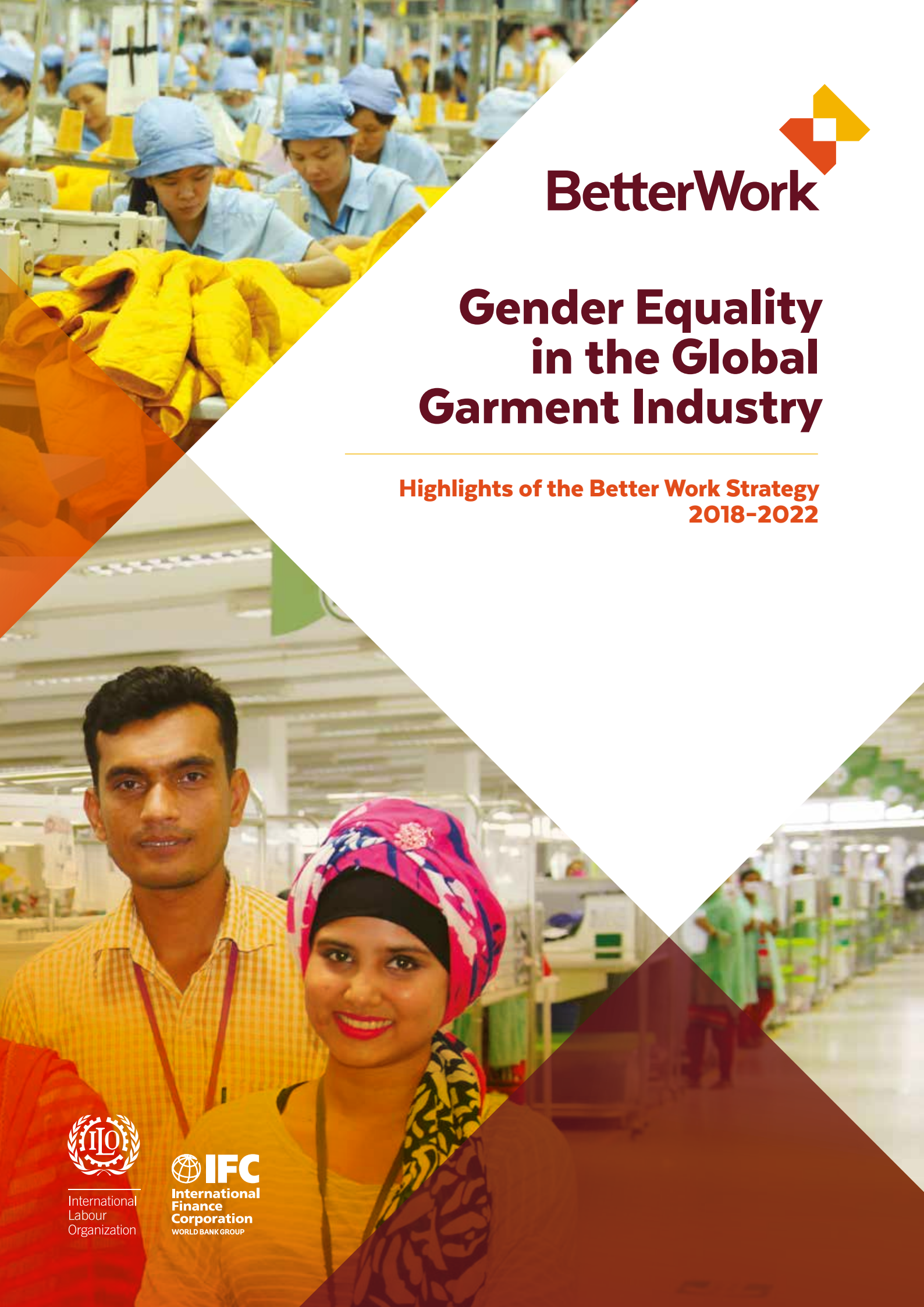




**BetterWork**

# Gender Equality in the Global Garment Industry

Highlights of the Better Work Strategy  
2018-2022



International  
Labour  
Organization



International  
Finance  
Corporation  
WORLD BANK GROUP

*“Peace, prosperity and social justice  
depend on the achievement of  
substantive equality between  
women and men.”*

– GUY RYDER  
ILO DIRECTOR GENERAL



## Gender equality: The opportunity

**The global garment industry has the potential to lift millions of women and men out of poverty worldwide, and can advance gender equality. This can only happen if decent, good quality jobs are available. Our research has demonstrated that when all workers, men and women, are treated fairly and have decent jobs, everyone benefits: the workers themselves, their employers, the industry, and the local and national economies. Good quality jobs catalyze women's economic empowerment, offer social protection and measures to balance work and family, and operate in an environment free from discrimination and harassment. The absence of these conditions impedes women's access to decent jobs.**

