*The Dhaka University Studies, Part-F Vol. XIII (1) : 1-16 June 2002*

# FEMALE CHILDREN IN THE LABOUR MARKET: DETERMINANTS OF FACTORY EMPLOYMENT

**Dr. Sumaiya Khair**

## 1. Introduction

The usual scene that meets the eye in the early morning on the streets of Dhaka is that of an army of women walking purposefully in groups, each with a lunchbox in hand. While most of them are young, some are merely children, and far too young to be designated as women. They leave their homes in the slums each day to fill the morning streets of Dhaka's industrial areas and head for the city's various garment factories. This army is the country's female garment industry workers. In Bangladesh, most industries prefer to engage young, single females as workers. In the garment export sector the trend is particularly marked. The bulk of the workforce in this sector comprises women. The workforce also absorbs a considerable number of girl children without whom the 'assembly lines' within the factory cannot function properly.

The present paper is based on an empirical investigation that was carried out some years ago to assess the situation of girl child workers in the country's garment industry.[1] Although the data may be a few years old the findings are nevertheless important in that they are a useful supplement to the sustained debates and dialogues worldwide regarding the issue of child labour.

507 female child workers in the garment industry made up the primary category of respondents followed by 33 parents/guardians and 62 employers/owners of garment factories. A combination of quantitative and qualitative methods was employed to gather the data. Admittedly, while

[1] Drawn from the author's unpublished Ph.D. thesis titled *Changing Responses to Child Labour : The Case of Female Children in the Bangladesh Garment Industry*, University of

quantitative data are necessary to determine the prevalence of a phenomenon, it is the qualitative study that reveals the complexities of a given scenario.

The paper examines various characteristics, at the household, workplace and individual levels, in an attempt to discover the motives behind children's decision to take up factory employment. Working conditions are examined in the light of the existing factory laws of Bangladesh to reveal the gap between law and practice. The paper also intends to demonstrate how little children know of, or are affected by, laws formulated especially for them.

## 2. The Socio-Economic Profile of Female Child Workers

This section seeks to portray a brief profile of the girl child respondents in terms of living conditions, age, marital status, family composition in order to gain some understanding of the particular socio-economic characteristics and background of the respondents.

Most of the respondents, 89.5 per cent out 507 children and 51.5 per cent out of 33 adults, were found to be living in bastees or slums after having migrated to the city from the rural areas. One can hardly miss the slums which have sprouted like mushrooms all over Dhaka and its adjoining areas over the last few years. Slums are mostly unauthorised settlements hosting a dense population occupying one-roomed overcrowded houses. The single-roomed shacks with overhanging roofs of rusty corrugated metal, bamboo or scrap materials and rattan walls, sometimes resting on stilts to avoid the trickle of grey water thick with waste, had dark interiors with very little provision for light and air.

Despite this dismal picture, life in each of the slums visited functions with clockwork precision. Smoke billows from wood

---

East London, Essex, U.K., 1995.

fires over which staple food for the family simmers while young housewives clean their living quarters. Half-naked young children crowd every dwelling, engrossed in their own world of play and make-believe. Men and women bathe in separate communal bathing areas functioning with a single tube-well or a public tap which provides water free of cost but only for a few short hours. While drinking water is scarce in the slums that I visited, the sanitation system is deplorable. Latrine facilities on a private basis are totally absent--the makeshift structures outside meant to serve as latrines are for communal use and are far from hygienic.

Of the 507 child respondents the majority 'self-reported' as being in the 10-14 years age bracket. The youngest respondent was 8 years old. The reason why I use the term 'self-reported' is due to the absence of birth certificates in Bangladesh and the inability of respondents to state their age accurately. The ordinary people of Bangladesh, in the majority of cases, reveal total ignorance of their actual chronological age. This is a major drawback, which clouds the credibility of many research studies where age is an important factor. I experienced similar difficulties in my research.

The difficulty experienced in computing the age of adult guardians was enough to warn me of the difficulties I would face in discovering the children's ages. Moreover, many of the children appeared undernourished, making it even more difficult to tell their age. This, in fact, is one of the most popular arguments offered by factory owners in an attempt to justify the appointment of underage children in their factories. I began by asking the children their age and gradually tested the credibility of their answers by asking them about major events in the country, like a particular epidemic, or a natural catastrophe like the floods of 1988, or the regime of a particular leader. In this way, I pin-pointed 507 respondents, out of a group of nearly 600, as being in the category of 'child', that is, 14 and below.

The exercise involved a lot of mind-boggling calculations, but in the end I managed to narrow them down sufficiently to produce a figure representing the actual age as accurately as possible. In the circumstances, the conclusions are the best that could be drawn.

51.5 per cent of the 33 parents/guardians interviewed worked in the garment industry where they were engaged in various occupations. Of the total adult respondents, 45.5 per cent were women who had young daughters working in the garment industry.

The investigation revealed that 96.6 per cent of the child respondents were single and had never been married. Only one out of the 507 children refrained from responding to the question regarding her marital status. Presumably, she was married but was embarrassed to admit it. The children replied in the negative when asked whether they would prefer marriage to work.

When the parents/guardians were asked about marriage plans for their daughters, their responses revealed a shift in the traditional practice of early marriage for female children. The respondents said that besides assisting them economically, their daughters' incomes also enable them to set aside a small amount for their marriages in future. However, they do not contemplate marriage for their daughters until they are at least 20 years old. After all, early marriage would also mean the premature loss of their much-needed income.

90.9 per cent of the total adult respondents comprising parents/guardians admitted that work in the garment industry is an effective deterrent to child marriage. If it were not for the factory work, their daughters would have been long married.

Moreover, it is found that the factory authorities are reluctant to engage married workers. They appear to prefer unmarried

females who are free to devote their entire time, attention and energies to the factory floors without suffering from any domestic constraints common to married females. Women can be paid less than men, they appear more acquiescent to enforced periods of overtime work, and they can also be laid off in the absence of orders without too much protest. Unencumbered single women are preferred who are willing to give 'undivided attention to their work without the constant anxieties about their husbands, their inlaws or their children'.[2] If the foregoing is true of young women one can imagine the benefit of engaging children in this trade.

All the child respondents came from fairly large families; the average family size of the respondents interviewed is 7. The families are basically nuclear in nature. The vast majority of the respondents belong to families comprising parents and their children only. Very few have dependents like an ailing grandparent or a widowed aunt. Some have relatives living with them but this is rare.

The majority, 67.3 per cent of the total child respondents, belonged to male-headed families where the father is the dominant figure. 29.7 per cent of the respondents have families that are 'headed' by their mothers, on account of their fathers working sporadically or having irregular jobs. Many women in Bangladesh are increasingly taking up the reins of the family in the absence of their husbands by way of death, divorce, desertion, re-marriage or simply due to migration to the city for a job. It should be noted however, that despite the presence of adult male members, women in my study were symbolic 'heads' of their families by virtue of their steady income. This is a departure from the popular notion that sees women as heads of families primarily in the absence of males. Other respondents had fathers who were too old or too sick to work.

---

[2] Kabeer. Naila, 'Women's Labour in the Bangladesh Garment Industry: Choice and Constraints in Camillia Fawzi El-Solh et al. (eds.), *Muslim Women's Choices. Religious*

An attempt was made to discover whether the sex of the household head had any specific impact upon the education of the children. The effect of having a relative as head of the household was also examined. The following cross table reveals the effect of household heads on the schooling of children. 502 children, that is, 99 per cent of the total were out of school at the time of this study. Therefore, the following table reveals the findings on the basis of those 502 children.

**TABLE 1: Cross Tabulation of Reasons for School Dropout by Household Heads**

| Reasons for School Dropout | Male-Headed | Female-Headed | Kin-Headed | Total |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Reluctance of Parents | 43<br>12.7 | 9<br>6.0 | 2<br>13.3 | 54 |
| Poverty | 211<br>62.5 | 95<br>63.8 | 11<br>73.3 | 317 |
| Respondents' Reluctance | 38<br>11.2 | 9<br>6.0 | | 47 |
| To work | 46<br>13.6 | 35<br>23.5 | 2<br>13.3 | 83 |
| Lack of Voc. Training | | 1<br>0.7 | | 1 |
| Total<br>Total Percent | 338<br>67.3 | 149<br>29.7 | 15<br>3.0 | 502<br>100.0 |

*Belief and Social Reality,* BERG, Providence/Oxford, 1994, pp.164-183, at p. 165.

