Transition to Adulthood of Female Garment-factory Workers in Bangladesh

Sajeda Amin, Ian Diamond, Ruchira T. Naved, and Margaret Newby

This article examines data from a study on garment-factory workers in Bangladesh to explore the implications of work for the early socialization of young women. For the first time, large numbers of young Bangladeshi women are being given an alternative to lives in which they move directly from childhood to adulthood through early marriage and childbearing. Employment creates a period of transition in contrast to the abrupt assumption of adult roles at very young ages that marriage and childbearing mandate. This longer transition creates a period of adolescence for young women working in the garment sector that is shown to have strong implications for the women's long-term reproductive health. (STUDIES IN FAMILY PLANNING 1998; 29,2: 185–200)

Traditionally, Bangladeshi society has been characterized by very early marriage and childbearing. In the early 1970s, the average age at marriage for girls was around 16. Although a trend toward later age at marriage began in the 1980s, and the average age was estimated to be 18 years in a 1989 survey (Huq and Cleland, 1990), the expectation for most women remained that they would marry in their mid-teens, not long after menarche (Aziz and Maloney, 1985), at which time the bride would move directly from her own family's household to that of her husband.

Adolescence is usually defined as a time between the ages of 10 and 19 years when young people are making the transition from childhood to adulthood. The three main aspects of this stage of life are demographic and biological, psychological and emotional, and economic. Young people may take on the physical characteristics of adulthood before they develop adult psychological, social, and economic skills. In other words, adolescence offers young people an opportunity within and outside the home to experience a period of independence as a biological but not as a social adult. Until recently, childhood ended suddenly with early marriage for girls, and adolescence was rarely recognized as a distinct phase of life.

Two ways in which society may change to offer women the possibility of experiencing adolescence are through increased educational opportunities, particularly at the secondary level, and through the opportunity to work outside the home. In this article, a combination of qualitative and quantitative data is used to examine the way in which opportunities for labor-force participation in the expanding garment manufacturing industry provide a social setting in which some young Bangladeshi women have the opportunity to experience adolescence. Despite long work hours and harsh working conditions, most workers are able to negotiate within their natal families some independence and autonomy as a result of their earning potential, while remaining aware that traditional marriage will end this phase of their lives. Although women may return to a state of economic dependence on their husbands after marriage, having experienced some degree of financial self-reliance may give them greater autonomy as wives and in reproductive decisionmaking.

During adolescence, girls develop the physiological characteristics of women, including reproductive capac-

Sajeda Amin is Associate, Policy Research Division, Population Council, New York. Ian Diamond is Dean of Social Sciences, University of Southampton. Ruchira T. Naved is Senior Fellow, Population Council, Dhaka and Research Coordinator, Save-the-Children (USA). Margaret Newby is Research Student, University of Southampton.

ity. Women who marry after 18 are reproductively mature and thus are less likely than younger women to be at risk of becoming pregnant in their most vulnerable years. During adolescence, as their reproductive capacity develops, young people learn how to cope with their own sexuality. Traditionally, in Bangladesh, female sexuality is managed through early marriage and through the custom of *purdah* (female seclusion), which controls the nature of interactions between men and women. However, factory employment creates strong incentives for delaying marriage and leads to types of interactions between the sexes that those who marry early in puberty do not experience. Young women working with factory machines gain self-confidence and a sense of modernity. They are exposed to a new social network, and to new lifestyles. The experience they gain in negotiating contracts and wages with men imparts skills that may have future implications for their relationships with their husbands. Work also changes their attitudes about education and raises the opportunity cost of women's time. As a result of the factory experience, garment workers are also exposed to information about health and contraception.

In Bangladesh, factory employment opportunities for women began late relative to those in other Asian countries that have experienced similar economic development. In 1978, some 130 employees of one of the first four garment factories producing for export were sent to Korea for management training, many of whom subsequently set up their own enterprises. By 1985, 700 factories were operating, and in 1995, the manufacturers' association listed some 2,400 registered factories (BGMEA, 1995). Most such factories are now owned locally, although some of the largest are joint ventures with Korea- and Hong Kong-based producers. By 1995, the garment sector employed about 1.2 million people, 90 percent of them women. Typically, these women come from poor rural areas and are often young and single when they are first employed. The garment industry is the first sector in Bangladesh to provide cash employment outside the home to such women.

Changing Patterns of Adolescent Work

Although the phenomenon of child and youth labor in developing Asian countries is not new, formal-sector opportunities are new, particularly for young women. A series of time-use studies conducted in the mid-1970s demonstrated that in most traditional economies, very young boys and girls contribute significantly to household labor, and that gender specialization also begins early in life (Cain, 1977; Nag et al., 1977; Jain, 1985; De Tray, 1983; UN, 1995a). Some evidence is found of change over time in the nature and pattern of work. Amin (1997), comparing time-use data between Cain's 1976 study (published 1977) and her own 1991 data, found overall hours spent working in rural areas fell for girls and women over that 15-year period, mainly as a result of the mechanization of post-harvest labor, which was traditionally performed by women. White (1994) also reports on change over time in the pattern of work for children and young adults. In 1976, children's work in the Javanese villages he studied consisted of peasant agricultural activities such as animal husbandry, crop cultivation, and handicraft production, as well as household work. In time, the nature of and motivation for work have changed as more opportunities have become available in Java's growing economy, but girls and boys have continued to work long hours. In some settings, such as Indonesia in the 1970s (White, 1994) and Bangladesh in the 1990s (Amin, 1996), the schooling of children and adolescents appears not to have precluded their substantial work activities, particularly when the students are part of subsistence or household economic enterprises. The data suggest that the low average number of hours children spend in school allows them to continue to work while they are students.

A comparison of International Labor Office statistics, despite their acknowledged flaws, reveals that as societies develop, they generally experience an increase in female labor-force participation in the formal sector and that age-specific labor patterns for women become closer to those of men. Increased participation of women in the formal sector is often attributed to the globalization of production in such sectors as garment manufacturing and electronics. Although the motivations for globalization are not explored here, one relevant argument advanced in recent studies is that the increase in numbers of women brought about by the globalization of manufacturing occurred only because young women have been willing to work under the exploitative terms offered (Standing, 1989). Young women workers are employed largely because they are flexible and more willing to work at substandard wages under conditions that men would not consider acceptable (UN, 1995a; Standing, 1989).

The employment of young women in labor-intensive factory production is widely seen as arising from their weak economic and social position. Arizpe and Arunda (1981) described women's factory employment as resulting from "the comparative advantage of their disadvantage" (cited in Nash [1986: 11]). Wages for women are lower because women are seen as supplementary wage earners in the household and because they lack the backing of labor organizations. Women are also perceived as docile and willing to spend long hours doing repetitive tasks, and they are acknowledged to have the skills and patience to do tasks requiring manual dexterity. Elson and Pearson (1981) argue that not only does women's employment originate in their subordinate social and economic position but also it can lead to an intensification of their inequality. Lim asserts that even when young women's employment originates in their subordination, factory work can benefit them (Lim, 1990). She states that in export-oriented factory production, "exploitation and liberation go hand in hand" (Lim, 1983: 85). Some of the aspects of liberation she identifies in East and Southeast Asia are similar to those found in Bangladesh: Although women work long hours for apparently low wages, the terms and conditions of their work are better than most of their existing alternatives. Although income may be pooled, women retain some personal control over it. By working in a factory outside the home, women earn a certain degree of freedom from their families and learn nonfamilial social roles.

Labor Legislation

To reduce labor costs, manufacturers employ underage workers as well as women. Manufacturers are motivated to locate their businesses in countries where child-labor laws are not enforced. Therefore, such countries have a comparative advantage over settings where manufacturers are actively prohibited from using child labor.

