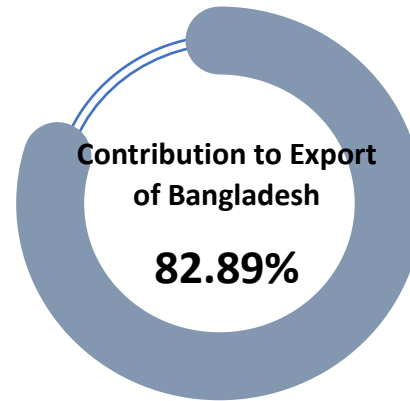


Promotion of Women Leadership in Garment Factories in Bangladesh

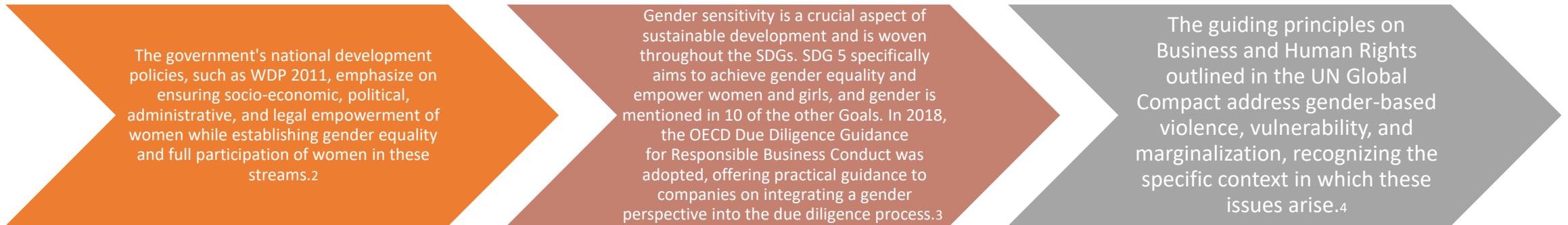
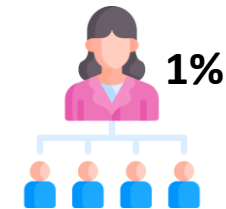


The RMG industry is a key contributor to the economic growth of Bangladesh by generating higher export earnings. Additionally, this sector offers ample employment opportunities to the youth of the country, particularly in low-skilled, entry-level positions.

According to the Bangladesh Bank report of FY 22 of April-June, the total export earnings from Readymade Garments (RMG) stood at USD 11184.76 million and its contribution to total export of Bangladesh was 82.89%.¹



Women are currently making up 53.65% of the workforce according to the recent research “Where are the Women: A study on the Declining Number of Women Workers in Bangladesh RMG Industry” (2022) by BRAC, GiZ and ETI Bangladesh. In the same research it is also mentioned, despite most of the workforce is women, women are underrepresented in leadership positions, with only 1 % holding such roles.



The Gender Sensitive Workplace Programme implemented by Joint Ethical Trading Initiative (JETI) is a critical step towards addressing these challenges in the RMG sector and promoting a more inclusive and equitable workplace environment.

1. Bangladesh Bank. (2022). Quarterly Review on Readymade Garments (RMG): April-June FY'22. Retrieved from https://www.bb.org.bd/pub/quarterly/rmg/rmg_apr_jun2022.pdf

2. Haque, M. (2021, June 25). Women Development Policy. Retrieved from https://www.researchgate.net/publication/355174742_Women_Development_Policy-_2011

3. OECD. (n.d.). Policy Coherence for Sustainable Development and Gender Equality: Fostering an Integrated Policy Agenda. Retrieved from <https://www.oecd.org/gov/gender-mainstreaming/policy-coherence-for-sustainable-development-and-gender-equality.pdf>

4. United Nations Human Rights Council. United Nations. (2011). Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights: Implementing the United Nations "Protect, Respect and Remedy" Framework. Retrieved from https://www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/documents/publications/guidingprinciplesbusinesshr_en.pdf

Intervention Flow



Situation Analysis



Training and Capacity Building



Awareness Raising and Sensitization



Advocacy and Consultation: Factory and Sector Level



Advisory Support



Evaluation and Learning consolidation

The Gender-Sensitive Workplace Program is founded on key principles that aim to develop a comprehensive action plan and promote a holistic approach. During the planning phase, it was crucial to gain a deep understanding of the contextual factors and barriers that hinder women's leadership in factories. The project's goal has been to bring about systemic change, ingrained within the institutional structure, fostering collaboration and engagement with factory and brand management.

