

## **Chapter 8b<sup>1</sup>**

### **Wage Work for Girls and the Transition to Adulthood**

Sajeda Amin, Population Council

This chapter explores how opportunities for wage work can influence adolescents' transition to adulthood. International labor statistics and other research findings show that males' and females' work lives begin to cleave sharply along gender lines during adolescence. While adolescent boys take up formal and informal employment opportunities, adolescent girls assume more domestic work responsibilities. That is the traditional trajectory—but recently this pattern has begun to shift in places where wage-earning jobs have opened for girls, reconfiguring the social and economic landscape of their lives and of the societies in which they live.

It is well recognized that a key determinant of a successful transition to adulthood is an adolescent's ability to acquire the necessary livelihood skills to engage in productive and appropriate work. It is not always clear, however, how particular pathways through adolescence may affect the outcome of this process. This chapter presents data on the employment patterns of adolescents and discusses the example of one sector in which young females in developing countries have made inroads into wage work: the garment industry. This discussion demonstrates that expanding adolescent girls' livelihood opportunities has the potential to free them from some of the constraints of traditional gender roles and to promote their transition to a healthy, productive adulthood.

---

<sup>1</sup> This chapter draws from published and unpublished reports by the author. Key references are Amin et al 1998 and Naved, Newby, and Amin 2001.

## **Gender Patterns of Wage Work in Developing Countries**

Time-use studies of adolescent girls and boys in various developing-country settings over the last several decades show that gender specialization in work begins early and intensifies as adolescents approach adulthood (Amin 1997; DeTray 1983; Jain 1985). Although young males and females work equally long hours, males are more likely to engage in work that is perceived to be productive, is directly related to earning income, and takes place outside the home, while females are more likely to engage in domestic work that is not as visible and is not compensated in cash.

A recent survey in Bangladesh of males and females aged 13–22 shows how gender specialization in work becomes considerably more evident once adolescents leave school. Girls and boys aged 13–15 spend the majority of their time in school. Outside of school, girls are much more likely to spend time doing household work, while boys spend time in other family-based and/or wage-earning work. By the time girls and boys leave school and enter the 19–22-year age range, girls spend the majority of their day engaged in domestic activities (almost 7 hours on average), while boys spend time on a range of income-earning activities outside the home (author's unpublished data from Bangladesh).

These data come from a context where wage-earning opportunities for males are extremely limited—even more so for females. In the above-mentioned survey, 87 percent of male respondents reported that they had engaged in some form of productive work in the past; of these, 53 percent said that they had been paid for that work. By contrast, 55 percent of female respondents said that they had engaged in productive work in the past, but only 19 percent reported that they had earned money for that work. This illustrates that while girls and boys engage in productive activities, more often than not girls are not remunerated for this work.

Equal proportions of boys and girls in this survey reported that they were looking for paid work—27 percent of male and female respondents. Thus, the survey documents the extent to which there is an unmet need for wage work among adolescents even in rural Bangladesh, where the culture and lifestyles are traditional.

A recent study of employment patterns among the young in Egypt found a similar pattern—a high demand for work and high levels of unemployment among young females (El-Kogali and Al-Bassusi 2001). The study found that 43 percent of males aged 15–24 and 19.3 percent of females aged 15–24 are in the labor force, either employed or unemployed and looking for work. The unemployment level among the males looking for work is 19 percent; among the females looking for work this level is considerably higher: 59.4 percent.

Wage-work data on the statistics paint a fairly dismal picture of the structure of work opportunities for adolescent girls. The process of entry into labor markets is harsh in any setting where economic conditions are bad and new work opportunities are not being generated. The data show that the impact of poverty and sluggish economic growth is disproportionately borne by young females in the workforce.

*There are, however, some places where young females have made inroads into the workforce, and sectors of the economy have developed that provide disproportionate numbers of jobs to young females.* There is also increasing evidence from developing countries that the advent of wage work for females is changing girls' and women's position in their households, communities, and societies. Wage-earning opportunities are most often seized by young females entering the workforce for the first time, who are not yet constrained by rigid gender roles. Once installed in wage-earning jobs, these young

females are further liberated from gender-role restrictions, enabling them to take an unprecedented degree of control over the course of their lives.

