

Female Employment and Aspirations for Children: Evidence from Bangladesh's Garment Industry

September 2018

The garment sector provides employment to more than 2 million women in Bangladesh and accounts for 80% of the country's export earnings. However, positions available to women remain mostly limited to the machine-operator level. This brief provides insights into gender roles and aspirations for children among families involved with the Bangladeshi garment industry.

We, Christopher Woodruff and Hannah Uckat at the University of Oxford are conducting an EDI case study on the garment sector in Bangladesh.¹ We find that women's autonomy over career decisions seems to be mainly driven by current economic circumstances. Our research shows that parents want their daughters to get married earlier and have lower career ambitions for daughters than for sons – despite having similar educational aspirations for daughters and sons. Just over half of participants in our study do not want their daughter to be working at age 30. Those in the lowest income brackets and with low education are more likely to have lower educational aspirations, marriage age, and career aspirations for their daughters. Meanwhile, many outcomes and aspirations for daughters were positively affected by having a larger family network in close proximity. With educational and career achievements having persistent effects on attainments of daughters and sons, today's decisions affect generations.

The evidence suggests several indirect ways of improving women's lives for generations. Keys to this are promoting male and female education, as well as improving income and family networks.

¹ Woodruff, Christopher and Uckat, Hannah (forthcoming) A woman's place is in the production management? Social identity as constraints to women's career advancement and firm productivity in Bangladesh's garment sector.

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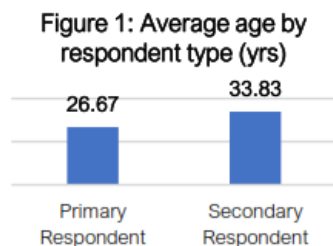
Study overview

To better understand gender roles in households of Bangladeshi garment workers, we conducted surveys with randomly selected female sewing machine operators and the other main decision-maker in their household. We interviewed 566 female operators (“primary respondents”) from 26 large factories and other decision makers in 512 of their households (“secondary respondents”). More than 90% of secondary respondents were male, and in most cases (85%) they were the primary respondent’s husband.

The ready-made garment (RMG) industry has contributed immensely to Bangladesh’s transition towards a major export-oriented economy over the past three decades. Accounting for more than 80% of the country’s export earnings², the industry is also a forerunner in women’s employment in Bangladesh. Over half of the 4 million Bangladeshi RMG workers are women³. However, positions available to women remain mostly limited to the machine-operator level. Current and past research has shown that social and gender norms facilitate resistance towards female leadership, career progression, as well as household decision-making for women in the Bangladeshi RMG sector.

Over the past two decades, gender equality has consistently been identified as a development objective and a means to promoting growth, improving governance, and reducing poverty globally⁴. Gender roles often limit progress towards gender equality because they restrict women’s abilities to make personal choices without needing permission or validation from others. Changes in norms around education, marital age, and employment for girls have the potential to create a shift towards a more equitable environment in both the home and the workplace for the next generations of women.

Educational level of parents determines attainment of respondents.



We focus on the sample of households in which at least two adults live. Most participants live in urban areas surrounding garments factories in the Dhaka Division. Among all respondents, the average age is 30 years, and the average educational attainment is 6 years. About 13% of respondents have no formal education, and more than half of participants’ fathers and mothers have no formal schooling.

Educational attainment persists across generations: participants whose mother has at least some formal education have nearly 2 years more education than the 70% whose mother is not educated at all. This is also the case for the father, where 59% of participants have a father with no education (see Figure 2). We confirm this persistence in a statistical analysis and find that mother’s and father’s education are similarly predictive for both female and male respondents’ education, and that the effect is larger if both parents are educated, as compared to only one parent. A respondent’s education level is also affected by other factors. For example, respondents whose mother worked in the respondent’s teenage years have about a year less education than those without a working mother. This could be the case perhaps

² The World Bank (2016) With Reforms and Investments, Bangladesh can Become an Export Powerhouse. Available at: <http://www.worldbank.org/en/news/feature/2016/11/14/reforms-investments-bangladesh-come-export-powerhouse>

³ ILO (2015) Improving working conditions in the ready-made garment industry: Progress and achievements. Available at http://www.ilo.org/dhaka/Whatwedo/Projects/WCMS_240343/lang--en/index.htm

⁴ The World Bank (2002) Measuring Female Empowerment as a Variable in International Development. Available at: <https://siteresources.worldbank.org/INTGENDER/Resources/MalhotraSchulerBoender.pdf>

either because female employment in the respondent's parents' generation was a result of economic necessity, or because the mother's household labor was passed on to teenage children.

