



► The Caring Mother, the Supportive Wife, and the Ambitious Supervisor:

Workplace perspectives on empowerment and the Gender Equality and Returns (GEAR) program in Bangladesh

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**The Caring Mother, the Supportive Wife, and the Ambitious Supervisor:
Workplace perspectives on empowerment and the Gender Equality
and Returns (GEAR) program in Bangladesh**

Date: May 8, 2023

Report by: Adiba Afros

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ABSTRACT

The ILO-IFC Gender Equality and Returns (GEAR) program aims to address the gender imbalances in the garment industry by providing training and career progression opportunities to female sewing section workers, and advisory services to factory management to create an enabling environment for women's advancement at the workplace. This study qualitatively evaluates the impact of GEAR on women's empowerment based on perceived changes at the individual- and workplace-levels, and, to some extent, the household-level. Based on case studies of two garment factories in Bangladesh, it was found that the program led to noticeable changes in the individual participants, but the degree of improvement varied among candidates depending on factors such as personal motivations, constraints, and past experiences. Domestic and childcare roles, maternity periods, and gendered constraints reinforced by workplace and household relations, predominantly shaped and, in several cases, abruptly halted career trajectories of female supervisors. While management's motivation to support female supervisors largely revolved around meeting production demands, organizational characteristics such as production type and the gender ratio of the workforce, strongly affected willingness to address female supervisors' performance barriers and create an enabling environment. Based on the findings, the study recommends facilitating discussions with management and workers to co-identify ways to accommodate pregnant and nursing female supervisors at work, creating opportunities for women's advancement beyond the sewing section, and targeting training efforts to address attitudes and behaviours, particularly of mid-level production staff.

1. INTRODUCTION

The ready-made garment (RMG) industry in Bangladesh has been pivotal towards increasing women's participation in the formal labour market. This transformative shift occurred within a context mired by limited employment alternatives for women and where patriarchal norms have generally restricted women within their homes and in a subordinate position to male providers (Kabeer, Mahmud, & Tasneem, 2018). With an initial industry workforce of approximately 100,000 workers in the 1980s of which nearly 90% were women, the employment figure has catapulted to over 4 million in recent years where women still comprise the majority of the workforce (ILO, 2020).

Despite women's significant contributions to the garment industry for nearly four decades, general statistics indicate that they are seldom represented in highly skilled and managerial positions. The ratio of female workers has been gradually declining close to half due to changing

industry requirements for more technically demanding positions and unequal access to training opportunities (CPD, 2018). To this day, women are concentrated in low-skilled sewing operator positions (Grades 4 to 7) and lack access to more skilled and better remunerated roles often held by men (ILO, 2020; Menzel & Woodruff, 2021). At the management level, various surveys found that men comprise over 95% of supervisory positions in garment factories (CPD, 2018; ILO, 2020). This shows that even in the garment sector, which has been instrumental towards expanding women's domains beyond their homes, the persistence of gendered barriers impede women from surpassing the glass ceiling within the garment workplace.

To help female garment workers overcome such challenges against career advancement, the Gender Equality and Returns (GEAR) program was developed under a joint initiative of the International Finance Corporation (IFC), and the International Labour Organisation (ILO) and delivered as part of Better Work's training and advisory services. Under GEAR, progression to supervisory positions is seen as a pathway to women's empowerment as it challenges gender imbalances at the supervisory level and transforms negative perceptions about women's abilities.

The program was piloted in 2016-17 under the name, Work-Progression and Productivity Toolkit (WPT). During this period, the WPT's impact on enhancing productivity and other business benefits such as reduced absenteeism, defect rates and turnover were measured through a randomized control trial-based (RCT) study of 28 participating garment factories. Control and treatment groups were used to isolate the effects of hard and soft skills training, and pre-and post-intervention surveys of workers, trainees and different levels of management were used to measure changes in attitudes and awareness of training topics (IFC, 2018).

Key insights from this evaluation study informed the subsequent adaptation and scaling of WPT into the GEAR program. For example, trainee selection criteria were included based on positive correlations between participant characteristics such as prior attitudes towards supervisory role and family support, and program indicators such as fewer training dropouts and increased promotions after training (Woodruff, Uckat, & Williams, 2018). The GEAR curriculum also includes hard and soft skills training, which combined, was found to boost trainee confidence, however, it did not significantly improve garment knowledge (i.e. names of processes, operations, identifying quality issues and operation breakdowns). Identified program limitations included high number of trainee dropouts and rejections of promotional offers after training due to reasons such as lack of interest, disliking training content, increased burden of work, family issues, switching jobs, health and pregnancies. Moreover, researchers also indicated that discouraging perceptions about women's roles and abilities such as management's preferential treatment towards men for promotion were likely to have curtailed desired impact.

Drawing from the previous study, this paper takes a qualitative approach to specifically explore the impact of the GEAR program on women's empowerment. Empowerment is assessed based on perceived changes at the individual- and workplace-levels and, to a limited extent, the household-level. To understand whether these changes led women to act upon strategic interests and consequently challenge structural constraints, the participants' motivations for joining GEAR and perceptions about gendered roles have also been explored (Kabeer, 2008).

This paper is structured as follows: The following section provides an overview of relevant literature on the concept of women's empowerment. This is followed by a detailed description of the GEAR program and methods used to evaluate program impact. The fourth section describes key findings from the two case studies. The fifth and sixth sections end with a conclusion and key recommendations.

2. UNDERSTANDING WOMEN'S EMPOWERMENT

The concept of women's empowerment has been defined, studied and applied through development initiatives in various ways. Central themes within critical explanations of 'empowerment' are the role of power and changes in individual consciousness such as the ability to question and transform one's own disadvantaged position and collectively challenge patriarchal constraints (Batliwala, 1994, 2007; Cornwall, 2016; Kabeer, 1999, 2008; Rowland, 1996). Kabeer (1999) conceptualizes empowerment as the ability to make strategic choices from options that were previously unavailable and to act upon these choices. Thus, the three key indicators for measuring impact of empowerment include: the ability to exercise agency (negotiate, make decisions), access to resources (social, human, material) that are required to exercise agency and achievements that are outcomes as a result of exercising agency (ibid.). While changes in individual consciousness is a crucial component, Kabeer underscores its transformative potential especially when women are able to challenge wider structures of patriarchal constraints as politically engaged agents of change. Such constraints include gendered roles of childcare and domestic duties and perceptions about women's subordinated status. Within the context of Bangladesh, these constraints are reinforced by 'purdah norms' on women's propriety and suitable roles within and outside the household (Kabeer, 2008). These roles are seen as integral to a women's identity and sense of self-worth and thus often internalized at the individual level. On the other hand, women's role as income earners are viewed as secondary to men and therefore undervalued.

