trade and is a symbol of Bangladesh's rich textile heritage.

* The Grameen Bank Housing Program is a co-operative non-governmental association that first began as a loan program for the rural poor to help them initiate income generating schemes. This proved successful, the incomes of the loan recipients rose, and most were able to repay the bank. Encouraged, bank officials decided to extend the bank's support to house-building, and now offer credit to its shelterless members, 84% being women, to build flood and water resistant modest houses. Along with loans of approximately \$350 at 5% interest, each borrower receives four concrete columns, a prefabricated sanitary slab and 26 corrugated iron roofing sheets.

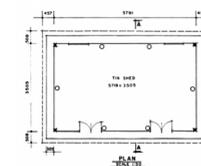
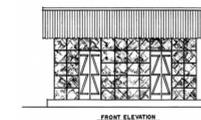
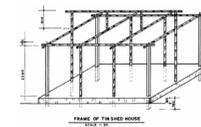
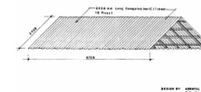
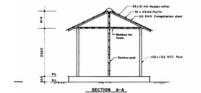


Figure 6
Structural system of basic unit provided by Grameen Bank Housing Program.

The motives for foreign interventions within the textile industry therefore are not selfless initiatives to empower the local communities and promote better working conditions, but rather to solidify the dynamics of dependency, reminiscent of those imposed during colonial rule. This research will delve into the intersection of humanitarian initiatives and modern colonialism in Bangladesh's textile industry, aiming to decolonize the sector and break away from dependence on foreign interventions. The Grameen Bank Housing Program* provides inspiration on ways to empower the local people to exchange income-generating activities with proper housing through a system of credits. Textile workers, craftsmen and craftswomen could regain financial autonomy wherein they gain profit from their own textile artistry and turn this profit into better livelihoods and housing.

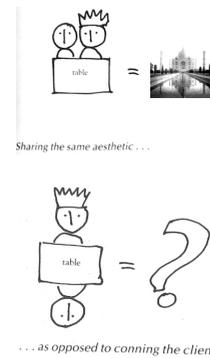


Figure 7
Charles Correa's sketches about the hierarchical result of the "builder" and the "user" (Retrieved from *The New Landscape*, Charles Correa, 1985).

* White savior complex, or white saviorism refers to a mindset or behavior in which a white person or group believes they must "rescue" people of color, often from less developed or marginalized communities, in a way that is self-serving or ego-centric. This complex is rooted in the idea that people of color, particularly in developing countries, are incapable of improving their own circumstances without the intervention of well-meaning white individuals or organizations. Throughout the research, white saviorism will be used as a symbol for the power dynamics omnipresent between humanitarian volunteers and local communities. The white savior complex is rooted in a form of racism, albeit often unintentional and even unconscious, but can be harmful when intervening on a humanitarian basis.

The research paper draws on literature to address two core themes: humanitarianism as neocolonialism and the textile industry in Bangladesh as a colonial remnant.

The complexities of these themes resonate with Charles Correa's reflections on the ethical dilemmas of intervention in developing contexts. Correa's questioning, "What is your moral right to decide for ten thousand, for a hundred thousand, for two million people? But then what is the moral advantage in not acting, in merely watching passively the slow degradation of life around you?" encapsulates the tension within humanitarian and architectural interventions (Correa, 1985). He highlights a realistic dilemma faced by architects and aid workers alike. Correa also critiques socially conscious professionals who "reach out to the poor" with a detached, hierarchical approach, in which the "builder" and the "user" do not share the same ambitions, resulting in solutions that do not address the fundamental needs of the communities (figure 7). In the context of the research paper, these initiatives, while outwardly beneficial, can risk reinforcing a paternalistic white savior complex*, positioning Western investors and architects as benefactors who determine solutions based on aesthetic or idealistic considerations rather than a deep engagement with local contexts and needs (Pallister-Wilkins, 2021). Editor of the book *The Architecture of Empowerment*, Ismail Serageldin proposes architects to redefine the act of intervention not only to build for the poor, but to rethink the premises of designing and constructing by collaborating with the community from the conception to the construction of the project.