In her 1992 study of “factory daughters” (i.e., girls working in garment factories) in Indonesia, Wolf found that these girls would rather put in grueling hours of factory work than work in family fields. Qualitative data showed that factory work was preferred over family-based agricultural work because of several differences in the two forms of labor, both of which were quite demanding (indeed, the factory work may have been more demanding in terms of the number of hours of work involved). Though cultural values demanded that “factory daughters” add their income to their families’ income pools, the receipt of their wages enhanced the value of their work, their self-image, and their status in their families.

In many agricultural families, wage work may be valued as a steady source of income that is not subject to seasonal cycles or the vagaries of nature. As such, sending one or several members of an agricultural family to engage in off-farm employment is an important way to diversify income sources and minimize risk in the family’s “portfolio of investments.”

### **The Case of Garment Workers in Bangladesh**

In some places wage-work opportunities for young females are considered to be appropriate and particularly beneficial to families. A case in point is the industry of garment manufacturing for export—an expanding sector in developing countries as a result of economic globalization. Factories in these countries that produce garments for export employ females in large numbers. In Bangladesh, where this sector grew rapidly in the last two decades, the garment-factory workforce is not only predominantly female,

it is composed primarily of young females. This situation provides a striking case study of the implications of new forms of employment for adolescent girls.

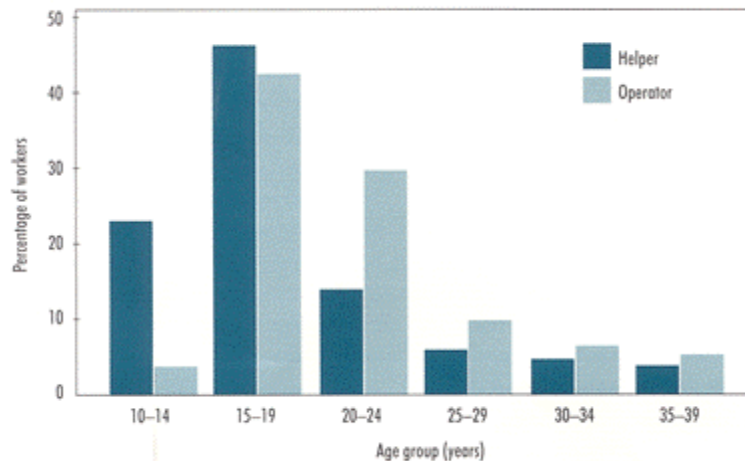
A 1997 survey of female factory workers found that the workforce was composed primarily of females, 80 percent of whom were aged 25 or younger. A simple age profile of the workers surveyed showed that over 40 percent of the workforce was in the 15–19-year age range. Only a handful of female workers (less than 20 percent) were younger than 15—likely a result of strong measures taken just prior to 1997 to curb the recruitment of children in the industry.

Interviews with garment factory owners in Bangladesh reveal that while they are willing to recruit females of all ages to work in their factories, a disproportionate number of young females are hired for this work. The young age profile of garment-factory workers reflects this recruitment bias favoring the young—which may, in turn, reflect the fact that wage work requiring long hours of labor better fits the lifestyles of young, unmarried females unencumbered by the roles and responsibilities of wives and mothers. Both the nature of the work and the traditional role expectations of women with husbands and children make long hours of factory work highly incompatible with marriage and childbearing. Thus, only 50 percent of female garment workers in Bangladesh are married, and those who are married are strongly committed to regulating their fertility.

Figure 1 shows the age distribution of garment workers in Bangladesh by occupation—i.e., “helper” (someone who helps in the assembly line but does not operate machines) or “operator” (someone who runs a sewing machine). Seventy-eight percent of these workers are under the age of 25; 47 percent of them began working at the age of 14 or younger; 32 percent began working between the ages of 15 and 19. Helpers are

generally younger than operators; a large proportion of helpers advance to the position of operators.

FIGURE 1. Age distribution of garment workers by occupation



Females of urban origin enter garment work at younger ages than do workers who migrate from rural areas. Among female garment workers who were born in Dhaka, 73 percent began working at age 14 or younger, compared to 43 percent of those born in rural areas. A likely explanation for this is that entering into garment work involves less of an upheaval for urban females than for those who must migrate from rural areas.

The ability to work intensively for a limited duration is probably one aspect of work in factories that is attractive to large numbers of females. Young wage workers seldom have high career aspirations. They value the ability to save money while they are young, before they are married, over and above investing in acquiring skills that will reap high yields in later years. For example, adolescent girls in Egypt tend to work in sectors in which low-level jobs require little training. These girls prefer working in low-level factory jobs or in shops over gaining skills that take a few years of training to acquire.

