

Trade Liberalization & Effects on Marriage:

CASE STUDIES FROM BANGLADESH, VIETNAM AND EGYPT



ICRW

International Center
for Research on Women
where insight and action connect

Marriage is an institution that shapes the status and livelihoods of women around the world.

Economic growth and trade liberalization can transform this institution by increasing employment opportunities for women. Marriage, especially early marriage of adolescent girls, may become less economically essential as young women become financially independent. Trade liberalization also can influence marriage through its effect on aspirations related to marriage and increased consumerism.

Bangladesh, Egypt and Vietnam liberalized trade using similar approaches but experienced different effects on marriage. Sajeda Amin found three unique effects of liberalization on marriage in these countries. In Bangladesh, trade liberalization created opportunities for young women to work in the garment sector and delayed the age at marriage. In Egypt, which had already achieved a relatively late age at marriage, economic liberalization was associated with delayed age at marriage for men and women, but not an increase in young women's workforce participation. In Vietnam, the impact of trade liberalization on marriage was neutral. Although women's employment increased in sectors like garments, women already had a long history of labor force participation and were marrying later so its effects, if any, were not as clear.



PHOTO (#83602548) BY LORENA ROS,
COURTESY OF GETTY IMAGES

COVER PHOTOS

(top) Iraqi women work at a sweets factory in Baghdad. Photo (#51350997) by Ramzi Haidar, courtesy of Getty Images.

(bottom) Indian brides sit with their grooms during a mass marriage ceremony for some 101 poverty-stricken couples from the India-Pakistan border areas. Photo (#77439710) by Narinder Nanu, courtesy of Getty Images.

■ ■ Bangladesh

The government of Bangladesh implemented economic reforms in the 1980s, removing barriers to trade and implementing other measures to stabilize its economy. During this period of trade expansion, many social and economic indicators improved (see Table 1). Export earnings also grew rapidly, fueled by the expansion of the garment sector, which primarily employs women. Garment production grew from just four factories in 1978 to more than 3,000 factories, which employed about 300 workers per site in the major urban centers of Dhaka and Chittagong, in 2005. On average, nine of 10 people employed in factories that mass produce for exports are women, who come from poor and large families and tend to have only eight years of formal education.²

Table 1. Economic and Social Indicators for Bangladesh

	1980	1990	2000	2005
GDP per capita, PPP ³ (<i>constant 2000 international \$</i>)	1051	1196	1543	1827
Literacy rate, adult total (<i>% of people ages 15 & above</i>)	29.0	35	60.1	n/a
Life expectancy at birth, female (<i>years</i>)	48.7	55.4	62.2	64.8
Life expectancy at birth, male (<i>years</i>)	48.9	54.7	60.9	63.0
Fertility rate, total (<i>births per woman</i>)	6.1	4.3	3.2	2.9
Urban population (<i>% of total population</i>)	14.9	19.8	23.2	25.1

Sources: *World Development Indicators and Asian Development Bank*

Before economic reforms, Bangladeshi women were largely excluded from access to paid factory work. Trade liberalization provided more women with opportunities for formal employment (the main alternative to factory work is domestic service). Jobs in the garment sector have enabled women to better negotiate their position in society: Early marriage, large age differences with spouses and social norms combine to render women unable to assert their rights.

Bangladesh traditionally has maintained an early age at marriage. Girls are considered ready for marriage at puberty or soon after. The median age of marriage for women is 15.4 years (see Table 4) and has only increased by one or two years each decade since the 1960s. High dowry demands, which are about \$200 (half of average per capita income in 2001), have not delayed marriage. Dowry standards dictate that younger brides are “worth” smaller dowries, so families want daughters to marry as early as possible. Factory work is one of the few means by which girls can save for their own dowries, and therefore, gain some leverage in determining when they marry.

Women are taking advantage of the opportunity to earn incomes and delay marriage and/or childbearing through export-oriented employment, despite the challenges of low wages, long hours and poor conditions that characterize garment production. Although most factory employees quit work to get married and have children, young women have been able to delay age at marriage and manage the higher dowry demands of delayed marriage.