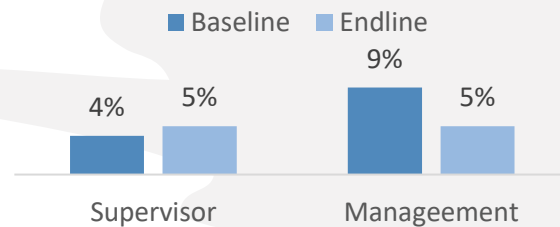
The program prioritizes the quality of work and incorporates impact-driven activities to foster a proactive approach. Its focus is on creating a culture that actively promotes women's leadership and empowerment, thereby establishing a supportive environment conducive to their growth and development. By addressing these fundamental aspects, the program seeks to drive sustainable change and foster gender equality within the workplace.

To advance female leadership within the factories, the project initiated a comprehensive approach that included conducting a thorough situation analysis to identify the existing bottlenecks. In addition to providing training, special emphasis was placed on promoting women's leadership through targeted content. The project also organized awareness campaigns and developed behavior change communication (BCC) materials tailored to this objective. Advocacy played a crucial role in the project's activities. Meetings and consultations were held at both factory and sectoral levels to advocate for the promotion of female leadership. The project provided advocacy support to factory management, assisting them in implementing necessary changes to foster an inclusive and supportive environment. Towards the conclusion of the project, a comprehensive evaluation was conducted to assess the outcomes and impact of the interventions. The project team consolidated the learnings and insights gained throughout the initiative and actively disseminated these findings among the participating factories. By sharing these learnings, the project aimed to foster continuous improvement and knowledge exchange within the industry.

Key Findings from Endline Survey

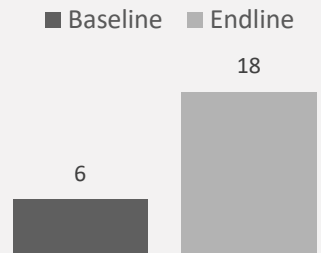
Based on the results of both baseline and endline studies, it has been observed that the proportion of female supervisors has exhibited an increase from 4% to 5%, resulting in a marginal rise of 1%. However, there has been a notable decline of 4% in the proportion of female managers, which has reduced from 9% to 5%. This requires further investigation to explore the causes of the reduction in managerial position, which might be associated with migration to other factories and new recruitment.

Female Representation in Supervisory and Management Roles



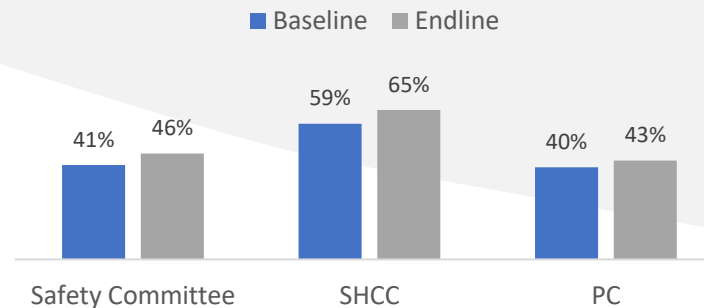
At the baseline stage, only 6 of the factories SHCC had a female chair. However, as per the endline findings, there has been a significant rise in this regard, with 18 of the factory committees onboarding female chair in their SHCC committee.

