GARMENT FACTORY WORKERS IN THE CITY OF FEZ

M. Laetitia Cairoli

Since the 1980s, garment manufacturing has burgeoned in Morocco, and labor on the garment shop floor has become the domain of females. This article examines the history and development of the garment industry in Fez, Morocco, and the nature of women's experience as garment factory workers. In particular, the author explores the cultural assumptions that render the employment of young and unmarried females more acceptable than that of mature, married women.

Since the 1960s the Moroccan government has placed increasing emphasis on industrial development. Between 1975 and 1990 the country's industrial labor force jumped from 223,000 to over one million. The most significant growth has been in garment manufacturing, which in 1993 employed 95,000 Moroccans—25 percent of the manufacturing labor force—the majority of whom were women. The rapid growth of industry, and particularly of garment production, an export industry that relies heavily on women's labor, represents a major and sudden transformation in the Moroccan economy, with social and cultural repercussions.

M. Laetitia Cairoli is an Adjunct Professor in the Department of Anthropology at Montclair State University in Montclair, New Jersey. The research on which this article is based was conducted with grants from Fulbright, the Social Science Research Council, and the Wenner Gren Foundation for Anthropological Research.

1. Morocco, Ministry of Commerce, Industry, and Privatization, Situation des Industries de Transformation (Situation of the Industries in Transformation) (Rabat: Délégation du Commerce et de l’Industrie, 1994). It is likely that the actual number of workers in the garment industry is underestimated. It is widely understood in Morocco that many industrial operations are unregistered and "hidden." Many industrialists prefer to keep their operations unnoticed by the government to avoid financial and legal burdens, and thus workers go uncounted.
This article consists of two separate, yet integrally related, components. The first part of the article describes the history and development of the garment industry in Morocco, focusing on the city of Fez specifically. This description includes an investigation of the nature of women’s experience as factory workers in Fez. The article then focuses on a particular aspect of female employment in the factory: it analyzes how the age and marital status of the females hired in Fez garment factories help to make their labor there more acceptable to the community. The entrance of females, en masse, into the garment factories of Fez contrasts vividly with local ideals of appropriate female behavior. I argue that the convention of hiring young, unmarried girls rather than mature married women helps ameliorate the contradictions inherent in allowing females to labor in what is a public, and more traditionally male, role. I explore the specific cultural factors that influence and help determine which females—daughters or mothers, sisters or wives—will labor outside the home and on the shop floor.

The fieldwork for this study was conducted in the city of Fez from August 1994 to August 1995. The methodology involved intensive ethnographic research, including interviews of Fez garment factory owners, workers, and their families, two random surveys carried out in separate garment factories, and three months of participant observation inside one of those garment factories.

RECENT ECONOMIC TRANSFORMATIONS

In 1983, following negotiations with its creditors—the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank—Morocco launched a series of stabilization and structural adjustment programs, much like those imposed on other heavily indebted countries. This economic readjustment transformed the nature of Moroccan industry. During the 1980s, Morocco began to increase its exports of manufactured products, such as garments and canned fruit and vegetables, produced by low-capital, labor-intensive industry. This change in the nature of Moroccan industry represented a radical change in the kind of work many Moroccans did and how they lived. It also signaled a fundamental transformation in the make-up of the industrial labor force, since the emphasis on labor-intensive manufacturing for export resulted in the wide scale incorporation of females into Moroccan industry. A Moroccan hired to work in a factory was, less than two decades ago, almost invariably a male; today, the Moroccan factory hand is almost as likely to be a female. The growth of the Moroccan garment industry accounts, in part, for why this is so.

2. Researchers have noted that women’s role in the reproductive realm is integrally linked to their role in production. See Diane Elson and Ruth Pierson, “The Subordination of Women and the Internationalisation of Factory Production,” in Kate Young, ed., Of Marriage and the Market: Women’s Subordination in International Perspective (London: CSE Books, 1981), pp. 18–40.

Since the 1980s, the textile industry has become the chief source of industrial employment in Morocco. This industry includes three branches: cloth and thread production, garment manufacturing, and leather processing. Overall, textile production nearly tripled from 1983 to 1990, and textile exports increased by 358 percent during this period. This growth was due largely to the expansion in garment manufacturing, hitherto a minuscule sector of the textile industry. Today the garment sector is one of Morocco’s principal manufacturing and export industries. Garment factories represent 13 percent of all industrial establishments in Morocco, and the garments they produce represent 25 percent of the manufactured products Morocco exports.