Research on wage workers in Bangladesh, Egypt, and Indonesia shows that *very often young females can justify taking on nontraditional roles and responsibilities outside the home and migrating over long distances to work for wages because these females and their families see wage work as an opportunity for girls to save intensively*. Indeed, we see extraordinary propensities to save among employed adolescent girls (see Chapter 8a).<sup>2</sup>

The reasons why and ways in which young female workers save their wages vary enormously by setting. In Taiwan, working daughters' wages are commonly spent to educate sons. In this setting, investing in daughters is not considered as necessary as investing in sons because after a daughter is married, her natal family has no further claim on her income (Greenhalgh 1985). In Egypt, wages earned by young females are invested in household goods that females are required by custom to bring to their marital households—indeed, they are expected to provide a substantial proportion of household goods that are perceived to be necessary. (Grooms are expected to provide the space for the marital household and furnish it.) Thus, working girls in this setting typically buy gas ovens, china, washing machines, and bed linen with the income they earn. Here, as in many places, parents and their daughters plan for daughters' marriage years in advance.

In Bangladesh, young working females talk about spending their savings on a dowry. In this society, men demand to be paid in cash and kind at the time of marriage. Dowry demands are a relatively recent phenomenon. Items that men ask for include wristwatches, bicycles, radios, and televisions (Amin and Cain 1997). The cash amount that a man will demand as dowry is directly proportional to his status and education and

---

<sup>2</sup> This propensity to save is not matched by access to formal savings accounts. Indeed, many girls have trouble guarding their earnings and have yet to be invited to participate widely in micro-finance institutions. The Population Council is working with selected garment-factory owners and bankers in Bangladesh to develop easier, more secure savings mechanisms for garment workers.

may be inversely related to the bride's status and education. The process by which dowry is demanded and negotiated is complex and beyond the scope of this chapter, but it is clear that the need to save for dowry is often a compelling rationale for the decision to send a daughter to work. In some cases it is conceivable that when a girl can continue working after marriage, her potential income stream may also be perceived as a substitute for dowry. We see some evidence of this in the study of garment workers in Bangladesh.

While there is no question that working in the garment sector in places like Bangladesh and Egypt entails considerable sacrifices, and the conditions of work are at times extreme, there is evidence that *girls and their families show great enthusiasm for these opportunities for girls to work for wages and are willing to make whatever accommodations are necessary to allow girls to avail themselves of these opportunities.* This includes allowing girls to leave home in settings where traditionally girls are largely home-bound. Indeed, the study of garment workers in Bangladesh showed that 87 percent of these workers in Dhaka migrated from outside the city, 92 percent of them with family members. Nevertheless, efforts are made to honor cultural traditions, even as they are being upended by girls entering the workforce. For example, in Egypt and Bangladesh, where a female working outside the home is perceived as being in violation of the cultural rule of female seclusion, working females often veil themselves and don extra layers of clothing as protection on their way to and from the workplace.

### **Social Effects of Wage Work**

*Girls value income-earning work for its obvious economic benefits and because of the enhanced status it confers upon them in their households.* Although most workers begin by earning very low wages, experience at work can lead to considerable wage

increases. Figure 1 shows that even the lowest-level female garment worker earns *five times as much* as a girl working for cash in any other sector. Furthermore, an entry-level helper in a garment factory can expect a salary increase of at least 30 percent within three years; thus, a helper with a starting salary of Tk. 929 (US\$ 24.50) will earn about Tk. 1158 (US\$ 30.50) after three years. Operators' salaries increase to an average of Tk 1600 (US\$ 42.10) after three years. Most helpers expect to become operators eventually as they gain experience. Workers' prospects for increased wages and skills are an important component of young people's motivation for entering factory work (Amin et al. 1998).

Girls value wage-earning work for its social benefits as well. A 20-year-old Bangladeshi garment-factory worker, Aleya, describes the ways in which work has changed her life compared to her peers who have married and never worked:

My married friends have to wear a sari [more traditional], but I can wear a Shalwar Kameez [a trendier garment]. 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 as brave as I am. I have learned a new trade and have a job, and they sit in the corner of the house and cook all day.

Lily, a 16-year-old who has just started working in a factory, describes her vision for the future as follows:

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...I will need to save 5000 or 7000 takas for the dowry to get married.

