8.1 Summary

In the past women’s primary role was of a home maker and it was for men to provide subsistence to their family. But in recent years, especially after Independence, the traditional status and roles of women in Indian society are gradually changing. One of the most important causes of such changes is the spread of education among women and the entrance of educated women in the field of employment. Occupation has provided a new social prestige to women. In the performance of occupational roles women are achieving new recognition. More specifically, their education and employment outside the home has led to the upliftment of their social status.

Now, an increasing proportion of women are moving towards urban areas, particularly to big or metropolitan cities, for employment. More women migrate from urban areas than from rural areas. A number of these women take up white collar jobs and are entering into new fields including administration, science technology, medicine, journalism and the like.

Separation from family and socio-cultural norms, isolation/loneliness, a sense of anonymity that offers more sexual freedom, and inadequate financial resources, make migrants more vulnerable to adopting high risk sexual behaviours. For these reasons greater attention must be given to working and living conditions and to migrants social networks which may make them more vulnerable to HIV/AIDS.

There are few studies about these migrant women. Not much is known about their working environment or their personal lives.
The present study was conducted to document and analyze the extent of risky behaviour among unmarried migrant working women in Delhi, impacting their sexual and reproductive health. Risky behaviour was measured in terms of those involved in substance use and any sexual activity. The study further explores dating behaviours and attitudes toward sex and risk perceptions towards unwanted pregnancy and sexually transmitted diseases. The study also explored women’s socio-economic strata and their living and working conditions. The study included 362 unmarried working women in the age-group of 18-30 years, staying in working women’s hostels in Delhi.

Among the young migrant workers covered in the study, 68 percent of them were migrants from the Northern part of India. Majority of them were graduates and came from urban areas. It may be said that urban-socio cultural milieu and the institutional network provide more opportunities to the women living in the urban areas. Rural women may suffer from inadequate opportunity structures as well as from socio-cultural taboos preventing them from moving and working outside their native place. The mean age of the respondents was 25 years. Large proportions of the respondents were Hindu and belonged to general castes. Most of the respondents possessed higher educational qualifications. About 54 percent of the women were graduates and about 40 percent of them had post graduate degrees or higher. The majority of these migrant women were working as professional or technical workers, skilled manual laborers, administrative workers, or as executives and managerial representatives. According to the respondents, their income level was very low making it difficult for them to survive in a metropolitan city like Delhi where the cost of living is very high.
Exploration into the socio-economic status of the women revealed that most of them came from the middle class families. Most of the respondents’ fathers possessed postgraduate (30 percent) or professional/technical qualifications (21 percent). The mothers of most of the respondents had a secondary level of education (40 percent) with a substantial proportion having attained a graduate degree (31 percent). It seems that the educational background of the family contributed to the upward educational mobility of the young women. It is also significant to note that most of the working women belonged to families whose occupational and income status had been satisfactory. In the present study, 21 percent of respondents’ fathers were working as professionals and about 22 percent had their own business. Mothers of the majority of the women (77 percent) were housewives. Findings also suggest that more than 60 percent of the young female migrants consider their family environment to be comfortable and about 80 percent of them reported their relationship to be smooth with both the parents.

It is significant to note that the majority of the women (75 percent) in the present study got parental support to leave their native place and work outside the home. It is also significant to note that the waiting period for entrance into the job market was not very long for most respondents. Most of the respondents entered into the job market within one year of their stay in Delhi. Most of the young women (50 percent) found their present job without any assistance from others. About one third of the women (30 percent) were working before coming to Delhi. The mean duration of stay for the respondents in Delhi was found to be around 2 years. Findings also indicate that 70 percent of the young female migrants made their first move to Delhi and the main reason for this move was better education facilities in Delhi or that they got their first job in Delhi. The majority of the respondents (73 percent) stayed either in hostels or with their relatives upon arriving to Delhi. Slightly more than half of the young women workers (57 percent) sent
money to their home and about two-thirds of them regularly communicated with their family members through phone or internet.

Women considered their parents as leading confidants on non-sensitive issues of education and health. Sensitive issues such as friendship, romantic relationships, hostels, job, marriage plans and sex were mostly discussed with friends.

The majority of the young women (43 percent) had stayed in the hostel for the last one to two years. A relatively large proportion of the women found out about the hostel either from their office colleagues (38 percent) or from their friends (32 percent). An overwhelmingly large proportion of the respondents considered independence (82 percent) and safety (77 percent) to be the main reasons to stay in a hostel. A large proportion of the residents shared rooms (90 percent). One-third of them shared rooms with a single woman (35 percent) and over one-half of them shared with more than one woman (55 percent).

All the 12 hostels had a rule regarding the duration of stay for girls in a particular hostel: each girl was allowed to stay only for a period of four to five years. Thereafter, she was required to leave the hostel and had to take a break for a year. After a year she could again take admission in the same hostel depending upon the availability of rooms. Among the nine hostels, three did not have a mess facility but kitchen facility with gas or stove was provided. Guest facilities were available in 67 percent of the hostels. In the majority of the hostels (75 percent) visitors or a common room was available to entertain visitors in the hostel. It was found that a large proportion of the inmates (65 percent) were unsatisfied with the basic amenities in the hostel such as toilet and bathroom facility, cleanliness, food quality, etc. By and large, a vast majority
(80 percent) of the hostellers stated that their relationship with the warden and other staff members was good.