Concerns about such exploitative working conditions have resulted in legislation in developed countries that aims to encourage stricter implementation of labor laws in developing countries. Most recently, the Harkin Bill, introduced in the US Congress, argues for sanctions against manufacturers employing child labor in factories overseas. Consumer groups have also advocated boycotts of items retailed in the US that are produced by child labor overseas (Basu, 1994). Although the enduring popular image of exploited children is of those who are well below the age of puberty, the recent labor legislation has also focused on young adolescents, particularly those aged 11–13 and, with respect to the garment industry, on young women of these ages.

As a result of concerns in the West, countries like Bangladesh have increasingly enforced child-labor legislation. Although these laws have altered hiring practices in factories (Bhattacharya, 1996), they have not markedly impeded the development of the garment industry, which continues to grow at unprecedented rates. Whether child-labor legislation has any overall effect on children's work is unclear, because those who are not working in factories can still find employment in the informal sector.

White (1994), reviewing labor laws in Indonesia and the Netherlands, maintains that child-labor activism is essentially misguided in trying to ban the employment of children. He argues that what is objectionable about child labor is not necessarily children's working in factories, but the conditions of their work: hazardous environments, long hours, low wages. These conditions would be better addressed by regulating and legalizing the conditions under which children can work for cash, rather than simply by attempting to introduce legislation to ban child labor altogether. White's principal observation is that children want to work for cash (rather than perform unpaid family work, which is deemed more acceptable in the West), and that making child labor illegal only makes it less visible.

In a setting such as Bangladesh where girls are considered eligible for marriage soon after puberty and work provides an alternative to early marriage, child-labor legislation could have important consequences for reproductive health. Parents who are unable to send a marriageable daughter to work may be motivated to arrange an early marriage for her.

A Study of Bangladeshi Garment Workers

The findings in this article are based on case studies and a social survey of garment workers living in Dhaka, collected as part of a larger ongoing study of garment workers in the country. Interviews for the case studies were conducted between July and December 1996. Respondents were selected from factories of varying size in four areas of the city. Workers were selected on the basis of marital status and type of occupation to ensure that the detailed case studies would reflect the range of experience of workers in the garment industry. Twenty-two workers served as focal cases. Interviews were semi-structured and open-ended, with a focus on the decision to work and associated changes in all aspects of life, with particular regard to marriage and family relations. Interviews were conducted during repeated home visits taking place over the course of as long as a month. Such a strategy was followed so as to verify and cross-check initial accounts using repeated narratives and different perspectives. Developments over the course of the interviews provided important insights into the biographical narratives.

The second source of data is a social survey conducted between February and April 1997. This survey covered garment workers and nonworkers as well. A systematic sample of 301 helpers and operators and 50 supervisors were interviewed from 13 randomly selected garment factories. The ratio of helpers and operators in the sample matched that found in each factory. All female supervisors were interviewed for separate detailed analysis as a select group of highly successful workers.[1] An additional 705 helpers and operators were contacted by the snowball method from the factory-based sample. A total of 512 non-garment workers were interviewed as a control group selected to match the garment-worker sample by age and socioeconomic status. The control group came from communities that have sent a high concentration of women to work, as well as from communities that are not characterized by high migration for garment work. The structured questionnaire covered topics similar to those found in the qualitative interviews: family background, current living arrangements, work and migration history, income and household economy, marriage and childbearing histories and aspirations, contraceptive use, and health.

Summaries of six of the case histories of garment workers are shown in Table 1. These summaries provide a reference point for those cases that are referred to frequently in the text and that illustrate the lives of adolescent workers. They show how entry into the industry, promotion, and movement between factories fits into changing family circumstances and living arrangements. All six women had entered garment work by the age of 16 and, in some cases (for example, in Shakti's case), when they were considerably younger.

In terms of age, marital status, and migration, garment workers are similar to rural migrants elsewhere in Asia. They are women who move to the cities when they are very young and still single, using networks of family and friends to enter factory work (Findley and Williams, 1991). The initial months of transition, which include their migration to the city, finding housing and a job, require considerable wherewithal and the support of a network of family or friends who are familiar with the relevant settings. Workers can leave this dependent stage quickly, because within a year, they can expect to earn substantially higher wages than their starting salaries by working long hours of overtime, by being promoted from helper to operator, or by moving to a new factory. However, considerable variation exists in the extent to which workers choose to take advantage of this independence. They opt to live with their families or relatives when possible, and they pool their resources and save money. Most fulfill important filial roles by pooling their income.

In the early years of the industry, considerable stigma was attached to garment work. This stigma still exists but has lessened. Despite the stigma, the narratives of these young women suggest that the opportunity for employment is generally thought of as a positive development. Factory work is considered to be modern and, therefore, superior to agricultural work, despite the long hours it demands. The combination of delayed marriage and the small luxuries that increased incomes allow creates a positive period of transition into adulthood. These young women's experience of work in the social context of Bangladesh contains all the elements of adolescence as defined above. Furthermore, for a large proportion of young Bangladeshi women, garment work has provided this opportunity for the first time.

Reasons for Choosing to Work in the Garment Industry

Although a variety of reasons are given for choosing garment-factory work, most workers enter the industry when they are young and before they are married. The quantitative survey shows that 47 percent of respondents entered garment work when they were younger than 15, and 32 percent did so between the ages of 15 and 19. Overall, 69 percent of respondents were unmarried and younger than 20 when they began to work. The majority are migrants: 87 percent of respondents were born in rural Bangladesh. Some may have migrated to Dhaka earlier in their childhood, but a significant proportion moved in association with starting garment-factory work. A woman's seeking such a job is often triggered by an immediate need to improve or stabilize her household's finances. Her income contributes to a large range of household expenses, and she continues working even after the particular need that triggered her taking a job has been met.

Even after workers gain some economic autonomy through their jobs, familial and social networks continue to assert considerable influence on their lives. All women described in the table began work in the garment industry with their families' support. Where respondents migrated without their parents, they initially relied on a female relative for help in Dhaka (Lily and Marufa) or a family contact with the factory production manager (Runa). Even Lily, who migrated to Dhaka without her parents' consent, was supported emotionally and in practical terms by her sister and her cousin, and a few days after her arrival in Dhaka, her father sent her money. Women who migrated with their parents or their whole families initially stayed with an uncle (Shakti) or relied on the experience of a sibling who had migrated to Dhaka previously (Jhuma). The family networks continued their support even after the respondents had become established in Dhaka, and the workers themselves offered support to migrating sisters, cousins, and even their whole families (Runa, Fahima, and Marufa).

Because the decision to work is often a part of a household strategy, although not necessarily one that is acknowledged readily, the narratives of parents and guardians are examined as well as those of the workers. The

Table 1 Summary of case histories of six garment workers, Dhaka, Bangladesh, 1996

Age (years)	Lily (16 years, helper)	Runa (17 years, operator)	Marufa (17 years, helper)
Background	Born in 1980, third of four living children. Father: farmer in Barisal Education: class 4 complete Family: lives in village	Born in 1979, eldest of five living children. Father: sharecropper/rickshaw puller Education: class 5 complete Family: lives in village	Born in 1979, eldest of six living children. Father: farmer, now rickshaw puller/laborer Education: no formal education completed Family: migrated to Dhaka after Marufa did
13		Left school during class 6 and brought to Dhaka by father to work in a factory as helper because of financial crisis. Earned Tk.400 and paid Tk.400 board and lodging per month to factory manager.	
14	Left school after failing class 5.	Wages raised to Tk.500. Sister came to Dhaka to work in garment industry.	
15	Parents arranged marriage. Lily avoided marriage by moving to Dhaka with cousin. After five days in Dhaka, started work as helper (Tk.500); started living with sister.	Became operator, wages raised to Tk.700. Moved into house with sister and cousin (both garment workers); their rent, Tk.900.	Came to Dhaka to live with grandmother and work as domestic.
16	Moved twice: after row with sister and to avoid rent increase (now pays Tk.600). Salary increased to Tk.650 + overtime.	Earned enough to send money home (Tk.400–500 every two–three months). Gave uncle Tk.4,000 to go abroad.	Returned to village for three months, asked parents' permission, returned to Dhaka and started work in garment factory as helper (Tk. 500). Moved to new factory (Tk.550), but after two months returned to old factory.
17		Salary currently Tk.975. Started saving for dowry.	Whole family came to Dhaka after family's land and savings lost in attempt to buy her father a job. Marufa moved to parents' house. Marufa's mother started garment work.