The above cross table reveals that 67.3 per cent out of 502 children came from male-headed households, 29.7 per cent out of 502 children came from female-headed households and 3.0 per cent out of 502 children belonged to families that were headed by kin members. The table demonstrates that poverty is the chief reason for school dropouts. 62.5 per cent of the children from male-headed (father) households and 63.8 per cent of children from female-headed (mother) households have cited poverty as their main reason for dropping out of school. Interestingly, 73.3 per cent of the children belonging to households headed by kin members have dropped out of school due to poverty. Therefore, although poverty is all pervasive it appears that education of children living with kin members is more likely to be affected by poverty. It may be that while parents try to educate them with whatever means they have, kin members are less likely to spend their paltry earnings on the education of their relative's child.

Another aspect that is evident from the above cross table is that children coming from female-headed households dropped out of school mainly in order to work and earn for the family. The options used in the cross table as possible reasons for school dropout require an explanation here for a clearer understanding. 'Poverty' and 'to work and earn' have been used here to denote different categories. The reason being that it is often found that families which are poor have children who do not attend school and yet do not work to earn for a living either. In contrast, there are poor families whose children drop out of school for the sole purpose of earning a living. in this light, the largest group of children, 23.5 per cent out of the 149 children from female-headed households (mother) have dropped out of school for the purpose of earning a living. It is clear from this data that children from mother-headed households experience and share the family's poverty more intensely than those belonging to father-headed households since females are more economically

vulnerable due to the existing private/public dichotomy that essentially segregates women form the world of men. This finding only confirms that female household heads indeed experience multidimensional difficulties in the Bangladeshi society.

## 2.1 Factory Employment and Decision-Making

The capacity of making their own decisions demonstrates the girl children's transformation from mute non-entities to active and confident social actors. Questions regarding decision-making within the household about a daughter's employment in the factory brought forth various responses. In a traditionally male dominated society like Bangladesh it is usually the sons who are permitted to seek fresh pastures away from home. Male children have more freedom in choosing a vocation of their own. Daughters, on the other hand, are duty-bound to obey the parents without question. With the advent of recent changes in the social structure, girls are applying various mechanisms in an attempt to gain the approval of their parents for factory employment.

Normatively the chief decision-maker in the family is the father (if he is alive). It is his permission that a daughter requires if she wishes to step out of the bounds of the house and into the world of work in the factory. In the absence of the father, it is the brother who steers the family. If she is married then it is her husband who decides her future as a possible wage-earner.

However, women are often permitted now by the male authority in the family to combine their domestic duties with paid employment. One of the primary motives behind this unusual display of consideration by the male is, perhaps, to exploit and usurp the earnings of the women. Rani's (12) story of her friend clearly illustrates this situation. She recounted the tale of a married friend who was forced by her husband to work in the garment factory. The husband said that since the dowry

paid by the girl's family was not enough, she should either work in order to pay it off or get it from her family. He threatened her with divorce if she refused to abide by his decisions. Rani stated that her friend, being physically weak, finds it very difficult to cope with the pressure of carrying a double burden of home making and factory employment. Nevertheless, she has to do as her husband wishes or risk being divorced. Rani's friend had no choice but to give in and work in the factory.

In many cases daughters faced considerable opposition to seeking outside employment. The standard reaction of some parents, in particular fathers, is utter horror at the prospect of their daughter going out to work. Again there are others who were bold enough to defy their parents' disapproval and join paid employment in the factory. Rukuni, 12, directly disobeyed her parents in joining factory work. She said that her father wanted her to study but Rukuni did not see how schooling could fulfil her immediate needs. Her parents, however, gradually and perhaps grudgingly, accepted her single-minded commitment to factory employment. Rini, 14, adopted a different strategy. She conspired with her mother to keep her factory employment secret from her father who was a rickshaw-puller. Her mother covered for her most of the time and since her father was mostly engaged in drinking and gambling in his free time he did not suspect anything.

The employment of strategies as seen above, reveals a transformation in patterns of decision-making that give children greater leverage in decisionmaking in response to growing awareness of their own needs. Children, like women, have their own ways of resisting against their relegation to a subordinate status. The following breakdown table reveals the trend further.

**TABLE: 2 Breakdown of Decision-Making Within Family**

| Decision-Making by | Frequency | Percent |
|---|---|---|
| Children | 355 | 70.0 |
| Parents/Guardians | 1 52 | 30.0 |
| Total | 507 | 100.0 |

While 70 per cent out of 507 children responded that they sought factory employment on their own volition, 30 per cent said that they did so at their parents' encouragement. Although it was not easy for many of them to seek factory employment, as is evident from the qualitative statements above, many children nevertheless took the decision on their own. Clearly, therefore, seeking factory work is not necessarily made in tandem with parental visions of a daughter's role or a family's economic plan.[3]

## 2.2 The Family Economy and the Use of Children's Wages

While 43.8 per cent of the total child respondents stated that both they and their parents use the wages that they earn, 87.9 per cent out of 33 adult respondents said that their children hand over their entire wages to them. The obvious gap between the responses of the children and the parents/ guardians suggests that there may have been an overall shift in the family economy as far as children's wage contribution is concerned. On the other hand, it could also mean that the children are keen on working overtime so that they can retain the overtime payment for themselves after giving their basic salary to their parents. Whatever may be the case, the following table reveals the breakdown of the use of children's wages.

[3] Wolf, Diane L., 'Daughters, Decisions and Domination: An Empirical and Conceptual, Critique of Household Strategies', *Development and Change, Vol.21, pp.43-74, at p. 51.*

**TABLE: 3 Breakdown of the Use of Children's Wages**

| Use of Children's Wages by | Frequency | Percent |
|---|---|---|
| Parents/Guardians | 85 | 16.8 |
| Self | 200 | 39.4 |
| Both | 222 | 43.8 |
| Total | 507 | 100.0 |

It appears from the above table that the notion of family dependence is somewhat overstressed and children today work for themselves as much as for their families alone. 39.4 per cent out of 507 children spent all their wages on themselves, whereas only 16.8 per cent of the children gave their entire earnings to their parents. The rest, 43.8 per cent, contributed some of their wages to the family economy.

Another aspect that influences children not to give their wages to parents is the apparent thoughtlessness with which they spend them. Nirmala, 14, explained vehemently:

> *My father is good for nothing. My mother, who is terrified of him, can never disobey him for fear of his beatings. At the beginning I used to contribute to the family economy but my father took everything from my mother only to lose it in gambling. We went without food. I vowed thereafter never to give them cash. Instead, now I try to buy my mother whatever she needs.*

Children therefore, take measures to suit particular situations and not all of them are favourable for parents/guardians. Children are conscious of the social changes around them and are consequently poised to take full advantage of them. Some of the young girls contemplated saving a portion of their incomes for their dowries (an inevitability these days). Thus.

they would be taking the burden of some of their parents' costs during their weddings. While some of the guardians admitted the truth of this, others were either hesitant or silent.

Some of the adults believed that the new-found independence and moneypower are making their girls deviant and irresponsible. Not all, they alleged, contribute to the family income, but instead blow away their earnings in frivolous ways: on clothes, cosmetics and movies. They complained that their children are not bothered about the financial constraints of the family and spend their earnings on whatever takes their fancy. The number of girls in this category is low as the alleged frivolous activities are usually undercut by traditional values according to which daughters invariably bow to familial influence. Moreover, as work in the factory allowed very little free time, chances of engaging in 'frivolous' activities, such as going to the movies, seem remote.

## 3. Work History and Conditions of Work

An attempt is made in this section to discover and describe the conditions in which children were found to be working in the factories. It includes a detailed study of choice of work, work processes, terms of work, problems at work and security in the workplace with specific regard to female children of the industry.

### 3.1 Age When Children Started Work and Motives for Seeking Factory Employment

Section 66 of The Factories Act 1965 specifically prohibits the employment of children who have not completed their fourteenth year. A child who has completed the age of fourteen shall be permitted to work in a factory only when he/she has received a certificate of fitness from a Certifying Surgeon upon application of the child or his/her parent/guardian or the manager of the factory where the child wishes to work.[4] During

the field research there were situations in which none of the above requirements were fulfilled. While children under the permitted age were openly visible on factory floors, my doubts regarding the existence of fitness certificates were confirmed. In fact, the practice of procuring false certificates confirming the age of children, which in most cases are. made available by bribing the doctor concerned, flourished only after the Harkin Bill began to take its toll.[5] The same rule applied in the case of visits from Factory Inspectors who are easily mollified by a bribe. Since children are an invisible force anyway, they are not listed in factory registers and consequently, the duties of factory inspectors become less strenuous and easier to justify.

The employers in the sample denied that age, as is generally alleged, is the principal criterion upon which selection of young workers is based. They regarded the notion that children are preferred, because they can be paid less, as without foundation. They argued that in view of the abundant adult labour supply, where an unemployed adult would be more than willing to work for the same wages as those paid to a child, employers have very little to gain by engaging young children who are clumsy and inexperienced. However, since children often accompany their mothers/sisters to work, they try their hand as sewing helpers and pick up a few pointers in the process. Said one employer:

*When parents request us to take on their children we*

---

[4] Sections 67 and 68 of The Factories Act 1965.