**MOROCCAN TEXTILES IN THE EARLY STAGES**

The evolution of textile production is typical of the development of other Moroccan industries. Textile production in Morocco passed into an industrial stage during World War II, when French colonials and European immigrants established cloth and cotton thread factories in Casablanca, Mohammedia, and Kenitra. As with most of the country’s colonial industry, textile production was almost entirely financed by foreigners. At independence in 1956, the state took over many of the formerly French-owned textile mills, and encouraged the growth of cloth and thread production through protectionist government policy. The production of cloth and thread, rather than clothing, was the mainstay of the industry until the 1980s. During the 1960s and 1970s, the government’s protectionist policies aimed at reducing textile imports helped create a substantial domestic cotton spinning, weaving, and cloth production industry.

In the early 1970s the state created a large number of public textile mills and the country attained self-sufficiency in cloth and thread production. By this time there were some 30,000 employees in the textile industry, almost all of whom were men. The textiles they produced, however, lacked the quality to compete internationally, and the state began to invest heavily in the sector in an effort to increase its profitability. At this time the textile industry was typical of Moroccan industry in general. A capital-intensive, high-tech enterprise, it had a low capacity for generating employment.

This early textile industry, based in cloth and thread production, was sustained by the Moroccan government. Private entrepreneurs were largely unwilling, or unable, to incur the high costs and risks of creating and managing the high-tech factories. But in the early 1970s, as the Moroccan government increased its investments in cloth and thread production, private Moroccan citizens began to develop garment factories to meet local demand. Unlike the cloth and thread-spinning mills, garment factories are relatively easy to start up, being low-cost enterprises which require simple technology—specifically, sewing machines.

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5. Much of the discussion of the evolution of the Moroccan garment industry is informed by the research of Leymarie and Tripier, *Maroc: le prochain dragon?*
This fledgling garment industry expanded and oriented itself towards producing exports during the 1970s, due to transformations in Morocco’s relationship with the European Economic Community (EEC). In 1969, Morocco and the EEC negotiated the first of a series of agreements that provided duty-free access for manufactured goods from Morocco. Throughout the 1970s and until recently, Morocco benefited from high quotas placed on the amount of clothing exported from Morocco and imported into Europe. Moroccan products were given a protected status, while Asian and Latin American imports were penalized. The agreements with the EEC promoted sub-contracting arrangements between European buyers and Moroccan garment producers, a development which will be explored in more detail below.

Although garment manufacturing was spurred on by increased opportunities for export, the industry’s development was slow throughout the 1970s, due in part to conservative government policies. It was the economic readjustment policies of the early 1980s, imposed by Morocco’s creditors, that ultimately transformed Moroccan garment manufacturing into a burgeoning export industry. Readjustment policies favored the development of export industries by suppressing export taxes, removing import taxes for export industries, and devaluing the dirham (thus making Moroccan exports cheaper). These measures opened the Moroccan economy to foreign trade and investment, and the garment industry, with its already privileged access to European markets, boomed. Between 1981 and 1991, the value of garments produced more than quadrupled.

During the 1980s another factor aided the growth of garment manufacturing. Economic crisis in Europe prompted European manufacturers to relocate the production process off-shore. In search of cheap foreign suppliers, they sent their business to Morocco, where labor was inexpensive and transportation difficulties were minimal. Altogether, the trade agreements with the EEC, the restructuring of the Moroccan economy, and the relocation of European production contributed to the creation of a rapidly expanding clothing industry in Morocco in the 1980s.

THE NATURE OF THE MOROCCAN GARMENT INDUSTRY

The garment industry that was created by these phenomena was based almost entirely on international sub-contracting with European—largely French—firms. According to these arrangements, the European firms supplied Moroccan entrepreneurs with all the materials necessary for the production of garments. The Moroccan companies provided the labor required to assemble the garments, which they then exported to Europe. No Moroccan raw materials were used in the process. The sub-contracting arrangements were


necessary partly because Moroccan garment manufacturers were unable to rely on domestic cloth production to supply them with the materials needed. The local cloth and thread production industry was incapable of meeting the needs of garment manufacturers, partly because this industry suffered a decrease in government support as a result of the 1983 economic reforms. As the Moroccan garment industry prospered, Moroccan cloth and thread producers became less involved in supplying the materials used in garment production.9