Other conceptual contributions rooted in the notion of power include Batliwala (1994, 2007) who describes empowerment as the process of transforming power relations. A key distinction between power and empowerment is that power is derived from control over material and ideological resources whereas empowerment is the *process* of gaining greater control over these sources of power to address gendered inequalities (ibid.). While Batliwala emphasizes the importance of upending systemic constraints, Rowland (1996) outlines three dimensions where empowerment occurs: the individual level such as through improved sense of self-worth, at the intermediate level through close relationships and the collective level in order to lead systemic change through collective action. Along similar lines, Cornwall (2016) stresses that there is no 'one-size-fits-all recipes for empowerment' since each person has their own motivations defined by their lived experiences; she also underlines the importance of creating an 'enabling environment' such as through changes in policies, legislation, for long-term change (ibid.). A common thread across these explanations of empowerment is the importance of changes at multiple-levels, within and beyond the individual.

On the account of power in the context of the garment industry, it is important to note that the power asymmetries that underlie gender inequities also intersect with additional hierarchies on the factory floor namely between workers and their management, as well as ones among workers based on seniority or fictive kinships. For instance, Dannecker (2000) highlights how fictive kinships such as roles assigned to senior operators as leaders or '*apa*' (older sister) mirror social hierarchies based on seniority; interactions between female workers depict how these relationships can be leveraged in some situations to pursue collective goals, and can contrarily also hinder leadership opportunities for younger women. Another study notes the multiple levels of constraints faced by female garment workers as women and also as workers employed under exploitative working conditions; in other words, labour rights and gender struggles are inextricably linked (Huq, 2019). Under such circumstances, collective engagement, such as unions can be an important medium for women to negotiate and address inequities unique to female workers (Huq, 2019; Kabeer, 2015). Female factory workers' leadership experiences through collective action in male dominated spaces like trade unions provide valuable insights into the more complex pathways for empowerment within the garment context.

Due to constraints intrinsic to garment work, several studies have also debated the empowerment potential through opportunities created within this sector. Contrarian perspectives highlight that garment jobs are the only viable option in a context with limited employment alternatives and tend to replicate gendered hierarchies at the workplace by placing women in low-paid and subordinate position to men (Dannecker, 2000; Huq, 2019; Prieto-Carro, 2008; Quayyum, 2019). An industry often characterized by harsh working conditions and long hours, these jobs are perceived as a double burden for women who are additionally required to

fulfil household and childcare duties and consequently, experience mental and physical health problems (Akhter, et al., 2017). On the other hand, proponents have argued that access to income enhances women's bargaining capacity at the household level, which has positive spill over effects particularly within their personal lives and close relationships (Kabeer, Mahmud, & Tasneem, 2018; Djaya, Brown, & Lupo, 2019; International Finance Corporation, 2018; Uckat, 2022). Additional indicators such as level of education, family relations and motivations for joining work also shape women's individual experiences of garment employment.

Since there is no 'one-size-fits-all recipes for empowerment' (Cornwall, 2016), this paper seeks to understand how GEAR may have catalysed changes across multiple dimensions, namely the individual-, factory workplace- and, to a limited extent, the household-levels. These changes are then analyzed to understand the types of opportunities or resources that may have newly surfaced as a result of the GEAR intervention and whether these have confronted any individual and structural constraints.

3. EVALUATING THE IMPACT OF GEAR (METHODS)

GEAR's *theory of change* is based on evidence from prior research indicating that female garment workers are underrepresented in supervisory positions due to a lack of a) Skills training, b) Management support and c) Visibility of women in leadership positions. These objectives have been translated into interventions targeted at the individual and factory levels. The program's key activities are: 1. Hard and soft skills training and on-the-job training for female workers, 2. Training and advisory services to management, and 3. Accelerated opportunity to apply for a supervisory position upon successful program completion.

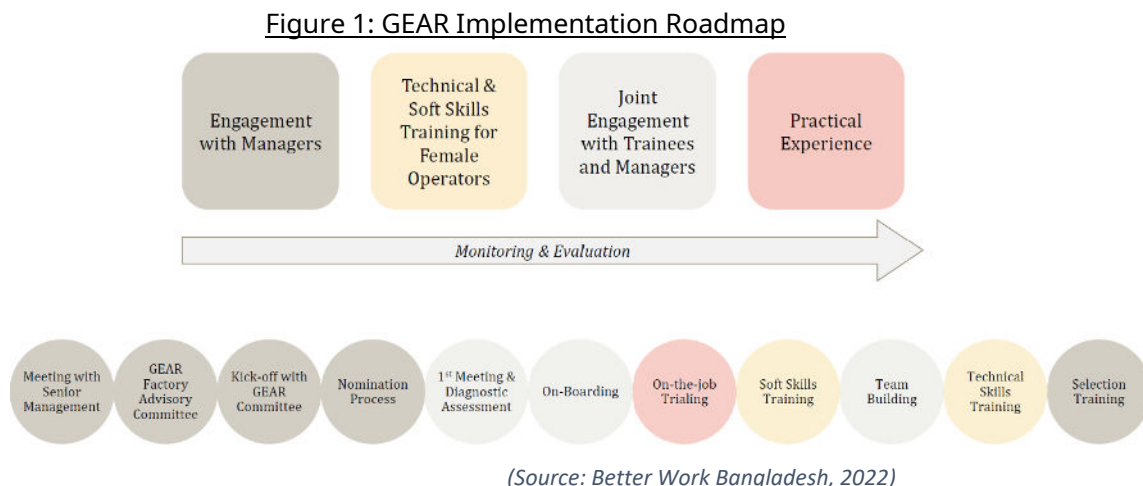
Female worker participants undergo classroom-based and on-the-job capacity building training so that they can be promoted as sewing line supervisors, contribute to increased line-level productivity, and develop leadership capabilities. To create an enabling environment at the factory-level such as by increasing awareness of how to select, promote, support, and retain female talent, GEAR consultants facilitate team building sessions between management staff and GEAR trainees and provide additional advisory services to upper and middle management (IFC, 2018). During periodic advisory visits, program staff from Better Work Bangladesh liaise with a factory-based GEAR advisory committee and trainees, and at the program level, a designated GEAR Coordinator engages participating brand representatives, senior management of factories,

and IFC to overcome implementational challenges such as when eligible trainees are not provided with access to promotion or not assigned to a trial line in preparation for a promotion¹.