Lily went on to tell us that she was willing to enter an arranged marriage to please her parents, but that she intended to live near her parents. In this respect, she is probably not too different from other girls her age in Bangladesh. What is strikingly different about her, however, is that while most of her peers would not have much say in when they married or where they lived after marriage, Lily had taken an important step to ensure

that her marital preferences would be considered by taking on wage-earning work prior to marriage.

## **Conclusion**

Garment workers are not merely the new generation of female wage earners in Bangladesh; they have also helped to redefine adolescence in this traditional society, giving new meaning to this period of transition to adulthood. Traditionally, early marriage has forced an abrupt and premature entry into adulthood for many girls in this and other traditional societies. The opportunity for girls to work for wages creates a healthy gap between childhood and adulthood, during which time girls can develop the economic, social, and educational skills they need to create a healthy, productive, and more self-directed future for themselves.

The availability of wage work influences the lives of young females in manifold ways, giving them knowledge, experience, and power that was denied to females only a generation ago. It is important to recognize, however, the many ways in which the changes wrought by girls' new economic opportunities are influenced and mediated by traditional and unchanging values regarding gender roles and filial obligations. Garment workers tend to marry later than their nonworking peers most often because they themselves want to marry later, but occasionally also because their natal families depend on their income, which these families stand to lose when the working daughters marry. In addition, female garment workers maintain ties with their families and villages of origin by sending money home frequently, partly because providing their social networks with financial support helps girls later to maintain secure marriages (Naved, Newby, and Amin 2001).

Mobility is key to the empowerment of female wage workers, many of whom must migrate from villages to cities for work, often traveling back and forth frequently. Adolescent girls' mobility has important implications for their status. On the one hand, a social stigma is associated with girls who are "compelled" to work for wages; on the other hand, these workers serve as important role models to their younger sisters and other girls.

Female garment workers in Bangladesh are clearly conscious of being "modern" and are keen to project this image. They often reinforce this image by changing their dialect and affecting urban accents. The workplace provides these girls with a strong network of peers who support each other in their quest to "modernize" themselves. It would be difficult for a girl to change her way of dressing or even move about in a city without the company of other girls. The thousands of female factory workers seen walking between factories in Dhaka and the city's suburbs are the strongest testament to the profound impact of wage-earning work on the lives of girls and women—and on the societies in which they live.

## References

- Amin, Sajeda. 1997. "The poverty-purdah trap in rural Bangladesh: implications for women's roles in the family," *Development and Change* 28, no. 2: 213–233.
- Amin, Sajeda and Mead Cain. 1997. "The rise of dowry in Bangladesh," in Gavin W. Jones, John C. Caldwell, Robert M. Douglas, and Rennie M. D'Souza (eds.), *The Continuing Demographic Transition*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Amin, Sajeda, Ian Diamond, Ruchira T. Naved, and Margaret Newby. 1998. "Transitions to adulthood of female garment factory workers in Bangladesh," *Studies in Family Planning* 29, no. 2: 185–200.
- DeTray, Dennis. 1983. "Children's work activities in Malaysia," *Population and Development Review* 9, no. 3: 437–455.

El-Kogali, Safaa El-Tayed, and Nagah Hassan Al-Bassusi. 2001. "Youth Livelihood Opportunities in Egypt." Cairo: Population Council.

Greenhalgh, Susan. 1985. "Sexual stratification: The other side of growth and equity in East Asia," *Population and Development Review* 11, no. 2: 265–314.

Jain, Devaki. 1985. "The household trap: Report on a field survey of female activity patterns," in Devaki Jain and Nirmala Bannerjee (eds.), *Tyranny of the Household: Investigative Essays on Women's Work*. Delhi: Shakti Books.

Kabeer, Naila. 1991. "Cultural dopes or rational fools?—women and labor supply in the Bangladesh garment industry," *The European Journal of Development Research* 3, no. 4: 133–160.

Lim, L.Y.C. 1990. "Women's work in export factories: The politics of a cause," in Irene Tinker (ed.), *Persistent Inequalities: Women and World Development*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, pp. 101–119.

Naved, Ruchira T., Margaret Newby, and Sajeda Amin. 2001. "The effects of migration and work on marriage of female garment workers in Bangladesh," *International Journal of Population Geography* 7, no. 2: 91–104.

Wolf, Diane. 1992. *Factory Daughters: Gender, Household Dynamics, and Rural Industrialization in Java*. Berkeley: University of California Press.