Similarly, Suha Ozkan's observation that *"the distribution of employment determines housing needs"* further contextualizes the way foreign interventions in Bangladesh's textile sector drive internal migration toward urban centers. As jobs in the garment industry concentrate in Dhaka, housing needs follow, intensifying urbanization in an already densely populated capital. This dynamic illustrates how the dependency on foreign interventions not only shapes Bangladesh's economy but also affects its urban infrastructure and social fabric, as workers from rural areas migrate in search of employment, leaving their traditions and crafts behind, to move to overcrowded and unsanitary slums, as discussed with Dhaka based founder of Binodini, a hand-made clothing brand, and architect Naemah Zaman*.

Framed within a broader historical context, these insights reveal a persistent cycle of dependency and exploitation. Scholars such as Barnett (2011) argue that modern aid and investment patterns reinforce colonial power dynamics, where former colonies like Bangladesh rely on external financial support to sustain their industries. Economist Amartya Sen's argument that true independence is predicated on economic freedom resonates in this context, as Bangladesh's textile sector depends on foreign consumers. To address this systemic dependency, scholars such as Sabaratnam (2017) advocate for a redefinition of humanitarianism, one that empowers local communities through resources and knowledge that prioritize self-sufficiency.

* After contacting the Creative Conservation Alliance, one of the founders, Caesar, provided the contact of Naemah Zaman, an architecture graduate from Dhaka and now founder of a handloom clothing brand called Binodini. In a call, Zaman shared that she aims to bring back qualitative handloom fabrics through the arts of Jamdani. Throughout the conversation and exchange of questions, she shared a lot about the current situation of the garment industry, and gave some feedback on the approach taken in this paper. A meeting is planned with Zaman in December, where she will organize a visit to a garment workers' village, adjacent to one of the large garment factories.



Figure 8
Exchanges with Naemah Zaman,
November 2024.

* After reaching out to the Bangladesh Garment and Sweater Workers Trade Union Center on Facebook, Khairul Mamun Mintu, the Secretary of Financial Affairs of the union, agreed to have a conversation on WhatsApp about the research proposed here. Following that discussion, three garment workers agreed to share their experiences and ideas for the project in a call, accompanied by Mamun and a translator. In December, a meeting will be organized at the union center in Dhaka with some representatives of the union, as well as garment workers and the financial secretary in order to speak about their thoughts on the research, as well as visit a garment factory and see how garment workers are living next to that factory.



Figure 9
Call with garment worker Tania from factory Denim Asia Ltd, Financial Affairs Secretary of workers' union Bangladesh Garments and Sweaters Workers' Trade Union Center (BGSWTUC), Khairul Mamun Mintu, and Amrin Hossain Annie, assistant and translator. November 5, 2024.

French philosopher Frantz Fanon's perspective on rediscovering post-colonial identity through traditional crafts and artisanal practices offers an additional layer to this discussion, suggesting that a return to cultural heritage—such as the lost art of Dhaka muslin and Jamdani (figure 10)—can be a path to reclaiming autonomy and resilience in the face of neocolonial pressures. Following discussions with Khairul Mamun Mintu, Secretary of Workers' Union BGSWTUC*, and with three garment workers in Dhaka, this claim is to be tested.

This literature review examines the intersection of humanitarianism, neocolonialism, and architectural ethics as they relate to the textile industry in Bangladesh. It aims to explore how these seemingly benevolent interventions can ultimately deepen dependency, exploit cheap labor, and drive urbanization, leading to a socio-economic structure still profoundly shaped by colonial legacies.



Figure 10
Man working the art of Jamdani in a rural village.
Photo by Anupreema.



Figure 11
Man working the art of Jamdani in
a rural Village.
Photo by Anuprema.

