

Manufacturing growth can benefit Bangladeshi women workers

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Workers in an apparel company in Dhaka, Bangladesh, in December 2014.
Credit: NYU Stern BHR / Flickr Wikimedia Commons

The life of a Bangladeshi garment factory worker is not an easy one. But new research from the University of Washington indicates that access to such factory jobs can improve the lives of young Bangladeshi women—motivating them to stay in school and lowering their likelihood of early marriage and childbirth.

The ready-made garment industry in Bangladesh has grown tremendously in the last 30 years and now accounts for more than three-quarters of the country's total annual export revenue, according to a 2009 report by the Bangladesh Export Processing Bureau. The Bangladesh Garment Manufacturers and Exporters Association notes there are about 4 million such workers in Bangladesh, 80 percent of whom are women, according to government reports.

The April 2013 collapse of a commercial garment factory building that killed more than 1,100 people thrust the industry into a harsh spotlight and brought attention and concern from human rights groups. But amid the hardships, the new research indicates there is a quiet upside to factory work for many Bangladeshi women.

UW economist Rachel Heath and co-author A. Mushfiq Mobarak of the Yale University School of Management studied data on school enrollment and marriage and childbirth outcomes from 1,395 households in 60 Bangladeshi villages in the year 2009. In a paper accepted for publication in the *Journal of Development Economics*, they looked at the age at marriage and at the birth of the first child for girls with greater exposure to factory jobs.

"We document the likelihood of marriage and childbirth at early ages drops sharply for girls when they gain exposure to the ready-made garment sector," the authors wrote.

More specifically, the researchers found that:

- Girls 12 to 18 years old who have lived in the proximity of a garment factory for about six years—the average time studied—were 28 percent less likely to be married than those living in villages in the same district that were not close to a factory.

- Girls who live near a factory tend to have 1.5 more years of education than their brothers when surveyed. This represents a 50 percent increase in girls' educational attainment over villages without a garment factory nearby.
- Girls and young women who are exposed to factory jobs when they are 10 to 23 years old are 79 percent more likely to work outside the home before marriage.
- Overall, girls are 7.2 percentage points more likely to be enrolled in school when factories open close to their village. This effect is especially strong among young girls, 5 to 9 years of age.

They also found that in the areas surveyed, the demand for education generated through manufacturing growth in Bangladesh accounts for more of the educational increases among girls than the Female Secondary School Assistance Program, a large-scale government-funded program to encourage female schooling.

"In summary, access to [factory jobs](#) significantly lowers the risk of early marriage and childbirth for girls in Bangladesh," Heath and Mobarak wrote in an accompanying research brief.

A small negative effect to factory job access on education also was found: Unlike the positive effect for those younger [girls](#), those who were 17-18 years old were slightly more likely to leave school for factory employment.

"Of course, to say the industry has had positive effects does not deny that there have been serious tragedies," Heath said. "We think that increased monitoring of conditions inside the factories can allow Bangladesh to reap the benefits of these jobs while minimizing the safety risks of working in them."

The results, the researchers write, also provide one explanation,

unexplored until now, for accelerated gender equity in education in Bangladesh, "thus generating policy implications for other countries interested in emulating Bangladesh's success."

Provided by University of Washington

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