Based on research in garment factories in Casablanca, Susan Joekes, who carried out research among Moroccan garment workers in 1980, argues that the garment industry’s transformation from production for the local market to production for export resulted in the hiring of a nearly all-female garment factory work force.10 Originally, Moroccan garment factory workers, like nearly all Moroccan factory hands, were predominantly male. Moroccan females were not expected to participate in public, income-earning enterprises, and the state made no effort to incorporate women into its industrialization efforts. Private Moroccan garment factories, before the 1980s, also employed men almost exclusively. The relatively few females who did work in the early Moroccan garment factories were employed only in the most unskilled and lowest-paid positions. They were not, for example, employed as sewing machine operators. It was the European subcontractors who promoted the wide scale employment of females in the 1970s, as they found that the lower wages accepted by women rendered their enterprises far more profitable.11 And thus the Moroccan garment industry was transformed during the late 1970s and early 1980s from a fledgling industry that hired men into a booming export-driven industry that hired women. This employment of female industrial workers is a characteristic of export-oriented industries across the globe.12

Still other aspects of the industry’s development have shaped the way labor is carried out on the shop floor. Because garment manufacturing is a low-tech industry, it is relatively easy for small scale entrepreneurs to set up factories. As one owner noted, “Anyone who can get a hold of ten sewing machines can start his own factory,” and indeed, this is how some individuals got established in the garment boom of the 1980s. The vast majority of Moroccan garment factories today are small, family-owned enterprises with 50 employees or less.

These small-scale, private enterprises are widely known to be highly unstable in production. The garment factories open and shut rapidly. Economists Serge Leymarie and Jean Tripier argue that because the Moroccan factories produce a limited range of clothing products for a limited (European) market, competition between individual establishments

is intense and each factory is relatively unstable. They note that throughout the 1980s, the industry became increasingly focused on France; by 1990, more than 80 percent of garment exports were destined for that country. The narrowness of the market reduces the power of negotiation for each Moroccan factory owner and makes competition among the small firms extreme. Since the production materials are completely supplied by the European client firm and the Moroccan factory owner’s role is simply to supply the labor, the Moroccan entrepreneur has little opportunity to distinguish himself from the multitude of competitors, all of whom are equally able to secure cheap labor. Foreign subcontractors jump from manufacturer to manufacturer, seeking out the best deal.

Thus for the workers, employment is insecure and ever-changing. Workers frequently find themselves hired, only to lose their jobs several months later when the factory suddenly stops producing, for reasons they do not fully understand. The workers experience unexplained and sudden lay-offs, often followed by a subsequent re-hiring as the factory owners make, break, and re-establish contracts with their European clients. While an individual worker may be in the labor force for many years, she is rarely at a single factory for long. She never expects to be in her position permanently. From the workers’ perspective, garment factory work is a kind of temporary yet long-term affair.

These small, private businesses stand in stark contrast to the large, state-owned textile factories that have characterized Moroccan industry in the past. Unlike the large public-sector establishments, the small and private garment shops are easily able to elude labor legislation. The females employed in these factories have had little success in securing their labor rights on issues regarding minimum wage pay, hours worked, or benefits secured.

THE GARMENT INDUSTRY IN FEZ

At the heart of Morocco’s best agricultural land and home to the country’s most influential artisanal community, Fez was, until the colonial era, Morocco’s cultural center. Set in a valley north of the great Atlas Mountains, Fez was, for long periods throughout Morocco’s history, a national capital and home to the sultans. Following the establishment of the French Protectorate in 1912, the French moved the political capital of Morocco to Rabat and focused their economic interests on the cities of the Atlantic coast. Today, Moroccans envision Rabat and Casablanca as modern economic and political centers. But they continue to revere Fez as a symbol of Islamic culture and speak of the city as their nation’s spiritual center.

Despite the popular symbolism associated with the city, Fez is in fact the country’s second most important industrial hub (after the Casablanca-Mohammedia industrial complex) and a leading garment-producing center. At the time of independence, the Moroccan government advocated the deconcentration of industrial development on the

14. Ibid., pp. 98–99. It is important to note, for comparative purposes, that Morocco nonetheless does not rank as a primary supplier for France.
coast and the growth of industry in Fez. In the 1970s, the government made inexpensive land available for Fez’s industrial development, creating the city’s first industrial quarter, Sidi Brahim. Two other major industrial quarters were subsequently built, including that of Ben Souda and Doukkarat. Over the past three decades the city has transformed itself from an artisanal and agricultural community into one surrounded by modern industry. In 1960 some 1,794 city residents were employed in industry; by 1986 this number had risen to 17,548¹⁵; by 1993, Fez had a total of 25,412 people working in 397 factories.¹⁶

Until the 1980s, the vast majority of these factory workers were males, many of whom were employed in Fez’s state-supported textile factories. Fez emerged as an industrial textile city in the early 1970s, when the Moroccan government installed four large, state-funded textile factories producing cotton thread and cloth largely for the local market. Several of these state-run textile firms continue to operate today. Indeed, a significant number of Morocco’s largest textile firms remain centered in Fez, and some still enjoy government support. Those still producing today persist as male industries; as one government official active in Fez’s Chamber of Commerce explained, “the Fez [cloth and thread production] industry is simply an industry that does not know how to feminize.” Thus it was not until the burgeoning of the garment industry in Fez that females began participating, en masse, in Fez’s industry.

