

RESEARCH BRIEF:

Gender Equality at the Workplace Baseline Findings from Better Work Vietnam



Better Work research briefs present a summary of the programme's research findings on particular topics

BETTER WORK

Evidence from Better Work surveys shows that much like patterns across the global garment industry, the majority of workers (about 80%) in the factories where Better Work operates are women. Women in developing countries have rapidly entered the apparel labour force since the mid 1970's. This has generated debate on whether these paid jobs result in female empowerment. Many scholars have highlighted that factory work for global markets can open up new avenues, for example by increasing their financial independence, but it can also create new forms of gender subordination, such as when women are exposed to unfair labour practices.

In this context, how can gender equality at the workplace be promoted?

Findings from a gender analysis of baseline data show that at the time that the garment factories joined Better Work Vietnam differences between male and female workers were marked. Women were positioned in different roles within factories and were less likely than men to receive training or to be promoted. Differences between women workers with varying levels of education were also significant, in particular with regard to awareness of their entitlements and their likelihood of speaking up.

These results show that there is a need for policy measures that give full consideration to the diversity of female workers' circumstances and contribute to strengthening their skills profile as well as their capacity to organize collectively.

I. SUMMARY OF KEY FINDINGS

Better Work Vietnam surveys show significant differences between male and female workers, as

well as between different groups of female workers, at the time the factories enrolled in Better Work. These differences include:

- Gender-based occupational segregation is pronounced. 49 percent of those surveyed were sewers. This is the main occupation for women. More men than women are found in roles such as 'cutter', 'packer', and 'supervisor'. Women are less likely to be promoted and to receive training than men. This is despite the fact that women, on average, have been employed at the same factory for longer than men. Only a small fraction of workers, regardless of gender or education, has received training.
- A larger number of male workers report enjoying good health and having more leisure time than female workers.
- Women seek health treatment more often than men. Women with higher levels of education seek health treatment more often than other women but also are more likely to find the quality of the health facilities at the factory poor.
- Few female workers with young children use factory provided child care facilities. Women with higher education are more likely than women with lower education to send their children to private care centres.
- In general few workers appear to voice their concerns, but the proportion of highly educated female workers who complain about work-related matters is higher than the proportion of women with lower education.
- The proportion of workers who believe barriers to promotion exist is almost 100 percent. A significant share of workers considers the relationship with their supervisor as the main obstacle to promotion. Women more than men believe so.

METHODOLOGY

Researchers analysed survey responses from 2578 workers in 98 apparel factories enrolled in Better Work Vietnam. Surveys were collected between January 2010 and August 2012. The analysis was restricted to baseline interviews.

In examining Better Work Vietnam data, researchers have highlighted five main areas: (a) occupational distribution, (b) pay and hours of work, (c) availability of training and promotion, (d) health and well-being, and (e) perceived barriers and voice. Results have been analysed separately for: women and men; women with low secondary education relative to women with higher education; and women with children aged five or younger relative to all the other women.

Better Work impact assessment questions include both objective and subjective dimensions. Information was collected on job characteristics such as occupation type, skills, hours of work and earnings. Workers were also invited to assess the quality of factory facilities and working conditions. And they provided details about their own health and well-being too.

THE CASE OF VIETNAM

In Vietnam, women's participation in the labour force is high, with a female employment to population ratio of more than 70 percent as compared to a ratio of 79 percent for men. More than 50 percent of the total female labour force still work in agriculture, 16 percent are employed in manufacturing and about 30 percent in services.

The garment sector comprises about 20 percent of Vietnam's total exports and employs more than 700,000 workers. Around 80 percent of these factory workers are women, a significant but small fraction of the total female labour force of 25 million.

Women in the Better Work Vietnam dataset constitute 81 percent of the sample for this study. About 84 percent of female workers and 82 percent of male workers come from rural areas. Male workers have on average one more year of schooling than female workers. Fifty-four percent of women and 47 percent of men are either married, widowed or divorced. Forty-four percent of women and 38 percent of men have children. About 66 percent of the workers who are mothers have at least one child who is younger than five years.

II. FINDINGS

The following main findings have been identified:

The main occupations for women are not the same as the main occupations for men. 49% of workers interviewed were in the role of 'sewers'. This is the main occupation for women (55% of the women surveyed in comparison to 24% of the total male subgroup). Occupations that provide relatively more jobs to men than to women are 'cutter', 'packer', and 'supervisor'.

The occupation 'checker' employs more female workers with higher education. The occupation 'helper' employs more female workers without infants. Two of the least female intensive jobs have the highest monthly pay of all occupations.

Women work slightly longer hours in a week than men, but receive lower bonuses and wages. Women without young children work longer hours on average than those who have them. Women's hourly wages (excluding bonuses) are, on average, about 85 percent of men's wages.

Women are less likely to be promoted and to receive training than men. Less than 14 percent of women have been promoted compared with about 25 percent of men. This is despite the fact that women, on average, have been employed at the same factory for longer than men.