Training participants are selected based on set criteria to increase likelihood of training completion and promotions. The selection criteria include: female workers with a minimum class 8 education, at least 2 years of experience in the garment sector, current position of a grade 3 (senior operator) or grade 4 (operator), willingness to become a supervisor and family support. Selected candidates then receive training, which alternates between 10 days² of classroom-based learning and 6-8 weeks of on-the-job sessions where each trainee is paired with an experienced supervisor for guidance. (Better Work Bangladesh, 2021)

Classroom-based training covers various hard and soft skills relevant to the supervisory role. Soft skill sessions are delivered in two phases, first phase is related to personal development such as mindfulness, addressing inner critique, confidence building, stress management practices and meditation. The second phase is delivered after the technical sessions and focuses on topics such as professional development, supervisor’s roles and responsibilities, and management styles. The technical skills sessions in between cover various production-related topics such as sample development, line balancing and quality control.

Key program activities are implemented over a period of 9-12 months as shown in *Figure 1: GEAR Implementation Roadmap* below. Management staff from Administration, Human Resources, Industrial Engineering and Production are included in the GEAR Factory Advisory Committee and are engaged in trainee selection and in promotions after training.



¹ Information based on communication with Better Work Bangladesh.

² This has been reduced to 6 days of classroom-based training according to latest program outline (Better Work Bangladesh, 2022)

To evaluate program impact, a comparative case study approach has been used to analyse processes of change within the complex environment of a garment factory and explore causal mechanisms (Yin, 1992). In-depth focus group interviews with various factory-level actors such as different categories of trainees, male supervisors, workers, and management representatives were conducted to understand how the program has influenced the trainees, and their working environment.

Case selection: Two case factories, Factory A and Factory B, were selected based on the following:

- Participated in GEAR at least 1.5 years ago: this is in order to capture changes in behaviours, attitudes, and organizational practices, which require time and reflection.
- Contrasting cases based on performance: to understand reasons behind unexpected outcomes. One of the indicators of program success is the number of trainees promoted into supervisory positions. According to the list of factories provided by Better Work Bangladesh, Factory A had promoted 9 trainees into supervisory positions, and Factory B had only promoted 4.
- Different product types: In the list of factories, it appeared that both the low performing factories produced lingerie. This led to an assumption whether product type, perhaps due to technical or other reasons, influenced training impact. Factory A produces knit items whereas Factory B only produces lingerie.
- Similar workforce size and industrial region: because of the limited number of only two cases, some commonalities were maintained to narrow research focus. However, both workforce size and regions are significant variables that can potentially influence impact. For example, larger workforce size can saturate visibility of female leadership, lower access to training opportunities and increase competitiveness for promotions. Conversely, it may also provide a larger pool of female workers interested to become supervisors.

Interviews and Focus Group Discussions (FGDs): Data was collected through semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions (FGDs) with different categories of workers, supervisors and management (total 39 interview participants, see Appendix I: Interview List for more details). This provided a comprehensive understanding of program influence and helped triangulate patterns and general themes from these discussions. Separate interview guidelines³ were developed for each category of interviewees to capture changes in opportunities, attitudes and behaviours at the individual and factory-levels, with some questions to understand spill over

³ Guidelines draw upon prior research by Kabeer (2000) on understanding women's decisions to enter labour market.

effects at the household level. Two informal telephone conversations with GEAR participants also helped gather insights into key areas to address during the interviews.

Two full days were spent at each factory to conduct the interviews in person. Interviewees were selected by the researcher based on availability. Some considerations were made to exclude workers and supervisors from critical functions and production lines under pressure to meet shipment deadlines at the time. For the recruitment manager interviews, the contact persons who in both cases were from the Compliance department, were asked about the most influential person in the recruitment process for supervisors. Interestingly, from Factory A, this was the Deputy General Manager (DGM) from the Compliance and Human Resources department, whereas in Factory B, it was the Production Deputy General Manager (DGM); this was based on their level of involvement in the implementation of the GEAR program. All interviews were conducted in a private space within the factory, and recorded with permission for transcribing afterwards. A general risk while conducting the interviews at factory premises is that interviewees may refrain from freely sharing their views in fear of being overheard and facing retaliation. To ease such concerns, all interviewees were assured about data confidentiality prior to the start of the interviews. Interviews with GEAR participants who had resigned from work were conducted over the telephone. Potentially vulnerable interviewees were also provided with the consultant's contact information to reach out in case of any concerns afterwards.

To ensure anonymity, the names of all interviewees have been replaced with pseudonyms. A complete list of interviews conducted at each factory can be found under Appendix 1: List of Interviews.

Training Observation

Two virtually conducted soft skills sessions were observed to view participant dynamics and content delivery methods. These sessions involved recently enrolled participants who were not part of the case factories. The two observed sessions included:

- Soft skills training: Team Building (conducted in February 2022, duration 3 hours) – Participants included female trainees and management from Compliance, Human Resources and Production departments; all attendees were from the same factory. The session was divided into two parts: the first part included female trainees and different levels of management who discussed topics such as ensuring equal opportunities at work, barriers against women's advancement, motivational tactic, teamwork and mentorship. The second part was conducted only with the trainees and included activities and discussions on teamwork, self-care, breathing meditation, step-by-step problem solving and future planning/ prioritizing.

- Soft skills training: Roles and Responsibilities (conducted in March 2022, duration 3 hours) – Session included female trainees from two factories. Key discussion topics included: roles and responsibilities of a supervisor, leader and operator, different supervisory styles and case study analysis.

4. PROGRAM IMPACT

Based on the collected information, the following findings highlight key changes experienced at the individual and factory-levels as a result of GEAR and its impact on perceived constraints. While changes at the individual level were more apparent, gendered roles reinforced through hierarchical relationships and onerous organisational practices remain key constraints against fully benefitting from newfound opportunities.

GEAR's Impact at the Individual Level

GEAR's influence is most prominently featured at the individual level of the program participants, but the perceived gains differed among women as explored through their motivations for joining the program, most valuable lessons learned and its consequences on their lives.

1. Addressing individual barriers: fear, self-doubt, lack of awareness about supervisory role.

Program participants unanimously expressed that the training has influenced them to question previously held beliefs about women's abilities. GEAR participants described how the soft skills sessions guided them to 'overcome fear' or 'gain courage' (*shahosh*), which previously held them back from even considering a supervisory role or advancing in their careers. Systematically learning about the key responsibilities of a supervisor, various techniques to manage stress and solve problems, and on-the-job experience were particularly beneficial. This individual conscientization occurred through classroom-based training sessions and the accelerated promotions that provided an opportunity to gradually develop confidence through practice in their newly appointed roles.

