

## Generational Effects of Handicraft Fair Trade Production: A Bangladesh Case Study

Tomomi Naka

Department of Regional Culture, Tottori University, Japan

Doi:10.5901/ajis.2013.v2n9p284

### Abstract

*Fair trade movements aim to respond to economic and social inequality and to support poor farmers and artisans in developing countries through trade. Many scholars are investigating to what extent and how the production of fair trade products affects those who are making them. Some studies have indicated benefits to producers in certain areas such as income, access to market, and business and other skill development. Others suggest concerns about negative effects of fair trade such as increased dependency of producers on particular fair trade endeavors, limited ability to address gender inequality, and increased financial burden on producers. However, little attention has been paid to generational effects on fair trade producers. To explore one of such effects, this paper investigates children's educational achievements in relation to their parents (who make handicrafts). Survey responses and interviews with handicraft producers and their children were collected from seven fair trade enterprises in Bangladesh in summer of 2012. The results indicate that producers value children's education highly, and many children, both male and female, gain more education than producers themselves. In the majority of cases, children finished the highest grade in their households. Children's interviews suggest that mothers' work often inspires them to continue their education, while they also recognize their limited economic situations.*

### 1. Introduction

Fair trade and fair trade movements aim to improve the lives of economically and socially disadvantaged or marginalized groups of people around the world through trade (Brown, 1993; Nicholls & Opal, 2005). The fair trade market is expanding and sales of fair trade items are on the rise (Krier, 2001; Smith, 2009). Stores in many countries, including Japan, the U.S., and Italy, sell numerous fair trade products, such as coffee and clothes. As the term fair trade becomes increasingly prevalent, scholars and fair trade supporters are investigating what changes fair trade has brought to diverse communities of producers.

Handicrafts were one of the first fair trade products. Soon after World War II, some of the leading fair trade organizations, which later became Ten Thousand Villages and Oxfam, started to sell handicrafts made by poor and disadvantaged people to support their livelihoods (Low & Davenport, 2005). While agricultural products, such as coffee and bananas, are widely known fair trade products nowadays, handicrafts comprise approximately one-fourth of fair trade sales (Randall, 2005). Within the general discussion about the effects of fair trade movements on producers, scholars are debating the effects of fair trade handicrafts production on local artisans and producers.

Scholars have been exploring the effects of fair trade movements from a variety of angles. Studies that focus on fair trade producers, which are most relevant to this article, suggest the results of fair trade production are mixed. Fair trade can bring beneficial effects in some cases, including increased income, access to market, and business and other skill-development opportunities (Jones et al., 2012; Le Mare, 2012; Nelson & Pound, 2009). On the other hand, some studies point out the potentially unfavorable effects that fair trade endeavors can have. Concerns include the increased dependency of producers on particular fair trade endeavors (LeClair, 2002), fair trade's limited ability to address gender inequality or to increase democratic participation in decision-making processes (Boersma, 2009; Hutchens, 2010), and the increased financial burden placed on producers (Lyon, 2007).

Because each study is based on a different group or community, geographic, cultural and sociological contexts need to be carefully considered. However, in general, as the first group of studies suggest, there are some benefits through fair trade at least in the short term. In contrast, the concerns suggested by the latter group tend to center on relatively long-term changes or the lack of such changes that fair trade production may bring to producers' communities. In order to explore one of the changes that fair trade production can bring to the producers' communities long term, this article examines children's educational achievement. While educational level alone does not necessarily show changes in the life prospects of children or in producers' livelihoods, it can indicate a facet of the long-term changes that fair trade production can bring to the producers' community.

This article analyzes educational achievement among children of the producers. Results from the survey and

interviews with the producers and their children suggest that in the majority of producers' households at least one of their children achieved the highest grade-level in their households. The interview comments and survey indicate that producers value children's education highly, and many children, both male and female, gain more education than producers themselves. Children's interviews suggest that mothers work often inspires them to continue their education, while they also recognize their families' challenging economic situations.

