Evaluation of Female Supervisor Effectiveness in the Bangladesh Garments Sector

In recent years, the ready-made garment sector has experienced rapid growth in Bangladesh. While overall, most of these new jobs have gone to women, few of them have been in management. At the same time, firms are under pressure to increase productivity. Researchers are exploring whether a vocational training program can successfully improve productivity and help women advance into management.

Policy Issue
Evidence suggests that the creation of secure, salaried jobs leads to a growing middle class and reduced poverty. Increasing the productivity of medium and large-scale firms is thought to be one of the best ways to create these stable employment opportunities. As a result, policymakers and firms are both interested in programs that can improve productivity. A barrier to enhanced productivity is limited managerial expertise. Underperformance by management may arise from a lack of training or from failure to select the right managers. This study looks at the role of these two perceived constraints to productivity by evaluating the impact a vocational training program that prepares mostly female workers in the Bangladesh ready-made garment industry to become supervisors.

Evaluation Context
The study examines the ready-made garment sector in Bangladesh, a sector that has historically played a crucial role in the early phases of the industrialization process. With labor costs rising in China, international buyers are increasingly sourcing from other countries. This has led to rapid growth of garment exports and employment in Bangladesh, with sector employment nearly doubling between 2002 and 2012. However, pressure from foreign governments and multinational organizations to increase wages and improve working conditions could put the industry at risk if productivity levels do not also rise.

Skilled management could play a key role in increasing productivity. But factories may be reluctant to pay for training out of fear that workers will leave to work for a competitor, while low-wage workers may not have the money to pay for formal training outside of work.
Most of the recently created jobs have gone to women; about 80 percent of machine operators in the ready-made garment industry in Bangladesh are female. However, only about 5 -10 percent of supervisors are women. It is possible that this limits communication and leads to quality defect and delays. Reducing this gender disparity could play an important role in increasing productivity.

**Details of the Intervention**

This project provided the GIZ Operator to Supervisor Training Program, which trains sewing machine operators to become line supervisors, to evaluate the impact of the training on female versus male participants and the effectiveness of female trainees who are promoted to supervisory roles. The program consists of 36 day-long training sessions held over a period of six weeks covering a variety of production, social, and leadership topics.

Seventy-seven factories agreed to participate in the training. Each factory was offered a number of spaces in the training session reserved for female and male workers to allow for comparison of outcomes across genders. The trainings were highly subsidized to incentivize factories to participate.

A baseline survey conducted with managers measured organizational and business practices. Additional surveys were conducted with training participants, workers nominated for but not (randomly) selected for training, and a sample of randomly-selected machine operators at three points in time: before the training, and four and ten months after training. Survey respondents also participated in a number of trust and communication exercises to measure effects of the program on collaboration between workers and supervisors. Detailed production level data was gathered in each factory throughout the study to measure the impact of the program on productivity, quality defects, working hours, and other productivity-related measures.

*Read more about this project in this policy brief from the International Growth Centre.*

**Results and Policy Lessons**

**Sources**


3. Gender ratios are based on factories participating in the first phase of this project.