**Better Work – a collaboration between the United Nation's International Labour Organization (ILO) and the International Finance Corporation (IFC), a member of the World Bank Group – brings together all levels of the garment industry to improve working conditions and boost the competitiveness of apparel businesses.**

Since its establishment, the programme has impacted three million workers across eight garment-producing countries throughout the world. Of these, the vast majority are young women who represent 79 per cent of workers in Better Work factories and dominate the workforce throughout the sector. Better Work has conducted extensive analysis of the garment industry to learn more about these workers. They are typically under the age of 30, and many migrate to start their first formal job in a garment factory. Women tend to be employed in unskilled, low-value occupations, such as sewing machine operators and helpers in the production process, whereas men are more likely to be employed in higher-wage jobs and in leadership positions. Because of harmful cultural and gender norms, women workers are often subjected to sexual harassment during recruitment and at the workplace, and they are frequently discriminated against when

it comes to their wages, conditions of work, benefits (including maternity protection and threat of dismissal upon pregnancy status) and promotion.

Better Work is committed to working with partners to address these challenges, helping ensure quality jobs in the global garment industry helping advance gender equality and realize the development potential that these jobs hold.

While addressing gender issues has always been a component of Better Work, our recent impact assessment showed that empowering women is not only a key outcome of the programme, but is also critical for the achievement of our overall objectives. As a result, Better Work is renewing its strategic focus on gender equality and women's economic empowerment by putting women centre stage in all aspects of our work.

# Challenges to gender equality in Better Work factories

**Despite our success in improving working conditions and empowering women in the workplace, several deep-rooted challenges to gender equality remain in factories participating in the Better Work programme. This reflects trends identified in the garment industry at large as well as more broadly in the countries where we operate.**

## **Occupational segregation**

Women tend to be concentrated in certain low-paying, low-skilled sectors such as the garment industry, and within it, are often stuck in lower paying occupations such as sewing machine operators and helpers. Due to stereotypes regarding women's and men's aspirations, preferences and capabilities, employers' perceptions of women's and men's skills and attitudes are affected. This trend has been strengthened over the last two decades: as garment production becomes more technology-intensive, occupations become increasingly skilled and better paid, employing a higher proportion of men.

## **Gender-based discrimination upon recruitment**

Although pregnancy tests and contraceptives are rarely used as a condition for employment in Better Work country programmes, more subtle forms of pregnancy-based discrimination are widespread. In addition, in Cambodia and Jordan, we found that men often face discrimination in recruitment due to stereotypes, for example, that garment sector work is women's work and that men are more likely to be 'troublemakers.'

## **Gender wage gap**

The difference in pay between women and men for work of equal value is particularly linked to the predominance of working mothers, who often face additional care responsibilities and therefore suffer from a significantly reduced earning capacity.

## **Sexual harassment**

Due to occupational segregation and incentive systems in factories, sexual harassment is widespread in the global garment industry. Because of negative cultural norms, fear on the part of victims, the lack of functional reporting mechanisms, and a tendency to view this behaviour as "normal", sexual harassment is largely underreported. However, our confidential surveys showed that, as Better Work began operations, an average of 36 per cent of interviewed workers were concerned with sexual harassment in their factories.

## **Working hours**

Garment production is often characterized by long working hours and overtime, putting an extra burden on women who serve as primary caregivers in their families and communities.

## **Supervisory roles**

Women continue to be significantly under-represented in supervisory roles relative to their share in total employment in the sector.





## CONSIDERATIONS

### **Pregnancy-related healthcare**

Few Better Work countries have legislation that allows pregnant workers to access antenatal care without salary deductions. The frequent use of short-term contracts puts pregnant women in a vulnerable position, often missing out on maternity leave benefits. While all Better Work countries have maternity benefits enshrined in their laws, only Bangladesh and Vietnam offer maternity leave beyond the 14 weeks required by ILO Convention 183. Whether or not maternity leave is paid depends on the worker's seniority. Breastfeeding breaks are also guaranteed by labour law, but are not always paid.

### **Trade Union representation**

While women workers are increasingly becoming representatives at the factory level, they are still not being equally represented. Also, leadership positions in union confederations and federations are still largely dominated by men. This is partly due to widely-recognized gender ideologies, as well as to the reality that women are still expected to assume the majority of childcare responsibilities after they return home, discouraging them from serving as trade union representatives.