[5] In August 1992, following campaigns by major labour organizations in the United States, an American Senator Tom Harkin introduced a Bill into the American Senate to deter child labour in manufacturing industries. As the measure was introduced too late for passage in 1992 it was reintroduced into the Senate in 1993. The Bill, commonly known as the Harkin Bill, sought to prohibit importation of any product made wholly or in part by children under the age of 15. The sanction created a great deal of tension in the garment industry of Bangladesh which employed a considerable number of young girls.

*have very little choice. We can hardly afford to lose the services of the parents who are good workers. It is easier to give in to their requests and take their children in. Moreover, whatever they earn here is well supplemented by the children's wages. At the end of the day they all stand to gain from it.*

Moreover, the employers argued that children who work on their own are in the habit of changing factories frequently so they quickly learn the work processes. 77.4 per cent out of 62 employers cited 'experience' as opposed to young age, as the basic premise which influences the selection of children.

Although at the time of this study most of the children interviewed were between the ages of 10 and 14, many of them had already worked for some years. While the largest group, 27.0 per cent of the total children, started work at the age of 10, only 2.4 per cent claimed to have started work at the age of 14. This reveals how early children are initiated into paid employment, despite legal restrictions. It is evident that even before they dropped out of school, many of them have, in one way or the other, assisted their parents in income generating activities. Jyotsna, 13, confirmed:

*I don't see why you should be so surprised at hearing how early we started work. As far as I can remember, I have worked around the house and assisted my elders in various ways since I was a toddler. Since I come from a large family, errands for elders were also endless. Moreover, nobody seemed to think that I would be unable to do the chores set for me on account of my age--for that matter, neither did I!*

The following frequency table demonstrates the age at which children have started work.

**TABLE: 4 Breakdown of Ages At Which Children Started Work**

| Age (in years) when children started work | Frequency | Percent |
|---|---|---|
| 7 | 2 | .4 |
| 8 | 17 | 3.4 |
| 9 | 82 | 16.3 |
| 10 | 136 | 27.0 |
| 11 | 104 | 20.7 |
| 12 | 90 | 17.9 |
| 13 | 60 | 11.9 |
| 14 | 12 | 2.4 |
| Total | 503 | 100.0 |

Missing Cases: 4

[Note: Missing cases are those who failed to respond].

From the above cross table it is evident that there is a general tendency for children to begin to labour in factories between the ages of 9-12. Among the 503 children who responded to this question, 136 or 27.0 per cent of the children started work at the age of 10 and 104 or 20.7 per cent of them began to work from the age of 11.

Economic constraints appear to be the principal cause, which propel these children to take up work at an early age. 97 per cent of the total adult parents/guardians said that they sent their children to work in order to supplement family income. Those belonging to single-parent families seem to face a greater challenge than those coming from two-parent families. The absence of the father, either through death or desertion, often complicated matters. When asked how far their families were

dependent on the income of their children, 84.8 per cent of the total parents/guardians replied- 'enormously'. The following cross table demonstrates how the need for children to supplement family income affects their decision to drop out of school.

**TABLE: 5 Cross Tabulation of Children's School Dropout by Necessity for Children's Income for Family Survival**

| Reasons for School Dropout | Yes | No | Total |
|---|---|---|---|
| Reluctance of Parents | 49<br>10.1 | 5<br>29.4 | 54 |
| Poverty | 314<br>64.7 | 3<br>17.6 | 317 |
| Respondents' Reluctance | 41<br>8.5 | 6<br>35.3 | 47 |
| To Work | 81<br>16.7 | 2<br>11.8 | 83 |
| Lack of Voc. Training | | 1<br>5.9 | 1 |
| Total<br>Total Percent | 485<br>96.6 | 17<br>3.4 | 502<br>100.0 |

As indicated earlier while computing Table 1, 502 children out of 507 of them were out of school at the time of the investigation. Therefore, the above table has been computed on the basis of 502 children. From the above cross table it is evident that 96.6 per cent out of 502 children dropped out of school as their income was essential to their families. 64.7 per cent out of 485 children who responded that their income was essential for the survival of their families cited poverty as the principal cause. The financial contribution of each child worker

must, therefore, supplement her family economy significantly.

Another reason often cited as a cause for child work is that the parents/guardians are reluctant to leave their daughters alone at home when they leave for work. The argument is that they fear exposing the children to various forms of abuse, not only from bad elements in the area, but also from members of the family. Consequently, they are compelled to take their children along with them to their workplace. Hanufa, 36, explained in hushed tones:

> *One cannot trust one's child with anybody these days. How can I leave my daughter on her own in the bastee when I know of the dangers to which she might be exposed? If anything happens to her in my absence she will have to carry the shame for the rest of her life. She will never be able to make a decent marriage in future.*

It seems, therefore, that it is the duty of the parents/guardians to safeguard the chastity of their daughter/ward against possible violations by outsiders, sometimes even by insiders. It is also the duty of the girl to save herself from abuse by absenting herself from her own home. Since 'chastity' of the girl is an essential ingredient of marriage in Bangladesh, the above statement also demonstrates that marriageability continues to be very important within the family and wider community.

While it is true that economic imperatives propel children into work, it is evident from my discussions with them that it is often not the only reason. A number of young girls, as well as responding to immediate financial compulsions, worked in order to secure an income for personal expenditure. Exposure to city life opens up avenues where the lure of modern clothes and cosmetics encourage young girls to earn a living from a relatively early age. Rupjan, 10, said excitedly:

> *I saw how the girl next door used to dress. You know,*

> *she even used nail polish and lipstick! She could do all that with the money she earned from the factory where she worked. I dreamed of the day when I would be able to the same. More than anything I wanted to apply nail polish and lipstick just like the other girl.*

Many children appeared to have taken up factory employment to escape familial control over their lives. Work in the factory enables them to stay away from the ordinary drudgery of their households. Some of them also mentioned that they wanted some financial autonomy from their families and therefore, decided to work in the factory. Rahima, 11, stated:

> *My father was against my joining the factory. I, however, wanted to be like the other girls working in the factory. They are free to roam the streets and wear what they like. When my friends leave for work I have nothing to occupy myself with apart from housework. I am sick of looking after my baby brother. Now that I work in the factory I can spend the major portion of the day away from the daily routine that was such a bore.*

It is clear, therefore, that apart from financial necessity at a family or group level, other factors also operate at a more personal level when children feel encouraged to join waged employment outside their homes. The stand taken by children in choosing their own vocations is indicative of their capacity to devise 'strategies' to resist their ideological subordination within the family. Since 'strategies' are shaped by several levels of constraints'[6], this mode of resistance by girl children dissolves the division that is created by the exercise of authority over them, not only by men but by adults in general.

### 3.2 Choice of Occupation

It is interesting to note that despite the existence of other kinds

6 Kandiyoti, Deniz, Bargaining with Patriarchy', *Genderand Society,* Vol.2, No.3, 1988, pp.274-290, at p, 285.

of factories in Bangladesh, female children are more attracted to employment in the garment factories. When asked why they joined the garment industry, the girls replied that they are restricted in their choice of occupation by reason of their gender. They contended that being girls there are very few jobs to choose from.

83 per cent of the total child respondents stated that work in the garment industry is their first occupation and for 16.6 per cent of them the contrary is true. For those who had worked elsewhere prior to their occupation in the garment industry, a higher salary was the chief attraction of this sector. 64.3 per cent of this group stated that they left their previous jobs in favour of factory work on account of the higher wages paid in this industry.

Almost all the children expressed their preference for factory work to any other occupation. When I put a hypothetical question to them that, if they were not already working, which sector would they prefer to join, the majority, 87.8 per cent out of a total of 507, voted in favour of the garment industry. The table below shows the trend in children's selection of occupation.

**TABLE: 6 Breakdown of Children's Choice of Occupation**

| Choice of Occupation | Frequency | Percent |
|---|---|---|
| Garment Factory | 445 | 87.8 |
| Domestic Service | 1 | .2 |
| Others | 61 | 12.0 |
| Total | 507 | 100.0 |

When questioned about their obvious preference for the

garment sector, they unanimously replied that even if the pay is less than normal standards, at least work is available. By 'normal standards' it may be assumed to indicate the sum of money that would normally be paid for that particular kind of work. The reference, however, remained unclear from the children's point of view. Perhaps, they meant that had an adult worked at the same occupation, he/she would have received more pay. Perhaps, the employer could have paid more but was intentionally not doing so. Upon further elaboration, the children appeared to favour the latter possibility. Another reason for their preference is that they have the scope to earn a little extra in the garment industry by working overtime.