Age (years)	Jhuma (17 years, operator)	Shakti (19 years, operator)	Fahima (19 years, operator)
Background	Born in 1979, third of four living children. Father: farmer, now small businessman Education: class 5 complete Family: migrated to Dhaka with Jhuma	Born in 1977, second of three living children. Father: textile-mill laborer Education: class 4 complete Family: migrated to Dhaka with Shakti	Born in 1977, second of five living children. Father: farmer Education: class 4 complete Family: lived in village
11	Brother came to Dhaka and worked as a cutter in garment factory for two years.	Left school. Father lost land through gambling and failed attempt to go abroad. Entire family moved to Dhaka to live with uncle and get jobs. Shakti asked parents and started garment work (Tk.250). Brother and mother also found garment-factory jobs.	Married a border guard, became pregnant, and was widowed. After childbirth, suffered from fever and was paralyzed.
12			Came to Dhaka for health treatment and lived with sister; daughter stayed in village.
13	Brother returned to village, Jhuma left school, and entire family migrated to Dhaka because of financial crisis. Jhuma and two siblings entered garment work (Tk.500).	Became an operator in a new factory for salary Tk.800.	Recovered her health.
14	Jhuma became operator and moved to another factory (salary Tk.1,300).	Returned to old factory to earn Tk.1,200. Mother gave up garment work because of ill health. Family moved to new house.	Took garment-factory job for financial security for self and daughter after discussion with family (Tk.722). Changed factory, became operator (Tk.1,125).
15	Family moved (rent Tk.550).	Family moved to current house (rent Tk.1,200).	Married an operator who proposed to her. Moved to husband's house, suffered physical abuse. Treatment cost Tk.10,000. Moved to new factory (Tk.1,400). Gave husband Tk.10,000 to go abroad.
16	Jhuma changed jobs, new salary Tk.1,400. Family moved to new house (rent Tk.650).	Shakti suffered from ill health but could not afford to take time off from work.	Separated from husband. Lives with siblings and nonrelative (all garment workers).
19		Father moved back to home village and uncle moved into Shakti's house. Moved to current factory after being involved in wage protest at old factory.	

Note: US$1 = 43 taka (Tk.) Salaries shown are monthly earnings.

following narratives illustrate the diversity of motivations to seek work among the girls described in the table.

Grandmother of Runa and Selima, daughters of a village rickshaw puller: The production manager of the factory was a school friend of their father. He heard that the rickshaw puller had four daughters to bring up and suggested the idea of sending the eldest daughters, Runa and Selima, to work in Dhaka. Runa came first and lived with him and he got her a job as a helper in his factory.

Halima Begum, 45, mother of three garment workers, two daughters (including Jhuma) and one son: We moved to Dhaka after the 1988 floods when my husband lost all his money in his rice-trading business. My husband got sick and went back to the village six months after we first came, but I stayed behind with my daughters and sons who are all working in the city now.

Monira Begum, 40, mother of Padma, 19, a married operator: My husband had tuberculosis, and the doctor said he could not work for three years at least. It became difficult to manage his treatment, groceries, and the rent on my income alone. Other girls go to work in the factories to help out their families, so my husband and I suggested to Padma that she should quit school after class 5 and go to work.

For young women who report that their decision to work was made by their parents, few report that the decision was imposed. They usually accept the need to help support their families as their own responsibility. Runa, aged 17 at the time of interview, was sent to Dhaka by her family to work when she was 13 or 14 years old. She describes how she reconciled herself to the family's decision during the difficult initial days of her job: "I would cry all the time when I first came to work, but I told myself, my father is poor and he has five children to feed. He has to send them to school . . . so I convinced myself to stay."

Most workers who, like Runa, are the first in the family to work in the garment industry are motivated to search for work in response to a crisis. Their narratives suggest that they experienced higher levels of stress at the beginning of their work lives than did their siblings who may have been exposed to more information and made easier transitions. Runa and Selima came from a village about two hours by bus from Dhaka to work at the factory where their father's childhood friend worked as production manager. Although their parents decided that the younger sister, Selima, should also go to work, the two sisters describe their experience differently. Runa describes being sad and traumatized initially, whereas Selima says she took her time to decide about starting work. She says that initially she did not agree to get a job, but that a visit with Runa made her realize that her sister and her working friends had a good life, so she decided to join them.

Similarly, two other sisters, Shakti and Shireen, came to the city with their parents, and both started working in factories when they were about 11. Shakti's younger sister, Shireen, was taken to work at the garment factory where her mother and brother worked because alternative child care was unavailable. As she grew older, Shireen helped with various tasks until she was deemed to be sufficiently productive to draw her own wage. Thus, in contrast to the experience of Shakti, whose entry into garment work shortly after the family's arrival in Dhaka meant a clear break with her previous life, Shireen's transition was gradual. In all six cases, the respondent is not the sole member of her family to work in the garment industry. In some cases, the whole family migrated to Dhaka and several family members began garment-industry jobs at the same time (Jhuma). In others, the respondent's parents remained in their village while several siblings and cousins went to work in the industry, having begun work at different times and assisted each other in obtaining jobs (Lily, Runa's sister and cousin, Fahima's sister and brother). In two cases, the respondent's mother also worked in the industry at the same time (Marufa, Shakti). Some married women in dire financial straits also took jobs in the garment industry.

Thus, as Kibria (1996) states, girls' entry into work is made easier when a support structure exists that facilitates their migration, helps them locate jobs, and provides some level of subsistence in the initial years. When family members already live in the city, the transition is relatively smooth. Social networks formed at school, contacts in the village, and kin relations through marriage generally facilitate the process of seeking jobs. Factories rely on these networks as well. A member of the Garment Manufacturers Association remarked:

> Garment working women come from villages and slums. Women move from villages to the slums and their contacts in the slums help them obtain employment in the garment sector.[2]

Little evidence is found of factories using more formal ways of locating workers, although posters and newspaper advertisements are sometimes employed. Usually, factory managers spread the news of a need for workers by word of mouth. At best, notices are posted at the factory door so that employees can pass the information on to their neighbors and friends.

Less commonly, respondents report that they made their decision to work on their own. One of the women described in the table (Lily) illustrates an unusual instance of rebellion. She ignored the wishes of her family and left the village to find factory work in the city in order to avoid being forced into a marriage she did not want:

> I knew my father wanted to marry me off, so I went to my cousin who was a garment worker in Dhaka and had come home for a holiday and told her I wanted to go with her to Dhaka.

Two other women also referred to personal decisions they had made about entering garment work. Marufa was sent to Dhaka by her parents to live with her grandmother and work as a domestic servant. After less than a year, she returned to her village and requested her parents' permission to work in a garment factory. Despite their opposition, Marufa did obtain such a job, and subsequently, her family followed her to live in Dhaka and are now heavily dependent on her income. Shabnaz, who later dropped out of garment work after marriage, came to Dhaka to live with her aunt and attend school. However, her aunt did not enroll her in school and she found herself working as a domestic servant for her aunt. After several years, she asked her aunt and her father to allow her to work in a garment factory. Thus, for some women the decision to seek a job in the garment industry is a personal one, sometimes made with family permission, sometimes made because it is a positive alternative to domestic work or early marriage.

Initial Experience of Work and City Life

For many women, initial work experiences were not good. They felt fear and confusion about finding their way around the city and they experienced difficulties adjusting to supervision in the factory.