Garment manufacturing entered Fez’s industrial scene in the late 1970s, and the Fez garment factories boomed during the 1980s. In contrast to the textile factories, which were originally state enterprises, Fez’s garment factories have always been privately owned. The majority of Fez’s garment factories are owned by members of a class of Moroccan elite known as the Fassi. The term “Fassi” is used throughout the country to describe a group of influential families originally from the city of Fez, who control much of Morocco’s wealth and political power. As with most garment factories throughout Morocco, those in Fez are generally family-owned enterprises modest in size, export-oriented and dependent on foreign contracts for their survival.¹⁷

Today Fez is a textile town. The textile industry, including garment manufacture, cloth and thread production, and leather processing, is the single largest enterprise in the city. It is dominated by the garment manufacturing branch. Fez’s sewing factories employ more than a third of all factory workers, and nearly all of these garment workers are females. Food processing, the second largest industrial activity in Fez, also relies on females who sort olives, peppers, tomatoes, and capers on assembly lines. If Fez’s female garment factory workers are counted together with the women and girls working in the city’s food processing plants, it becomes evident that 49 percent of Fez’s factory workers are female.¹⁸ Morocco’s economic development during the 1980s has produced in Fez

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and girls flood the labor-intensive, export-oriented manufacturing enterprises such as the garment factories. This situation contrasts vividly with that which existed less than two decades ago, when the town’s central industries—the cloth spinning and weaving factories—were the province of men.

The overwhelming presence of females in the city’s factories also belies the ideological position of most Fez residents, who hold to the belief that the public domain—the world of business and the street—is not the province of females. The labor of females in the garment factories thus poses a contradiction between belief and practice, a contradiction which is assuaged partly by the convention of hiring primarily young, unmarried females in the garment factories.

THE CONDITIONS OF GARMENT FACTORY WORK

The conditions of work within factories in Fez generally differ according to whether they are foreign or locally owned. There is a minority of foreign-owned firms, and several well-established Moroccan ones that are known for following Moroccan labor laws relatively well, and for providing adequate wages, benefits, and working conditions. The vast majority of the Fez garment factories, however, completely disregard Moroccan labor legislation, which is modeled on French law and would be progressive if it were enforced. The labor law most commonly disregarded is that requiring that each worker be provided with an employee identity card, which legally establishes the worker’s status as an employee in an enterprise that is registered with the government. These identity cards are coveted among Fez factory workers, for they assure workers that they will receive the benefits and protections Moroccan labor laws guarantee. Very few of the garment workers in Fez are provided identity cards, partly because the majority of the city’s garment factories operate “outside the law.” That is, they do not register workers officially and thus avoid the necessity of providing workers with the rights, wages and benefits outlined by law.

By law, workers should receive 7.24 dirhams (US $0.72 in 1995 exchange rates) per hour, which amounts to a salary of 1,200 dirhams (US $120) per month before overtime. In actuality, most workers report receiving between 300 to 800 dirhams (US $30 - $80) per month. By law, workers ought to labor no more than nine hours per day with a maximum 48-hour work week; overtime ought to be paid at an increased rate. In reality, factory hours are highly erratic, and unpaid overtime is a standard feature of employment for nearly every garment worker in Fez. Some factories are notorious for requiring workers to work through the night when deadlines must be met, and many workers speak of “sleeping at the factory.” In the majority of factories no benefits are provided, contrary to Moroccan labor law, which stipulates that workers receive sick leave and paid vacation. Workers have no job protection, and frequently lose their jobs with no warning when

19. Primary school teachers and lower-level government bureaucrats earned approximately this sum at the time of my research. Several factory owners reported that this was the wage their workers received, but the workers I encountered did not claim to earn this sum.
factories shut down, as they frequently do. Workers are commonly fired after several years of service in any one factory by owners who fear that these workers might demand the seniority benefits that Moroccan labor law guarantees. Workers speak of getting fired “for getting old,” as if it were normal in the course of factory work.