They enjoy a sense of security during work in the factories and said that the working environment prevailing in the factories is far more congenial than can be found anywhere else. In other words, the children felt that they would not have felt as comfortable and safe working anywhere else. Moreover, they had the freedom to go home at the end of the day unlike say, domestic service, which appeared to be a matter of great significance to the respondents.

The last thing that the majority of the children want is to work in people's homes as domestic servants. When questioned about their apathy towards domestic work, they replied that it is often poorly paid, if paid at all, and has no uniform working hours. Moreover, there is no dignity in this work. Since domestic service afforded no holidays or free time, they would always be at the beck and call of the inmates of the house.

The children stated that unlike the garment industry, which pays reasonably well if they work hard enough, domestic work does not pay enough no matter how hard they work. They also referred to incidents where domestic servants were severely beaten and maimed by their employers on the slightest of pretexts. Apart from a handful, most of them were careful not

to comment on sexual harassment of domestic servants by male employers in private households. Gentle inquiries brought forth a torrent of information, most likely gleaned from hearsay and stories told from newspapers, on sexual harassment in private households. Sakhina, 10, recounted her horror of domestic work on account of the stories she heard:

> *I go cold when I think of the things that happen within the four walls of a house. If someone kills and buries you nobody will know. I hear people talking in the bastees about violent incidents in people's homes. I do not ever want to place myself in such a situation. In contrast, the factory is a much better place to work in. There are people everywhere and one feels safe in here.*

When the adults were asked why they had placed their children in the garment industry, 42.4 per cent out of 33 stated that they chose to send them there on account of the good salary that is paid. Moreover, 84.8 per cent of the total adult respondents stated that their children benefit in many ways by working in the garment industry and 60.6 per cent said that they do not think that their children would have fared better elsewhere. The benefits for them, it appeared, are more financial than anything else.

Some, however, expressed mixed feelings. They said that although it is true that the garment industry came as a blessing for the female population of the country, it also brought social evil in its wake. Many adults believed that the close proximity of men and women at work and economic independence are having adverse effects on their children. While many children are believed to be associating with unscrupulous people, others, they maintained, have become mothers of illegitimate children. Moreover, they have become disobedient and arrogant and do not have regard for their elders.

### 3.2.1 Factory Preference for Girl Children

When the employers were asked whether girl children are preferred to adults in the garment industry, 87.1 per cent out of 62 answered in the affirmative. They said that young girls are quick to learn and are hardworking. Although the employers denied that age is not the principal criterion for the selection of workers, they nevertheless admitted that young girls are preferred in view of their submissiveness. Girl children are a more docile workforce who are easy to control. It seems that the traditional attributes of femininity in Bangladesh, i.e. passivity and submissiveness, greatly influence the selection of young girls. As Kabeer points out:

> *Employers seeking to tailor their labour recruitment strategies to the needs of profit maximisation, demonstrate a preference for certain characteristics in their workforce--cheapness, docility and dispensability. The ascription of secondary-earner status to women in many cultures gives them a competitive edge in the market for these jobs...*[7]

This inclination to employ young female labour demonstrates how gender relations succumb to shifts, even under the strictest of traditional normative principles which dictate what is proper, and what is not, for young females. Another factor that influences the incorporation of children into the factories in Bangladesh is their non-admission to worker's unions. Robert, in a similar study on female workers in the clothing and textile industries in newly industrialised countries, observes that 'this emphasis on passive and ornamental femininity is intended to forestall the rise of any sense of independence or unified strength among the women'.[8]

7 Kabeer, Naila, 'Cultural Dopes or Rational Fools? Women and Labour Supply in the Bangladesh Garment industry, *European Journal of Development Rlesearch*, Vol.3, Part 1, 1991, pp.133-160, at p. 135.

8 Robert, Annette, 'The Effects of the International Division of Labour on Female Workers in the Textile and Clothing Industries', *Development and Change*, Vol.14, 1983 pp.19-37, at p. 29.

However, the employment of children is not without problems. While 43.5 per cent of the total employers complained about unscheduled absences from work, 40.3 per cent said that the child workers were also largely responsible for damaged equipment on the factory floors. As one disgruntled employer said:

> *Nobody seems to realise how difficult it is to work with children. Although they hardly know how to handle machinery, their curiosity gets the better of them as they try their hands at the sewing machines when nobody is looking. The result is a large number of broken needles and jammed machinery. Sometimes I think children are more a hindrance than help.*

The impression I received was that the employer went out of his way to help the child workers despite the material loss. Unfortunately, the 'truth' is not always so clear-cut.

### 3.3 Modes of Recruitment and Terms of Work

While a large number of girls in the sample stated that they found their jobs on their own, the majority, 60.9 per cent out of 507, admitted that they obtained their jobs through friends and family. The research demonstrates the growing independence of children in the choice and procurement of their own jobs. Those who found jobs on their own initiative live in the vicinity of the factories. The employers, on the other hand, preferred to state that most of the children were granted jobs upon the request of a parent or a relative. 27.1 per cent out of 62 employers responded that children are mostly recruited through the good offices of friends/relatives already working in the concerned factories. This was also stated by a number of parents.

As for the existence of contracts, 99.6 per cent of the total child respondents replied in the negative when asked about the existence of a contract. This tallies to a certain extent with the

response of the employers of whom 82.3 per cent admitted that no written contracts are drawn up in the event of appointing children.

Children are initially required to work for a period of one to three months (depending on the individual factory) on a trial basis. Only after they have worked to the satisfaction of the management are they 'officially' appointed as employees in the factory. Terms are agreed upon, sometimes verbally. At others, they are set out in a paper bearing their photographs, which require either their signature or their thumb impression.

It was evident from the interviews of the children that the somewhat loose nature of their appointments enabled them to switch jobs freqbently. Job-hopping is an accepted pattern among the young employees--they are willing to leave their existing job for one, which offers only a fraction more in terms of salary and other benefits. Saleha, 14, explained the need for additional cash, however little:

> *A single taka makes a world of difference in a poor man's house. I know that a lot of people think we are greedy to be hopping from job to job just for a taka, but how can I make you understand what it means for us to earn whatever little extra we can? You see, every little bit counts.*

Although they are more or less free to leave their employment, economic considerations may compel them to stay on at a particular job until they find work that offers better pay.

### 3.3.1 Working Hours and Work Processes

According to Section 70 of the Factories Act 1965 no child or adolescent shall be required or allowed to work in any factory-

(a) for more than five hours in any day, and

(b) between the hours of 7 p.m. and 7 a.m.

Moreover, the period of work of all children employed in a factory shall be limited to two shifts, which shall not overlap or spread over more than seven and a half hours in any day.

All child respondents in my sample, however, worked a full day. 54.4 per cent of the total children stated that they worked twelve hours each day. None was found to work for the specific hours fixed by law for child workers. In fact, they work as long as any adult in the factory. In the sample the respondents said that although they are supposed to start from 9 a.m. in the morning and continue until 5 p.m. in the afternoon, the general trend is to work from 8 a.m. in the morning until 9 p.m. in the evening, with an average break of about one hour for their mid-day meal.

Although they would have liked to say that children only worked for the specified hours, 84.7 per cent of the total employers admitted that girls under 14 often worked overtime. However, from their point of view, they were referring to eight hours of work as 'specified' and not what is generally permissible for children under the law. Moreover, they refrained from elaborating on the actual length of overtime work.

The young girls are expected to work particularly hard when there is a deadline to meet in respect of orders from foreign buyers. In that case, they work from 8 a.m. in the morning until the early hours of the next day, often until 3 a.m. The situation gets worse when they are required to report for work at 9 a.m. on the same day. Working hours are not strictly adhered to and often exceed the usual length. Rests during working hours are not common. However, some children I found had the time during working hours to frolic around the bales of cloth, lost in play in their respective factories, but I knew that they were the exception and not the rule.

Children face many problems when they have to work late.

While some of them are aware of the risks on the streets at night, others are more affected by the physical exhaustion resulting from a long and hard day's work. The following table demonstrates their responses.

**TABLE: 7 Breakdown of Children's Problems of Working Long Hours**

| Problems | Frequency | Percent |
|---|---|---|
| Street Risks | 231 | 45.6 |
| Lack of Rest | 264 | 52.0 |
| Others | 12 | 2.4 |
| Total | 507 | 100.0 |

While 45.6 per cent of the total children mentioned risks on the streets, 52.1 per cent stated that the main problem of working late was the lack of rest. Since they have to leave home for work quite early in the morning, late nights were not easy to cope with. Whenever, they work late, they feel run down the next day.

With regard to work processes, children are always appointed as sewing helpers and are engaged at trimming thread and help cut up excess cloth from the finished goods. Their absence often holds up work processes because the work being conducted in 'lines', suffers serious disruptions in the event of even a single gap therein. Although this is true mainly of machine operators, sewing helpers constitute a large enough work force to contribute significantly to production activities. They assist machine operators who, in most cases, are adults. The reason why I say 'in most cases' is that I also found over 21 underage females operating machines. Despite their age, these young girls have acquired sufficient skill in handling machines.