> *Nasreen, 14, single helper:* On the first day I lost my way coming home from work. My older sister found me standing by the road, crying, and brought me home.

> *Runa, 19, single operator living away from home:* I hated walking to work—the rickshaws, cars, and crowds on the streets scared me, and I didn't even know the way to the bazaar.

> *Shabnaz, 19, currently an unemployed helper:* Work in a garment factory is no joyride. They set a target of 120 pieces for you for the day, but it is not possible to do more than 80 pieces, so they make you work two to three hours of overtime. But then when you go to get your time card signed, it shows 'worked till 4:30' (regular hours).

Most workers mentioned overcoming these fears as being among the major changes they saw in themselves since they started garment work.

> *Nasreen:* The main changes in my life are that at first, I was afraid in the streets and the factory. Now I am brave. Earlier I was shy to speak. Now I don't feel shy. When I first went to the factory, I cried inside myself and did not want to talk to anyone. Now I like to talk to my co-workers.

> *Shaheen, 26, single helper:* I am braver now. I understand more things which I did not before. I hear many things which I did not before.

> *Rehana, 25, married helper:* I think the main change in me is that I am cleverer (*chalak*). I could not walk in the streets alone before because I was afraid, but now I can walk there alone. There are things that girls living in the village do not understand; they are foolish.

Because so many new and unfamiliar settings must be negotiated after finding a factory job, it is not surprising that workers choose to live with family and relatives if they can. Thus, in addition to providing support as sources of access and information, families also play an important psychological role. In the quantitative study, 87 percent of respondents aged 10 to 14 and 81 percent of those aged 15 to 19 lived with their parents, spouses, or other relatives.

Most workers are recruited only after they pass a number of tests of skill to demonstrate their familiarity with the English alphabet and with numbers and to show their ability for garment work. These skills are needed to gain promotion to the position of operator.

> *Marufa, 17, helper:* There are numbers in English, I cannot read those numbers. If I could read those, I could become an operator. If you become an operator, your status will be different.

These tests, which are simple for anyone with a basic education, may encourage parents to ensure that their daughters have some schooling. However, results from the quantitative survey show that 48 percent of adolescent workers (47 percent of 10–14-year-olds and 44 percent of 15–19-year-olds) have no formal education. Thus, although the advantages for those who have been to school are obvious, the factories do provide work opportunities to intelligent women lacking formal education. Workers undergo a test at the time they are recruited. Lily describes her own experience:

> Five days after coming to Dhaka with my cousin, we got a neighboring factory worker to take us to the factory, and she introduced us to the supervisor. First, the supervisor told me to match two numbers, then she asked me to cut a piece of thread with the cutter. We (me and my sister) started working that day,

> and she asked us to bring in an application with a photograph, which we submitted five days later.

Lily describes her experience simply, but the process can be complicated. She must have had to go to several workers to find a factory that was hiring at the time. She was relying on the generosity of her cousins to support her, so she was in a rush to find a job. Finding a place to be photographed and filling out an application form must have been difficult for a young village girl.

Managing Income

Because the primary motivation for seeking a job is to earn a living, salary histories are an important part of the workers' narratives. Their views of the prospects for economic mobility, management of income, propensity to save, and patterns of expenditure provide important insights into their lives. Most garment factories have several categories of workers: entry-level workers are called helpers or apprentices; helpers capable of reading the English alphabet and numerals are promoted to become operators, at which point they learn to run machines; some workers with secondary education may occasionally graduate to the roles of line chiefs or supervisors. Although the ratio of helpers to operators varies, in a typical factory, it is about one helper to two operators. The number of senior posts is very limited. For example, a factory of 300 workers will have fewer than ten supervisory posts. Nevertheless, because some supervisors start as helpers, a helper may aspire to become a supervisor. Salary and incentive structures are similar across factories. In the quantitative survey, the mean basic monthly wage of helpers was 625 taka (about US$15) and that of operators was Tk.1,307 (about $30). Thirty-three percent of workers received no overtime; however, that figure may reflect irregularity in payment of overtime rather than the proportion who did not work overtime. Among those who do receive overtime earnings, the mean for helpers is Tk.223 ($5) and for operators, Tk.407 ($9) per month.

Within an occupational category, variation in wages can be substantial, depending on seniority and performance. Most workers describe relatively rapid wage increases in the first year of work. Several young women expressed this prospect of mobility as an important positive aspect of their work experience and one that is not a characteristic of any other potential work opportunities. Examples of the occupational mobility of workers can be seen in Table 1. Most women in the study who had worked in the garment industry for more than a year had changed factories at least once and had been promoted from helper to operator. Shakti changed factories several times and her wages quadrupled, even though part of the apparent increase in retrospective reporting may reflect wage inflation over time. The cross-sectional survey data in Table 2 show that although the basic salary increases with duration of employment, the change is more modest than what is suggested in retrospective reports. Workers who have been in the industry for five or more years earn, on average, twice the wage of new entrants. By looking at wages by employment duration for helpers and operators separately, we see that part of the wage increase is due to promotion, but that even within an occupational category, scope for a salary increase exists.

Shakti's sister Shireen, a 17-year-old operator, describes her experience of strategic moves between factories to improve her wages:

> When I started work the factory offered me a monthly wage of Tk.250 [$6]. Twenty days later I went to another factory where they offered me Tk.800 [$19]. Nine months later, I went to a third factory where I got Tk.1,200 [$28]. I stayed there for three or four years, but my wage increased only by Tk.100 [$2], and they did not always pay at the same time of the month. So I came to this factory, and I now make a total of Tk.1,600 [$37] in wages, transport expenses, and bonus.

Movement between factories is related not only to wage level but also to regularity of payment, amount of overtime work, personal relationships with management, and attitudes of families. Thus, Runa's lack of mobility between factories may be attributed to a family relationship with the factory production manager. Fahima moved to a new factory after marriage, because her husband preferred her to work in a factory where less interaction occurred between male and female workers.

The workers' narratives describe the low entry-level salaries that are often inadequate to cover basic living costs. Runa describes her financial situation a year after she first began garment work: "I made barely enough

Table 2 Mean total income (in taka) by occupation and duration of garment-industry employment, Dhaka, 1997

Duration (years)	Helpers	Operators	All workers
<1	741	1,247*	836
1–<2	773	1,327	1,043
2–<3	881*	1,505	1,267
3–<4	830*	1,509	1,434
4–<5	1,011*	1,540	1,518
5+	1,078*	1,745	1,720

Notes: Data are weighted by occupation, place of residence, and age. Only helpers and operators are included. Total income includes monthly basic wage and overtime (US$1 = Tk.43). *Indicates a sample size of fewer than 50 cases.

money to pay for rent and food. I earned Tk.500 ($12), but my rent and food came to Tk. 400 ($9)."

Garment workers learn quickly that by working hard and negotiating with management, they can increase their income rapidly. Changing jobs and moving to a new workplace may be an integral aspect of earning better wages. The better-educated workers also start at the apprentice level but may gain faster promotion. Although Aleya is earning more than her roommate (Runa), who has a slightly better education, she, like other garment workers, has expressed how education comes to be valued because it is rewarded with faster progress in the factory:

> *Aleya, a single, 20-year-old operator:* I stopped studying after class 5 because my father was religious and did not believe in girls' education. Now I know the value of education. No one can take it away from you; it is your very own. If my father had let me, I would have been a doctor. . . . If you have more education, you earn more . . . you are more likely to become a supervisor if you are a matriculate [have 10 years of education].

In terms of expenditure patterns, workers maintain the near-subsistence level of expenses for food and rent that they had at the start of their work life and try to minimize unnecessary expenditures. Parul, a single 23-year-old operator with considerable savings, describes how she manages her spending:

> I hand over my wages to my mother and take a small allowance from her every day. I don't go to the movies—I save the money. I also save money by walking rather than taking a rickshaw. I sew my own clothes.