Conditions inside the factory are difficult. The work day is long and workers are rigorously controlled throughout the day. In many factories, workers are not permitted to move from their places, or even to speak, during work hours. (Such regulations are heeded to varying degrees, depending on the rigidity of factory administrators.) Workers are frequently kept at the job long after quitting time, and are not permitted to leave their posts until the day’s quotas have been met. Workers recognize the difficulties of habituation to the seemingly unending routine inside the factory. When asked how they like the work they consistently respond that “it is difficult to get used to.” In my own own first days as a worker inside one Fez factory, workers urged me to “be patient” and encouraged me, saying that in time my legs would no longer hurt from standing all day and that eventually I “would not feel the cold so much.” I would, they assured me, “slowly become accustomed to the system.”

Many long-time garment workers in Fez factories believed that labor conditions within the factories had undergone a serious decline due to the workers’ strike of 14 December 1990. This strike erupted into rioting, looting and civil unrest which lasted several days. It is widely believed that large-scale factory closings resulted from the strike; locals assert that, since the strike, one third of all garment factories in Fez have been shut down.

It is difficult to assess the extent of factory closings resulting from the strike and the effect the strike actually had on the quality of work conditions in the garment factories of Fez. Nonetheless, women who had been long-time employees in the garment work force consistently described working conditions before the strike, and during the 1980s, as far superior to those of the present. Workers themselves believed the decline in conditions to be due to the reduction in the availability of garment factory jobs. With fewer positions available to an ever-growing number of poor and unemployed young females, owners are better able to deny workers their legal rights to equitable wages and fair working conditions. Workers consistently reported a significant participation in organized labor unions and labor activism before the strike, which was no longer apparent among garment factory workers in Fez in 1995. Workers attributed the decline in labor activism to the widespread fear that factory owners would carry out their threats to shut down factories and depart Fez, leaving even more of them jobless.

Work in the garment factories is tedious and physically exhausting; yet workers complain most bitterly of the fact that garment factory work is shameful. They speak of being disrespected by high level factory staff, and of being treated like “cows,” “prostitutes,” or “maids,” inside the factory. They complain that in the public eye they are not respected for their labor, as are educated female bureaucrats who work in schools and

20. I was unable to secure a definitive list of factories in operation before December 1990. Several lists of factories operating in Fez at the time of my research were made available to me through government offices, but these proved to be inaccurate. Factory owners, workers and Fez locals alike, however, reported a massive movement of factories out of Fez after the 1990 strike.
offices. As one worker, a 27-year-old single woman who had been employed as a garment worker for over ten years, noted, "...People see you in the street and say that you are just a factory girl, that you have no value."

In fact, garment factory workers are generally looked down upon for their participation in factory labor. Factory labor is in itself poorly regarded because it is manual labor, neither autonomous nor artisanal, and participation in factory work connotes a low class status. But for females, it suggests as well a lack of family honor and the real or potential loss of personal virtue. Girls who engage in factory labor are assumed to be related to males who are unable to support and protect them appropriately. The glaring presence of factory girls on the streets of Fez is often cited by locals as proof of the inadequacy of families to control and monitor their daughters adequately. Nonetheless, as is argued below, this lack of control over girls who are daughters is far less threatening to the community than the potential lack of control over women who are wives.

**GIRL BUT NOT WOMAN: UNMARRIED FEMALES AS GARMENT FACTORY WORKERS**

Moroccan garment workers are almost invariably unmarried young girls who live at home with their parents and unmarried siblings; it is relatively rare for married women to perform garment factory work, particularly if they have children. Moroccans widely recognize this fact and refer to garment factory workers as *binat* (girls), making the linguistic and social distinction between a female who has not yet married and one who has (and who is thus forever referred to as a *mra* [woman]).

The research I conducted revealed that garment workers are generally daughters in lower class households which, in comparison with others of their class, are relatively poor and which suffer high rates of male unemployment. According to my surveys, 76 percent of workers surveyed were never-married females, 16 percent were married and 8 percent were divorced. Nearly all of the workers surveyed (92 percent) were between the ages of 13 and 25. Never-married and divorced workers (84 percent of the total) almost invariably lived as daughters in their natal households (divorced young women return to their natal homes when possible). The 16 percent of workers who were married were either newly married and as yet childless, or were destitute women, with young children, whose husbands were unable to work.

The strategy in factory households is to send all eligible family members to work, and to combine the meager incomes earned to ensure household survival. Twenty-one percent of workers reported contributing some or all of their salary to the family, although the average factory salary fell severely short of meeting the needs of any single family. Nonetheless, these salaries were considered significant in lower class households where men found difficulty securing steady work.