## 2. Research Context

This study is based on seven fair trade production enterprises that are affiliated with Prokritee, a fair trade handicraft organization, and have close relationships with the Mennonite Central Committee (MCC). Since 1973, MCC has been working for Bangladesh, to support its development. One area where MCC has been working is job creation, particularly in rural areas where no major industries exist for the residents. At first, MCC staff members and volunteers worked to create handicrafts that were made out of local materials, such as jute, so that local residents could raise their incomes. As handicraft businesses grew, MCC gradually passed the business leadership to Bangladeshi workers, forming individual enterprises. In 2001, Prokritee was created to manage these local Bangladeshi enterprises.

There are currently nine enterprises, which receive a variety of services from Prokritee, including product design and marketing support. Each enterprise, however, is financially independent. Enterprises in this study have received services and advice from MCC workers, especially at the beginning. Currently, the handicrafts made by the enterprises are sold via Prokritee to many major fair trade organizations abroad, including Ten Thousand Villages (USA and Canada), People Tree (Japan), Ctm altromercato (Italy), and Trade Aid (New Zealand). Seven enterprises were chosen from among the nine affiliated with Prokritee because their geographical locations were relatively easy for me and my research assistants to visit and conduct interviews. Five of them are in the Agailjhara area in Barisal, one is in the Charipur area in Feni, and another is in the Muktagacha area in Mymensingh. All of them are in rural areas with few, if any, other industries.

Following Prokritee's mission and operational principles, these enterprises employ local women in poverty, who have little to no income or land and who act as heads of their households (such as widows, separated, and divorced women). On average, these enterprises employ 57 full-time producers. Each enterprise makes different products, including handmade papers, greeting cards and notebooks (made from jute, silk, and recycled papers) and ropes, dolls, and ornaments (made from jute and hemp). A survey and semi-structured interviews were conducted among 94 of the workers at these enterprises during May and June 2012. At each enterprise, 10-15 producers took part in the survey. These research participants were from many production sections, so the data include diverse opinions and views. When possible, my research assistants and I visited a few producers' houses. All of the houses were simply furnished with a dirt floor. According to accounts from assistant managers at the enterprises and the producers themselves, many improvements have been made to the residences since the producers gained employment. In addition to producers, we interviewed 24 children of these producers, who were available to come to the enterprises or were at our home visits.

## 3. Producers

According to our survey, the average length of employment at these enterprises is 12.6 years. Producers' ages range from 16 to 55 (average 36.9 years old). The level of education of the producers varies. 29.7% (28 producers) had no formal education. 47.9% (45 producers) received some level of primary education (until 5<sup>th</sup> grade). Only 3.1% (3 producers) had education above the 10<sup>th</sup> grade level. Producers generally live with their children and husband or other relatives. On average, the household size is 4.67 people.

**Table 1.** Producers' Educational Level

Educational Level	N	%
None	28	29.7
Primary (Grade 1 to 5)	45	47.9
Junior (Grade 6 to 8)	13	13.8
Secondary (Grade 9 and 10)	4	4.2
Higher Secondary (Grade 11 and 12)	2	2.1
College and University	1	1.0
No Answer	1	1.0
<b>Total</b>	<b>94</b>	<b>100 **</b>

\* Educational level is based on the Bangladesh educational system.

\*\* The numbers in this column do not add up to 100 because of rounding.

According to the enterprises, the average wage that producers earn is 3000 taka (approximately 40 US dollars) per month. In addition to this monthly wage, the producers receive two holiday bonuses, a dividend based on the sales of the enterprises, and 100 taka per month for medical assistance. Each enterprise sets aside some money for a community development fund and a skill development fund. Producers also occasionally receive some extra benefits, such as gifts like fruit trees or eye glasses and workshops on selected topics, such as hygiene and gardening. Producers are encouraged to save money but most of them only save the minimum amount that the enterprises asked them to save, 25 to 100 taka per month.

Producers' stories demonstrate their difficult economic situations before their employment at the enterprises. Some lost their husbands by illnesses; some were separated from or divorced by their husbands and had to look after their children alone. In such cases, in-laws were less willing to support them. Some of them returned to their natal homes but found that their aging parents were no longer able to support them. For example, Sadia lost her husband when their son was only six months old. She was devastated and felt helpless. A good neighbor who knew of the enterprise mentioned a job opportunity at the enterprise to her. She took an interview and eventually got a job. She said that prior to her employment all her attention was paid to basic survival, but now she is hopeful for her and her son's lives. Her concerns shifted from daily survival to future hopes. She said, "In my early age, I was deprived of happiness because of my husband's death. Now if I get happiness from my son and his success, it will be my pride."

