

Natalie Miles
KM Global
Wales, Wisconsin, United States of America
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Garment Manufacturing or Schooling?

Education is one of the most influential and important parts of a child's life. Learning and growing in the early stages of childhood creates a foundation for lifelong development, especially for young girls who have faced obstacles to their education both historically and culturally. It is a stigma that some countries are just now starting to wipe clean. One country struggling to include education in the daily life of children is Bangladesh, which happens to be the second-largest garment manufacturing location in the world. Unfortunately, these two facts are related. Garment manufacturing is interfering with girls' education in Bangladesh and other areas across the world. Some garment manufacturing, occasionally known as fast fashion, is the production of popular clothes produced in bulk at cheap prices. Often workers are forced to perform in brutal and immoral work environments in order to mass-produce these fast fashion garments. The factories take a heavy toll on these girls' childhood, education, and future. Working in a fast fashion factory can contribute to a decrease in girl's education. A potential solution would be to enable more families to focus on education over factory jobs by promoting rewards for the girls and their families when enrolled in or completing school or participating in a development program. This, along with other efforts, could help to end fast fashion for all.

Helping to support their families while earning a small salary is sometimes more necessary than gaining an education for girls in countries like Bangladesh. According to Sosale et al. (2019), "Data from the 2017 Bangladesh Bureau of Educational Information and Statistics show that dropout rates for girls are at a high 42% at the secondary school level." Some girls in certain countries are able to receive a top-notch education, while others, like many girls in Bangladesh, will not even make it to high school. This is an issue that people need to be aware of, so generations to come can feel at ease about being born a girl. Hanson (2021) points out that "5.9% of [American] females between age 15 and 24 were dropouts in 2017." The 36.1% gap between a Bangladesh girl and an American girl is so incredibly large that people need to be looking into the situation much deeper than they have been so far. These girls need support and deserve an equal education just like girls in the United States. Growing up on opposite sides of the world should not determine whether a young girl has the opportunity to attend and complete high school. Stefan Trines (2019) adds that "the tuition fees at these schools reportedly averaged USD\$5,200 in 2017 so that these schools are accessible to primarily wealthy urban elites. The average per capita income in Bangladesh was USD\$1,466 in 2016." Because of the cost of tuition, families might be financially unable to enroll their daughters, especially because most families will have more than one child and, depending on the gender of the children, young men may have a better chance of attending high school. Amin & Nuzhat (2016) point out that "it is a common practice in rural households to not send their young daughters to schools as they believe females are born to solely run households." These girls are lacking not only an education but social skills, independence, and opportunity. Instead, they are forced to cook, clean, and do chores. In the long run, the benefit of an education and social skills gained from attending school will definitely outweigh the tuition cost and set these girls up for successful futures. The stigma of girls not attending school needs to end. If these girls attain an education, it could help them achieve a better job and in return generate more money for their families and their futures. By attending school and obtaining an education, they could potentially delay having children until later in life and eventually break

the cycle of young females marrying at a young age and in turn, forgoing getting an education. According to Sakib (2021) “Bangladesh is among the top 10 countries in the world for child marriage. It is eighth from the bottom in South Asia, according to a UN report that said Bangladesh has a 51% child marriage rate.” Child marriage is considered a marriage under the age of 18, but in many countries like Bangladesh, many young girls marry even earlier. It is important for these girls to teach their own children the importance of education and equality. This is an important cycle that needs to be created for not only the girls of Bangladesh, but every girl looking for a place to start to break this chain of events.

Fast fashion garment factories are located all over the world, with some of the major industries in South Asia and India. These factories recruit girls by coming into their villages and towns, promising workers a home, an education, food, and a salary if young girls work for them. However, once they begin working for fast fashion garment factories, these young girls are often forced to work 12-hour shifts with no breaks and sometimes no pay. The promises are broken and the girls are left in the dust. Butler (2019) says that “with such low wages, employees often feel compelled to take on large amounts of overtime to make ends meet.” The situation just grows larger. Some fast-fashion companies well-known to the average consumer include brands such as H&M, Shein, and Zara. In the United States, many young teens rely on these fast fashion companies to create inexpensive, on-trend clothes, but little do they know of the damage and despair these young girls endure to create these garments. With all the girl’s time dedicated to working, the available time for learning and education is nonexistent. In fact, being employed in these types of factories as a young girl can be life-threatening for a multitude of reasons. Moulds (n.d.) points out that the girls are “seen as obedient workers who slip under the radar, making them easy to manage. [Sofie Ovaa, a coordinator for the global campaign of Stop Child Labour] says: ‘...These are very low-skilled workers without a voice, so they are easy targets.’” These young girls do not know how to stand up for themselves, ask for help, or even know what a safe workplace should look like. Cases of leaked chemicals, fabrics, and toxins getting released in the air are common and there is no support system to help these girls. Getting caught in these fashion traps at a young age can cage these girls for life or even be a death sentence for some. Something needs to be done for these girls and their families.