The monotony experienced by child helpers is relentless. As

Chameli, 12, informs:

> *I get tired of doing the same thing every day. My feet ache from having to stand most of the day. The lines would be held up if I did not work properly. The work is so dreary that sometimes I just want to give it up.*

In every case, the child labourers were found to be continuously and actively involved in their work which indicates that theirs is no small contribution. Instead, their work is central to various parts of the production activities and is integral to its completion and reproduction. Apart from their normal tasks, children are also required to pass tools and run errands for others.

I found that allegations that children in the garment industry are required to carry out heavy and/or overtly dangerous work are largely without foundation. Instead, their problem is one of sheer monotony which does not appear to involve any immediate danger. However, there may be isolated cases where young sewing helpers are also required to undertake heavy work--cases that I did not come across.

### 3.3.2 Terms of Payment

Despite their workload, children were found to receive very low wages. The child respondents in the sample claimed that they are paid a fixed sum irrespective of the type or length of work. According to White and Tjandraningsih, although there is a tendency for children to be concentrated in the lowest-paying jobs, (one of the reasons for the low wages is the concentration of children in those tasks), it is difficult to find a special 'children's wage rate'.[9] They contend that wage rates are the same for children and adults. However, there are mechanisms whereby children may be paid less than adults. For one thing, children fear the power and position of authority of the employer and other adults within the factory. Moreover, the

9 White, Benjamin and Tjandraningsih, Indrasari, 'Rural Children in the Industrialisation Process: Child and Youth Labour in "Traditional and Modern" Industries in West Java, Indonesia', 1992, The Hague et al., 1992, at p.31.

possibility of being fired in favour of a more skilled adult hovers over their heads. Consequently, children are more eager to do more work for less reward.

Although the employers in my sample stated that children received substantial wages for their work, I found that their wages varied between Taka 300-400 every month. This was typical of all the factories that I visited. However, 55 per cent of the total employers admitted that wages paid to machine helpers are not in accordance with the minimum wages laid down by the Minimum Wages Board of 1984 formed in accordance with the provisions of Section 3 of the Minimum Wages Ordinance 1961. The Board fixed Taka 627 as the minimum wages of an unskilled worker in the garment industry. The girl child labourer receives only Taka 300-400 in the capacity of an unskilled labourer.

The trend of paying children low wages flows from a number of factors:

*Firstly,* the positions of sewing and finishing helpers are disproportionately filled by underage workers, whose attachment to their jobs in a particular factory is unpredictable and relatively unstable. The somewhat 'footloose' nature of the child workers affects the management in their decision in awarding good salaries to young workers.

*Secondly,* most of the young workers are found to be illiterate and unskilled. Prior to their factory jobs the majority were occupied in household chores. In fact, they often learn their skills on the floors of the factories they work in 'at the expense of the management'.

*Thirdly,* and most importantly, they suffer from a dual stigma--that of being children and of being female. As it is, females are considered to be workers of secondary grade and therefore, not worthy of an enhanced pay. Being female children makes the

situation worse because their labour is considered only to supplement the main functions in a given factory. Moreover, the illegal nature of their employment enables the employers to induce a feeling of gratitude in those children, almost as though they were doing them an enormous favour by permitting them to work in their factories.

There is a general irregularity in the payment of children's wages each month. The children's age and their helplessness in the power hierarchy within the factory compel them to refrain from demanding their wages outright. Consequently they wait in anticipation of their pay both individually and as a group. Abeda, 11, reports:

> *There is no guarantee that we will receive our wages each month, let alone in the first week. There have been so many times when our wages have remained unpaid for a couple of months together Even when they were paid, they were below what we are entitled to.*

Consequently, a general uncertainty prevails at the beginning of each month as the child workers anxiously await their salaries. Section 5(1)(a) of the Payment of Wages Act 1936 states that

> *the wages of every person employed upon or in any factory or industrial establishment upon or in which less than one thousand persons are employed, shall be paid before the expiry of the seventh day.*

Under this section, however, establishments having one thousand or more persons may pay the wages within ten days. Although the majority of the factories I visited employed less than one thousand persons, the payment of wages was found to be erratic.

Non-payment of wages on time made life difficult for impoverished families. As Rashida, 11, commented:

*There being no excess food at home, it is imperative that we receive our wages on time...but each month we have to borrow money in the face of such gross uncertainty, a practice we can hardly afford. Each month our burden of loans increases---why do they [the factory owners] treat us like this?*

Therefore, although salaries are supposed to be paid to them on a monthly basis, 74 per cent of the total children said that they did not receive their wages regularly. While only 9.1 per cent out of 507 children said that they received their salary in the first week of each month, 65.9 per cent of the respondents in the sample claimed that there is no certainty about payment dates. The following frequency table shows there is neither a fixed pattern nor any regularity with regard to payment of the wages.

**TABLE: 8 Breakdown of the Basis of Wage Payment**

| Pay Day | Frequency | Percent |
|---|---|---|
| Ist Week of Month | 46 | 9.1 |
| 2nd Week of Month | 127 | 25.0 |
| Uncertain | 334 | 65.9 |
| Total | 507 | 100.0 |

Most of the respondents stated that they are not content with their wages. They believed that considering their workload, they ought.to be paid more. Sometimes they are required to help out at three or four machines at a time. Selima, 13, stated:

*We are not properly paid. They think that because we are young they can cheat us. Do you know how many other people we run errands for besides our own work?*

> *Add them up and you will see that we work more than two adults put together! It is because of poor pay that we change jobs so often. Whoever offers even one taka more, we don't hesitate to quit our present jobs. A taka makes a world of a difference for poor people like us.*

Given the option, the children would prefer to work on a piece-rate basis, in which case their hard labour would fetch better pay.

Salaries are paid directly to the young workers on a monthly basis and not to their parents/guardians. Upon receipt of the pay each child has to sign in, or leave a thumb impression on the salary record books. Increments for child workers are unheard of in the factories.

### 3.3.2.1 Non-Payment for Overtime Work

It was found that major irregularities prevailed with regard to payment for working overtime. 48.4 per cent out of 507 child respondents said that generally they work for an average of four hours after regular working hours. The pressure of work became particularly intense during peak seasons when there are deadlines to be met. 55.4 per cent of the total child workers stated that their wages do not include overtime payment, but that they are led to believe that they will get a reasonable sum if they work overtime. According to Section 58(1 ) of the Factories Act 1965, work in excess of nine hours in any day should be rewarded with overtime payment at the rate of twice the ordinary rate of wages. Since this provision is applicable to adult workers, employers find it easy to deceive child workers of their dues. However, for every hour worked after 5 p.m. the amount received as overtime payment varies from factory to factory. While some children said that they are promised half of their basic salary as overtime payment, others stated that they are only given a few takas per hour of extra work.

Although these workers are supposed to receive the overtime

payment of the preceding month with the regular pay of the current month, it does not take place in the majority of cases. Sometimes overtime payments are withheld to prevent the children from leaving the factories for another job.

Interestingly, 99.8 per cent of the total child respondents admitted that working overtime is a norm rather than an exception. In other words, it is compulsory for them to work overtime. This negates the notion that working overtime is a matter of choice. Dilara, 13, responded with some surprise:

> *I never knew we had a choice with regard to overtime work. The factory authority makes it sound as though it is part of the work schedule. Moreover, since we are illiterate we cannot calculate how much we are being paid for our overtime work. We go home satisfied with whatever they decide to give us.*

However, it was found, contrary to what is ordinarily believed, that children are more willing to work overtime than most adults. A Research Fellow at the Bangladesh Institute of Development Studies (BIDS) recalled an incident during one of our discussions, which backs up this inclination on the part of children. She narrated her experience with children in a glove manufacturing industry, which did not make their employees work overtime. She informed me that children were reluctant to work in that factory simply because there was no scope for earning a little extra and getting a bit of extra food.

It is quite evident, however, that none of the child respondents were clear about their situation as far as overtime wages are concerned and that they are largely ignorant about how their wages are calculated. In all probability they are, in the majority of cases, being cheated out of their well-deserved earnings.

The low wages paid to the children indicate how grossly their contribution as producers is underestimated. That children are integral to the work processes is denied by depriving them of

the minimum wages they are entitled to. Although low wages to children point to several aspects of the problem of child labour, it focuses upon children's vulnerability to exploitation.