Figure 2: Average participant education (yrs) increases if parent is educated

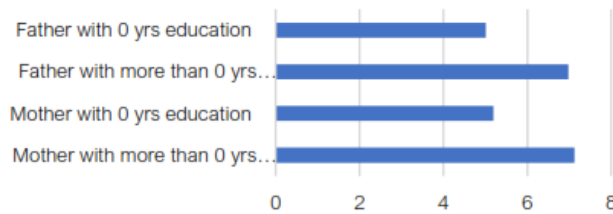
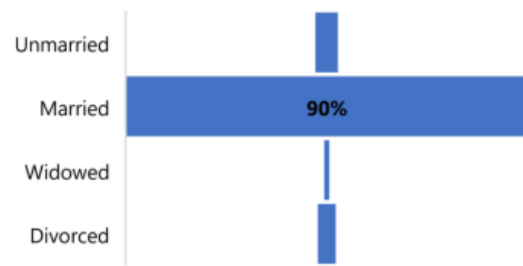


Figure 3: Marital Status of primary respondents



Female sewing machine operators contribute substantially to total household income. On average, households in the sample earn about 21,000 BDT (~ 250 USD) per month, almost half (48%) of which is contributed by the primary respondent. About 90% of primary respondents are married, as shown in Figure 3. Participants are mostly living away from their family networks, as many respondents migrated from villages to the industrial areas for work. Just about half of participants have no family members living within one-hour travel distance from their home.

Parents and grandparents' education and the strength of the close family network correlate with the education level respondents want their daughters to achieve.

Figure 4: Primary respondent's education aspirations for children (yrs)

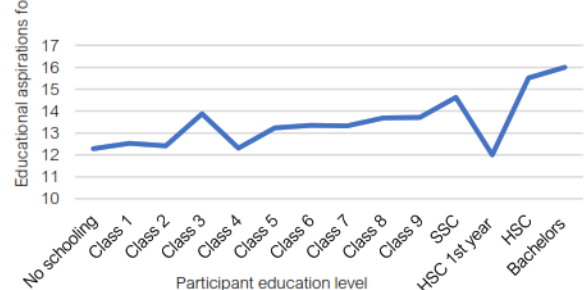


Although our sample of primary respondents is entirely comprised of women who work in full-time wage jobs⁵, primary respondents say they want their sons to achieve about two years more education than their daughters (Figure 4). This gap is larger for secondary respondents (2.7 years). We find evidence that the education history of two generations matters for respondents' ambitions for their daughters. The respondent's

education is positively correlated with educational aspirations, as shown in Figure 5. Moreover, in a statistical regression analysis of the desired level of daughter education on both respondent education and the respondent's mother's education, both coefficients are statistically and economically significant.⁶

Parents want their children to have much more education than they themselves received. This is in line with the results in Heath and Mobarak (2015), which find that the advent of the garment industry led to women staying in school for longer.⁷ In our primary participant sample, about 44% say they would like their daughter to attain a bachelors or master's degree, whereas less than 1% of primary respondents want their daughter to achieve class 9 or less. Controlling for respondent education and household or personal income,

Figure 5: Educational aspirations for daughter significantly increases with respondent education level



⁵ All primary respondents worked full-time in the garment industry when their contact details were collected in the factories, and only 4.6 % were not in paid employment at the time of the household survey.

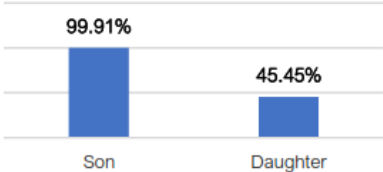
⁶ Note that we lose precision once we control for quadratic functions of personal and household income.

