



## CASE STUDY

# From the Ground Up: Building Gender Transformative Leadership for Enterprise Union

### ► Context

The women in the Cambodian garment sector represent over 80% of the workforce. The sector provides an average of 640,000 jobs per month in exporting factories. In turn, garment workers, the majority of whom are domestic migrant women workers, send home an average of 40% of their salary.

Better Factories Cambodia (BFC) has been in a deep dive into gender equity in the garment sector over the last decade, and has synthesized the learnings into articulated gender strategies. The Gender Transformative Leadership Training is a pilot initiative that is born out of needs identified from BFC's past work on gender equality issues and in turn will inform BFC's ongoing work to promote gender equity. This Gender Transformative Leadership Training and other pilot initiatives inform the implementation of an updated gender strategy that methodically addresses key barriers to women advancing in the garment sector.

### ► Strategic Program Design

#### **Strategy alignment of tackling knowledge barriers to gender equity:**

Globally, the Better Work programs consider gender equality promotion across five pillars – discrimination, health and safety, voice and representation, care and family, and leadership and skills development. A key barrier to equity highlighted in BFC's gender strategy across all five key pillars of equity is workers' lack of knowledge of benefits and rights. This knowledge barrier is closely related to motivation barriers that prevent women from speaking up for fair treatment.

#### **Enterprise-level leadership development aligned to existing BFC advisory and coaching efforts:**

In developing a pilot gender transformative leadership training, the team considered the existing leadership structure in a factory and existing complementary BFC programming. At the factory level, the core of BFC's advisory and coaching services is targeted at the members of the bipartite committee (the Performance Improvement Consultative Committee or PICC).

"While leadership is often discussed, gender issues are often overlooked in leadership contexts. Leadership positions in higher-level union confederations and federations are still largely dominated by men, despite

## ► Key Learning

Many of the union leaders participating in this training are also members of bipartite committees. This training served as their first introduction to gender-sensitive training topics, and as a result, they developed action plans to integrate gender aspects into their workplace. The training is an important starting point for the training's target audience of enterprise-level union leaders.

**Facilitated networking leads to more compelling peer learning of gender barriers.** The clearest and most important takeaway cited by BFC gender team was the value of facilitated networking. "It was important that they had the chance to talk with each other. Trade union leaders are rewarded for being compelling speakers. But this training was an opportunity to listen. During the training, participants shared stories of their challenges. They realize that everyone faces challenges, some similar to their and some different, but women are face more challenges compared to their male counterparts in the union structures due to the gender stereotypes and biases." – BFC gender focal points.

**When we talk about female leadership, we need to talk about gender.** For many participants, the concept of masculinity was relatively superficial. Outlined in its gender strategy, BFC's approach to engaging men is not to reinforce the common refrain in gender equity policymaking that portray men as "the problem". Instead, it recognizes that men face distinct challenges and can play active roles in fostering gender equality.

**Learnings yielded from piloting inform improvements and future program design.** Through the pilot training sessions, the cross-cutting gender team was able to learn lessons such as, "in a non-segregated session, people start blaming each other too quickly thus challenges are best discussed in gender segregated sessions. Potential solutions and discussions can be shared back in the non-segregated session." BFC gender focal points also noted that while sensitive topics were not discussed in open group conversation, it is important to create safe space for participants to share.

Furthermore, "if we want to design more impactful projects, we need to think about coaching and mentoring, follow-up coaching, not just training. There are participants in all BFC training who have the potential to be coaches and mentors. We want to see a supportive environment, where they can support each other to improve their leadership and decision making."

the majority of employees are female. One of the biggest challenge is to instilled women into leadership position in trade unions. Thus, it is crucial for both male and female union leaders at the enterprise levels to advance gender equality and women's empowerment to better represent and amplify diverse workers' voice in the workplace." – said BFC gender focal points

### **Piloting gender transformative training:**

In BFC's gender strategy, gender transformative means services that transform the existing distribution of resources and responsibilities in ways that create a more equal relationship between women and men, and challenge discriminatory norms and practices, especially how female workers are being treated. This training begins with basic gender awareness and builds to gender transformative principles, including analysis of workplace and broader societal power dynamics.