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21. My surveys revealed that in factory households, one of every two persons is working. A Moroccan government study found that one person supports three in Fez households: Centre d'Etudes et de Recherches Démographiques, Direction de la Statistique, *Famille à Fès: Changements ou Continuité?* (Family in Fez: Changes or Continuity) (Rabat: Les Editions Guessous, 1991), p. 172.
Daughter But Not Wife

In Morocco, the phenomenon of females working en masse in industry is just two decades old. Women’s work on the shop floor contradicts revered ideologies, widely held to be Islamic, that set the model for gendered behavior. In some social contexts these ideologies are changing; nonetheless, they retain significance for many, particularly for those in the traditional lower class, the class from which garment workers are drawn. According to Moroccan gender ideals, a woman’s proper role is that of wife and mother, a position that is essentially non-economic and correctly played out in the privacy of the domestic sphere. Men traditionally take the position of bread-winner and operate in the economic realm outside the home. A family’s honor is embedded in its ability to keep women inside and protected, thus maintaining the divide between male and female that is at once a separation between private and public, kin and non-kin, home and business.22

These notions of gendered behavior reinforce, and are reinforced by, the structure of the patriarchal family. In factory households the ideology and practices associated with the classic patriarchal family retain a fierce hold. Traditional patterns of respect of younger for elder and of female for male prevail. Wives defer to their husbands, and children to their parents. Older siblings advise and direct younger ones, and sisters heed the authority of their brothers. Girls serve and wait on fathers, mothers, and elder brothers, and they do not openly resist their parents. As junior and female members of the household, unmarried daughters are granted the least authority and expected to demonstrate an attitude of deference and servitude.

Male authority in the family is legitimized by the notion that women are economically dependent, subservient and in need of control. The intrusion of females into Fez factories, then, could potentially threaten male authority by placing females in wage-earning positions traditionally held by men. This threat has not been realized, at least partly because the females hired are single girls, still living in their fathers’ households in the role of daughter, rather than older women laboring in the role of wife. Sending daughters (rather than wives) to work might actually help impoverished families preserve ideal family structure.

Factory workers and their families point proudly to the definition of marriage as an economic union characterized by male financial support and female dependence, a notion of marriage that they perceive as specifically Islamic. They are familiar with the Moroccan legal statutes (based on Islamic Law) that assert that men owe their wives material support and cannot command them to contribute to the family economy. A woman who does work for a wage is not obligated to give her salary to her husband and has the right to keep her earnings for herself, if she so chooses. Female garment workers and those in their

communities perceive these aspects of Moroccan family law as assurances that women, as wives, will be provided economic protection in marriage.

Because the law gives women rights over their own wages, a husband has no dominion over his wife’s earnings. In sending wives out to work, then, men risk losing authority over their wives, an authority based at least partly on the male’s position as economic provider. Men in Fez today overwhelmingly disapprove of the idea of wives who work and make efforts to ensure that the women they marry will not work for a wage after marriage.23

While they proudly defend the notion that women as wives have legal rights to their own salaries, factory families unanimously believe that daughters have no right to argue for control of the wages they earn. It is assumed that young, unmarried daughters, as junior and female members of the household, will provide support and services to their parents; daughters can work for a wage as part and parcel of the other kinds of services they are accustomed to providing the household. Sending daughters to work, then, allows families to take advantage of the income-earning opportunities they need. At the same time, working daughters do not pose the same kind of threat that working wives present husbands, for they do not upset the balance of authority and dependence around which marriage and family are structured. The wage labor of daughters is more easily assimilated into family power hierarchies than that of wives.

Thus families send their daughters to the factories, allowing husbands and fathers to maintain some sense of honor by continuing to protect their wives. Daughters willingly go out to work knowing that, in the least, they spare their mothers the indignity of labor outside the household. As one working girl, whose father was deceased, explained, “It would be disrespectful for a mother—an older woman who has worked her whole life for her children—to go out and work when her children stay at home. . . So long as the children are not in school, it is for them to go out and work, out of respect for their mother, because she is old and weak.”

As noted above, the overwhelming majority of factory workers reported handing over their salaries to their parents.24 This money was most often used to pay for household necessities, including food. Most workers reported that whether or not they were permitted to keep a portion of their salaries, and how significant this portion might be, depended on the urgency of the household’s needs in any given month.