Training on topics such as communication with workers and management and building professional relationships at work also improved the participants' abilities to navigate challenging relationships at work as well as with family members. For example, Shomi (Factory B) noted that the problem solving and communication techniques learned during training helped improve her work performance and relationships with workers. Beyond the workplace, some noted the use of stress management techniques to maintain healthy boundaries between their professional and domestic lives. Citing GEAR's lessons on overcoming fear, Shirin (Factory B) shared that she

no longer refrains from sharing her views during discussions with her in laws and Rohima (Factory A) recalled that she started saving money for emergencies following the trainer's advice.

2. Opportunity to move past factory-level barriers: slow or inaccessible promotions for women.

Although prior motivation to become a supervisor is a key criterion for selecting GEAR candidates, some interviewees had greater clarity than others about their career ambitions at the time of joining; this was explained during the interviews when asked about their motivations for joining the GEAR program. In these cases, GEAR reinforced existing motivations and helped surpass factory-level barriers such as slow supervisory promotions at Factory B, which can take 3-4 years, and discriminatory promotional practices at Factory A, where men were often preferred for supervisory role. For example, Nazma (Factory A) who aspires to work in a senior management role explained how she was once denied promotion for being a woman. When GEAR applications were announced, she negotiated a promotion by the end of training as a condition for partaking in the program. Her ambitions are illustrated in earlier efforts to learn technical skills and becoming an elected worker representative, which she deemed to be a way *"to build her network of influence"*. Prior to joining garment work, Nazma had also worked at community-based NGOs and established a cooperative organisation in her village. As the eldest sister in the family who supported the upbringing of younger siblings after their father passed away, her deep-rooted determination is best encapsulated in the following quote:

"Since completing their studies, my brothers took up government jobs where people refer to them as 'Sir', but everyone calls me "Mizan Sir's sister". It somehow pains me to hear this. I also wish people would respectfully recognize me as a "Sir" or "Ma'am" because, with the blessing of Allah, my brothers are where they are today because of my hard work."

- Nazma (GEAR trained and promoted, Factory A)

For Nazma, career advancement is a way of gaining recognition that is otherwise lacking despite her significant contributions to the family and at the workplace. In a particularly challenging environment like Factory A, GEAR was a welcomed opportunity for women like her who otherwise struggled to move past discriminatory promotional practices.

Others with prior motivations included Hamida from Factory A, and Shirin and Shanta from Factory B. These women had performed supervisory tasks before joining GEAR but had not been officially promoted. Although Hamida and Shirin were able to secure promotions after GEAR, their aspirations to work as supervisors were cut short due to persistent barriers related to work (harassment) and family (childcare duties).

3. Promotion to a management position enhanced professional status and respect.

Some female supervisors noted how promotion through GEAR enhanced their social status at the workplace as they were no longer considered workers but management staff. In Factory B, female supervisors noted that over time, they were trusted with increased responsibilities and that frequent interactions with senior management enhanced their importance and courage since general workers do not have similar access. Only one of the promoted supervisors from Factory A noted a similar point, whereas the others were dissatisfied and felt that they did not receive due respect since their salaries were lower than their male counterparts.

However, enhanced status and respect were not immediately granted following GEAR but rather earned by strategically navigating seniority-based hierarchies among workers on the factory floor. GEAR encourages participants with higher educational qualifications, who tend to be younger and less experienced. As a result, GEAR supervisors faced resistance from senior-level machine operators who were ineligible to apply due to lower literacy levels. Severe resistance was noted in Factory B, where management had to intervene and instruct workers to refer to the newly promoted supervisors as 'sister' (*apa*) to reinforce the management-worker power hierarchy and as a way of showing respect.

4. Promotion after training increased earnings.

Increased earnings were used by some women to ease financial insecurity, purchase long-term assets such as land, improve the quality of life and education for their children and invest in social capital such as through the purchase of occasional gifts for in laws. For example, Tasnia (Factory B) mentioned:

"I used to struggle with an operator's salary, whereas now I have a higher income. My son has a better education, we eat better and I can occasionally buy nice gifts for my in laws. Moving forward is better for me in every way, financially, emotionally, I feel good when I can do something."

– Tasnia, (GEAR trained, Factory B)

Similarly, Sharmin (Factory A) shared that with the increased earnings, she was able to save money and buy land together with her husband, on which she plans to build a house for retirement.

However, earning increases after GEAR varied between participants due to internal practices for supervisors. While Factory B had a longer on-the-job training period with relatively low pay for all workers, Factory A had a shorter training period but provided lower pay to female supervisors than male.

Individual-level Constraints

The extent to which women could reap benefits after training and promotion were affected by individual-level constraints, some of which are embedded in societal norms and expectations that tie women's identity and sense of self-worth to gendered roles as mothers and wives. Struggles to fulfil these 'primary' roles in addition to a demanding professional career were frequently cited as reasons for dropping out or resigning after promotion. The most commonly raised constraints include:

1. Childcare and Pregnancies.

Childcare duties exclusively fell on women, which hindered work performance and motivations for advancement. Some female supervisors had an additional family member such as mother or sister-in-law assisting with childcare duties, while others kept their children at the village under the care of extended family members or *madrassas* with boarding. Although both factories had onsite childcare facilities, several women preferred to leave their children with a relative at home citing higher risks of spreading illnesses in a shared factory-based facility.

Shirin (Factory B) who was promoted after GEAR with highest post-training exam scores, left a promising career after only 6 months upon her husband's insistence. Her mother had fallen ill and could no longer look after their son, which is why her husband, who was unemployed at the time, decided to move back to the village. Shirin explained how she has accepted this as her 'fate':

"For women their husband is everything. If their husband tells them they can no longer work... (pause) and then suddenly this situation with no one to look after our son... (pause) I am the mother, I have the primary responsibility of looking after my child. Tell me, do I have a choice not to care for him? My family has higher priority than my career."

– Shirin, housewife (Factory B, GEAR promoted supervisor)

Difficulties retaining female supervisors was also noted in Factory A where five GEAR participants became pregnant soon after promotion. Among them, three resigned after collecting maternity dues. Referring to these incidents, a male Human Resource staff described how women struggled to meet performance requirements after childbirth due to '*hormones*' and '*lack of focus*'.

