

Breaking the Career Ceiling for Women in South Asia's Garment Industry

A Study of Working Women in Bangladesh, India, and Pakistan

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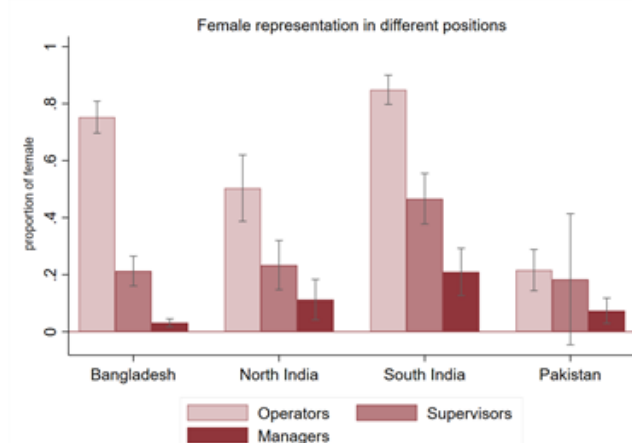


Labor force participation is only the first step. We study barriers to women's career advancement in South Asia.

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Topic at a Glance

Getting women into formal employment is only the first step. Our evidence from over 6,000 sewing machine operators in 103 garment factories across Bangladesh, India, and Pakistan shows that substantial gender gaps persist even among men and women doing the same jobs in the same workplaces. While men and women are equally confident in their on-the-job skills, men are more likely than women to expect to become supervisors and to plan to apply for promotions.



The majority of sewing machine operators are women, except in Pakistan. Across all study areas, women's representation falls sharply in supervisory and management positions.

These gaps cannot be explained primarily by differences in education, experience, hours worked, family support, or concerns about long working hours. Instead, our findings point to lower aspirations among women, a greater perceived need for further training, and workplace practices and attitudes that may limit opportunities for career advancement. Closing gender gaps therefore requires moving beyond policies that focus only on getting women into jobs. Employers and policymakers must also address the individual and workplace barriers that prevent women from turning jobs into careers.

New Insights

Much of the policy discussion about women's employment in South Asia focuses on whether women enter formal employment (i.e. "get jobs"). Far less is known about what happens after women obtain these jobs: whether they receive the same opportunities to develop skills, advance to higher-level positions, and build careers as their male colleagues. This project addresses that gap using survey evidence from more than 6,000 sewing machine operators in 103 large export-oriented garment factories across Bangladesh, India, and Pakistan. By studying men and women working in the same occupation and same factories, the analysis helps identify gender differences in career progression among men and women who have already entered formal employment.

- **Women remain underrepresented in supervisory and managerial positions.** Women's representation falls sharply between machine operator jobs and supervisory and managerial positions across all study areas.
- **Substantial gender gaps persist even among workers in the same occupation.** Men employed as sewing machine operators earn approximately 8 percent more per month and

4 percent more per hour than female operators. The differences in career expectations are larger: 31 percent of men, compared with 12 percent of women, expect to become supervisors; 62 percent of men, compared with 42 percent of women, plan to apply for promotion in the future.

- **Differences in observable worker characteristics explain only a limited share of these gaps.** Oaxaca–Blinder decompositions account for differences in characteristics such as education, experience, hours worked, marital status and other observable factors. These characteristics explain about 43 percent of the monthly earnings gap, but only about 8 percent of the hourly earnings gap, 15 percent of the gap in expectations of becoming a supervisor, and 20 percent of the gap in intentions to apply for promotion. Most of the observed gender differences therefore remain unexplained by these characteristics.
- **The evidence does not support a simple explanation that working women lack confidence, family support or are concerned about long working hours.** Over 90 percent of female machine operators do not expect to leave their job anytime soon, and report that their families are happy or very happy about their employment. Concerns about long working hours or harassment from co-workers or superiors also do not appear as primary worries linked to a hypothetical promotion to a supervisory role.
- **Low aspirations and perceived need for further training may be important barriers to women's career advancement.** Women report similar confidence in their on-the-job skills as men, yet they tend to be less confident in their skills as (potential) supervisors and exhibit lower aspirations for supervisory roles, stating that they are "satisfied with their current job," particularly in Bangladesh and South India.
- **Workplace practices emerge as potentially important barriers to advancement.** Women report less favorable experiences in areas including skill development, evaluation systems, employment practices, and grievance mechanisms

Policy Recommendations

The findings suggest that policies to increase women's economic opportunities should look beyond labor force participation and

formal employment to focus on what happens after women enter the workplace. Increasing women's access to jobs remains essential, but our results show that substantial gender gaps in earnings, promotion intentions, and expectations of advancement can persist even among men and women working in the same occupation and same workplaces. Employers and policymakers should therefore consider barriers on both worker and workplace side to create pathways that allow women to turn jobs into careers.

- One priority is to strengthen access to skill development and make pathways to advancement more transparent. Employers can establish clear criteria for promotion, communicate what workers need to do to move from production positions into supervisory and managerial roles, ensure that women have access to training and opportunities to acquire higher-level skills, and actively encourage high-potential women to pursue these opportunities.
- A second priority is to strengthen workplace systems that affect career progression. More transparent performance evaluations, promotion procedures, and grievance mechanisms can help ensure that advancement reflects worker performance rather than informal practices or subjective judgments. This is particularly relevant because observable differences in worker characteristics explain only a relatively small share of several of the gender gaps documented in the study.
- Finally, employers should pay greater attention to the role of supervisors. Our results reveal gender differences in workers' perceptions of how supervisors evaluate their skills. Training supervisors to recognize potential gender bias, establishing more objective performance measures could help reduce the influence of subjective perceptions on men's and women's career opportunities.

Together, these recommendations imply a shift in emphasis from simply increasing the number of women in formal employment toward addressing both the supply- and demand-side barriers that may shape their career progression once employed. Importantly, our ongoing research is testing whether these barriers can be changed. Through a randomized controlled trial, in a subset of factories, we are evaluating supply-side interventions designed to strengthen women's skills, confidence, and aspirations for career advancement, alongside demand-side interventions targeting managers and supervisors. The evidence generated by the next

stage of this project will help identify which approaches are most effective in enabling women to turn jobs into careers.

Limitations

Several limitations should be considered when interpreting the findings. First, the study covers more than 6,000 workers in 103 large, export-oriented garment factories across Bangladesh, India, and Pakistan. The factories were selected by leveraging the researchers' partnership with the H&M Group and its sourcing relationships with domestic supplier factories. The sample therefore represents a specific segment of the garment industry - large factories connected to global export markets - and should not be considered representative of all garment factories or other workplaces in South Asia.

Second, while we document substantial gender gaps and identify worker- and workplace-level factors that may contribute to them, we cannot establish that these factors cause differences in career advancement. In particular, the unexplained portion of the Oaxaca–Blinder decompositions should not be interpreted as discrimination. Establishing causality is the focus of the next stage of the project, which evaluates supply-side interventions targeting women workers and demand-side interventions targeting managers and supervisors within participating factories.

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