⁷ Heath, Rachel and Mobarak, Mushfiq (2015) Manufacturing growth and the lives of Bangladeshi women. Journal of Development Economics, Vol. 115:1-15.

educational aspirations for one’s daughter also significantly increase with the number of family members living nearby, for both the primary and secondary respondents.

Participants have higher career aspirations for sons than daughters. Parents with higher education and personal income, and men who had working mothers, have higher ambitions for their daughters.

Figure 6: The percent of participants reporting they want their son/daughter to be working at age 30



While educational aspirations for sons and daughters are relatively similar, this does not hold true for career ambitions. All but one respondent wants their son to be working at age 30, while less than half of participants want their daughter to be working at age 30, as shown in Figure 6. The share of those reporting that they want their daughter to be working at age 30 increases significantly with respondent education (see Figure 7), as well as with respondent personal income, even when controlling for household income. Having a larger family network close by also has a positive and significant correlation with future work

aspirations for daughters across the sample. Interestingly, men whose mother worked while the respondent was in his teenage years (8% of the male sample) are about 18% more likely to want their daughters to work when she is 30 years, when controlling for family network, respondent education, household and personal income, and mother’s and father’s education. Meanwhile, there is no equivalent effect for female respondents, which indicates that exposure to working women early in life may have had a formative effect on men in the sample.

As shown in Table 1, government employment is the most popular ambition parents have for their children overall. However, more people want their son to be a government employee than their daughter, while becoming a teacher is most desired for daughters. About 3% of participants hope their son would run his own business, while no one hopes this for their daughter. Notably, very few people want their children to work in the garment industry. Less than 1% of participants hope their son would work as a line supervisor or sewing operator, and about 2% hope this for their daughter. The most popular jobs are high-skilled, secure wage- employed jobs for both daughters and sons.

Figure 7: Percent respondents who want daughter to be working at age 30 increases with respondent education level

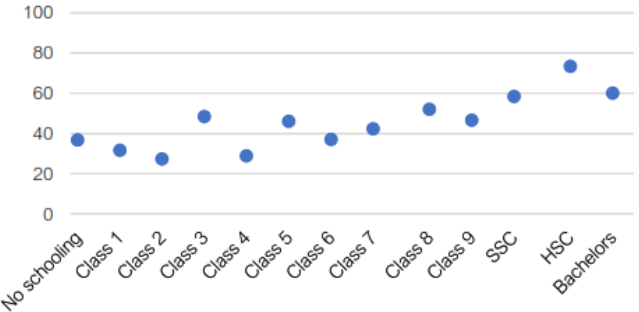
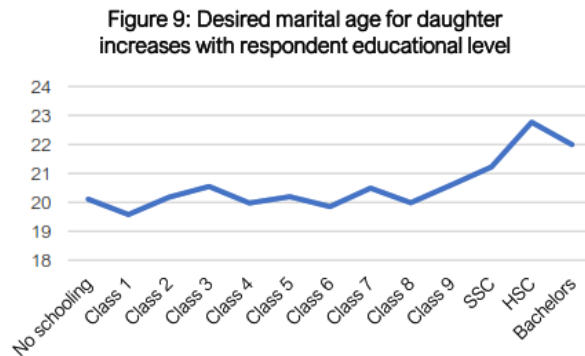
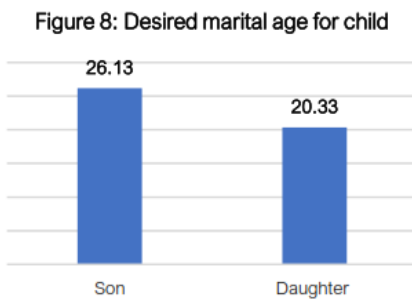


Table 1: Participant hopes for child occupation at age 30		
Occupation	Percent Response: Daughter	Percent Response: Son
Government employee	33.9	57.2
Teacher	35.7	6.8
Doctor	22.9	13.8
Engineer	0.8	8.1
Policeman/women, soldier	0.6	7.00
Running their own business	0.0	3.0

Worker in another business or factory	1.0	1.2
Nurse	2.2	0.1
Lawyer	0.8	1.0
Garments worker: Supervisor or better position	1.4	0.7
Other	0.0	0.9
Garments worker: Helper or Line operator	0.6	0.0
Worker on a farm or other agricultural business	0.0	0.1
Servant/Maid	0.0	0.1
Farmer or own farm	0.0	0.1

Planned marital age for daughters increases with education, income, and family network.