One solution alone will not entirely solve this problem. Many people depend on fast fashion jobs as part of their daily earnings, including children. But everything relates back to one main issue: a lack of education. Sosale et al. (2019), says, “According to the 2017 Bangladesh Human Capital Index, children in Bangladesh lose an average of 4.5 years of schooling.” In the United States, that is one’s entire high school career plus some of the middle school days. During these years, students learn not only academics but about themselves and their future. Attending school can give a child an outlet from real-life responsibilities and allow them to focus on themselves and their futures. Missing out on an education is parallel to missing out on a future. To help mitigate this issue, several countries are currently implementing multiple girls’ development programs. If these projects are established and expanded throughout more countries, more girls will have the opportunity to be involved in some sort of educational program and potentially fewer will be employed in garment factories. These girls can learn new skills that they can carry on through life. One of the two important female development programs making a difference is the Female Secondary School Assistance Project (FSSAP), which is an incentive program for education that started in the 1900s and now reaches worldwide. With help from FSSAP, girls receive a reduced tuition rate and other rewards for attending school, such as money. This money not only provides an income for the girls and their families but also allows them to start saving and investing for future

education and eventually a successful career. Sosale et al. (2019) also point out that this program has “benefited 2.3 million students, of whom 55 percent were girls.” The success rate is already climbing; if Bangladesh jumps on board with this program, they have the opportunity to be a part of that success rate as well. According to Rahman (2016), “Improved quality of higher education provides an opportunity for better jobs.” Obtaining an education means more opportunities and a larger field of jobs available to these educated girls. With this program, the girls are able to receive an education, and their parents benefit in return because they receive rewards such as cash and scholarships for their children. Every year of education completed is important; therefore, simply adding one year of learning can help a child grow in literacy, language development, mathematics, and more.

Another program that has tremendously improved the education of girls is The Secondary Education Development Program (SEDP). These classes examine some of the issues that have occurred in the past two decades and form a plan to fix these problems by educating young girls. One example of a class in the SEDP curriculum is the Adolescent Girls’ Program, which teaches young girls about sex education, the importance of knowing about reproductive health, managing their bodies, and sanitation. Islam et al. (2017) say that “Bangladesh has the highest adolescent fertility rate in South Asia where 1 girl in 10 has a child before the age of 15 whereas 1 in 3 adolescent becomes a mother or pregnant by the age of 19.” This rate is not only concerning for the country but for climate change, and other environmental factors. The SEDP program is a supplement for girls who cannot attend school to learn about those topics or become aware of the situations that could occur. With these efforts, these programs will eventually help transition low-income, developing countries into developed countries by teaching young ladies the importance of safe sex and sanitation. Step by step, the community will grow and create a stronger and more equal environment. In return, girls will learn about their bodies and will receive money for participating in the program. The money received is recommended to be saved towards an education. Ultimately, this will reduce the number of girls in the fast fashion industry because the girls are earning money in a safer and more beneficial way instead of a fast-fashion job that could be potentially life-threatening. If more Adolescent Girls’ Programs are implemented in more areas of Bangladesh, these girls will become resilient and more autonomous. They will not need to work in garment factories and can complete their schooling while continuing to earn money for their families. This will ultimately create a ripple effect for the girls’ possible children and other family members. Influence is everything. Siddiq (2019) says that “[the] lack of support from family and society... against the rural community—among other factors—affect rural girls’ education.” These education classes will help shift public perception of girls’ education and establish a new culture centered around education equality. Breaking this cycle takes a tremendous amount of effort, but it can be accomplished. Educating the youth, especially girls, will create not only an inclusive society but give hope to other countries also struggling with this issue.

People living in the United States and elsewhere around the world can also help eliminate fast fashion and in turn, help provide a brighter future for girls. To start abolishing this major issue around the world, people can participate in simple acts to show support for the workers trapped in this tangled business. Being aware of the origin of clothes purchased, as well as how they are manufactured, is just a start. By checking the labels and doing a bit of research, people can reduce the fast fashion process by shopping and supporting ethical stores and brands. Linden (2016) makes a good point that “If fast fashion consumers were to shift their preferences it appears as though fast-fashion retailers would shift their production...” This means that consumers are essentially in control of the future of fashion. Everything

buyers do have a ripple effect on themselves and the population of the world. While there can be challenges in making the switch and shopping from ethical, non-fast fashion stores, quality brands are out there, including Patagonia, Levi's, and Reformation. Sometimes the lack of options, sizes, or design can be unpleasant, but Tomietto (2021) makes a good point that "...big brands pour their money into marketing and brand development. Ethical brands put it into their supply chain and their products." More and more companies are noticing the actions fast fashion jobs have on young girls and their families. A lot is on the line if consumers continue to shop unethically. Taking the next steps is now left up to the consumer.

As mentioned above, not one solution alone will fix the issue of fast fashion. A more gradual solution to help this issue would be to donate school supplies or money to campaigns that encourage these girls to grow, succeed, and gain an education. Some organizations that collect donations include the Adolescent Girls' Program, Save the Children, UNICEF USA, and many more. Hart (2020) mentions that "Children from ... Bangladesh still need notebooks, pencils, backpacks, and sports equipment, now more than ever!" With the help of donors, the girls and their families in Bangladesh might have a chance at new opportunities. These girls could have the future they deserve if they are given the opportunity to continue their education instead of being forced to continue to work in fast fashion factories.

For many families, education is not always a priority, especially for girls in underdeveloped countries. This is a stigma that has been around for centuries and spans all over the country. If the world is educated about the negative effects of fast fashion and is aware of the companies that participate in this type of garment manufacturing, and in turn, encourages the rights of a young girl's education, change is sure to follow. Fast fashion significantly and negatively affects a young girl's life and the statistics prove that. Children should not have to work to help support their families at the expense of getting at least a high school diploma. Despite the fact that fast fashion factories contribute to a decrease in girl's education, more opportunities for girls to learn are possible when the focus is shifted from working a factory job to obtaining an education. This is a hard mission to accomplish but if the whole world understands this issue, these girls could have the childhood they deserve. By supporting initiatives such as the Female Secondary School Assistance Project and The Secondary Education Development Program (and the Adolescent Girls' Program within that program), people can and will make a difference for these girls of Bangladesh, especially if consumers acknowledge the fact that fast fashion is an issue that needs to be discussed. With the help of these assistance programs, receiving a high school diploma in Bangladesh as a young girl, just got more probable.

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