### 3.4 The Factories

Most of the factories that I studied were found to be inappropriate in their planning and design to serve as an industrial unit. The majority of these factories function in rented premises built primarily for residential purposes. While some of them are housed in buildings that are incomplete, just bare structures of brick and mortar, others are hemmed in on all sides by existing blocks of shops on busy streets. Consequently, they are ill equipped to meet the demands of a large workforce. The factory buildings are overcrowded with low roofs affording inadequate ventilation in the hot and humid climate. The buildings have narrow staircases, often numbering only one, with no provision for backstairs to facilitate the safety of the workers in the event of a fire. Interestingly though, 56.15 per cent of the total number employers stated that the conditions prevailing in their factories are in accordance with the provisions contained in Chapter III of the Factories Act 1965.

#### 3.4.1 Lack of Rest and Lunchroom Facilities

Although Sections 45 and 46 of the Factories Act 1965 provided for proper canteens and restrooms respectively, none of the factories I visited had either arrangement. Most of the workers ate their lunch wherever they liked--either in the factory corridors, verandas or rooftops. One of the most dangerous aspects of this is evident in factories that are devoid of railings on their rooftops or banisters on the stairs. Accidents in those cases are inevitable. Some of the respondents who live in the vicinity of the factories go home for their midday meal--this is considered to be a great advantage. Others take their own food to work. Factories do not provide refreshments except during overtime shifts. In fact, many children were found to

prefer overtime work in order to procure that extra bit of food. It seems therefore, that the poor, by being pragmatic, find comfort in many forms. Although they are cheated of their overtime payments, they are happy about whatever little food they receive when they do work overtime.

### 3.4.2 Sanitation

Although the employers reported that the toilet facilities in the factories were adequate, discussions with the girl child labourers revealed that toilets lacked proper maintenance and cleanliness as envisaged in Section 20 of the Factories Act 1965. With regard to lack of maintenance the employers are inclined to blame the workforce for their apparent lack of knowledge of the proper use of toilets. However, there are separate provisions for male and female workers. It is to be noted that children do not constitute a separate category and are, therefore, expected to use the toilets meant for female workers. The girl children informed that the number of latrines were not enough for the entire workforce.

### 3.4.3 Holidays

The children complained of being overworked without being awarded regular holidays. Apart from festival days like Eid, (Muslim religious festival), they are expected to report to work seven days a week without fail. They are not spared from work on Fridays, which is the weekly public holiday in Bangladesh. Therefore, although Section 51 of the Factories Act 1965 provides that workers shall not be required to work on a Sunday or a Friday as the case may be, work on Fridays is commonplace. When I asked Benu, 12, about working on Fridays, she replied:

> *Holidays? There is no holiday for us. Every day is a working day. If I choose to take a holiday, I would suffer a cut in my salary.*

The employers had a different story to tell. 77.4 per cent of the total number of employers responded that the children/workers received regular/weekly holidays. I was, however, inclined to believe the children as I have visited them on many occasions in the factories on Fridays. Provisions in Section 79 (1) of the Factories Act 1965 on allowing every worker at least ten days festival holidays (on special social/religious occasions) with wages are regularly violated.

### 3.4.4 Rest and Recreation

The children said that their daily work left little room for recreation. Part time schooling is also out of the question because the dictates of the family demand that they help out with the chores at home after work. Gender plays a very active role here. Responses to questioning revealed that the respondents' brothers are not expected to pitch in and help. Sometimes these girl workers are so tired that they skip dinner and go to bed directly on reaching home. Beauty, 12, smiled tolerantly and explained:

> *School? Games? I have no time for those. When I return home my family expects me to do my share of the household chores. I have family obligations which do not disappear simply because I work in the factory.*

Having experienced the ideologies of the poor during my research, I asked myself whether the children would be able to really play, as is so earnestly advocated for children of their age, had they not been engaged in factory work. The factors that I perceived negative the possibility--little girls grow up long before their time anyway, with little scope for play. Welfare of the family, often to the exclusion of self-interest, is of paramount importance in their lives. The traditional practice of self-sacrifice by girl children within the social and familial boundaries renders them devoid of a childhood in its Western sense. Under the circumstances, I do not think factory work

makes much difference in this regard.

### 3.5 Problems at Work: Material and Physical Discomforts

One of the common difficulties focussed upon the children is the interminable length of working hours. They said that since their work is repetitive the ensuing monotony is tiring. Devoid of proper training, the children find it difficult to master the art of cutting thread and materials evenly. If the work is not neat, they are fined. The fine is usually deducted from their salaries. In addition, they are often scolded and beaten. The latter practice depends greatly on the temperament of the supervisors concerned.

When the respondents are absent from work due to illness they generally suffer a cut in their salaries at the rate of about Taka 10, (which in most cases is equivalent to a day's wages), for each day of absence. Although 79 per cent of the total number of employers said that children received medical attention in the event of any accident at work, 93.7 per cent of the total number of child respondents answered negatively. When sick, the children have to pay for their own treatment and medication, even when they are hurt during working hours. Unless the injury sustained is gross, the management does not bother with them. As for compensation in the event of injuries during work, 96.3 per cent out of 507 children replied in the negative. Of the 3.7 per cent who replied in the affirmative, 73.7 per cent admitted that the amount awarded is very little. Some of them, however, said that they are given painkillers by supervisors to help ease headaches or other minor ailments during work. Concern, it would seem, is more for the loss likely to be incurred as a result of the illness of the workers rather than for the children's welfare. Others maintained that the management have no room for compassion for sick workers whose employment is often terminated if their illness persists. 'How can the rich understand the poor man's sorrow?' was the

standard reaction. Since children are legally excluded from factory work and are therefore, invisible, employers do not bear any direct responsibility in the event of their illness.

The children complained about the regimented hours that regulated their visits to the toilet. 80.5 per cent of the total number of respondent is said that they are not allowed to go for a drink of water whenever they wish and 68.4 per cent stated that they are not free to use the toilet whenever they want. On average they are permitted to go for a drink of water or to the toilet once every five hours, irrespective of the degree of the need. Some of them claimed that restrictions on the frequency of the use of toilets compel them to drink less water as a result of which a number of them have developed urinary problems. Consequently, they suffer from acute pains at times. As Khodeja, 13, explained:

> *How can we control our physical problems? One day I was suffering from dysentery. I was in acute pain. However, I reported to work for fear of being fined for absence. I was not allowed to visit the toilet even though I explained my predicament. It was only when I nearly collapsed did they allow me to use the toilet and lie down on a bench in the corridor.*

Although Section 22(3) of the Factories Act 1965 prohibits the locking or fastening of doors affording exit, the work-rooms are locked from the outside and the doorman keeps a strict vigil over the movements of the workers. Labourers, children and otherwise, can never 'sneak-out' without attracting attention. I discovered, however, that one of the principal reasons for keeping the gates locked is to prevent the smuggling out of clothing made of high-quality imported textile material. As one exasperated employer reported:

> *These children are utter thieves! I would not put anything past them. Only the other day we caught one of*

*them as she tried to sneak past the guard with some of the expensive cloth stuffed underneath her dress.*

When asked about any physical discomforts resulting from long hours of work, the children replied that their eyes burn after a hard day's work under the glare of fluorescent lights. Very often their eyes itch and water for days on the end. Most of them complained about the fluff that floats everywhere. They never seem to be able to get rid of it. It sticks to their clothes and hair and the exposed parts of their bodies. Jasmine, 14, informed dramatically:

*I am sure that we are going to get cancer if we continue to work in such unhealthy conditions. But then, when I think of the alternatives, I feel this place is better than anywhere else...in spite of the fluff and long hours of work.*

The respondents complained of experiencing dull aches all over their bodies at the end of each working day. This is not surprising as the children are mostly occupied in activities that do not permit them to work from a seated position. 73.4 per cent of the total number of child respondents claimed that they are required to discharge their duties from a standing position. Given the long stretch of working hours the practice can indeed be painful.

**Employers' Response**

From the employers' point of view, employing children can be troublesome. While 43.5 per cent out of 62 employers complained about children's unannounced absences from work, 40.3 per cent of them mentioned the destruction they wrought on the factory floors, particularly with regard to the machinery and equipment. The employers cited various ways when asked about the kind of disciplinary measures taken against child labourers in such circumstances. They admitted that they are not always aware of the way the children are treated by the

managers or the supervisors. To their knowledge, however, no extraordinary or extreme measures are employed. They added:

> *How much can you punish a child? They forget the punishment almost immediately and get up to mischief again in no time. Pulling their ears is a standard procedure for slight offences.*

Salary cuts are, however, usual in case of more serious offences. Table 9 reveals the usual methods used by factory authorities in disciplining their child workforce. It demonstrates the various penalties that are usually imposed while dealing with various problems created by child workers.

**TABLE: 9 Breakdown of Disciplinary Actions**

| Penalties | Frequency | Percent |
|---|---|---|
| Salary Cut | 29 | 51.8 |
| Job Termination | 7 | 12.5 |
| Other (e.g. physical punishment) | 20 | 35.7 |
| Total | 56 | 100.0 |

Missing Cases 6

[**Note:** Missing cases are those who refrained from answering].