Apart from the living conditions it is also important to know about the women’s working conditions. Findings reveal that the majority of the young women (83 percent) were working in the private sector. Over 40 percent of the women reported that the majority of their office colleagues were males and another 40 percent reported an almost equal number of male and female colleagues. The majority of the women stayed close to the work place and they commuted alone to their work place.

One of the major problems of working women was working long hours. This created many problems for them and intruded into personal time. In the present study a fairly good proportion of respondents (60 percent) had to overstay in the office.

Exploration into women’s job satisfaction revealed that among all occupational groups, most of the respondents expressed satisfaction with their jobs. Thirty percent of respondents were dissatisfied with their jobs. The reasons for dissatisfaction were: lack of future prospects, insufficient pay, dislike of the work and odd working hours.

During the focus group discussion young women reported that sex-based discrimination was common. In the sphere of promotion, placement and amenities they felt that their male colleagues were given better treatment. Women felt that in regards to promotions, experience and efficiency in work should be considered the main criterion for promotion. About one-fourth of the respondents (24 percent) reported experiencing verbal or psychological and emotional or sexual harassment at the work place.
Knowledge of at least one contraceptive method was almost universal (97 percent) among the respondents. The most well-known method was the male condom, which was mentioned by 92 percent of the women. 37 percent of women were aware of all the mentioned modern methods of contraception. Thirty-nine percent knew of all traditional mentioned methods. Very few—just 34 percent of the women had accurate knowledge about condom use. Forty-nine percent of women had negative attitudes towards condom use; 51 percent had positive attitudes. Although the women were aware of contraceptive methods and where to get them, many of them reported that they were not confident enough to purchase condoms.

In general, young women were aware of some aspects of pregnancy, but lacked detailed knowledge as to how and when pregnancy could occur. Communication with parents about sexual issues was not associated with enhanced awareness levels about reproductive health. Those who reported discussions with friends and boyfriends appeared to be more knowledgeable about reproductive health than other women. The positive association between those involved in risky leisure activities, use of cigarettes, alcohol or sexual intercourse and knowledge of reproductive health is also notable.

Since the outbreak of the HIV/AIDS epidemic, there has been an effort to make people aware of modes of infection and prevention and increase compassion towards infected persons. Findings in the present study indicate high levels of awareness of HIV/AIDS. Knowledge of HIV/AIDS among the women was almost universal. Women had fairly good knowledge about high-risk behaviours that put a person at risk of HIV/AIDS. Knowledge about different preventive measures is satisfactory among working young women. Only a small proportion had misconceptions about the possible modes of transmission of HIV/AIDS and the fatality of the
disease. Some of the women reported mosquito bites as a possible source of infection. There was no evidence of possible stigmatization and rejection of infected persons. Electronic media was women’s main source of information on HIV/AIDS and a few respondents reported receiving information from print media. Just half of young women had heard of STIs other than HIV.

While marriage marks the onset of sexual activity among the large majority of young females, there is growing evidence of premarital sex. Findings suggest that having a boyfriend and physical contact such as holding hands, hugging, kissing, petting and even sexual intercourse were common among the young female migrant workers. Out of total 362 women about 13 percent of them had experienced penetrative sex. Out of them, a large majority (80 percent) had sex with a regular partner in the last 12 months preceding the date of survey. Among the sexually active women the mean age at first sexual intercourse was 23 years.

A large proportion (69 percent) of them had their first sexual intercourse within a more committed relationship i.e., with a boyfriend. Love and curiosity were the main reasons for their sexual experience. However, 31 percent of the women had their first sex with a non-regular partner, 14 percent had their first sexual experience with an office colleague or a boss, and 12 percent with a friend with whom they had close friendship. The sexual partners of females were, on average, more than 2 years older.

Six percent of females reported that they had ever been forced into having sexual intercourse. The perpetrators of the sexual coercion included boyfriends. The vast majority of the female workers (77 percent) who ever had sex reported only one lifetime sexual partner. Twenty-three percent of them had more than one lifetime sexual partner.
Although knowledge about contraceptives was found to be high, only 47 percent of females reported that they ever used contraception when they first had sex. Only 45 percent of them practiced contraception in all sexual encounters. Among those using contraceptives, the male condom was the method most commonly used and it was used mostly to prevent pregnancy. A lower percentage of women (30 percent) who had sex with a casual partner, reported using contraception at the time of first sex compared to those who had sex with a steady partner (70 percent). The common experience of females was that they could more easily insist on condom use with their boyfriends rather than with a casual partner.

Many women who had experienced sexual intercourse were more concerned with avoiding pregnancy than with preventing HIV/AIDS and other STIs.