Pregnancies were noted by most interviewees (workers, management, male and female supervisors) as an explicit barrier against women's advancement into supervisory positions and beyond. This is both an individual constraint, in that it is a personal choice (often under immense societal pressure) that hinders availability and performance at a physically demanding job, as well as a structural constraint due to inadequate support for pregnant and nursing women within and beyond the workplace and gendered expectations of childcare duties. For instance, GEAR-trained

Afroja (Factory B) who recently gave birth was working as an 'Input Man' whereas her co-workers had been promoted a step above to Assistant Supervisors. When asked about the difference in positions, she explained that it was due to a prolonged maternity period: she could only work for eight hour shifts during pregnancy, had to take four months leave after childbirth and now, instead of using the factory childcare, she rushes home every day during lunch to breastfeed and only performs two hours of overtime work whereas her co-workers need to stay back for longer.

In another example, Samira (Female Supervisor, non-GEAR, Factory A) who had to return to work 40 days after a caesarean birth explained that *"maternity break leaves a gap in performance, which increases work pressure on supporting staff who are unwilling to take up additional workload. Birth- and child health- related problems also affect attendance regularity."* She noted standing for long hours and carrying bulky loads as key challenges during this period.

2. Additional burden of domestic responsibilities: household chores, 'women's work'.

All the interviewed female supervisors (except Nazma from Factory A) were married and living with their families. While some had supportive families and husbands who shared in household chores, others were less fortunate. After a full day at work, several women went home to start their second shift of household duties. Sharmin described her day as follows:

"After I go home from work, I cook and then sleep around midnight or 1 am, wake up again around 6.30 am, feed my child and then come to work in the morning... There is a lot more pressure as a supervisor. Previously as an operator, I would switch off my machine and go home. If I didn't want to stay late, another operator could do the work. But there are no substitutes for supervisors, they must stay late till 8-10pm."

– Sharmin, Assistant Supervisor (GEAR trained, Factory A)

Some perceive household duties as 'women's responsibilities', and that they must perform these tasks as a decent and supportive wife. Several interviewees (both male and female) described household chores as *'typical work for a woman', 'women's responsibility',* something women *'must'* do, and particular tasks like cooking as an *'age-old tradition passed down by mothers and aunts'*. Inability to perform these gendered roles also resulted in feelings of guilt and inadequacy. As Sharmin further noted:

'I never ask my husband to do chores, don't I have a conscience? He comes home after working hard all day. (Don't you work hard?) Yes, but as a woman, I am required to do chores. I am used to it now like others who have become habituated. When I am unable to do so, I feel bad.'

– Sharmin, Assistant Supervisor (GEAR trained, Factory A)

3. Restrictions by family and husband: decisions to resign.

Some participants' families/husbands did not directly oppose their participation in GEAR but showed hostility when long working hours, or stress and exhaustion after work, coincided with their domestic roles. For example, when Sufia (Factory B) shared her decision to participate in GEAR, her husband responded 'Go see if you can work as a supervisor, if you fail, then don't come to me to complain'. Sufia later declined the offer for promotion upon her husband's insistence as she was unable to perform household chores after work. Some of the female supervisors in Factory B also noted that their husbands called their Senior Officers from time to time to check in, or in case the women did not answer their husband's phone calls.

4. Alternative motivations: women as secondary providers, increasing choices rather than climbing the career ladder.

A commonly held perception is that women are secondary income providers who join paid work to support the family and to ease financial burdens rather than pursue career ambitions. When asked about suitable jobs for women, common suggestions included professions with 'less work pressure' to allocate more time to domestic duties since women 'need to manage the household' and 'look after husband and children'. On the other hand, any professions are deemed suitable for men since they are 'obligated to work' and provide for their family. Men's obligations were described as follows:

"Men are required to do all kinds of work compared to women. For women, work is a matter of choice since her husband has the duty to look after her. Husbands must work no matter how small the profession is, they need to take care of their wives, children, and parents. Women work for their families too, to improve their future. Men have greater responsibilities."

- Afroja, Input man (Factory B, GEAR trained)

Similar views were shared by male supervisors and management, noting this as a reason why many women lack motivation to pursue supervisory roles. Suggestions regarding suitable jobs for women included jobs such as teachers, and NGO staff and – within garments – technicians, line chiefs, reporting section, and sample section work. Other suggestions included nursing and teaching jobs due to women's innate abilities to 'nurture' and 'care' for others, and home-based work to stay safe, closer to families and avoid gossip.

Another reason behind reinforcing such gendered roles may be that garment work is considered too arduous as described by several female interviewees, and those with alternative means for support do not view this as an aspirational working environment. For example, Rohima (GEAR

trained, not promoted, Factory A) was pursuing a second master's degree alongside a full-time factory job and the management had encouraged her to join GEAR due to her advanced educational qualifications. However, Rohima had strong aspirations to become a teacher and had been actively searching for teaching jobs through her family. For her, GEAR was mainly a way to broaden her options for the future.

5. Health problems: standing for long periods.

Health-related problems were commonly cited as one of the reasons for dropping out or declining promotions. Shanta (Factory B) dropped out of the training program because she started experiencing '*chest pains*', which were exacerbated by supervisory tasks that required '*shouting at people and running around*'. In the same factory, both Ayesha and Sufia were promoted as 'Input Man'⁴ supervisors but soon after resigned from the post as they struggled to stand for long periods. Ayesha described that "*Supervisors need to run around a lot for their work, get accessories and shift operator and machine locations. There is little scope to sit because of the tasks involved*". Further into the conversation, Ayesha and Sufia also noted low salaries, high levels of stress and workload, limited technical knowledge and husband's influence as additional deterring factors.

6. Lack of technical knowledge.

Most interviewees explained that workers from the quality section were generally more educated but lacked technical skills (i.e. garment sewing knowledge, various processes and ability to operate different types of machines), which is why GEAR participants with a quality background had weaker on the job performance after training. This is contrary to GEAR's trainee selection criteria that states to include machine operators rather than quality section workers. For example, Sufia who previously worked in the quality section (Factory B) struggled to explain quality issues to workers who often asked for practical demonstrations on different machines. This affected her performance and increased resistance from line workers who were more technically adept and senior to her. Exceptions in performance were noted among participants like Hamida (Factory A) and Shirin (Factory B) who had stronger motivations to become supervisors, and proactively invested their own time to learn how to operate different types of machines.

Creating an Enabling Environment at the Workplace

GEAR's influence at the factory workplace was explored through questions relating to changes in promotional practices, behaviours and attitudes toward male and female supervisors and relationships between GEAR participants, workers and management. Changes (or the lack

⁴ Factory B has four promotional grades for supervisors: 1. Input man (salary Tk. 8400, no overtime), 2. Assistant Supervisor, 3. Supervisor and 4. Senior Supervisor

thereof) at the management and overall factory level were rather mixed. Better Work’s program data measured program success based on the number of participants promoted after training. Accordingly, Factory A, which promoted 9 GEAR participants after training, was noted to be more successful compared to Factory B that only promoted 4. Yet over time, Factory B surprisingly fared better in creating an enabling environment such as by adjusting internal hiring and training practices; this benefitted female workers outside of GEAR and resulted in greater on-the-job satisfaction for female supervisors.