Differences can also be observed between women with different educational levels. About 17 percent of highly educated female workers have been promoted at least once and 16 percent have received training in the past 6 months. The corresponding shares for female workers with lower education are 12 percent and 10 percent respectively. Only a small fraction of workers, regardless of gender or education, has received training. Among the few who have received training, the share of men who have been trained in supervisory skills is higher than the share of women.

Job tenure differs among women, depending on their education and stage in their life cycle. About 46 percent of women with low education have been at the factory for three years or longer compared with 38 percent of better educated women. And women with infants have been at the factory for longer than women without infants (49 percent of them have been at the factory for 3 years or longer compared with 41 percent of workers without infants).

A larger number of male workers report enjoying good health and having more leisure time than female workers. Women seek health treatment more often than men. Women with higher levels of education seem to seek health treatment more often than other women but also are more likely to find the quality of the health facilities at the factory poor.

Very few of the female workers who have children younger than 5 use factory provided child care facilities. Only 3 percent of women with lower education and a negligible share of women with higher education do so. This is because these services are either considered to be of poor quality or are not available at all. Women with higher education are more likely than women with lower education to send their children to other child care centres.

This difference indicates a possible source of inequality between women from high-income households, who can afford to pay for privately provided childcare, and women from poorer backgrounds who must resort to informal and often unpaid forms of care.

In general few workers appear to voice their concerns, but the proportion of highly educated female workers who complain about work-related matters is higher than the proportion of women with lower education. Only about 7 percent of both female and male workers report having complained in the past year.

A greater number of highly educated female workers relative to other workers tend to be more dissatisfied and vocal about their concerns. These concerns include overtime, pay, the quality of facilities on the factory floor, as well as verbal abuse and sexual harassment.

The proportion of workers who believe barriers to promotion exist is almost 100 percent. This would suggest some general dissatisfaction with power dynamics and opportunities at their workplace. However this contrasts with the proportion of workers who had made a formal complaint in the previous year, which is quite small. This apparent disconnect may reflect a lack of effective spaces where workers feel safe to voice their opinions and a general workplace culture that does not encourage dialogue between managers and employees.

A significant share of workers considers the relationship with their supervisor as the main obstacle to promotion. Women more than men (38 percent compared with 31 percent) believe so. There are also differences on what different groups of

female workers believe to be other barriers to promotion. More women with low education feel that their religion is a barrier to promotion while more women with high education believe their nationality is an obstacle. In general issues to do with ethnicity or cultural background are perceived as possible sources of discrimination. More women with infants than women without them see a lack of skills as an obstacle to their upward mobility.

III. RECOMMENDATIONS FOR POLICY & RESEARCH

The results presented here demonstrate the need to for paid employment to bring greater empowerment for women working in Better Work Vietnam apparel factories. Factory work cannot be considered to be empowering for women workers if it only increases their household income without eliminating gender-based disadvantages they often face both at work and at home.

To be empowering, paid work must widen women's opportunities for decent jobs and strengthen their capacity to have a say in their household decisions. This can be facilitated by strategies including making public resources and social services available to women workers to support the development of their own and their families' labour capacities.

The findings that workers, and particularly women, have limited access to training, point to the need to facilitate training activities on the factory floor that are inclusive and contribute to strengthening the skills profile and the organizational capacity of female workers. Moreover, fostering more effective forms of worker representation is important. Women workers' involvement in Better Work's Performance Improvement Consultative Committees (PICCs) could play a useful role in this.

The evidence that a considerable share of the female workforce has young children indicates that provision of childcare and health facilities to support workers in their caring functions is another key priority.

Analysts concerned with the empowerment potential of garment employment need to examine evidence on aspects such as female workers' upward mobility, just treatment in the workplace, availability of health and care facilities, opportunities for collective action, and an adequate balance between paid work and other dimensions of life. It is also important to identify workers' needs by educational level, stage in their life cycle and migration status, and not only by gender.

More research is also needed. Data collection and analysis could extend to a variety of issues, such as a better documentation of pay conditions and hourly earnings and a greater focus on the effects of factory employment on women's own life aspirations.

The latter would involve investigating whether the female workers concerned have chosen their jobs or have been forced into them by need or family pressures; whether they have a say on how the money they earn is spent; whether they consider employment in the garment sector as only a stepping stone to more desirable forms of work; and whether they would wish the same form of employment for their sisters or daughters.

Better Work is using the findings of this research in the way it delivers its services in factories.

For full results, see M Fontana and A Silberman (2013), [Analysing Better Work Data from a Gender Perspective: A Preliminary Exploration of Worker Surveys with a Focus on Vietnam](#), Better Work Discussion Paper no.13.

Better Work is funded by (in alphabetical order):

Australian Government

Netherlands Ministry of Foreign Affairs

State Secretariat for Economic Affairs, Switzerland (SECO)

Corporate donations from the Levi Strauss Foundation and the United States Council Foundation (funds provided by The Walt Disney Company)