Producers see that work at the enterprises provides them something beyond wages for survival. For example, Shanjida, another producer, said, "Before joining here, I did not know any work, but after joining here I learned many new things, such as making various creative handicrafts by rope, which I like the most. With the wage I earn, I can support my children's education fees, and I like working with the other women." In rural Bangladesh, most women stay at home and take care of household chores. Going outside the home, being able to spend time with other women, and acquiring craft skills are new opportunities for producers.

Indeed, working with other women is noted frequently as the aspect that producers like most about their jobs after the wages. At work, producers have plentiful opportunities to talk, exchange opinions, and give and receive advice. When we visited their enterprises, we felt the presence of such on-going conversations. Producers' talk covered many topics, including family relations, food/cooking, and current local affairs. Their children were another main topic.

#### **4. Children's Education: Producers' View**

Producers stress that once they have income for their daily survival, they make it a high priority to pay for their children's education. Both Sadia and Shanjida mentioned that with their jobs, not only do they have money to feed their families, but they are able to pay education fees for their children. As indicated in earlier comments, for Sadia, her sons' success is her most significant future hope. Elaborating on her comments, she said that she makes sure that she can support her son in getting good education. Similarly, Shanjida also pointed out to the interviewer that she is now able to support her children's education.

The producers' emphasis on education comes from the fact that educational level greatly affects a person's career opportunities in Bangladesh. The producers have experienced this effect first hand. Employment as a producer does not require a certain educational background or degree. However, without a bachelor's or a master's degree, producers cannot be promoted to supervising positions, even if they have long years of excellent work experiences. Most producers lack these educational qualifications required for supervising positions. In fact, none of the women surveyed had received permanent promotion. There are, however, opportunities for producers to be recognized for their diligent and excellent work. By vote among producers, they can be elected as producer representatives and attend producer management meetings. This is a highly respected position by producers and enterprises. Nevertheless, without having a certain level of education, formal promotion is limited. Such an educational requirement is common in Bangladesh. The producers are well aware of this requirement and hope that their children will have opportunities to pursue higher levels of education and better subsequent careers.

#### **5. Children's Education: Survey Results**

The survey examined the educational level of producers' children. 71 out of a total 88 producers who have children (80.7 %) answered that one of their children is the person who has finished the highest grade in their households. If we exclude cases in which the children are too young to have surpassed their parents' grade levels, 93.4 % (71 out of 76) of producers said that their children have gone to the highest grade in their households.

The sex of the children does not seem to affect this answer. In 36 cases, sons completed the highest grade in the household, while in 33 cases daughters have finished the highest grade. In 2 cases, both daughters and sons went onto the highest level of education. In more than half of the cases (56 out of 88, 63.6 %), the producers' children went onto not only the highest grade in the household, but to the highest level of educational institutions. For example, this includes a case where other household members never go on to junior schools (grade 6 to 8), while one of the producer's children did.

**Table 2.** Children's Educational Levels in the Producers' Household

Producers' Responses	N
No Children of their own	6
Child/ren went to the highest grade in the household	71
Other household members went to the highest grade in the household (Among them, cases where children were too young to go onto the highest grade in the households)	17 (12)
<b>Total</b>	<b>94</b>

**Table 3.** Numbers of Cases in which Children Completed the Highest Educational Grade/Class by Sex

Sex of Children	N
Male	36
Female	33
Both Male and Female	2
<b>Total</b>	<b>71</b>

Further examination indicates that producers whose children have achieved the highest level of education in the household share some characteristics. Those producers tend to have more children (average 2.48 children) than others (1.32 children). They also tend to be a little older (average 38.1 years old) than others (31.1 years old). Having more children may increase the likelihood that one of the children attains the highest level of education in the producer's household.

Another characteristic is that the producers whose children completed the highest grade in the household tend to have been employed at the enterprises for longer than other producers. On average, the first group of producers has worked for 13.2 years at the enterprise. In contrast, the latter group has worked 11.0 years on average. The difference is even greater when we compare producers whose children went on to higher level of educational institutions (average 13.3 years of employment) and other producers (8.68 years). This relationship between length of employment and children's educational achievement is interesting and suggests an area where further studies can be done. From this survey, it is not possible to tell whether and how length of employment at the enterprises affects the children's level of education. However, a further study could clarify whether the steady jobs and income at the fair trade enterprises contribute to encouraging producers' children to continue their education.