■ ■ Egypt

In contrast to Bangladesh where export growth began during a time of economic crisis, Egypt's economic reforms⁴ followed a long period of economic growth and rising economic aspirations. Egypt is a middle-income country with a large urban population, but social indicators are relatively low (the notable exception is literacy rates, which have improved dramatically in recent years) (see Table 2). Trade liberalization in Egypt is associated with only modest socioeconomic gains.⁵

Economic reform in Egypt did not result in larger increases in women's employment, unlike the trend in other countries experiencing similar trade liberalization. Prior to economic reform, the majority of employed women worked in professional or clerical jobs. As the public sector contracted, women lost their white-collar jobs but held on to expectations related to that work, such as pleasant and safe working conditions and jobs located near urban centers

Table 2. Economic and Social Indicators for Egypt

	1980	1990	2000	2005
GDP per capita, PPP (<i>constant 2000 international \$</i>)	2086.80	2799.89	3527.22	3843.93
Literacy rate, adult total (<i>% of people ages 15 & above</i>)	39.0	47	53.7	71.4
Life expectancy at birth, female (<i>years</i>)	56.8	64.3	70.9	72.8
Life expectancy at birth, male (<i>years</i>)	54.4	61.4	66.8	68.4
Fertility rate, total (<i>births per woman</i>)	5.4	4.27	4	3.1
Urban population (<i>% of total population</i>)	43.9	43.5	42.5	42.8
Urban population (<i>% of total population</i>)	14.9	19.8	23.2	25.1

Sources: Male and Female Life Expectancy: World Development Indicators and Asian Development Bank

where they lived. Although the Egyptian government created several industrial zones and invested in infrastructure development to attract investors, these industrial zones were located in areas far from urban centers, making it difficult to attract a larger number of women workers. Moreover, in Egypt, work in export-oriented factories is considered harsh, and studies of garment workers reveal complaints about long working hours and high production demands. Finally, long hours dissuade young women from working after they marry because the long hours are not considered compatible with role expectations in marriage and childbearing.

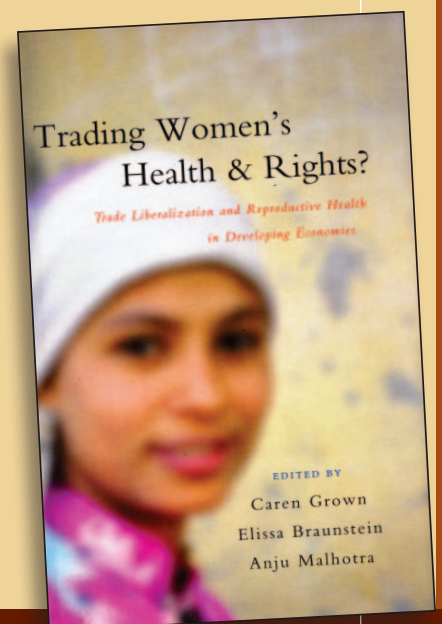
Egypt's median age at marriage for women is 19.9 (see Table 4), which is late compared to other developing countries, though early marriage has a long precedent in parts of Egypt. Analysts have suggested that two causes of marriage delay in the decades immediately prior to trade liberalization are rising education levels and war with Israel. Since the economic reforms, marriage costs have grown, primarily due to rising consumerism and living preferences, which also contributed to delayed age at marriage.

■ Vietnam

Vietnam's policy of economic reform, *Doi Moi*, started in 1986 after the failure of centrally planned socialist policies created heightened economic hardship. Economic conditions were characterized by high poverty as well as poor economic and social indicators (see Table 3).

Trading Women's Health and Rights? is a collection of 12 theoretical analyses, empirical investigations and case studies that explore the effects of trade liberalization on women's reproductive health in developing countries. The book is based on a project undertaken by the International Center for Research on Women (ICRW).

This brief, drafted by Anne Hainer, is based on "Impact of Trade Liberalization for Working Women's Marriage: Case Studies of Bangladesh, Egypt and Vietnam" by Sajeda Amin in *Trading Women's Health and Rights? Trade Liberalization and Reproductive Health in Developing Economies*. Caren Grown, Elissa Braunstein, Anju Malhotra, eds. Zed Books, NY, 2006.



Despite high levels of poverty, Vietnam had a strong legacy of education, and its educated yet low-cost workforce attracted foreign investment. Manufactured exports were the primary goal of *Doi Moi*, but in 2002, most exports were agriculture and aquaculture products; less than 25 percent of exports were manufactured goods. Vietnam entered the garment and textile markets relatively late, hindering the country's ability to benefit from trade agreements and attract direct foreign investment.