03

PROBLEM STATEMENT

Humanitarianism is portrayed as a benevolent force aimed at alleviating suffering and fostering development in underprivileged regions. However, many humanitarian interventions inadvertently catalyze dependency and perpetuate systems of inequality and exploitation, mirroring the dynamics of colonial rule (Dussart & Lester, 2019). In Bangladesh's textile industry, this dependency is particularly evident, where the interests of Western stakeholders overshadow the needs of local workers.

Exploring the historical roots of this industry reveals a legacy of economic reshaping dating back to colonial rule. Bangladesh, once celebrated for its heritage in weaving, particularly through Jamdani and Dhaka muslin, saw this traditional craft decline under colonial and commercial pressures in the 18th and 19th centuries (Fauzia Erfan Ahmed, 2004). Today, foreign investments in Bangladesh's textile sector echo similar patterns, reshaping the industry to serve external demands rather than promoting sustainable local growth.

This research examines the intersection of humanitarian aid, neocolonialism, and economic dependency within Bangladesh's RMG industry, drawing inspiration from initiatives like the Grameen Bank Housing Program to envision models that prioritize local autonomy and empower artisans to reclaim financial independence through textile artistry. Addressing these dynamics is crucial to achieving a decolonized textile industry that truly benefits local communities, free from dependency on foreign interests.



Figure 12 & 13
Examples of houses built with the
Grameen Bank Housing Program.

04

FRAMEWORK

Following the literature review, the framework aims to show that architecture can be the connecting element between the garment industry and the decolonization of humanitarian intervention. As determined by literature and case studies, this could be done through participative design to empower the local communities on the long term.

Mughal Era

Colonial Period

Industrial Period

Globalisation

Liberation of Bangladesh, 1971

Rana Plaza Factory Collapse Disaster, 2013

garment industry and craftsmanship

architecture

neocolonialism

colonial roots

participative approach

decolonization of interventions

community empowerment

Bangladesh University of Textiles, 1921

Empress Nur Jahan, holding a portrait of Emperor Jahangir, circa 1627, by Bishandas.

Marie-Antoinette in a Dhaka Muslin Dress, Elisabeth Vigée Le Brun, 1783.

The Rise of the Bangladesh Garment Industry
Fauzia Erfan Ahmed, 2004

The Ethics of Assistance
Deen K. Chatterjee, 2004

Adhocism by Charles Jenck and Nathan Silver, 1972

Design like you give a damn,
Cameron Sinclair, 2006

Grameen Bank Housing Program, 1976

Development as Freedom,
Amartya Sen, 1999

Post-Humanitarianism
Mark Duffield, 2019

The Timeless Way of Building,
Christopher Alexander, 1980

Colonization and the Origins of Humanitarian Government
Fae Dussart & Alan Lester, 2019

Les Damnés de la Terre,
Franz Fanon, 1961

Architecture to change the world?
Suha Ozkan, 1997

Decolonizing Intervention: International Statebuilding in Mozambique, Meera Sabaratnam, 2017

The Architecture of Empowerment,
Ismail Serageldin, 1997

Empire of Humanity: A History of Humanitarianism,
Michael Barnett, 2011

The New Landscape,
Charles Correa, 1985.

Rethinking Humanitarian Aid from a Postcolonial/Decolonial Perspective, Yuki Fugita, 2020

Paternalism beyond Borders, Michael Barnett, 2016

- Programs
- ◆ Paintings
- Literature

05

RESEARCH QUESTION

How can architecture contribute to decolonizing foreign interventions in Sylhet's garment industry (1), while dismantling dependency (2) and empowering garment workers and their communities over the long term (3)?

Subquestions

1. What are the specific housing and community needs of Sylhet's garment workers, and how can a participatory architectural design process address these needs while empowering the community?
2. What lessons can be learned from the history of Dhaka Muslin and Jamdani, and how can contemporary perspectives on humanitarianism be reframed to challenge modern colonial approaches?
3. To what extent can a revival of local craftsmanship promote economic self-sufficiency for garment workers, lessen reliance on Western funding, and reduce urban migration—and how feasible is this approach?