**Table 3.** Comparison between Producers whose Children Completed the Highest Grade in the Household and Other Producers

Characteristics	Producers whose Children completed highest educational grade in the household	Other Producers (who have children who did not completed the highest grade in the household)
Average Number of Children (years)	2.48	1.32
Average Age (years)	38.1	31.1
Length of Employment at the Enterprises (years)	13.2	11.0

## 6. Children's Perspectives

To explore children's view of their education and their mothers' work at the enterprises, we interviewed 24 producers'

children at different enterprises and of different ages (ranging from primary school to college level). The interviews suggest that these children recognize that their mothers work hard for them at the enterprises and wish for their children's success in school and subsequent careers. When asked about their mothers' work, all of the children said that their mothers' work helps them to continue to pay for their education as well as family necessities. For example, Arif explained that his mother's work helps him and his sister to continue their studies. Arif's father left his mother for another woman and this put his family in great poverty. With his mother's employment, his sister was able to finish her bachelor's degree. Arif continues his study and has now passed the Secondary School Certificate (SSC) exam with a good result. He says, "I am proud of my mother," and appreciates her work as she contributes to their development. While not all children are academically inclined, many children receive scholarships and have obtained diplomas and degrees.

The interviews with children suggest that sons and daughters are similarly aware of their mothers' hopes for them and appreciate their mothers' work. Children also pointed out that both daughters and sons are encouraged to pursue their education. For example, pointing out the differences between her mother and other mothers, Nipa (10) said that "my mother treats all of my brothers and sister in equal way, but sometimes other mothers do not treat sons and daughters in same way." This corresponds with the earlier survey result that both sons and daughters are similarly indicated as the person who has finished the highest grade in the household.

Children themselves have high hopes for their future careers. Some of the professions they hope for include doctors, nurses, teachers, accountants, and engineers. However, not all of the children have a good understanding of the professions they mentioned. For instance, some children did not know what type of education and training would be helpful or required to pursue specific careers. On several occasions, my research assistants explained to the children that they should be in a different track and class if they wish to achieve their future careers. While the future jobs that the children mentioned may not be realistic, these comments indicate that they see their future life as hopeful and open for many opportunities.

At the same time, children's comments suggest that they perceive drawbacks and limitations to their mothers' work and have developed coping strategies. While all of them appreciate their mothers' work and income, some wish that their mothers could stay at home. Zahir, for example, said that he wishes his mother could stay at home like other mothers. In rural Bangladesh, the ability for a mother to stay at home can indicate social and financial class. Children feel that the absence of mothers at home during day time puts them in a different class from other classmates—a reminder that while their mothers have to work, others do not have to because they are financially better off.

Children also have to cope with financial and other limitations. Studying without private tutoring is one example. In Bangladesh, private tutoring is common and often crucial to obtain high marks on exams. However, producers' children cannot afford such services. The children interviewed mentioned that it is difficult to prepare for major exams (such as graduation exams) without private tutoring, but they have to deal with the situation. In a few cases, older siblings and cousins could help them. In most cases, however, children often have to figure out the questions by themselves. My research assistants, who are university students, said to me that they really wished to give the children more helpful advice in preparing for the exams because they know that even if children are clever and attentive in class, private tutoring is often necessary to pass exams with good scores.

Children, even those who are relatively young, also mention that they have to support their mothers at housework as their mothers simply do not have the time and energy to do all of it after long hours of work. Older children help with the cooking and other household chores. When busy, some producers bring their work home in order to produce the necessary number of handicrafts. Children, especially those who are old enough, may help their mothers on such occasions. In one case, a child said that she helps her mother even if she has to skip school. She is a good student and lessons are not so difficult for her. She says, "I only skip school when we have few classes. But I can manage that. I ask help from my classmates about class lessons. I also have a cousin; I ask everything from him about class and other things in school if I cannot go. That's how I catch up with my school." While this situation is rare, and this practice is discouraged by the enterprises, the child's comments show how crucial her mother's income is for the family.