Workers reported that their sense of duty to the family compelled them to comply with their parents’ requests, and that they willingly handed over their earnings; many presumed that they had no right to withhold their earnings from their parents. Although it was rumored in Fez that working girls attempted to pocket their earnings without telling their parents25 (many workers are paid in cash, sums of money that vary monthly), workers widely asserted that attempts to keep a significant portion of the salary would be

24. Most frequently workers reported giving the cash to their mothers, a fact corroborated in Joekes’ study of garment workers in Casablanca; Joekes, Female-led Industrialization, pp. 77–81.
25. This statement was often made to illustrate the typical garment worker’s lack of honor.
fruitless. As one observed, “A girl can try to hide her money, but then what can she do with it? If she buys anything, like a dress for example, her mother will surely see it and ask her ‘Where did you get this dress?’ Her mother will know she has taken the money.” Given the general lack of space and privacy in lower class households, it is indeed difficult for the workers to keep secretively a meaningful sum of money. Moreover, given the overwhelming needs of most factory families, it is troublesome for many young workers to contest their parents’ demands.

Thus the factory worker labors to support her family, much as she performs the housework assigned to her as a daughter when she is at home. Her contributions to the family economy do not significantly alter her role or her status in the household. In word and in deed the factory worker retains her position as a dependent, junior person in the household. Workers report that despite their contributions, a girl never “governs herself.” They unanimously insisted that a father and brothers have the right to control a girl’s behavior even in the case where she is financially supporting them. As one 17-year-old worker explained, “If a girl wants to go to a café, her brother will say no, even if she is earning money. And he has the right to do this. She will not defy her brother or her father.” The cash the worker earns does not override age-old patterns of respect for those whose age or gender places them in authority. The following sequence of events, taken from my field notes, aptly characterizes female workers’ roles in their households:

I sat waiting for my friend to return from work as her mother readied the evening tea. The girl’s brothers, one younger and the other older, sat with us, watching television. The mother kept urging the younger boy to go out and purchase the milk needed for coffee, but the boy kept putting her off. She did not ask her older son, who was in his late twenties and unemployed, for assistance. It was after 6:00 pm when my friend entered the room, tired from a day spent standing at the factory, very eager to sit down. Her mother whispered to her as she kneeled at the table, and she quickly jumped up and disappeared. She returned some minutes later, with milk.

Factory girls remain faithful to their roles as daughters within the household. This is not to suggest, however, that their work inside the factory has no wider impact on their lives. Indeed a worker gains latitude, simply because work outside the home by definition takes her away from the protective eye of her family. En route to the factory, and in stolen moments and sometimes afternoons spent away from the factory, under the pretext of work obligations, working girls can gain some freedom of movement. But these liberties are considered to be pilfered, and not earned.

Fez residents acknowledge that there are several features of factory work that combine to ensure that a girl’s wage labor in garment factories does not earn her the status and influence associated with the role of breadwinner. The income the factory girl brings in is not steady—the family cannot rely on her factory work from month to month; often, due to factory closures, the working daughter finds herself unemployed and marginal to the family finances. The amount she earns, moreover, is small and, although it is often needed, rarely does she single-handedly support the household. And because factory labor is so poorly regarded, her occupation gains her no prestige, as it might if she were an educated, respected, bureaucrat.
Thus, despite their toil and efforts in support of their families, garment factory workers are widely considered by residents of Fez to be “only girls” who “work for make-up,” or face cream, or fashionable clothing. This myth does more than dismiss the reality of exploitation within the garment factories. Reiterated time and again by Fez residents, this perception helps to reinforce the position of the young garment workers as daughters within their households, and thus to preserve the primacy of the structure of the patriarchal family. As girls, who labor only for frivolity, these workers do not risk disturbing traditional authority patterns within their households.

Protecting Wives and Honoring Families

If married women were hired within the factories, on the other hand, there would be a greater potential for alteration in the structure of the patriarchal family, and consequently in patterns of gendered authority in the community generally. As noted above, only 16 percent of garment factory workers in Fez are married; some 60 percent of these married workers labor because their husbands are ill and unable to support them.

Normally, when young women become wives, their participation in factory labor comes to a halt. Indeed the critical importance of a wife’s work within the home partly explains this phenomenon, as does the husband’s reluctance to allow his wife to work. But, in Fez, many factory owners discriminate against hiring older, married women. Hiring practices help ensure that it is unmarried females, daughters and not wives, who staff the garment factories of Fez. In my interviews with Fez factory owners, they frequently asserted that they did not wish to hire older women, that is, married women. Indeed, it is rare to find a woman over the age of 30 working in the garment factories of Fez. (Despite trends towards the rising age of females at first marriage, most Moroccan females are married by this age). Older and married women report that they are often sent away from the factory door when inquiring about work, a dismissal they attribute to their age. Owners assert that older women are less nimble and learn the production system less rapidly than young girls. Obviously, females do not, in reality, begin to lose their capacity to labor in the factory at an age as young as 30. I believe that the owners’ assertions belie the real reasons women are not hired. These have to do with ideas about gendered authority, marriage, and the difference in status between girls and women in the community.