Girls who are still living with family members commonly hand over their entire earnings to the head of the household and expect to receive an allowance for travel to work and incidental expenses, in the way Parul describes for herself. Others hand over their basic salary and keep their overtime earnings for personal expenses, an arrangement that allows them to manage part of their own income. Data from the quantitative survey show that 42 percent of workers pool all their income with the household, 43 percent pool some with the household, and only 15 percent keep their whole income. Among adolescents, 77 percent of 10–14-year-olds pool all their income, compared with 48 percent of 15–19-year-olds. The scope for some control over income appears to rise with age and income.

Workers are expected to contribute toward household expenses regardless of whether they live at home or independently, and most oblige. Among the respondents who lived with their parents or with an older sibling as household head, most did not retain control over their income. However, this finding may be a reflection of the image of being dutiful daughters that the women wish to portray. As one grandmother of two workers says:

> My granddaughters are good girls and they send money home to their father every month. They are not like those other garment workers who are always spending their money on clothes and movies.

Regardless of how much control they retain over their incomes or their savings, workers know the extent of their own savings and can report what they have accumulated even when these savings are controlled by other family members or pooled with the household savings. Parul, for example, saved Tk. 20,000 ($465) after five years of work. She has unusually high savings because she was supported by her sister's husband in her initial years of work. When her sister was divorced, she and Parul started pooling their incomes to run the household, but Parul's savings remained intact. Parul says:

> I cannot spend my money as I wish . . . my mother says, 'by saving money I will arrange your marriage into a good family.' . . . Dowry will be needed for my marriage, not much, Tk. 10,000. The groom's family will give earrings, bangles, and necklaces. My Tk. 10,000 [$233] is deposited in the bank.

During this period of adolescence, garment workers acquire adult skills, including management of their budgets, even though they may not retain control over most of their income. As income levels increase so does the proportion of the salary that the worker saves or remits to her family in the village, barring major events such as marriage or changes in household circumstances.

Workers living away from their families may retain greater control over their incomes, but the custom of remitting wages for the education of siblings or the sustenance of the family appears to endure. Runa, 17, now earns Tk.975 ($23) per month, of which she spends Tk.500 ($12) for food and rent. She is not able to remit money to her family each month, but she buys clothes for them and tries to give her father Tk.400–500 (from her own and her sister's earnings) when he visits her every two or three months. In addition, Runa manages the accounts for her younger sister who lives and works with her and hands over to Runa all her wages. After about four years of spending most of her surplus on her family, Runa and her family decided that she should stop sending money to the village and start saving for her own dowry, because, as Runa says:

> Money has to be paid for marriage. I don't know how much will be needed. If you can give a larger amount of money, you can get a better groom.

When earnings are sufficient, the propensity to save is strong among all the workers, regardless of the extent to which they manage their own savings. The form of savings varies widely; money can be placed in a bank account, with a rotating savings group at the factory, lent out for interest to friends, family, or co-workers, or converted into gold jewelry to serve as a dowry.

The most striking feature of the workers' management of their income is that even after they have demonstrated considerable ability in the workplace by earning high wages and negotiating better working conditions, retaining autonomous control over the income earned is not a common concern. Instead, most women, whether they live at home or elsewhere, believe that their incomes are an integral part of the larger household budget. Although the narratives reveal that workers are keenly aware of ways to increase their wages, they remain submissive with regard to making decisions within the household. To a large degree, they perceive serving their household's interests as being in their own long-term interests. As Kabeer (1991) points out, pressure is brought to bear upon them to conform to traditional patterns of female behavior, which include submission to household interests as dutiful wives and daughters to compensate for generally negative perceptions about garment working in the society at large.

Social Costs and Benefits for Workers

Several researchers have noted the considerable social stigma attached to garment work in Bangladesh (Kibria, 1996; Paul-Majumdar and Zohir, 1994). Awareness of this stigma is apparent in the workers' accounts as well as in the narratives of those around them. In the early years of the development of this sector, garment working may simply have been stigmatized as deviant behavior. Over time, the workforce has expanded rapidly and the nature of the stigma has changed. More than one million women are now engaged in such work, so that working in the garment industry can no longer qualify as deviant or unusual behavior, as it did ten years ago. Some of the respondents noted that even during the time they have been working in the industry, they have seen an improvement in attitudes.

The quotes below show how workers and their families perceive social attitudes and adapt to them. Shanti, a 21-year-old supervisor, says:

> In our country, those who do not work are regarded as good girls. If a girl works, people ask many questions—where is the office, what is the office like, what is the work? But it is not worthwhile to give importance to these words. One cannot sit idle just to be called a good girl. One has to do something and stand on one's own feet.

Jhuma's mother says:

> We do not go to visit my husband's brother because they are rich and educated and they feel uncomfortable about acknowledging our relationship.

Parul says:

> My marriage has been arranged to a private-car driver, but he has not been told I work in a factory. He thinks I work for a tailoring shop like my sister. . . . I have my reputation to keep; people do not respect those who work in the garment factory.

A 19-year-old worker remarks:

> Our neighbors and relatives do not look well upon garment work. Landlords don't want to rent to us. Proposals come for a girl, but then they back out when they find out she works in a garment factory.

Workers and families often justify the decision to get a job as a strategy for saving for their own dowries or marriage expenses, although often the dowry is not paid. Dowry is mentioned as a motivation for sending daughters to work, perhaps in order to overcome the stigma attached to the inability of male members to support the family.

Garment workers are also stigmatized for their greater autonomy and mobility. They are assumed to be at risk of sexual activity outside marriage, because they spend extended parts of the day beyond the supervision of their families. In discussing the social stigma associated with their work status, the respondents reflected on their coping strategies for both elements of the stigma. Workers address their compromised situation with regard to marriage by saving and paying for their own dowries. On the matter of risk of sexual activity, they portray the workplace as a protected environment. The social construction of the workplace is an important element of how young working girls reinterpret values of purdah in light of their changing work status (Siddiqi, 1991). Workers are most likely to associate with their peers when interacting outside the family network. Garment work necessitates frequent movements between the protected spaces of the home and the factory. Many workers attempt to protect themselves from negative judgments in the public space of the streets by covering their heads and upper bodies with large scarves and by ignoring men who accost them. They are also likely to cope with the discomfort of the negative images by thinking of garment work as a transitional phase. Runa remarks:

> The garment boys also ask me to marry them, but I do not agree. If I marry a garment worker, I will have to work in the garments for my whole life. So I don't want to marry a garment worker. They get such a low salary.

Kibria (1996) argues that work for young women is not yet "normalized," that is, wage work before marriage as a stage of life for women has not yet become the norm, as it is in most East Asian countries. For a period of working for wages to become a normal stage of life, greater social acceptance of garment work must prevail than is evident at present. Despite the lack of social acceptance, the women themselves value the modern nature of their work, consider garment work to be a lesser hardship than most forms of agricultural labor, and value the autonomy and independence that come with earning an income.

The stress of garment-factory work is not often spoken about directly but, instead, is reflected in the concerns workers express about their health. These concerns range from losing weight, looking tired and overworked, to specific complaints about eyesight or illness. The quantitative data show that in the month before they were surveyed, 73 percent of respondents suffered from head and ear complaints, 69 percent from general fatigue, and 45 percent from eye problems. Approximately one-third of those who suffered from head and ear problems during the preceding month sought treatment. Basu (1992) describes similar concerns about health and mentions frequent visits to doctors and pharmacies in her study of urban slum dwellers in Delhi. The case studies provide some details of the type of treatment sought. For minor complaints, respondents usually go to a pharmacy and buy medicines recommended by the shopkeeper. For more severe symptoms, they usually visit a private physician. The narratives give the impression that the visits to the pharmacy or doctor are frequent, and several respondents mentioned major episodes of illness that have accounted for large expenditures of their income.