Organisational Characteristics

Specific organisational characteristics (See Table 1) strongly affected the extent to which the factory management incorporated lessons from GEAR into internal hiring and training practices.

Key characteristics	Factory A	Factory B
<i>Product type</i>	Knitwear (t-shirts, polo shirts)	Lingerie (women’s undergarments)
<i>Workforce, % female</i>	2019: 41% female; 2022: 38% female	2019, 2022: 81% female
<i>Total Number of Supervisors, % female</i>	2019: 310, 3% female 2022: 332, 4% female	2019: 213, 10% female 2022: 233, 22% female
<i>Other factors</i>		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Women in highly skilled positions prior to GEAR e.g., Production Officers, Technicians - Brand requirement to have 30% female supervisors

Product type and workforce gender ratio strongly shaped management’s motivations for promoting women in Factory B. In this case, GEAR complemented ongoing internal efforts to train and promote female supervisors. Since male workers and supervisors were ‘*too embarrassed*’ to work with women’s lingerie, a significant majority of the workforce was female (81%). According to the Production DGM, Amir, lingerie production is also relatively rare in Bangladesh and requires unique garment knowledge, which is another key reason for internally promoting supervisors from among skilled operators.

Prior to participating in GEAR, Factory B already had some women in skilled and senior-level positions such as Production Officers and Technicians. Therefore, while there had been a steady rise in women’s advancement since GEAR, visibility of female leadership was not necessarily a

new phenomenon. Female supervisors promoted outside of GEAR shared their experiences of working with one such female Production Officer who would encourage operators saying that *“One day you will also earn as much as me, you will not need to depend on your husbands, will be able to buy whatever you like, support your own families and provide alms to the poor.”* Another motivational factor noted by the management (Factory B) is that one of their main brand customers had a requirement to maintain 30% female supervisors (in proportion to the female workforce).

On the other hand, Factory A had a majority male workforce, which slightly increased over the years. The percentage of female supervisors remained disproportionately low both during and after GEAR training with 3% female supervisors in 2019 and 4% in 2020. Although the same brand as noted in Factory B also worked with Factory A, the minimum requirement of having 30% female supervisors was not mentioned by the management as a motivational factor.

Factory A

Factory A was noted by Better Work as a successful example based on the promotion of 9 out of 10 trainees into supervisory positions. At the time of conducting this study, four of those promoted were remaining at the factory. Among them, one had already submitted her resignation and others expressed dissatisfaction with the overall conditions for female supervisors.

Among positive developments, GEAR promoted supervisors who initially faced resistance from subordinate workers noted that such behaviour gradually improved as they fostered stronger relationships and honed their supervisory skills. However, despite performance improvements, female supervisors continued to face challenges particularly from the production management level. Some of the main workplace-level constraints are as follows:

- **Management preferred male supervisors due to beliefs about barriers inherent to women.**

Nazma (Supervisor, Factory A) pointed out that *“Women get promoted as supervisors through GEAR not from the production line like men.”* This is largely due to commonly held beliefs about women’s lack of physical strength and confidence and their primary roles as caregivers. Several interviewees pointed out that female supervisors struggled to perform physically laborious tasks such as carrying heavy bulks of accessories and garments from different departments to the production line and changing machinery layout prior to the start of a new production order.

In terms of soft skills, women were perceived to have more self-doubt, often ‘felt helpless’ and were unable to take criticism. Kobir (Supervisor, male) added that women cannot *‘display power like men’* and are instead expected to be *‘polite’*, *‘gentle’* and *‘quiet’* whereas men can easily

move around at work and are risk-takers. On the contrary, Nazma (Supervisor, female, GEAR promoted) expressed her frustration about such expectations, stating that when women argue or share a different opinion, they are called '*disobedient*'. In another interview, Shahid (DGM, HR/Compliance) described that some of the female supervisors '*lacked organizational fit*' and had a '*limited comfort zone*', which hindered their abilities to maintain close relations with both men and women and with staff members from various departments.

Limitations posed by gendered roles were raised by all interviewees, noting that women required additional leaves and considerations for pregnancies, childcare, and domestic duties. Management staff also reinforced these roles through paternalistic attitudes. For example, a manager explained:

"If workers are required to stay till 7pm, and there are guests visiting at home, management should be understanding towards women who need to entertain the guests, prepare, and cook. Men never ask to leave early for such reasons. If they did, we would respond saying 'You are a man, why does it matter if there are guests coming later?' Management is more thoughtful and considerate towards women's responsibilities."
- Shahid (DGM, HR/Compliance)

Similar attitudes were also embodied by male staff members who openly discouraged women from working as supervisors. For example, Sharmin's (Assistant Supervisor, GEAR promoted) male co-workers and Line Chiefs often advised her to switch back to an operator position as they were concerned about her well-being and inability to fulfil household duties. She explained that *"These men are used to strenuous labour and feel bad when they see women in a similar role. They say 'as an operator, you can work and also look after your husband and children.'"* Another view shared by Shopon, a male supervisor coaching a GEAR trial line, was that prospective female supervisors should have a 'do it all' attitude and reassure their families that their career will not undermine their duties as a mother and a wife. Only one male supervisor, Kobir, noted such perceptions are consequences of a 'patriarchal society' (*purushtantric shomaj*) rather than women's preordained roles. Noting such paternalistic attitudes and expectations about women's roles as key obstacles against women's professional advancement, Halima (female Supervisor, promoted outside of GEAR) recommended that it was crucial to change the mindsets of production staff.

- Unequal pay for female supervisors undermined motivation and satisfaction level of existing female supervisors.

All female supervisors promoted within and outside of GEAR claimed that they received lower pay than their male counterparts despite performing the same tasks. Hamida (GEAR promoted, resigned) explained that male supervisors get directly recruited as supervisors with a salary of Tk. 18,000 (roughly USD 170) and receive higher annual increments, whereas women are paid within the range of Tk. 15,500 -16,500 (roughly USD 147-157).

- Informal mentorship system, a common way of coaching workers to eventually take up supervisory and higher positions, often excluded women.

Due to the aforementioned perceptions and attitudes towards women, male supervisors rarely considered women for coaching. For example, Kobir (Supervisor, male) had helped train five operators, among whom only one was a female and Shopon (Supervisor, male) had trained four male operators, during their employment at the factory.