06

HYPOTHESIS

To support the garment industry workers while avoiding long-term dependency, the whole economic system of Bangladesh, which very highly depends on exporting RMG to the Western world, will have to be questioned and re-developed. The garment industry is often praised as reducing unemployment and empowering illiterate women from rural villages to be financially independent (Sarker, 2018). Although this is a benefit of the Bangladeshi RMG export industry, the health concerns, exploitative nature, safety hazards, and in turn the urbanization of Dhaka are causes for concern (Khanna, 2011). This rapid urbanization also forces migration of people to slums adjacent to garment factories.

This kind of intervention is of course beyond the scope of one graduation project, and even beyond the scope of multiple architectural projects. However, considering most garment workers currently live in overcrowded informal settlements, architecture could play a role in bettering their lives (figure 14). The proposal of a housing project for garment workers or craftsmen and craftswomen working in a local textile factory in Sylhet could make way for sufficient research and understanding to have the legitimacy of intervening.



Figure 14
Informal settlements around Asia
Denim Ltd.

07

GOAL

The first goal of the research is to critically examine how contemporary humanitarian interventions perpetuate a system of dependency and personal enrichment rather than genuine long-term aid, acting as remnants of the colonial era in the context of the garment industry in Bangladesh.

Then, the research aims to provide enough understanding of the context for a housing project to be proposed, targeted at workers within the textile sector in Sylhet. The project could reflect elements of the Grameen Bank Housing Program, only dedicated to garment workers or craftswomen and craftsmen, giving them a reason not to migrate to the capital.



Figure 15
Craftsmen weaving textile with the
Jamdani technique.
Murshid Anwar, 2012

08

METHODOLOGY

*The following unions were contacted thus far, and in *italics* those that have responded positively to collaborate.

-*Bangladesh Center for Workers Solidarity (BCWS)*
 -Green Bangla Garments Workers Federation (GBGWF)
 -SuPWR
 -*Bangladesh Garment Workers Solidarity (BGWS)*
 -National Garment Workers Federation (NGWF)
 -*Bangladesh Garments and Sweaters Workers' Trade Union Center (BGSWTUC)*

*The following activists were contacted thus far.

-Kalpona Akter: former child worker, co-founded the Bangladesh Centre for Worker Solidarity (BCWS).
 -Amirul Haque Amin: president and co-founder of National Garment Workers Federation (NGWF).
 -Sultana Begüm: president of Green Bangla Garment Workers Federation (GBGWF).
 -Maheen Sultan: Head of the Gender and Social Development cluster at BRAC Institute of Governance and Development (BIGD). Works for NGOs, the UN, Grameen Bank, and the Bangladesh Government
 -Taslima Akhter: activist and photographer. Member of several activist organizations. Documented the Rana Plaza collapse in 2013
 -Zonayed Saki: Bangladeshi politician. Spoke at Third Central Council of BGWS on November 1st, 2024.

*The following programs were contacted thus far, and in *italics* those that have responded positively to collaborate.

-Bangladesh Institute of Labor Studies (BILS)
 -*Prof. Dr. Eng. Ayub Nabi Khan from the BUFT University of Fashion and Technology*
 -BRAC Institute of Governance and Development

1. Defining specific housing and community needs and establishing a participatory design process.

It is important to actually reach out to various workers' unions to connect with garment workers, hear their stories, and gain insight into their real needs, ambitions, and thoughts on this research and its potential outcomes.*

Hearing from activists and local supporters of the workers' union could also give rise to interesting discussions.*

Also, speaking to students in the fields of architecture and textile studies could bring interesting approaches to the research.*

2. Drawing lessons from the historical erasure of Dhaka Muslin and Jamdani, and understanding how modern humanitarian interventions sometimes mirror colonial approaches.

Contacting mills and garment manufacturers in order to understand the power dynamics that shape the garment industry.*

*The following mills and factories were contacted thus far.