Female Chair in SHCC



The analysis of the baseline and endline data reveals that the representation of women in sexual harassment complaint committees witnessed a notable upsurge of 6%, escalating from 59% to 65%. While 6% might not seem substantial as a standalone percentage, it is crucial to note that this exceeds the minimum threshold prescribed by law, which mandates that at least 3 out of 5 committee members should be women. Similarly, in safety committees, the proportion of female members witnessed an increase of 5%, rising from 41% to 46%. In participation committees, there was an increment of 3% observed, with female representation rising from 40% to 43%. It is important to note that, unlike sexual harassment complaint committees, there is no law specifying a minimum threshold for female representation in participation committees and safety committees. Nonetheless, this increase signifies a step towards enhancing gender diversity and inclusivity within these committees.

Female Representation in Committees





Project Learnings

Importance of Female Leadership:

As reported by workers and management, male workers tend to approach female leaders to discuss sensitive issues as they perceive that male leaders hold more power and authority, and female leaders show more sensitivity and sensibility in their approach. Additionally, female leaders with a combination of soft and technical skills tend to be better connected to their colleagues and management, which increases their impact and outreach. Moreover, committees that are led by women or have a female chair address agendas for a more gender sensitive workplace culture, resulting in better working conditions and job satisfaction for all workers.

Impact of Female Leadership:

According to the reports from factory managements, the project interventions have had a positive impact on the production floors, resulting in a significant reduction in friction among workers. This improvement can be attributed to the presence of female leaders who have created a safe and inclusive environment, enabling female staff members to express their opinions and concerns comfortably in front of management. This increased sense of safety and empowerment has fostered a more collaborative and productive work environment. The factory managements further emphasized the importance of female leadership in cultivating a positive workplace culture, where employees feel heard and valued, leading to greater job satisfaction and improved overall performance. However, it is noteworthy that the endline survey indicates a reduction in female leadership despite the project's efforts to promote it. Two possible assumptions can be drawn from the project's experience. Firstly, female workers may have migrated to other factories, impacting the representation of female leaders within the surveyed factories. Secondly, it is possible that at the time of the endline survey, female employees were still in the process of onboarding into leadership positions, and their presence may not have been fully reflected in the data. It is crucial to ensure ongoing efforts to promote and support the advancement of female employees into leadership roles, while also considering factors such as workforce mobility and the time required for new leaders to assume their positions.



Project Learnings

Preconditions of Women Leadership:

In order to promote women leadership in factories, certain preconditions must be met. These include having a supportive management team that encourages and promotes gender diversity and equity, as well as providing continuous engagement and support through funding and resources for training programs. A strong HR and compliance team is also necessary to create a work environment that fosters women's leadership. Additionally, factory policies should include provisions for women's leadership, such as gender-balanced organograms. Lastly, access to training programmes that enhance soft skills is crucial for promoting women's leadership. These preconditions are essential for creating a workplace culture that is inclusive and supportive for all employees, leading to greater diversity, equity, and overall job satisfaction.

HR Practices for Women Leadership Promotion:

In the context of factories, there are two observed cycles of HR practices to promote female workers to supervisor roles. Both cycles have the same steps, with the only difference being an additional step in the beginning of one of the cycles. The common steps involved in promoting a female worker to a supervisor role begin with observing the female workers and identifying potential candidates who have demonstrated the ability to meet targets and communicate effectively with others. Once potential candidates have been identified, the HR team discusses opportunities for promotion with the worker. Following agreement to try for the supervisory position, the female worker is provided with technical training and works as an acting supervisor for a week or two as part of the training role play. Once the training is successfully completed, the female worker is onboarded as a supervisor. The only difference in one of the cycles is the additional step of creating interest in women employees for promoted positions. This is necessary because even when potential female workers for promotion are identified, they may not be willing to take up the role or decline the offer after completing the training.