- Production department's objectives for meeting order deadlines while reducing costs undermined efforts to support newly trained female supervisors.

In response to key challenges with GEAR, a manager stated that:

"Some of the production floor-level management are less accepting of the GEAR project, because they need to meet production requirements at the end of the day. They cannot use GEAR to justify incomplete production targets. Some are unwilling to support GEAR as it takes time and patience to develop a new supervisor."

- Shahid (DGM, HR/Compliance)

Conflicting objectives between the Production and Compliance departments were also highlighted by GEAR participants. Some noted that although the Compliance staff tried to support GEAR trainees especially regarding maternity related issues, they lacked influence over the decisions of production-level staff.

- Preferential promotions for women through GEAR increased animosity among male peers.

Male and female supervisors promoted outside of GEAR considered the program's promotional practices as unfair towards men since they lose opportunities for advancement to less motivated GEAR participants. Samira, a female supervisor who was promoted several years prior to GEAR noted that:

"GEAR disregards existing promotional process by directly promoting female supervisors. If a male worker is interested to become a supervisor, and sees that the Admin/HR department gives this opportunity to someone lacking motivation, this can demotivate him and lead to worker dissatisfaction."

- Samira, Supervisor (non-GEAR, internally promoted)

Reflecting similar concerns, Shahid (DGM, HR/Compliance) explained how they equally prioritized both male and female workers based on interest and skill level for their internal management training program.

- Senior production staff with lower educational qualifications than GEAR’s female supervisors perceived them as a threat.

In response to potential barriers against career advancement, Nazma (Supervisor, GEAR trained) stated that selected production staff with lower education levels “*want to hold on to their existing positions till the end of their careers since they have limited possibilities for advancement and will not be accepted at a new factory as easily. These types of people will not create opportunities for others.*”

- Female workers lacked interest in supervisory roles due to excessive workload and low pay. Among workers, supervisory work is perceived as challenging, and underpaid compared to the amount of workload. Labiba (Machine Operator, female) noted that “*Operators are better off than supervisors, they can take breaks, grab a snack from the canteen, whereas supervisors can rarely catch a break.*” In another example, Taslima (Assistant Supervisor, GEAR promoted) remarked that ‘*A supervisor is like a newlywed bride, when she comes to a new family, she needs to perform all chores from A-Z and face pressure from all directions. A supervisor’s work is just the same.*’

- Allegations of harassment by male staff.

One of the GEAR promoted supervisors claimed that she had resigned after continuous harassment by her Production Officer who disapproved of her promotion, had threatened to cause difficulties, and was known to collect bribes for promotion. She further noted that he would make indecent comments about women, but the HR department could not take any actions against him due to his seniority.

Factory B

Based on the promotion of 4 out of 10 GEAR participants after training, Factory B was noted by Better Work as among the less successful participating factories. Amir, (DGM, Production) explained that since GEAR training did not fulfil all necessary technical gaps, management continued training the unpromoted participants internally and eventually offered them promotions; among them, two of the trainees declined promotions.

Since 2019, several changes have been noted in Factory B, some of which were reinforced by the presence of GEAR. The female supervisors expressed that they were content in their current roles

and with the level of management support addressing work-related barriers. Key positive developments include:

- **Overcoming initial resistance from workers.**

This was a key barrier against some GEAR participants at Factory B. Shomi (Supervisor, GEAR trained) recalled lacking acceptance among more senior-level female operators who were supposedly jealous or resentful of the younger and less experienced GEAR participants. Some of these senior workers had been working as sewing machine operators for over 10 years without any promotion due to lack of educational qualifications. To address such concerns, production management organised a production floor meeting and publicly instructed workers to cooperate with the newly appointed supervisors, show respect and refer to them as 'Apa' (sister -formal more respectful term) instead of their first names.

- **Changes in Promotional Practices.**

Since GEAR, there has been a steady upwards trend in the recruitment of female line supervisors from 10% female supervisors in 2019 to 22% in the following year. Interviewees also noted the increased visibility of women in supervisory roles. During this period, there has been a gradual reduction in the external hiring of supervisors since externally hired supervisors were noted to be less knowledgeable about production requirements and lacked technical skills for lingerie production.

Inadequate technical skills were perceived as a key limitation of GEAR participants, which impeded supervisory performance and diminished scope to earn respect and acceptance among workers. Accordingly, management increased technical skills training for internally promoted supervisory candidates who were taught to operate at least 2-3 different types of machines.

Participation in GEAR also led to a growing interest in formalized training by external providers. Some interviewees noted that structured learning improves performance and addresses negative perceptions associated with the supervisor role. A management staff emphasized the role of external training providers, stating that:

“Institutionalized training has an added effect of increasing accountability. Trainees feel greater obligation to try harder afterwards. When management counsels them on similar topics, workers assume that management is only doing it for business reasons, whereas external trainers are considered to be impartial.”

- Amir (Production DGM)

- Increasing visibility of female leadership motivated some female operators to seek further training.

Female supervisors shared examples of female operators who had expressed interest in promotional opportunities. These operators were subsequently referred to the production management for further training through on-the-job practice and/or at the factory-based Learning Centre.

- Reallocated physically demanding tasks like moving heavy loads to male mechanics.

Unlike Factory A where most interviewees (both male and female) cited that carrying heavy bulks of materials was a limitation for female supervisors, none of the female supervisors at Factory B noted this as an issue. At Factory B, this task was allocated to male mechanics who were responsible for supplying required materials to the production lines.

Interviewees noted the following constraints against the retention and promotion of female supervisors:

- Persistent constraints due to gendered roles.

Factors outside of the workplace such as excessive burden of domestic duties, childcare and family relations, were noted as persistent constraints against retaining trained female supervisors. These were described as common circumstances for women that cannot be addressed solely through factory-based interventions, which has limited influence on household matters. At the factory-level, management noted that they took the following steps to mitigate these constraints: adopted GEAR's selection criteria and required interested supervisory candidates to obtain prior approval from their families. This was to ensure family's support for working longer hours, and taking fewer leaves from work. Supervisors returning from maternity breaks were excluded from stringent performance evaluations and nursing mothers received an additional 30-minute break as it is not possible to keep new born babies in the existing child care facilities and since workers and their families generally prefer to keep their children at home.

- Lengthy process for supervisory promotions.

Internally promoted female supervisors noted that GEAR was a quicker pathway to promotions since the internal recruitment and training process ranged from 2-3 years until candidates are considered for the Assistant Supervisor role. The first supervisory grade is the 'Input Man', which is an on-the-job training period that can range from 3 to 12 months depending on performance.