On the other hand, the workers' narratives reveal that, despite a general awareness of the costs of work in terms of stigma and physical stress, and despite the need for coping strategies, at a personal level, these problems are offset by their enhanced confidence in their own abilities. Such confidence evolves as workers demonstrate their abilities at work, as they demand and receive wage increases, and as they fulfill performance requirements. Workers also indicate that the technological nature of their work and their ability to operate sophisticated machines are an important part of their self-image, as is the higher quality of life that they can afford as a result of moving to the city and earning a better income than they could have in their villages. In describing how garment-industry jobs have changed their lives, workers typically list positive feelings about earning an income and being able to help their families, living in the city with indoor toilets and running water, and being able to afford to go to the doctor.

Workers appear to maintain a higher standard of dress than do their nonworking sisters, adhering to the latest fashions and spending money on makeup and jewelry. Because few role models exist for young working women, and because they do not fit any traditional cultural mold, workers also have the opportunity of defining new roles for themselves. Padma, 17 and married, quoted below, also suggests that by dressing smartly and living well, garment workers attempt to reduce some of the social costs of their employment:

> The garment girls live a posh life. They wear good clothes and expensive clothes. They even wear sandals worth Tk.300. Because people neglect garment girls and do not respect them, that is why they live a posh life, so that people will value them.

The narratives suggest that workers see themselves as being in an intermediate stage between childhood and adulthood. The clearest outward manifestation of this perception is their manner of dress. Most workers wear a form of clothing called *shalwar kameez*, which is considered too grown-up for children and too young for adult women, but is deemed appropriate for garment workers. Rural women, on the other hand, typically make a direct transition from dresses and shorts as girls to the sari, which is the preferred adult garment. The shalwar kameez is a northwest Indian costume with baggy pants and a long, loose tunic that has come into vogue in Bangladesh only since the 1960s. So, in addition to being appropriate for the intermediate period between childhood and adulthood, it is also associated with being modern and fashionable. In contrasting her lifestyle to that of her friends in the village of similar age, Aleya, a single, 20-year-old operator says:

> My married friends have to wear a sari, but I can wear a shalwar kameez. They cannot go

> out of the house on their own, and I go back and forth between the village and the city. They are not as confident or brave as I am. I have learnt a new trade and have a job, and they sit in the corner of the house and cook all day.

Garment workers clearly are consciously "modern" and "smart" and keen to project such images. The titles that workers are given are expressed in English, which helps to formalize their designations—helpers (sometimes "apprentice"), operators, supervisors, cutters. These categories are organized in a hierarchical manner with differentiated pay scales and skill requirements. A girl starting out can quickly set concrete goals for advancement. The requirement that factory workers maintain daily and monthly time cards at work probably serves to help them ascribe value to their time.

Migrant workers are able to reinforce this modern image by changing their dialect and affecting urban accents. Fahima, a 19-year-old operator, married twice and now separated, says:

> When I go back to the village, they are impressed by my nice clothes and my nice (city) accent, and people like to come to hear about my experience, and I get a lot of attention.

One feature of adolescence that is identified in the literature is the creation of peer groups in which young people, by interaction and group identity, can develop their personal identities. Traditionally in Bangladesh, when women moved quickly from being someone's daughter to becoming someone's wife, then someone's mother, many lacked the opportunity to develop their own identities (Aziz and Maloney, 1985). Even in urban Bangladesh, however, where significant changes are taking place in the lives of young women, social norms make discussion of sexual activity difficult among the unmarried. Some insight is gained concerning young women's socialization from discussions on seclusion and the maintenance of purdah, which is perceived to be centrally concerned with women's sexuality.

Socialization and Social Interaction

The tradition of purdah is perceived as a set of rules to control sexuality by minimizing interactions between persons of the opposite sex. As mentioned above, on the streets, workers usually wear scarves over their heads and bodies to avoid being observed by men. Most workers interpret purdah as avoiding contact with men and wearing clothing to hide face and form. However, these scarves are cumbersome and hamper efficiency, so they are not worn on the factory floor, and sometimes they are explicitly forbidden by management. Nor is it possible to avoid male contact on the factory floor. For these reasons, most workers conclude that their lifestyles do not allow them to adhere to the strictures of purdah. Some choose to reinterpret purdah in the manner described by Simmons et al. (1992) for the first generation of family planning workers, as a state of mind rather than as an adherence to rules of physical conduct; others prefer looser interpretations, such as "purdah means avoiding physical contact with a man."

Workers also cope in other ways with their inability to maintain purdah. As Siddiqi (1991) suggests, common strategies for maintaining purdah include portraying the factory as "indoor" space and perceiving the factory supervisors and managers as "elders" whose role is to regulate the morality of workers. Articulate and liberated women tend to redefine purdah as a state of mind, but, curiously, no one questions the basic morality of the custom of purdah itself.

In a manner similar to discussions about sexuality with adolescents of South Asian origin in Great Britain (Hennink, 1997), workers' comments suggest that some level of sexual activity exists among their peers even though they would never discuss their own experiences:

> I heard that someone did it [had sex] in the factory between the machines.
>
> Girls flirt and brush up against men when they are working together and they joke and laugh with them.

These sorts of comments that figure in the accounts of garment workers portray them as being similar to adolescents in the West. However, in Bangladesh, none of this activity is socially approved or accepted, and the sanctions against such interactions with men remain strong. A male respondent described how his marriage was precipitated by his having had an "open" date with his future wife.

> *Masum, a 24-year-old male worker married to a co-worker:* I forced her to go to the movie. The next day everyone at the factory came to know about our date. I had a row with her sisters on the factory floor who said they would never choose a person like me for their sister to marry.

Masum was embarrassed by this confrontation and swore he would not show his face in the factory again without marrying the girl. He married her that same evening in the registrar's office.

Siddiqi (1991) remarks that because the essential values of female seclusion are maintained in its reinterpretations, the institution remains intact. Reinterpretation and the recognition of the need for greater freedom of movement also may mean that norms are changing in a consequential manner. From either point of view, the context in which sexuality is managed is changing, probably with a slightly greater possibility of premarital sexual activity than was possible under the rigid traditional imposition of purdah.

Clearly, garment workers are socialized very differently from girls of the same age who are married and not working. When asked who they would compare themselves with, garment workers are most likely to think of schoolgirls, who, in terms of having similar peer networks, resemble garment workers more closely than do married adolescents.

Peer networks are vital for seeking and gathering information about wages and the availability of jobs in the industry, and for providing information and evaluation of information about a range of other aspects of life. As may be expected, factories are also sources of rumor and gossip. For example, two women from the same factory reported that they thought that abortion leads to infertility because one of their co-workers was rumored to have become infertile from repeated abortions. Stories of relations with men are usually reported as gossip rather than as personal experience.

Transition to Adulthood

In terms of their social status, garment workers are not considered to be adults, despite their long work days. They are referred to as "girls" whose protection in the workplace is the responsibility of their supervisors, who take the role of family guardians (Siddiqi, 1991). Preparation for adult roles that they expect to assume in the near future is an important element of workers' socialization. Saving for one's dowry is such a preparation and incorporates future expectations. Because Bangladeshi society equates marriage and childbearing with adulthood, these events remain the definitive transition to adulthood for single workers, no matter how long they may be delayed.

The transitional phase that this particular kind of labor-force participation provides is the first step toward the creation of adolescence. Schlegel (1995) defines adolescence as something more than a transitional phase, including in the term factors such as the social and personal management of sexuality, the influence of peers and of social organizations, and the acquisition of work skills. Clearly, girls working in the garment industry meet the criteria of experiencing adolescence in these ways.

At the same time, the social transformation effected by garment work is necessarily viewed as a transitional phenomenon so as not to appear as an inordinate threat to the familiar social order. The attitudes of garment workers echo these sentiments.