It is clear from the above table that 51.8 per cent out of 56 employers said that the usual method for disciplining child workers is to cut an amount from their salaries. While 35.7 per cent spoke of other measures, like light slapping, only 12.5 per cent of the employers said that they fired the children from their jobs. It is evident therefore, that child workers usually suffer monetary loss for whatever wrong they commit on the factory floor.

### 3.5.1 Personal Security of Factory Child Workers

As shown already, most of the children stated that they feel quite safe and secure working in the garment industry. They maintained that people outside have no idea how things operate within the factories. Consequently, outsiders harbour misconceived notions about factory life. Jamila, 11, said:

> *I tell everyone how nice it is to work in the factory where there is no time to be involved in bad activities (at this stage she looks at me knowingly). It is, however, difficult to convince people about it. I found it hard to convince my own father who, at the beginning, was not keen on my joining the garment industry, as he, too, had heard about 'incidents' in the factories. Now, after seeing how well I am adjusted, he does not worry any more.*

When asked whether they faced any sexual overtures from their male colleagues or supervisors or managers in the workplace only .2 per cent answered in the affirmative. 51.1 per cent denied any problem of this kind and 48.7 per cent admitted to hearing about such occurrences in other factories. The presence of unrelated males alongside female counterparts on the factory floors is yet another break with socio-cultural norms, a development objected to by the more orthodox section of the local community.

The respondents pointed out that problems often arise when young male colleagues proposition a young girl in the factory. As the relationship develops, either they marry with everyone's blessings or the affair ends on a bitter note. In the latter case, accusations often include allusions to sexual harassment and exploitation. Kabeer in her observation regarding the effect of de-segregating the factory floor states that

> *..the breakdown of the 'natural' principle of sex segregation represented by factory work was denounced in the strongest terms. Not only was it seen as taking away work from unemployed men-the breadwinners of*

> *the families--but more fundamentally as a threat to the very fabric of the moral community.*[10]

When asked what remedy they have to this problem, 52.3 per cent of the total girls replied that the standard is to suffer in silence. My initial understanding was that children, particularly girls, would remain silent in such circumstances, as they would probably receive the raw end of the deal and be sacked if the management learned about it. Surprisingly, 52.3 per cent said that in such cases both male and female workers would be dismissed.

While the respondents regarded their workplace as quite secure, they appeared more concerned for the lack of security on the streets, particularly when they commuted to and from work. Men frequently make abusive catcalls and call out to them suggestively when they commute to work. It is as if by being bepurdah (purdahless) they are more 'available' and consequently, to be treated as 'fallen women'. The girls reported that they are bothered not only by the men on the streets, but also by local mastans (musclemen or hooligans) and the police. According to the children the police posed a greater threat as being 'protected by their uniforms' (a figure of speech, meaning their jobs) they could commit atrocities with impunity.

Most of the respondents were found to belong to areas near to the factories in which they worked. The children commute with fellow workers, some with their guardians and very few alone. Therefore, although females have come out of their seclusion to work, they are still faced with constraints on their mobility. Despite attempts at 'bargaining' against patriarchal domination women and female children are compelled to negotiate their roles within the parameters of what is socially construed as 'respectable'. Consequently, despite their participation in the 'public' territory women and female children continue to cling on to the practice of purdah, even if in a modified manner. This

[10] Kabeer, Naila, 1991, op.cit., at p.151.

is primarily due to their wish to herald their worthiness of protection and respect. Although changing, ideologies therefore continue to exert a powerful force in the lives of those very young women who are actively seeking to escape them. However, among the child respondents who have made the break with socio-cultural norms, considerations of financial gain and personal autonomy have become predominant.

**Absence of Kin in the Respondents' Factories**

The notion regarding the presence of kin in the factories is one of the principal grounds justifying the presence of children by employers. My findings, however, reveal a different pattern. Contrary to popular belief, I found that a large proportion of child workers, constituting 61.7 per cent of the entire group, do not have any relative working in the factories where they work. This goes against the prevalent notion that most child labourers in the garment industry accompany family members who are already working there. The following frequency table demonstrates the proportion of relatives working in the same factory to that of the respondents.

**TABLE: 11 Breakdown of the Presence of Kin in Respondents' Factory**

| Kin Presence in Respondents' Factory | Frequency | Percent |
|---|---|---|
| Yes | 194 | 38. 3 |
| No | 313 | 61.7 |
| Total | 507 | 100.0 |

The presence of relatives in the same factory is deemed to serve as a potential safety measure against sexual harassment at work. However, as mentioned earlier, even where there are no

relatives, children are perceived to be well-looked after by their adult co-workers, both male and female.

It is clear from the accounts of the children that the threat to their reputations by the male-female proximity is diffused by the creation of fictive kinship within the factory. Thus, it is usual to find them referring to complete strangers as 'bhai' (older brother), 'chacha' (uncle), 'apa' (older sister) or 'khala' (aunt).

### 3.5.2 Relations with Employers, Management and Adult Co-Workers

As regards the employers, the children appeared to be reasonably well disposed towards them. They remarked that although they hardly see the employers, except when they accompany foreign buyers, they nevertheless treat them kindly whenever they see them. The children often displayed a curious sense of affection for their employers that belied the power relations. Rupban, 13, said emphatically:

Our Malik (owner) is like our father. He may punish us in any manner he wishes. After all, don't our parents punish and discipline us when we make mistakes? Whenever he sees us our Malik behaves very kindly. It is sad that we do not see him more often.

The real problem lay with supervisors and managers who keep constant vigil over the progress of their work. They carry out whatever disciplinary measures are deemed necessary thereby incurring the children's wrath. the following frequency table reveals the breakdown of the treatment of child workers by the management body.

**TABLE: 10 Breakdown of Treatment by the Management**

| Children How Treated | Frequency | Percent |
|---|---|---|
| Well | 88 | 17.3 |
| Badly | 191 | 37.7 |
| Moderately | 228 | 45.0 |
| Total | 507 | 100.0 |

The foregoing table reveals that while 17.3 per cent of the total children said that they are treated well and 45 per cent said that they are moderately treated by the management, 37.7 per cent alleged that they are treated badly by them. The respondents hastened to add that even the adult workers are not partial towards the supervisors and managers. However, the children revealed an understanding unusual in ones so young when they admitted that the managerial personnel are only doing their job and that there is nothing personal in there attitude towards them.

As for the relationship with adult co-workers, it is a relationship fused with ties of friendship and kinship. 74.1 per cent of the total respondents claimed that their adult co-workers treat them well and always look out for them. They are mostly sympathetic to their needs and are always ready to lend a helping hand. Even where the children are unaccompanied by relatives, they hardly seem to feel the absence as the vacuum is readily filled by well meaning 'pseudo-guardians'.

**4. Absence of Legal Awareness**

Most of the respondents in the sample were hardly aware of the existing legal measures with regard to child labour. They said that their employers did not acquaint them with any such provision. In this regard, given the unconcerned manner in which factory regulations are violated, I was quite willing to believe the children. Some of them stated rather doubtfully that

although they heard something about 'child rights', they are not very sure what is meant by it. 91.7 per cent of the total number of children replied in the negative when they were asked whether they are aware that law prohibits employment of children below 14 years in industries. Of the 8.3 per cent or 42 respondents who answered in the affirmative, 40.5 per cent claimed to have learned about it from friends/acquaintances/relatives who worked in the same or similar factories as the children.

Although the respondents are largely ignorant about domestic labour laws, a vast majority, 89.2 per cent of the total children were found to know about the Harkin Bill. Tables 12 and 13 reveal the evident disparity between the child workers' awareness of domestic labour laws and that of the Harkin Bill, i.e. a proposed foreign legislation.

**TABLE : 12 Breakdown of Children's Awareness of Domestic Laws Regarding Their Employment**

| Aware of Domestic Laws | Frequency | Percent |
|---|---|---|
| Yes | 42 | 8.3 |
| No | 465 | 91.7 |
| Total | 507 | 100.0 |

**TABLE: 13 Breakdown of Children's Awareness of the Harkin Bill**

| Aware of Harkin Bill | Frequency | Percent |
|---|---|---|
| Yes | 452 | 89.2 |
| No | 55 | 10.8 |
| Total | 507 | 100.0 |

From the above tables it is clear that the great majority of the child workers in the garment factories that I studied were devoid of any knowledge of domestic factory laws, even those which directly concerned them. 91.7 per cent of the total respondents denied any knowledge of local laws relating to their employment in the factories.