- Posh Garments Ltd.: Around 5000 employees
- Tex Garment Zone: customers from The Netherlands, Denmark, Germany, Sweden, Japan, Australia and New Zealand, around 500 employees
- Beximco : domestic and export markets, 70 000 employees
- Square Textiles Ltd: 1000 employees
- Ananta Apparels Ltd.: H&M, Levi's, Zara, Jack&Jones, Gap, Calvin Klein Jeans, ONLY, Tommy Hilfiger, Primark, American Eagle, 26 000 employees
- Fakir Garments : 1200 employees
- Standard Group : 40 000 employees
- Asian Apparels Ltd.: over 18 facilities and over 40000 employees
- Akij Textile Mills: 1600 employees

Also, foreign investors should be given the right to share their side of the story.*

*The following foreign investors were contacted thus far.

- British International Investment
- DBL Group : conglomerate receiving investments from foreign stakeholders
- Abdul Kader Azad, Managing Director of BGMEA (Bangladesh Garment Manufacturers and Exporters Association): trade organization of garment manufacturers
- BKMEA (Bangladesh Knitwear Manufacturers and Exporters Association): trade organization of garment manufacturers

3. Understanding what the revival of local craftsmanship entails, and realistically determining if it could serve in promoting self-sufficiency and reduce migration.

Speaking with associations that empower traditional crafts and hearing from craftsmen and craftswomen.*

*The following associations were contacted thus far, and in *italics* those that have responded positively to collaborate.

- Aranya: supports knowledge exchange and skill development workshops with native tribes in the Sangu-Matamuhuri Reserve Forest in Chittagong. Indigo dye business and jewelry line, promotes alternative livelihood option for the CHT communities
- Creative Conservation Alliance*
- Bengal Craft Society: nonprofit organization which aims to develop a self-sustainable, profitable system for empowering craftsmen
- Naeemah Zaman: founder of a handloom clothing brand called Binodini*