Recent economic developments created new employment opportunities for men and women, though Vietnam already had a history of high labor force participation of women in trade, commerce and agriculture. Women are more likely than men to work in export-oriented factories such as garment production, even though working conditions are considered to be harsh, in terms of longer hours, and the relative absence of job security and benefits such as medical and health insurance.

Table 3. Economic and Social Indicators for Vietnam

	1980	1990	2000	2005
GDP per capita, PPP (<i>constant 2000 international \$</i>)	n/a	1152.56	2039.97	2736.67
Literacy rate, adult total (<i>% of people ages 15 & above</i>)	87	90	92	n/a
Life expectancy at birth, female (<i>years</i>)	62.1	66.8	71.5	73.21
Life expectancy at birth, male (<i>years</i>)	58.3	62.8	66.7	68.2
Fertility rate, total (<i>births per woman</i>)	5.0	3.61	1.9	1.8
Urban population (<i>% of total population</i>)	19.2	20.3	24.3	26.4
Urban population (<i>% of total population</i>)	14.9	19.8	23.2	25.1

Sources: *World Development Indicators and Asian Development Bank*

Marriage occurs later for women in Vietnam than the other countries in the study. The median age at marriage is 21 (see Table 4). Trade liberalization cannot be singularly responsible for these delays. Boosts in girls' education, vocational training and other factors — including the Vietnam War's effect on sex ratios — could have influenced marriage timing. Additionally, socialist law encouraged women and men to make marriage choices and prohibited traditional

practices such as arranged marriages, polygamy and concubinage. Increases in women’s autonomy — such as earned incomes that have given women better positions within their families to negotiate with parents on marriage decisions — also are associated with delayed age at marriage. As *Doi Moi* continues and socialist legacies fade, another anticipated source of change in marriage patterns in Vietnam is more consumerism and the reemergence of traditional marriage practices.

Table 4. Age at Marriage among Women

Indicator	Bangladesh	Egypt	Vietnam
Median age of marriage all women	15.4	19.9	21.0
Median age of marriage urban women	16.8	22.0	23.7
Median age of marriage rural women	15.1	18.4	20.5
Percent of women married before 18	79.0	30.0	14.7

Conclusion

As these case studies show, culture mediates the impact of economic change on marriage differently in different contexts, thus prohibiting any generalizations about trade liberalization and marriage. While the policy implications of these results depend on the national context, reproductive health advocates should focus on demanding more opportunities and choices for women, taking marriage regimes, cultures and preferences explicitly into account. As countries implement liberal trade policies, or otherwise alter these regimes, it is crucial that scholars, activists and policymakers are aware of the potential divergent socioeconomic effects that could result, both those intended and unintended.



PHOTO (#75396068) BY PER-ANDERS PETTERSSON, COURTESY OF GETTY IMAGES

HEADQUARTERS OFFICE: 1120 20th Street NW | Suite 500N | Washington, DC 20036
tel: 202.797.0007 | fax: 202.797.0020 | email: info@icrw.org | www.icrw.org

ASIA REGIONAL OFFICE: C – 139, Defence Colony | New Delhi – 110024 India
tel: 91.11.2465.4216 | fax: 91.11.2463.5142 | email: info.india@icrw.org | www.icrw.org/asia

References

- ¹ Amin, Sajeda. "Implications of Trade Liberalization for Working Women's Marriage: Case Studies of Bangladesh, Egypt and Vietnam." in *Trading Women's Health and Rights?* edited by Caren Grown, Elissa Braunstein, Anju Malhotra. Zed Books, London (2006): 97-120.
- ² Literacy was extremely low in Bangladesh before liberalization, but the government subsidized and promoted education – especially in rural areas – to combat this deficiency. Despite these education reform efforts, the average Bangladeshi still receives only eight years of education.
- ³ Purchase power parity (PPP).
- ⁴ Egypt's economic reforms focused on decreasing the size of the public sector, reducing import tariffs to spur investment, implementing special tax holidays to attract foreign investment and changing labor laws.
- ⁵ While Egypt experienced good overall economic growth, it was not fueled by exports. In general, exports have never accounted for more than 4 percent of GDP.