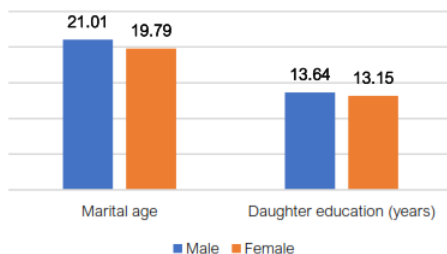


As shown in Figure 8, respondents would like their daughters to get married six years younger than their sons. Controlling for household and personal income as well as family network, the desired marital age for daughters significantly increases as participant education levels increase, reaching an average marital age of 23 among participants who have finished high school (see Figure 9). While household income does not significantly correlate with the desired marital age for the daughter, the respondent’s personal income has a small but statistically significant positive correlation with increased desired marital ages for daughters, controlling for education and having a family network nearby.

Among female participants only, the education level of the participant’s mother is associated with a higher desired daughter marital age. Overall, having more family nearby is significantly correlated with higher reported desired marital ages for daughters, and this effect appears to be driven by male respondents. A strong family network close by may affect ambitions for daughters among men more than among women.

Male respondents overall have higher ambitions for their daughters.

Figure 10: Male respondents have significantly higher daughter educational and marital age aspirations than female respondents



Interestingly, male respondents overall have higher aspirational expectations for their daughters than female respondents do, as demonstrated in Figure 10, even when controlling for a range of factors. Male respondents on average want their daughters to get married at 21 years, whereas female respondents would like their daughter to be married about one year earlier. Male respondents also have slightly (and statistically significantly) higher educational aspirations for the girls in their households as compared to female respondents. About 46% of male respondents hope their daughter

will become a government employee, while only 25% of female respondents have the same hope. A potential explanation is that women may internalize gender roles, or may reflect their own occupational, educational, and marital experiences in what they expect will happen to daughters in the future.

Women's autonomy seems to be driven by current socioeconomic conditions.

With aspirations for couples' children differing between husband and wife, whose aspiration will have the larger influence on the actual outcomes for children? This is likely to depend on bargaining power within the household. We are investigating one proxy for women's bargaining power here: a woman's ability to make autonomous decisions about her career. In the surveys, participants were asked about who in their household decides whether they should accept a promotion to line supervisor, if they are offered a promotion. In 65% of the cases, the primary respondent reports she would decide with the secondary respondent on whether she should accept a promotion. Just over 30% of respondents say they would make this decision alone and, out of these, a third report that they still need to ask for permission.

Defining full autonomy as being able to decide alone without requiring permission, we find an 'inverse U-shape': autonomy increases with personal and household income up to a certain level, but then declines. We also find that women considering themselves the household head and with a larger family network have higher autonomy, when controlling for a range of background variables. In contrast, parents' education and mother's employment is not significantly related with autonomy. This suggests that women's autonomy over career decisions is mainly affected by her current economic conditions instead of generational persistence.

Conclusions

Using data from a household survey conducted with a random group of female operators and adult household decision-makers, we investigate gender roles and aspirations for children in families of Bangladeshi garment workers. We find that aspirations for children are influenced by the circumstances of the respondents and the respondents' parents, and that these circumstances affect differences in aspirations for boys and girls. Respondents have higher educational and occupational aspirations for sons as compared to daughters. We find that respondents with higher education and larger family networks want their daughters to achieve higher education, better careers, and to get married later. Further, we find that male respondents overall have higher aspirations for their daughters. It is important to note that these findings are purely correlational. Our ongoing work includes experimental and quasi-experimental studies on these issues to further test gender roles in this population. Yet, the evidence suggests indirect ways to improve women's lives across generations, for example by promoting male and female education, as well as improving livelihoods and family networks.

Authors:

This brief was prepared by Anaise Williams, Hannah Uckat and Christopher Woodruff.

The authors gratefully acknowledge funding from the Economic Development & Institutions (EDI) and Private Enterprise Development in Low-Income Countries (PEDL) programmes.

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