On the other hand, the Harkin Bill, a proposed foreign legislation that was yet to gain legal force, made considerable impact on these children. 89.2 per cent of the total respondents said that they are fully aware of its implications and that they feared it. The respondents claimed that they first heard about it in the factories when young children were being fired in keeping with the potential requirements of the foreign legal instrument. Moreover, young workers were herded into small rooms away from the factory floors in the event of visits from foreign buyers. Soon the entire system became alert to the issue and word spread like wildfire.

Responses from adults, on the other hand, revealed that, contrary to what I had learned during my pilot study, a large number of them know about the legal restrictions on child labour in industries. While 57.6 per cent of them stated that they have no legal awareness, 42.4 per cent replied in the affirmative. This demonstrates that a considerable number of adults are aware of laws related to child employment in factories. They admitted that poverty is the chief factor that encourages them to break the law and engage their children in wage employment. 66.7 per cent of the total number of the adult respondents had heard about the Harkin Bill, mostly from their children. While the majority still had their daughters working in the factories, 33.3 per cent of them said that their children lost their jobs as a result of the Harkin Bill.

The employers were surprisingly honest about the existence of children in their factories. 58.1 per cent out of 62 employers

admitted to having young girls under the age of 14 working there. 52.8 per cent of the total number of employers at the time employed children numbering between 1199. Of the 42.9 per cent who answered in the negative, 76.9 per cent said that the principal reason for their absence is the American embargo. Very few cited personal disapproval of child labour. As far as knowledge of local labour laws is concerned, the employers appeared sufficiently informed about it. Although some of them came up with fragmented responses (computed under 'No' in the table below), a good number professed to know both about the domestic laws and the relevant ILO provisions. The following breakdown reveals the proportion of the employers' awareness of existing domestic labour laws and ILO provisions.

**TABLE: 14 Breakdown of Employers' Knowledge of Laws**

| Aware of Laws | Frequency | Percent |
|---|---|---|
| Yes | 2 7 | 43.5 |
| No | 35 | 56.5 |
| Total | 62 | 100.0 |

The above table reveals that apart from the much-debated Harkin Bill, 43.5 per cent of the employers professed to know about the domestic laws as well as the ILO conventions applicable in Bangladesh regarding child labour. 53.2 per cent of the employers answered in the negative. This finding coincides with the children's allegations that they have not been duly informed of the laws by the factory authorities. However, it is doubtful whether such knowledge would make much difference in employment patterns.

## 4.1 Attitudes Towards Protective Legislation

The child respondents were quite articulate about their perceptions of the future. They appeared to be very worried about their job prospects in view of protective legislation like the Harkin Bill, particularly because the local garment authorities have geared up measures to eliminate child workers from the garment industry. They were quite vehement in their responses to the effects of the Harkin proposal and stated that laws ought to be designed to help them instead of cheating them of their livelihood. 99.8 per cent of the total number of children said that they do not believe that termination of their jobs would give them better access to health and education because, as they see it, without work they and their families would be as good as dead. Their families shared their views. Similarly 74.2 per cent of the 62 employers enterviewed stated that they do not believe that work in the garment industry is harmful for young children. In fact, 91.1 per cent of them said that if children have to work at all, work in the garment industry is best suited for them.

Moreover, while 87.1 per cent denied sharing the sentiments contained in the Harkin Bill, 98.4 per cent of the total number of entrepreneurs believed that if anything, such action would have a negative impact over the lives and development of these young girls. They said that protective legislation like the Harkin Bill is definitely not friendly to children. They alleged that it is all set to drive the children out of their jobs and onto the streets where, deprived of their independent lifestyle, they will resort to robbery, prostitution and other anti-social pastimes. The employers believed that it is the need for money that influences the choices of children in selecting an occupation that promises cash money over one, which merely promises food, clothing and shelter in, for example, domestic service. Protective legislation, they alleged, robbed children of their financial stability and their hard earned and much treasured sense of independence.

## 5. Conclusion

It was evident from the study that the role of the Bangladeshi female has undergone a redefinition, a process that has impinged in a similar fashion on the female child population of the country who have until recently been confined to agricultural and household activities.

One of the principal factors that encourages children's employment in export factories in Bangladesh is their individual desire for personal autonomy and independence. Although the desire to have money for their own use is not new among impoverished children, it appears to be more acutely experienced by the present generation. The export factories open up seemingly unlimited opportunities whereby children can exercise their personal autonomy, particularly in respect of consumer purchases. Many of them are attracted to this area of employment in order to gain economic independence.

Although the desire for independence, experience and economic solvency is paramount, girls are increasingly bowing to the influence of global and national consumer culture by allowing themselves to be drawn into wearing fashionable clothes, using cosmetics, patronising cinemas and so forth. The meaning of 'survival', i.e. a concept of 'relative poverty', thereafter takes on a new dimension where media and peer pressure make it important for children not just to have sufficient food and clothes, but to have certain kinds of clothes, ornaments and other possessions, to consume certain kinds of food and drinks, and to engage in certain kinds of activities which are the attributes of 'proper' people [11] This was evident from my experiences with the young factory workers. They dressed in accordance with, or at least tried to imitate, the latest trend in the city. Some of them even cut their hair in a way

11 White, Ben, 'Children, Work and "Child Labour": Changing Responses to the Employment of Children', Inaugural address delivered at the Institute of Social Studies,

which is unusual for girls of their social and economic standing. Others sported cheap wristwatches. This indicates how the factory girls are developing strategies that will bring them on a par with those who they consider to be 'proper' people. Therefore, while economic needs have compelled a break with traditional norms, it is also true that young girls choose to continue to work in the export sector on account of the sense of material independence gained through the experience.

The foregoing discussion demonstrates how young female children are making radical departures from their traditional way of life. However, despite their progress, gender ideology and subordination continue to affect the employment of young girls in garment factories. Apart from being very cheap, the female labour force on the whole can be mobilised to work throughout practically the entire year. This is particularly true of female children who do not even require, for example, maternity benefits or leave. In other words, they are available to work at all shifts for very little.

Suffering from the dual stigma of being minors and females, young girls often find themselves at odds with existing situations. While having to deal with repetitive, low skilled, underpaid work, they are also compelled to contend with the general disapproval of their 'boldness' and 'shamelessness' from various sections of the society. Their use of cheap makeup and gaudy ribbons and psychedelic coloured shalwar-kameez and sarees often invite scathing remarks as the girls, their heads uncovered, walk down the streets on their own. The children's responses in this regard, though varying between anger, despair, shame and a deep sense of guilt, nevertheless, revealed determination and grit as they vowed to overcome all odds in order to be able to continue to work.

Their accounts reveal how they broke with the conventional

The Hague. June 16, 1994, at p. 41.

authority by redefining their roles as earning members of the family. In the light of this empirical analysis, it may be said that girl children in the Bangladesh export factories are not exactly passive 'victims'. The horror stories linked with children's employment in export factories are, in my research, largely fictional. Children are not in need of 'rescue' from horrendous working conditions, but rather of empowerment in their workplaces. I believe that it is no more acceptable for adults to face similar situations of abuse and degradation simply because they are adults. All these points could be applied to workers of all ages, not just to children.[12] In fact, the children's own preferences are often undermined where noble ideas demand the abolition of child employment but are at odds with the views of the children themselves. In this regard I agree with White as he explains:

> *The kinds of work situations seen by intervention agencies as acceptable or relatively unproblematic are often, from the child's point of view, precisely the kinds of work which bring the most problems. Seen from the other side of the coin: the kinds of activity which intervention agencies have tended to define as the 'problem', for children often represent precisely the search for a solution to other important problems which they face.*[13]

By imposing absolute prohibition on employment of children in the garment industry or such other export factory, we can only succeed in depriving them of whatever little freedom they have achieved from the bonds of patriarchy and the right to work their way out of absolute poverty. Moreover, not all chiidren are able to reconcile the global dictates of 'right' and 'wrong' with their immediate need for food and money. To quote White again

12 Morice, A., 'The Exploitation of Children in the "Informal Sector: Proposals for Research in Rodgers, G. and Standing, G. (eds.), Child Work, Poverty and Underdevelopment, ILO, Geneva, pp.131-158, at p. 157.
13 White, Ben, 1 994, op. cit., at p. 7.

as he reminds us:

> *Some children may reject the global message and instead wish to work in support of their parents or even in support of social, political and environmental 'causes', which is also their right. Another much more practical argument is that it is highly doubtful that children's employment can be meaningfully 'humanized' while it continues to be criminalized.*[14]

Therefore, suppose that children in waged employment in factories were ensured of the best working conditions; worked for short hours; were granted sufficient facilities for rest, recreation, health and education; were paid well and on time; earned the right to be heard and gained respect and recognition as able workers. In such a situation it would be meaningless to abolish all kinds of children's work. Instead, it would be beneficial for all concerned if a framework of children's rights is created that balances both societal values and children's unique needs.

14 Ibid., at p. 49.