Two considerations should be taken into account in our work on gender equality:

**First, bringing about change does not rest on the shoulders of women alone.** Men's role in breaking barriers and stereotypes, sharing care and other responsibilities and actively supporting the voice and leadership of women in all aspects of their lives and organizations is key. To sustainably change gender inequalities in societies, the engagement of men and boys is crucial. If large numbers of men are to support and implement gender equality initiatives in Better Work, it will be necessary to speak in concrete, positive ways to their concerns, interests, hopes and problems.

**Second, we recognize that women and men are not single, homogeneous populations.** Women and men may face layers of discrimination that overlap based on their socioeconomic status, sexual orientation, gender identity, ethnicity, religion, disability, migration status, family responsibility and age. These different social categorizations are particularly relevant in certain Better Work country contexts and should be fully integrated in country programmes' gender strategies.



## WHAT HAS WORKED IN ACHIEVING GENDER EQUALITY

Better Work has had a measurable positive impact on addressing the challenges outlined above and promoting gender equality. Evidence from surveys of more than 15,000 workers and 2,000 managers across five countries shows that since the programme's establishment:

**Better Work has decreased the gender pay gap by up to 17%**, reduced sexual harassment concerns by up to 18%, and increased women's access to prenatal care by as much as 26%.



Improvements in working conditions are more significant **when women are freely elected and fairly represented** on worker - management committees.



Quality jobs for women have knock-on development impacts including **higher income, better health** for workers and their family members and **improved education** for workers' children.



Female supervisors trained by Better Work achieved a **22% increase in productivity** on their line. A workplace free of harassment also leads to higher profitability.





BUILDING ON SUCCESS:

# Our vision for achieving gender equality

Better Work aims for a society where women and men have equal and decent work opportunities, are free from gender-based violence and discrimination, and are able to access their rights, fulfil their potential and direct their futures. By the end of 2022, Better Work seeks to more effectively promote gender equality and women's economic empowerment in the global garment supply chain at the factory level, and by influencing and strengthening policies, institutions and practices at the national, regional and global levels.

Toward this vision, Better Work will increase its gender responsiveness through embedding gender equality themes into our factory services, policy engagement activities, research and communications. We will also drive gender responsiveness from within by strengthening our internal training and learning processes to champion gender equality among ourselves.

**Our current and future work is structured around the following gender equality themes:**



#### **Discrimination**

Preventing sexual harassment; tackling contractual discrimination (e.g. recruitment and occupational segregation); bridging the gender wage gap



#### **Paid Work & Care**

Sexual and reproductive health and rights (including pregnancy related healthcare and nutrition); maternity protection; breastfeeding; childcare



#### **Voice & Representation**

Representation of women workers in factories' committees (including Better Work's worker - management committees) and trade unions, union federations, and employer organizations; voice in collective bargaining processes



#### **Leadership & Skill Development**

Career opportunities in factories (e.g. line supervisors and management positions); leadership positions in governments, trade unions and employers organizations; financial literacy and household budget planning

## THE BETTER WORK

# Approach to change

**Our targeted areas of intervention prioritize women's economic empowerment across all our activities. By focusing on the four gender themes in our daily work, we will be able to advance the gender equality agenda and maximize our impact in improving working conditions and productivity as a whole in the global garment supply chain.**

### **In-Factory Services**

The heart of Better Work lies in its interactions with garment workers, employers, labour inspectors, manufacturers and brands. Better Work will advance gender equality and women's economic empowerment by addressing gender norms through our factory-level services (assessment, advisory and training). By strengthening the gender focus of our assessments, we will improve our ability to identify and deal with the wide range of gender issues in factories, including particularly sensitive topics such as workplace sexual harassment. We will continue to address non-compliance through our advisory services, ensuring visibility and fair representation of women in social dialogue. Through advisory services and training, we will continue to promote skill development and expand initiatives to build women's confidence, leadership and career opportunities, such as through our supervisory skills training.

### **Global Supply Chain (GSC) Engagement**

Our factory-level evidence on the prevalence of sexual harassment, the dynamics of discrimination and career advancement, and attitudes towards maternity protection allows us to influence global brands and retailers to focus on women's economic empowerment and change business cultures and practices in their supply chains. Better Work is in a strong position to work with brands and manufacturers to promote gender-sensitive global supply chain practices.

Due to our unique positioning in the global garment supply chain as a catalyst for change, Better Work is also well placed to create synergies and partnerships with other organizations at the local and global level who have particular expertise on the identified gender themes which fall beyond our programme's core competencies. We will forge new alliances in the supply chain to advance our objectives.

### **Influencing National and Global Policy on Gender Equality**

Given the significance of the garment sector in the countries where Better Work operates, the industry provides a strong entry point to build more effective national institutions, strengthen public—private partnerships and address policy gaps.