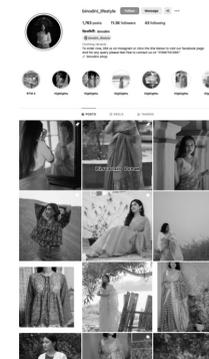


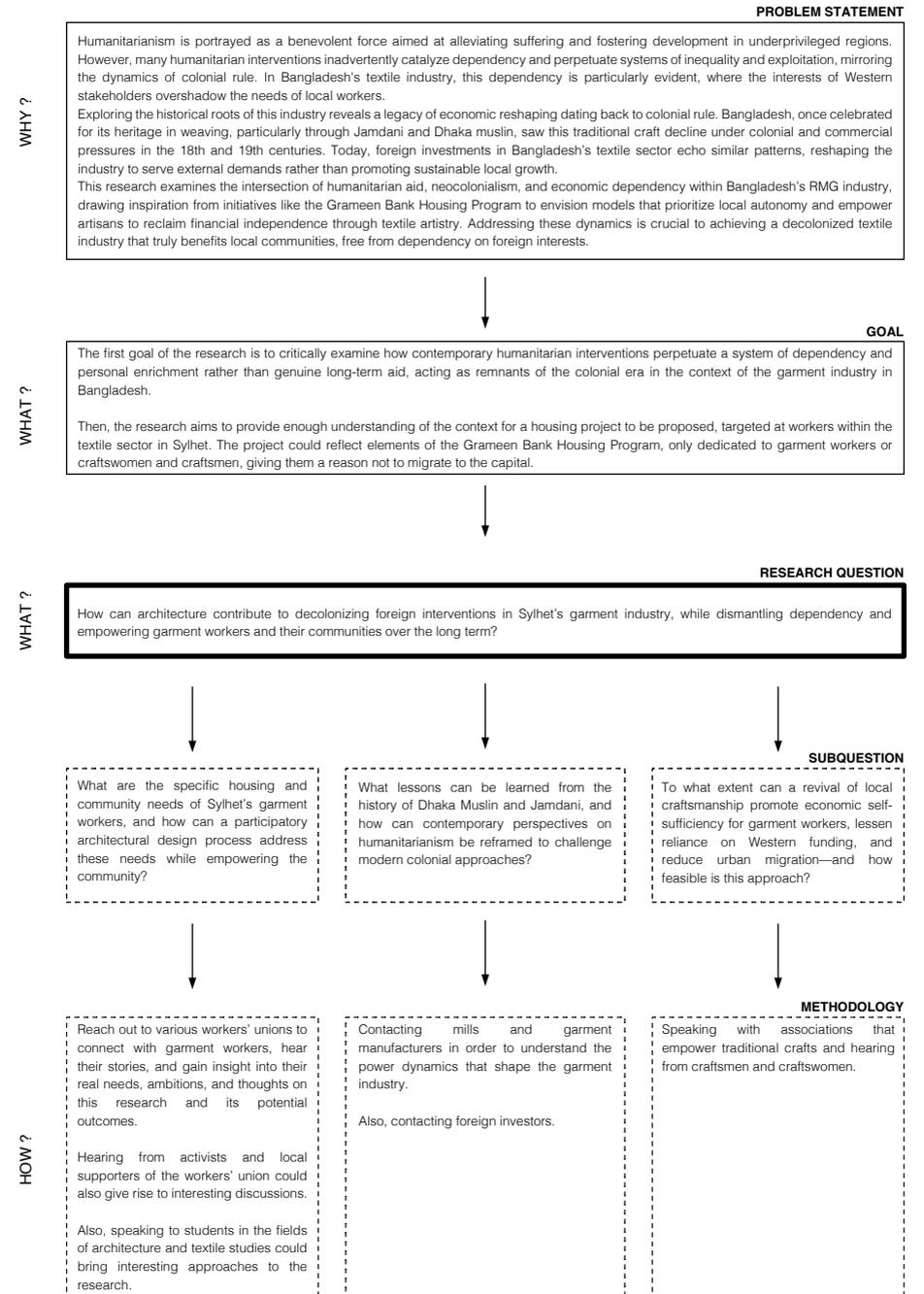
Figure 16
Instagram page of Naeemah Zaman's handloom brand, Binodini.

The result of these tasks would be a toolbox or manual comprising of all of the needs, ideas, approaches, and desires expressed by the people that were willing to share, as well as those of prior cases found in literature.

This toolbox will then be used to formulate a housing design for garment workers or craftsmen within the textile sector, always referring to the toolbox for making decisions. Keeping contact with those that formulated the toolbox will remain crucial, in case questions were to arise which cannot be addressed using the toolbox- through design, the toolbox will then complete itself.

09

RESEARCH SCHEME



10

RELEVANCE

This research is highly relevant as it addresses the ongoing issues of economic dependency, exploitation, and cultural erasure in Bangladesh's textile industry.

By examining how modern humanitarian interventions often replicate colonial power dynamics, it challenges the widely accepted notion of aid as purely benevolent. It allows us to question ourselves as European architects intervening in countries that we're not familiar with, and is a start at drawing the line between genuine aid and feel-good initiatives.

In the context of the global fast-fashion industry, understanding these dynamics is crucial for developing more sustainable and equitable practices that empower local communities rather than perpetuate their reliance on external forces. Moreover, the potential to revive traditional textile craftsmanship offers a pathway to preserving cultural heritage while fostering long-term economic self-sufficiency for garment workers. As architects, it allows us to place ourselves in this context while sufficiently understanding what it entails, when intervening to create housing for workers within the textile sector in the Sylhet region.

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Exchanges with Prof. Dr. Eng. Ayub Nabi Khan from the BUFT University of Fashion and Technology, Dhaka.

Exchanges with Amrin Hossain Annie and Khairul Mamun Mintu from the Bangladesh Garments and Sweaters Workers' Trade Union Center in Dhaka.

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