As noted above, the Fez community generally perceives the labor of females in garment factories as immoral. But, for several reasons, the employment of women who are mothers and wives is perceived as even more dishonorable than the employment of girls who are daughters. It is true that young, and as yet unmarried, girls are more amenable to factory control due to their social and chronological age—because they are children and not adults. This fact holds universally and explains the frequent employment of young girls on global factory assembly lines. But in Morocco, the role of wife holds a particular kind of meaning. The woman as wife ideally remains submissive to her husband. It is in her ability to play out properly her subservience to him that she demonstrates not only her own honorability, but the integrity of her husband, his family, and her own natal kin.
While for the daughter work in the factory implies servitude to the father, for the wife factory work hints at female autonomy, rather than proper dependence. Again, this is due to the fact that married women have legal rights over their own salaries.

The woman as wife, submissive in word and deed, has an elevated role to play. It is in this role as wife, and eventually as mother, that women gain a kind of religious status. As wives and mothers, Moroccan females play a central role in religious practice, making possible the quotidian and the annual ritual expressions of Moroccan Muslim identity. Married women are experts in preparing and managing the necessary ritual processes. It is the respectful and traditional wives who prepare couscous every Friday at noon to mark the Muslim holy day, sometimes producing extra portions to give to the poor. Through the month of Ramadan, it is women as wives (and mothers) who skillfully cook the evening meals that make the duty of fasting possible for their husbands and families. They prepare the breakfast meal for the ‘id al-Fitr (the feast that marks the end of Ramadan). Wives have the knowledge needed to prepare and cook properly the ram men slaughter for the sacrifice marking the ‘id al-Kabir (the great feast). Altogether, in the role of wife and mother, women make it possible for the Muslim community to carry out the central rituals and practices of Islam. This role has a quasi-religious dimension, and through it females attain a social worth above that of unmarried females.

An incident that I witnessed while working as a “worker” and ethnographer inside one Fez factory illustrates the position of married women, both in the factory community and in the community at large. At the start of the month of Ramadan, the factory administrators had shortened the work day to meet the needs of fasting workers. Working hours for the month of fasting would run from 8:00 am to 3:00 pm. Several days after the adoption of the new schedule, the administrators announced that they would alter the schedule again; the new schedule would go from 7:30 am to 2:30 pm. This change would meet the needs of the married workers, who had complained that they were not being released early enough to prepare the soup needed for the family’s break fast meal.

When the announcement about the change was made, the crowd of workers went into an uproar. The vast majority of workers argued loudly against the new schedule, which would force them to wake one half hour earlier, a difficulty during Ramadan for those who wished to spend the evenings feasting and visiting. “We are all unmarried girls,” they shouted, “We don’t need to be home to cook!” Indeed the overwhelming majority of workers were unmarried females. Nonetheless, the factory administration instituted a revised Ramadan schedule to allow the small minority of married women enough time in the afternoon to return home and prepare the soup with which Moroccans break the fast. The elevated status of married woman, a status higher than that of unmarried girl, demands the respect of factory owners.

In the Ramadan incident, factory administrators had little choice but to accommodate women in their carrying out of their most revered role, their role as wives and possibly mothers. And it is for this reason that mature women, the majority of whom are wives in Morocco, are less desired as workers by factory owners. The factories cannot as easily exploit married women, for their husbands would be shamed and outraged. If a married woman is kept at the factory into the wee hours of the night, if she is prevented from
returning home to cook the evening meal, as young working girls often are, not just the woman herself but the status of the husband and of the family will be diminished.

In one incident in the factory where I worked, a worker was slapped in the face by a male supervisor, and she slapped him back. The most shameful aspect of the incident, one worker bitterly commented, was that the worker involved was a married woman, working not because she was destitute, but because she chose to work for the material benefits her personal income allowed her. Through her actions this woman had shamed not only herself, but her unwitting husband and family, I was told.

CONCLUSION

Since the 1980s, the textile industry has become a chief source of employment in Moroccan industry, with garment manufacturing at the lead. This burgeoning of the garment industry has occurred through the labor of Morocco’s females, most of whom are young and unmarried girls.

It is said in Fez that the females who staff the garment factories are willing to work under such difficult conditions, and for so little pay, because they are “only girls.” In Morocco, the role and status of females inside the household is inextricably linked to whether they play a role outside the household, and if so, what kind. Specific cultural assumptions about what it means to be a daughter and a sister, rather than a wife and perhaps a mother, help determine female participation in work in the garment factories.