Multivariate analysis of the predictors of sexual behaviour confirms that women who had high interaction with peers, those who perceive that their peers have sex, those with higher aspirations in life and high erotic exposure, were involved in risky leisure activities and had alcohol were significantly more likely to be sexually active.

Peer behaviour seems to have a substantial effect on the behaviour of young women. The proportion of young women workers who reported sexual intercourse was higher among those whose close friends used some type of substance or were involved in sexual behaviour.

Among those who had ever had sex, 63 percent reported having experienced reproductive and sexual health problem. Among those who had not experience sexual intercourse, 35 percent of them suffered from at least one symptom. There is a significant difference found in the problems faced among those who did and did not experience sexual intercourse. The results
point to the existence of reproductive and sexual health problems among young women. Young women expressed confidence in government health facilities as much as in private ones for the treatment of health problems.

Among the women who had experienced penetrative sex, more than 60 percent of them perceived that they were at moderate to high risk of contracting HIV/AIDS as they did not use condoms every time during sex.

The combination of permissive attitudes, sexual experimentation and lack of accurate information poses a significant threat to the sexual health of young women and exposes them to risky sexual behaviours and its consequences.

8.2 Conclusions and recommendations
The present study attempts to understand sexual risk behaviour and risk perceptions in relation to unwanted pregnancy and sexually transmitted diseases among unmarried young female migrant workers. The study addresses the severe dearth of information, particularly on high-risk sexual behaviour, among this subgroup of the population.

Historically, societies have dealt with the problem of premarital sex and illegitimacy by strictly supervising young people so that sexual activity does not begin until marriage (WHO 1993). Findings show that despite social restrictions a substantial had ever dated opposite-sex partners and had a boyfriend. Many hold permissive attitudes on the acceptability of premarital sex and believe that women could have sex with a person to whom she is planning to get married and that sex is the basis of an intimate relationship. In total, 13 percent of young migrant women workers had developed relations with young men, had engaged in sexual activity, and had
immediate reproductive health needs. Sexual intercourse generally took place within the context of a relatively stable relationship (i.e., with either a boyfriend or a future spouse). A significant proportion experienced risky or unwanted sexual activity and had multiple partners. These young women were vulnerable to unintended pregnancy and sexually transmitted infections. A substantial number of women reported love and curiosity as the main reason for their first sexual intercourse. Very few women reported casual sex; the main reason could be that they have regular and steadier partners. A similar finding has also been documented in an earlier study (Tamang et al. 1998).

The findings of the study have some important programme implications. Knowledge about contraceptives was high, but the use was low and irregular. Young women workers were aware of some forms of protection from unwanted pregnancy and STIS. However, their information was incomplete and they held certain misconceptions that are rarely addressed in health programmes. Our findings on sources of sexual and reproductive health information are in keeping with evidence from other recent studies (IIPS 2008, McManus and Dhar 2008) showing that in the absence of reliable sources of information, youth rely on peers for information. As a result, they are likely to be poorly informed or misinformed on these issues and prone to suffer the consequences of unsafe or unprotected sexual behaviours. For instance, many believed that young women could not be infected with any diseases if she had sex with a regular and steady partner. Therefore interventions need to dispel such myths and misconceptions. In particular, the message that every sexual act potentially can lead to the risk of diseases and unwanted pregnancy should be clearly imparted.
Findings also suggest that less than half of the women who experienced sexual intercourse used any kind of contraception when they first had sex. The most commonly used contraceptive method was a condom and it was mostly used with a steady partner. Use of a second method in addition to condoms was uncommon in this sample. This finding is consistent with results of other studies, which have found that young people prefer to use a single method (Santelli et al. 1997 and Cushman et al. 1998). The majority of the respondents using condoms did so for dual purposes—prevention of both pregnancy and HIV infection. But consistent condom use was very low. Some of the girls felt that condom use did not provide full protection or that one did not need it while having sex with a steady partner.

Early sexual experience without protection, as observed from the data, has implications for sexual and reproductive health programs and the welfare of young people. Sex education must begin early in order to increase the proportion of females postponing sex into later life. Programs on sexual and reproductive health should respond to young peoples’ concerns about avoiding pregnancy and STIs by, for instance, promoting a positive image towards condom use and improving young peoples’ confidence about the purchase and correct use of condoms for dual protection. The implementers of programs and activities should devote some attention to education on other STIs, in addition to HIV. Programs should be developed to target parents in order to make it easy for them to support their children in sexual and reproductive health issues.

Since peers were the most preferred source of getting information on reproductive and sexual health among the young workers, peer education and outreach can be an effective channel for disseminating reproductive and sexual health information among these young working
women. Electronic media should also be used as much as possible to provide information to young women.

8.3 Limitations of the Study

One of the primary limitations of the current research is that all data come from young female workers’ self-reports and may be subject to recall bias or social desirability bias. Because of the strong conservative culture in India, the self-reported data may not reflect true behaviours. Many females may be uncomfortable discussing their sexual behaviour and thus underreport it.

The study has several important strengths. It provides a unique opportunity to consider relationship progression from both a physical and an emotional perspective. Rarely do studies consider the behaviors of young people before sex, much less their emotional relationships.