Better Work is well-positioned to strengthen public institutions through partnerships with different stakeholders, including national governments, trade unions and employer organizations. Governments are primarily responsible for enforcing and strengthening laws and regulations, including through ratification of relevant ILO Conventions; this means they are uniquely situated to advance gender equality and empower women economically. Trade unions and employer organizations have a key role to play in ensuring women's voices are heard and that there is a fair representation in their constituencies and leaderships, especially in an industry with such a high female participation in the labour market. At the global level, as the ILO and the World Bank Group will strengthen collaboration on complementary policies fostering decent work and competitiveness, they will contribute to creating an enabling environment that catalyzes women's economic empowerment.

Better Work's unique research findings and data are used for awareness raising at the factory, industry and national levels, as well as for campaigns and other communications channels contributing to informing the global policy dialogue on the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Better Work's unique convening power of participants in the global garment supply chain will be harnessed to influence gender norms.

#### **PROMOTING GENDER EQUALITY WITHIN THE BETTER WORK TEAM**

**In order to be even more effective in our factory-facing work, we are committed to strengthening the capacity of our team on gender equality by investing in training and learning opportunities for our staff. More broadly, we also carry the responsibility to contribute to improving the public sector practices in employment of women and men, and creating and guaranteeing decent jobs. As part of a standard-setting organization, Better Work practices what it advocates.**

**The Better Work team is addressing gender norms to guarantee a workplace free of (sexual) harassment. We recognize the challenges of combining paid work and care and adjust our workplace and working conditions to allow women and men to live equally fulfilling lives as workers and care providers. In employment, the team is committed to promote the leadership and skills and career development of women.**



## GENDER EQUALITY THEMES



**Discrimination**



**Paid Work & Care**



**Voice & Representation**



**Leadership & Skill Development**

## AREAS OF INTERVENTION

### Business Practices in Global Garment Supply Chain



**In Factory Services**



**Influencing GSC actors**

### Policy and Practice at National, Regional and Global Level



**National level**



**Global level**

## OUTPUTS

Awareness raising for all workers on gender equality  
Women trained to increase career advancement opportunities  
Women trained to play proactive roles in worker – management committees and trade unions

Partnerships with global brands and retailers to scale up initiatives for gender equality in the garment GSC

Partnerships with national stakeholders and advocacy campaign for gender responsive policies and practices

Advocacy campaign for gender responsive policies and practices, especially on gender-based violence

## OUTCOMES

Reduced gender discrimination violations, e.g. decrease in gender wage gap and in workplace sexual harassment  
More women in leadership positions in factories  
More women trained and empowered to play proactive roles in trade unions and worker – management committees

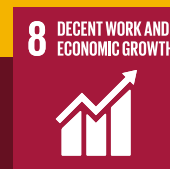
Gender-responsive policies and practices adopted in the supply chain beyond Better Work factories, incl. on care, SRHR, nutrition and pre/post-natal care  
Global supply chain actor commitment to support national and global policy level discussions

Stronger women's voice and representation  
Strengthened legal frameworks to combat forms of discrimination

Evidence-based global policy making on gender equality  
ILO standard on gender-based violence adopted

## IMPACT

**A workplace free of discrimination, including of violence and harassment**  
**Improved health awareness and stronger agency for women workers**  
**Stronger women's voice and representation in social dialogue mechanisms at factory, sector and national levels**  
**Women in leadership positions in factories and among tripartite constituents**



## OPERATIONALIZING THE STRATEGY

INTERNAL PROCESSES	IN-FACTORY SERVICES	RESEARCH, COMMUNICATIONS & POLICY INFLUENCE	PARTNERSHIPS
Staff training	Scale up of sexual harassment prevention training	Research on gender equality impacts	Collaboration with national governments on gender responsive policy and legal frameworks
Internal awareness-raising campaign	Scale up of supervisory skills training for women supervisors	Advocacy campaign	Capacity building for trade unions and employer organizations on gender responsiveness
	Quotas for women representation in advisory and PICCs	Informing ILO and IFC/World Bank policies	Leverage of brands' priorities and access to drive change for gender equality in their supply chains
	Deeper investigation of discrimination in assessments		Collaboration with global and local NGOs on SRHR, nutrition, breastfeeding and pre/post-natal healthcare, financial literacy

## A more equitable workplace is within our grasp

While serious challenges remain to achieving full gender equality in the world's garment factories, significant progress has been made. The success of our model for improving working conditions through women's empowerment has been validated by third-party research. Now we are leveraging this success, and our learnings from the research, to scale up positive impact on gender equality and achieve lasting change. We will report back to all stakeholders on our progress as we continue to refine our vision and implement this strategy.

For regular updates, case studies and new research findings, visit our website and follow us on social media.

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