> *Lily, 16, helper*: Much later, after working for five to seven years, after learning how to handle a machine and becoming an operator, after saving a lot of money, I want to build a nice house near my parents' house, buy a cow, and buy things for the house. Then I will marry whoever my parents choose for me. I will need to have Tk.5,000 [$116] or 7,000 [$163] for the dowry. . . . It's best to marry a boy from your own area . . . someone who has passed high school, has a job in an office or as a line chief or supervisor in a garment factory. . . . If the boy is a matric fail (less educated), as long as his family owns land and a big house, that will be all right too.

Lily remarks that continuing work after marriage is difficult, given the responsibilities of housework, child care, and other family duties.

Implications for Reproductive Health

Garment work has direct implications for girls' reproductive health by enabling them to delay marriage, and by motivating workers to delay childbearing even when they are married. Although family networks can provide support for child care, childbearing is nevertheless perceived in terms of lost earning opportunities. Factories are generally unfriendly to the idea of maternity-leave provisions or crèche facilities and prefer to employ unmarried and childless workers. When workers take maternity leave, they often have to reenter the factory as new employees and thus lose the benefit of their previous promotions.

Some evidence exists that work allows women to delay marriage. However, the data on marriage delays need to be interpreted with caution, because marriage is a cause of attrition from work. Table 3 shows a considerably higher proportion of workers who are single compared with nonworking peers of the same age. In the 15–19 age group, 74 percent of the workers surveyed are single, compared with 64 percent in their villages of origin (the "sending" villages), 45 percent in the other, nonsending villages, and only 29 percent in the nonsending towns. Some of this higher proportion of single women among workers may be the result of marriage-related attrition from work. The higher proportion remaining single in the sending villages relative to the nonsending villages is an indication that garment work has legitimized later marriage in their own communities.

Table 3 Percentage of women never married, by age group, among garment workers and nonworkers, Bangladesh, 1997

	Garment workers		Nonworkers					
			From sending villages		From nonsending villages		From nonsending towns	
Age	Percent	(N)	Percent	(N)	Percent	(N)	Percent	(N)
10–14	100	(97)	97	(59)	88	(43)	54	(13)
15–19	74	(438)	64	(233)	45	(130)	29	(93)
20–24	24	(254)	7	(124)	5	(83)	12	(58)
25–29	5	(93)	0	(60)	0	(33)	4	(26)
30–34	2	(67)	0	(24)	0	(16)	0	(8)
35+	0	(56)	0	(11)	0	(6)	0	(4)

However, the sending villages may have had a delayed pattern of marriage to begin with, compared with the nonsending villages; also, the experience of sending young women to work in the city may have legitimized later marriage. Table 4 shows that only 31 percent of 20–24-year-old and 29 percent of 24–29-year-old garment workers who were not married before beginning to work were married by the age of 18. Working in the garment industry seems to reduce the incidence of marriage not only for the very young but also for women older than 20. Only 56 percent of garment workers aged 20–24 were married by the age of 20, compared with 83 percent of women in the sending villages, 92 percent of women in the nonsending villages, and 86 percent in the nonsending towns.

Bangladesh is experiencing a rapid transformation to small family-size norms. A recent analysis shows that desired family size in Bangladesh is 2.1 children, lower than that for any other country in South Asia (Bongaarts and Amin, 1997). Workers typically want two children, one girl and one boy, with considerable spacing in between. In this environment of low family-size norms, that the same norms hold true for garment workers is not surprising. The apparent difference for garment workers is their ability to implement delayed childbirth much more easily than nonworking women can. Workers are more likely to state specific reasons that motivate them to want small families. These reasons include high aspirations for their children's education and the increase in cost of living in terms of higher rents.

> *Aleya, single, 20-year-old operator:* It's best if you have one son and one daughter, but in case you have two of either sex, you still should not go for a third. I am confident that I can convince whoever I marry why it is important that you should stop at two. (You see) men don't think, which is why they don't understand these things, and you just have to be patient and explain things to them. For instance, a woman has to explain to her man that they have to use contraception from the very first day of marriage.

Table 5 presents several responses from garment workers and nonworking rural women to similar questions about ideal family size that were included in the present survey and in a village study conducted by one of the authors (Amin, 1996). Whereas the statements about ideal family size are similar, the level of agency and motivation reflected by workers is stronger, and the nonworking rural respondents convey more fragile motivations and greater passivity about attaining family-size goals.

As may be expected for unmarried respondents, discussing knowledge or use of contraceptives is difficult because it implies that they are sexually active. Nevertheless, these women clearly have been exposed to information about contraception from the media and from their married friends and relatives. In general, responses to questions about where contraceptive services are available and what workers do in cases of illness revealed that urban workers are more likely than rural women to mention going to a doctor, health center, or pharmacy rather than being visited by outreach workers, the kind of health care that is more typical for rural respondents (Salway, 1996). In the quantitative survey of garment workers, 80 percent of unmarried adolescents were able to state at least one source for obtaining contraceptives.

Discussions with health-service providers also suggested that garment workers may be under greater pressure to engage in early sexual activity outside of marriage relative to single girls who are not working. The informants in the health sector reported that even single

Table 4 Percentage of women married early, by current age group, among garment workers and nonworkers, Bangladesh, 1997

	Garment workers		Nonworkers		
Current age	Married after starting work	Married before starting work	From sending villages	From nonsending villages	From nonsending towns
Married by age 18					
20–24	31	79	71	84	78
25–29	29	67	82	91	65
30–34	—[a]	61	71	81	88
35+	—[a]	66	82	83	100
Married by age 20					
20–24	56	96	83	92	86
25–29	50	80	90	91	81
30–24	—[a]	72	71	94	100
35+	—[a]	82	100	100	100

Notes: Data for garment workers (helpers and operators) weighted by occupation, type of residence, and age. Nongarment-worker data unweighted. [a]Number of cases too low for meaningful estimate.

Table 5 Responses of young women working in the garment industry contrasted with those of nonworking rural women to questions about desired family size, Bangladesh, 1996

Garment workers (Dhaka, 1996)	Rural respondents (Rajshahi, 1995–96)
Padma, 17, married: "If you take the pill or get an MR, you might never be able to get pregnant again. . . . I will have one [child] now and another five to seven years later and will not have more than two. Because the way population is growing in the country, it is not good to have more than two. I heard this on the radio and TV. If you keep having kids, landlords will not rent to you."	Shadi, 23, married: "I want to have one child but he [husband] wants two. Two is enough. At the moment we are not using any contraception."
Parul, 23, engaged: "I want one son and one daughter." [Prompted: What if your husband wants more?] "I'll still have only two: He is not the only one entitled to an opinion."	Hosneara, 25, married: "I have two children, and I hope Allah does not give us any more. Considering how poor we are, one would have been enough."
Shireen, 17, single: "I will take into consideration how many my husband wants, but if he wants too many, I will not go along with it."	Alema, 21, married: "I already have a son. Whether we are going to have one or two more has not been decided yet."

Note: MR = menstrual regulation.

workers are concerned about pregnancy when they visit a health-care provider for irregular menstruation. Increased exposure to the risk of sexual activity may simply be a result of the long hours that young men and women spend together unsupervised by parents and guardians. Nevertheless, the social sanctions against sexual activity are strong, and many workers are uncomfortable with the pressures that they face in the factory.

> *Padma:* There are some problems at work . . . a lot of men like to flirt with the girls and tease them. . . . They pinch the girls, touch their hands, press their breasts. They do it when the electricity goes off. . . . Some girls don't like that and they complain to the supervisor.