## Case 1: Ms. Khema

***“I can see that I have change a lot as a person. I used to think that aggressive communication can solve problems”, said Ms. Khema works in the packaging department at a garment factory outside of Phnom Penh.***

Joining the factory in 2016 after having a baby, she has relatively quickly taken on leadership positions as both a packaging team leader and the vice presidency of her factory’s union. Ms. Khema shared her perspective on the Gender Transformative Leadership Training.

Interestingly, she credits the training with significant changes she has made as a leader generally. “I used to let my anger control me and spread negativity within my team during work problems or when my supervisors put pressure on me. I wasn’t able to control my emotions or find any solution to the problems. Consequently, my entire team suffered.”

Even after this relatively short training, she says that “the way I communicate with my children and my colleagues is different. I used to blame people for problems, but now I try to be more constructive.” Ms. Khema goes on to say that she has a small business at home. This course has even helped her communicate more effectively with her customers. After six months, she says that she’s getting more customers, and she attributes the business success to things she learned in the training.

In terms of gender awareness, “For a long time, I didn’t fully understand my rights as a worker.” Ms. Khema says that she now understands, “I am also an important member of my workplace. As a worker, I now seek clarifications, or sometimes I just need a good reason why we are doing certain things”. Tearing up towards the end of the conversation, Ms. Khema says, “I never had the opportunity to receive training like the ones hosted by BFC, where we get to learn and grow.”

Since the training, Ms. Khema has started sharing the lessons with her team. She has also applied the learnings in her role as a team lead and bipartite committee member to resolve interpersonal conflict, and these communications tools are helping her build on her natural talent in being able to clearly explain ideas or lessons.



## Case 2: Mr. Sambath

“I have over 100 members in my union. My members listen to me more now because they see the change in my daily behavior. My influence with them is stronger because they can see I am not just talking nonsense”. Mr. Sambath is the team lead at the cutting table and the president of a union at a local garment factory.

Initially unfamiliar with the concept of the Gender Transformative Leadership Training, its significance gradually became apparent to him. He found the trainers skillful, the activities plentiful, fostering an engaging environment. He was interested in collaborating with other enterprise union leaders. Seeing emotional reactions during discussions, particularly from women participants, shed light on similar workplace issues, prompting self-reflection on similar challenges within his own workplace. He notes that “not everything has a solution. Workplaces are more complicated than training sessions. But we can try our best to apply what we have learned.” Mr. Sambath observed that the trainings didn’t teach them how to solve all problems, rather than they helped him improved his own way of working and problem solving.

Mr. Sambath says that he still applies lessons learned from the training because it has been useful. "The way I communicated before... I didn't put others first, I would put myself as the main character. Now I listen to others more." Especially within family, he says that he used to decide what they do. Now he asks for information before decisions.

***"My relationship with my wife has completely changed. Rather than thinking that I am the husband, I'll decide for the family, we now make decisions together and make decisions that are more beneficial for the family" - Sambath***

## ► Looking Forward

"As we look ahead, we're encouraged by the remarkable transformations we've witnessed during the training sessions," say BFC gender focal points. They recall instances of participants finding their voices and even experiencing shifts in attitudes, the concept of LGBTQ+ were more common among participants than before the training. Now, their focus turns towards fostering broader systemic changes and the crucial role of supportive systems in empowering women. "If the system does not support women with opportunities, then we will always run into barriers".

Moving forward, the team is actively developing diverse strategies approaches aimed at fostering women's leadership across various dimensions. In tandem, BFC continues to integrate gender perspectives into all core services, aligning with the newly crafted BFC's gender strategy. While previous efforts centered on training sessions at the federation and confederation levels, fostering dialogues on internal policies conducive to women's engagement. While the current focus extends to nurturing women leaders within enterprises, facilitating their initial steps towards higher roles and career advancement in their leadership journey.



*Training participants holding drawings representing themselves, their journey and gender behavior changes*