Challenges

Labour Law and its Implementation:

Gender discrimination is the primary cause of the overrepresentation of women in insecure and low-paying jobs. Despite women being overrepresented in certain sectors, senior decision-making positions remain predominantly occupied by men.⁵ The Government of Bangladesh (GoB) holds the responsibility, under the BLA, 2006, to provide adequate support to the country's RMG industry. The BLA, 2006 Act covers women's rights in Bangladesh's RMG industry. However, previous research has indicated that much of this legislation has not been effectively enforced due to a lack of proper government oversight and law enforcement. Additionally, there is a lack of comprehensive documentation in the literature regarding the implementation of BLA, 2006 provisions specifically related to women's rights in the workplace, especially in the field being studied. Furthermore, there is no consensus on the barriers hindering the promotion of gender equality through the utilization of BLA, 2006 provisions in the RMG sector, particularly in empowering women.⁶

Personal Barriers and Social Influences:

One of the major hurdles encountered by female workers relates to the constraints imposed by their families. Limited awareness, safety concerns, and longer working hours associated with higher positions often result in families discouraging and withholding support for their female members to take on promotional roles. The unequal distribution of household responsibilities and the predominance of caregiving duties assigned to women further compound these concerns and act as barriers for women workers.

Lack of Skills:

It has been reported by HR of the factories that, many female workers do not feel confident to take on leadership roles due to the lack of skills required. Workers who already possess leadership qualities such as strong communication skills are usually considered for promotion. Women who lack socio-economic surroundings that support these qualities may not get the same opportunities for promotion.

5. Inclusive Labor Markets, Labor Relations and Working Conditions Branch, 2017

6. Samir, Bhadra & Ali, Mir & Alam, Mahabub & Rehena, Mst & Uddin, Shawan. (2022). The Rights of Women Employees under Bangladesh Labor Act: The Case of Ready-Made Garment Industry in Bangladesh. 3. 1-14.

Challenges

Organizational Behavior and Influences:

Women in leadership roles face challenges from male and female workers alike. Female workers in leadership roles face challenges such as jealousy and side comments from other female workers who are not in such roles. Male workers may ignore or challenge their decisions, making it challenging for female workers to establish their authority. This can create an uncomfortable and unsupportive work environment for female leaders.

Limited Opportunities for Learning and Development:

There is a lack of opportunities to acquire soft skills such as effective communication, problem-solving, and time management skills. Such skills are essential for building confidence and addressing concerns that female workers may face in their initial months in a leadership position. Follow-up trainings and on-the-job support are also necessary to help female leaders navigate the challenges they face and develop into effective leaders.

Less Priority:

Excessive production load often causes strategies taken for promoting female leadership and gender-sensitive workplace or employee wellbeing to take a back seat by the management. This compromises the factory's vision and strategy and reduces the time and resources available for promoting female leadership.

Security Risk:

The factory is often located far from the locality where most workers come from, and the roads are unsafe for women to travel after sundown. Female staff typically travel in groups or with a male colleague escorting them, but promoted female supervisors may have to stay extra hours for their job, which makes them feel unsure about accepting leadership roles.

Recommendations



It is evident from our findings that promoting female leadership in factories requires a comprehensive and holistic approach that addresses existing challenges. This can be achieved through various interventions implemented by relevant stakeholders.

Firstly, a continuous awareness and sensitization interventions should be initiated to promote gender sensitivity in the workplace and community around the factories. Workforce education on the importance of a gender-sensitive workplace and a supportive environment for female workers is crucial. Additionally, households counseling facilities can sensitize workers' families on reproductive responsibilities and supporting female workers.

Capacity building interventions are also essential for promoting female leadership. These interventions should be well-designed, continuous, and include access to soft skills training, technical skills training, refresher training, and on-job support for female workers.

Effective policy provision and implementation strategies are necessary to manage people and achieve strategic business objectives. The strategy should focus on attracting, developing, and retaining staff to compete effectively. This can include creating an affirmative action policy and implementing complementary people-focused HR tools and mechanisms

Finally, accountability and facilitative roles should be a collective approach taken by NGOs, INGOs, Business Associations (BGMEA, BKMEA), Suppliers, Brands, Government, and MSIs. These stakeholders should collaborate and work in their respective territories to create a cohesive plan and jointly decide their facilitative roles.

Promoting female leadership in factories requires a collaborative effort, with various stakeholders playing their part to create a supportive and inclusive workplace environment.