Thus, although little direct evidence is found of premarital sexual activity, health-service providers maintain that garment workers have a special need for education and services for reproductive health because of their exposure to the risk of sexual activity and their inadequate access to information. In the absence of special services, peer networks will probably continue to be the primary sources of information for garment workers. These networks may be less reliable than most traditional informal networks, because the workers are all about the same age and few are married. Residing in an urban area with higher standards of living, workers may have better access to the media, but because they are unmarried, they have less access than their married counterparts to confidential professional services or even to grandmothers, mothers, and brothers' wives living nearby. As discussed above, some of the information exchanged by garment workers may be inaccurate, for instance the belief that abortion may lead to infertility or that women in some families take longer to conceive than others and thus do not need to use contraceptives. Because many women leave the garment industry upon marriage but are open to receiving information while they are still working, health-care providers should extend their services, particularly those relating to information, education, and communication, to unmarried garment workers.

Conclusion

An important part of the new socialization young women experience through working in the formal sector has to do with their negotiating the various ways that society stigmatizes working women and constrains all women in their quest for autonomy, while at the same time valuing their economic contributions. The perception of factory work as technological and sophisticated and, therefore, superior to most alternatives is an essential part of constructing a positive image to combat the stigma attached to violating seclusion rules.

The labor force is differentiated in terms of status and earnings, allowing women to set goals of advancement. Co-workers form important peer groups: for rotating funds, for traveling to and from work together, and for providing information and evaluation about alternative opportunities and even about marriage prospects. The presence of peers has implications for young women's reproductive health, as does the increased pressure for sexual activity that comes with the greater mobility and autonomy of women and their interactions with men. However, the overarching reproductive health implication of working is that it allows women to delay marriage and, even after marriage, to delay childbirth, because of the high opportunity costs to women of leaving the workforce.

All these beneficial outcomes of garment-industry jobs have been experienced largely by women who started working as teenagers, many of them at ages that would put them into an illegal category in terms of existing Bangladeshi child-labor laws. However, where choices are extremely limited, and where education is rarely a realistic option, factory work in the garment industry may be regarded as a positive opportunity enabling girls to delay marriage and motherhood and to reduce their reliance on alternative and more risky forms of employment.

Notes

1 The supervisors have not been included in the current analysis so that such a select group would not be over-represented.

2 In fact, only 11 percent of the survey respondents cited here live in slums. The informant uses the word slum to indicate lower-class housing areas more generally.

References

Amin, Sajeda. 1996. "Female education and fertility in Bangladesh: The influence of marriage and the family." In *Girls' Schooling, Women's Autonomy and Fertility Change in South Asia.* Eds. Roger Jeffery and Alaka M. Basu. New Delhi and London: Thousand Oaks and Sage Publications: Pp. 184–204.

———. 1997. "The poverty-purdah trap in rural Bangladesh: Implications for women's roles in the family." *Development and Change* 28, 2: 213-233.

Arizpe, Lourdes and Josefine Arunda. 1981. "The 'comparative advantage' of women's disadvantages: Women workers in the strawberry export business in Mexico." *Signs* 7: 453–473.

Aziz, K.M. Ashraful and Clarence Maloney. 1985. *Life Stages, Gender and Fertility in Bangladesh.* Dhaka: International Centre for Diarrhoeal Disease Research, Bangladesh.

Bangladesh Garment Manufacturers and Exporters Association (BGMEA). 1995. *BGMEA Members' Directory: 1995*. Dhaka: BGMEA.

Basu, Alaka M. 1992. *Culture, the Status of Women and Demographic Behavior: Illustrated with the Case of India.* Oxford: Clarendon Press.

Basu, Kaushik. 1994. "The poor need child labor." Op-ed, *The New York Times*. 29 November: A23.

Bhattacharya, Debapriya. 1996. "International trade, social labeling and developing countries: The case of Bangladesh's garments export and use of child labor." Bangladesh Institute of Development Studies. Unpublished.

Bongaarts, John and Sajeda Amin. 1997. "Prospects for Fertility Decline and Implications for Population Growth in South Asia." *Policy Research Division Working Paper* No. 94. New York: Population Council.

Cain, Mead T. 1977. "The economic activities of children in a village in Bangladesh." *Population and Development Review* 3, 3: 201–227.

De Tray, Dennis. 1983. "Children's work activities in Malaysia." *Population and Development Review* 9, 3: 437–455.

Elson, Diane and Ruth Pearson 1981. "Nimble fingers and cheap workers: An analysis of women's employment in third world export manufacturing." *Feminist Review* 7: 87–107.

Findley, Sally E. and Lindy Williams. 1991. "Women Who Go and Women Who Stay: Reflections of Family Migration Processes in a Changing World." *World Employment Programme Research Working Paper* No. 176. Geneva: International Labor Office.

Hennink, Monique. 1997. "Family planning services for people with special needs." University of Southampton (UK). Unpublished doctoral dissertation.

Huq, Mohammed Najmul and John Cleland. 1990. *Bangladesh Fertility Survey 1989 (Main Report).* Dhaka: National Institute of Population Research and Training.

Jain, Devaki. 1985. "The household trap: Report on a field survey of female activity patterns." In *Tyranny of the Household: Investigative Essays on Women's Work*. Eds. D. Jain and N. Bannerjee. Delhi: Shakti Books. Pp. 215–249.

Kabeer, Naila. 1991. "Cultural dopes or rational fools: Women and labor supply in the Bangladesh garment industry." *The European Journal of Development Research* 3, 4: 133–160.

Kibria, Nazli. 1995. "Culture, social class and income control in the lives of women garment workers in Bangladesh." *Gender and Society* 9, no. 3: 289–309.

———. 1996. "Becoming a garments worker: The mobilization of women into the garments factories of Bangladesh." Paper presented at the United Nations Research Institute for Social Development and Centre for Policy Dialogue, an international workshop on Working Towards a More Gender Equitable Macro-economic Agenda. BRAC Conference Centre, Rajendrapur, Bangladesh, 26–28 November.

Lim, Linda Y.C. 1985. Women Workers in Multinational Enterprises in Developing Countries. Geneva: UNCTC/ILO.

———. 1990. "Women's work in export factories: The politics of a cause." In *Persistent Inequalities: Women and World Development.* Irene Tinker. New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press. Pp. 101–119.

Nag, Moni, Benjamin N.F. White, and Robert Creighton Peet. 1977. "An Anthropological Approach to the Study of Economic Value of Children in Java and Nepal." *Center for Policy Studies Working Paper*. New York: Population Council.

Nash, June. 1986. "A decade of research on women in Latin America." In *Women and Change in Latin America.* Helen Safa and June Nash South Hadley, MA: Bergin and Garvey Publishers.

Paul-Majumdar, Protima and Salma Chowdhuri Zohir. 1994. "Dynamics of wage employment: A case of employment in the garment industry." In *Bangladesh Development Studies* Special Issue on Women, Development and Change, ed. Sajeda Amin. 22, 2/3: 179–216.

Salway, Sarah. 1996. "Contraception following childbirth in Bangladesh." University of London. Unpublished doctoral dissertation.

Schlegel, Alice. 1995. "A cross-cultural approach to adolescence." *Ethos: Journal of the Society for Psychological Anthropology* Special Issue on Adolescence, ed. Alice Schlegel, 23, no. 1: 15–32.

Siddiqi, Dina M. 1991. "Discipline and protect: Women factory workers in Bangladesh." *Grassroots: An Alternative Development Journal* 1,2: 42–49.

Simmons, Ruth, Rezina Mita, and Michael A. Koenig. 1992. "Employment in family planning and women's status in Bangladesh." *Studies in Family Planning* 23,2: 97–109.

Standing, Guy. 1989. "Global feminization through flexible labor." *World Development* 7,7: 1,077–1,096.

United Nations. 1995a. "The World's Women 1995." *Social Statistics and Indicator Series K,* No. 12. New York: United Nations.

———. 1995b. "Women's Employment and Fertility: A Comparative Analysis of World Fertility Survey Results for 38 Developing Countries." *Department of International Economic and Social Affairs/Population Studies*, No. 96. New York: United Nations.

White, Ben. 1994. "Children, work and 'child labour': Changing responses to the employment of children." *Development and Change* 25,4: 849–878.