## 7. Conclusion

The survey and interviews suggest that a majority of fair trade handicraft producers in this study have children who completed the highest grade in their households. Both sons and daughters are encouraged to pursue their education and there is little difference in the numbers of sons and daughters who are mentioned as the person who has completed the highest grade in their household. Accounts by producers suggest that they stress the importance of children's education highly and their children often recognize this.

The results of this study also suggest several areas for future research to fully understand the long-term effects that fair trade production can bring. In this study, the survey indicates that producers whose children have gone to the highest grade in the household tend to have worked at the enterprises for longer. Steady income earned by fair trade handicraft production may have contributed to this. However, because of this study's focus, it is not yet clear how length of employment relates to the children's level of education. As mentioned in the beginning of this article, studies have suggested that fair trade production does not adequately address gender inequalities, including women's participation in decision making processes (Boersma, 2009; Hutchens, 2010). However, in this study, the survey and children's accounts suggest that daughters and sons of producers are similarly encouraged to pursue their education. Educational achievement is only one facet of the effects of fair trade production, but if this trend continues, it may lead to more profound effects on the gender relationships in the subsequent generations.

While this is beyond the scope of the present study, the relationship between children's educational advancement and local economic and other development could be a fruitful topic to explore in the future. The pursuit of education may lead children to relocate to the cities. With training and experiences, children may return to help contribute to the local community in the long run. In other cases, children may not return. Relocation, in this case, may end up taking away young, talented individuals from communities and hindering the further development of local areas. Conducting follow-up studies about children's lives in the future could provide insights into the effects of fair trade production.

This is a case study situated in production enterprises affiliated with a Bangladesh fair trade production organization. However, examinations of children of fair trade production workers can provide insights into one of the long-term effects of fair trade production in general. As mentioned in the beginning of this article, studies on fair trade production and its effects on producers have suggested several benefits and concerns that may arise in the future. The examination of producers' children can help us to examine whether some of these negative effects are indeed brought about by fair trade production.

## 8. Acknowledgement

I am grateful for the help and logistical arrangement provided by staff members in Prokritee office and enterprises to conduct this research.

## References

- Boersma, F. V. (2008). The urgency and necessity of a different type of market: The perspective of producers organized within the fair trade market. *Journal of Business Ethics*, 86, 51–61.
- Brown, B. (1993). *Fair trade: Reform and realities in the international trading system*. London: Zed Books.
- Hutchens, A. (2010). Empowering women through fair trade? Lessons from Asia. *Third World Quarterly*, 31(3), 449–467.
- Jones, E., Smith S., & Wills, C. (2012). Women producers and the benefits of collective forms of enterprise. *Gender & Development*, 20 (1), 13-32.
- Krier, J. M. (2001). Fair trade in Europe 2001. Retrieved from <http://www.european-fair-trade-association.org/efta/Doc/FT-E-2001.pdf>
- Le Mare, A. (2012). 'Show the world to women and they can do it': Southern fair trade enterprises as agents of empowerment. *Gender & Development*, 20 (1), 95-109.
- LeClair, M. (2002). Fighting the tide: Alternative trade organizations in the era of global free trade. *World Development*, 30 (6), 949–958.
- Low, W. & Davenport, E. (2005). Postcards from the edge: Maintaining the 'alternative' character of fair trade. *Sustainable Development* 13, 143–153.
- Lyon, S. (2007). Maya coffee farmers and fair trade: Assessing the benefits and limitations of alternative markets. *Culture & Agriculture*, 29 (2), 100–112.
- Nelson, V. & Pound, B. (2009). The last ten years: A comprehensive review of the literature on the impact of fairtrade. Retrieved from [http://www.fairtrade.org.uk/resources/natural\\_resources\\_institute.aspx](http://www.fairtrade.org.uk/resources/natural_resources_institute.aspx)
- Nicholls, A. & Opal, C. (2005). *Fair trade: Market-driven ethical consumption*. London: Sage.
- Randall, D. (2005). An exploration of opportunities for the growth of the fair trade market: Three cases of craft organisations. *Journal of Business Ethics*, 56 (1), 55-67.
- Smith, A. M. (2009). Fair trade, diversification and structural change: Towards a broader theoretical framework of analysis. *Oxford Development Studies*, 37 (4), 457-478.