- Perceptions about excessive workload of supervisors, and low pay deterred some female operators from applying for supervisory positions.

Some of the GEAR participants such as Shanta who dropped out of training and Shirin who resigned after promotion with a salary of Tk. 17,000 (approximately USD 161), noted that the pay

was inadequate and that a senior level operator can earn the same amount with fewer responsibilities. Factory B has four promotional grades for production-level supervisors starting with 'Input Man' with a low salary of around Tk. 8400 (approximately USD 80) without any overtime; this is significantly lower compared to salaries of senior sewing operators who can earn Tk. 9387 (approximately USD 89) per month without overtime and even up to Tk. 18,000 (approximately USD 171) with overtime.

5. CONCLUSIONS

This paper evaluated the impact of the GEAR program that seeks to empower female garment factory workers through training and advancement into supervisory positions. Over a year after its implementation, perceived changes by program participants, management staff and workers at two garment factories in Bangladesh were analyzed to understand program impact at the individual- and workplace-levels and, to some extent, at the household-level.

The program has resulted in noticeable changes within individual participants though the gains varied between candidates due to personal motivations, constraints/barriers, and past experiences. For those with prior motivations for career advancement, GEAR was an opportunity to surpass factory-level barriers such as management's preference for male supervisors. While soft skills training was appreciated by all participants, the hard skills component was particularly informative for those from the quality section who are generally more educated but less technically adept compared to sewing machine operators. Most participants agreed that GEAR should be continued as it provides an accelerated pathway to promotions and it helped address personal barriers by systematically learning about supervisory work, which previously seemed inconceivable. The program also provided a scope for younger and more educated line workers to surpass informal seniority-based hierarchies among sewing operators and gradually gain respect and higher social status as management staff. Trainees' expectations of higher earnings as a result of promotions were not immediately met due to internal gradations of supervisors based on performance: Factory B maintained a relatively low-paid starting supervisory grade, and in Factory B, female supervisors were dissatisfied at the gender-based pay gap since they received less salaries than their male counterparts. While it is implied that supervisory promotions will eventually lead to increased pay, the fairness of compensation for supervisors (wage level in relation to workload and gender wage gap) is beyond the purview of the existing GEAR curriculum but a frequently mentioned concern among several candidates.

Gendered constraints reinforced by workplace and household relations continued to predominantly shape and, in several cases, abruptly halt career trajectories of female

supervisors. Domestic and childcare roles posed a double burden for women who were responsible for household chores after work and lacked childcare support. Inability to cater to families often resulted in feelings of guilt and inadequacy among female supervisors since career ambitions were perceived to be secondary to familial responsibilities. When late working hours, stress or exhaustion from work coincided with household duties, it caused friction within household relations and is commonly cited as reasons why husbands or other family members dissuade women from pursuing supervisory work. Maternity periods are perceived as a significant barrier against women's advancement that results in performance gaps. Moreover, the absence of adequate maternity support and work transition systems burdened the affected female supervisors and their co-workers who are required to meet stringent production deadlines. Despite notable changes at the individual-level, the program's impact on addressing wider constraints and the trainees' active engagement in these collective processes are less apparent.

The mixed accounts of workplace-level changes illustrate intersecting influences within the factory environment that further hinder scope to address gendered constraints. Management's motivations to support female supervisors revolve around the fundamental objective of meeting production demands. Thus, organizational characteristics like production type and gender ratio of the workforce, which is also the applicant pool for internally hiring supervisors, strongly affected willingness to address female supervisors' performance barriers and to create an enabling environment. This is demonstrated by Factory B, which produces women's lingerie, a niche product, by a majority female workforce due to local sensitivities. In this case, management were keen to promote women prior to joining GEAR, hence the presence of GEAR complimented existing efforts to bolster supervisory recruitment practices. On the other hand, Factory A lacked a similar 'business case' to support women since the internal candidate pool was mostly male and there were significantly more external hiring options for knitwear production. Although most of the GEAR trainees received promotions at Factory A, these women reported greater levels of dissatisfaction at work and the persistence of negative perceptions especially among the production staff.

6. RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the above, the following recommendations may be considered to further enhance program impact:

1. [Facilitate discussions with management and workers to co-identify ways to accommodate pregnant and nursing female supervisors at work](#) – Maternity and nursing periods should be re-envisioned as an opportunity for upskilling rather than a 'performance gap' in women's careers. During this time, instead of being assigned to less value-added tasks to ease work

pressure, female workers could potentially learn technical skills or shadow senior employees (less physically strenuous but skilled tasks) in preparation for more advanced positions. The concept of paternity leave could be raised during discussions to initiate conversation about men's role in childcare responsibilities. Community-based solutions for maternal and child care could be further explored.

Like the practice of hiring substitute or 'floater' operators for absent workers, a maternity substitution system can also be developed to ease workload on co-supervisors who are required to take up additional tasks when a female supervisor is on maternity break.

2. [Create opportunities for women's advancement beyond the sewing section and in higher skilled positions \(recommendation from all female interviewees\)](#) - Examples of other potential areas include quality, finishing, cutting, printing, embroidery, sample section, store and record keeping, which have considerably less work pressure compared to the sewing section. Several interviewees were also interested in advanced technical positions such as garment Technicians, Line Chiefs and Production Officers, who allocate strenuous tasks to line supervisors and therefore have less work pressure and requirements to be present at the production floor; these positions require extensive garment knowledge and technical skills and are generally recruited from among experienced line supervisors.
3. [Target training efforts to address attitudes and behaviours, particularly of mid-level production staff such as Senior Supervisors, Officers, and Assistant Managers](#) – Line level staff informally mentor machine operators and recommend promising candidates to higher level managers. It is therefore necessary for them to overcome negative perceptions about women's abilities in order to consider women for learning opportunities and to support them to overcome performance barriers.

While GEAR currently focuses at the workplace-level, household relations which continue to pose a significant barrier in some cases against the retention of trainees and promoted supervisors, could be more directly addressed such as by hosting key family members to an information session or 'visit the workplace' day.

4. [Consider organizational characteristics such as gender ratio of workforce and supervisors, and product type to tailor training and advisory approaches](#) – Factories with a growing number of female supervisors prior to training (i.e., Factory B) are likely to benefit more from strengthening existing internal resources and processes. For example, training-of-trainers (ToT) sessions can be provided to relevant factory staff to incorporate lessons on motivating female workers, stress management, workplace communication, self-care and other relevant

topics. On the other hand, cases like Factory A that are heavily constrained by negative perceptions about women abilities can benefit from additional advisory/training targeted towards male production staff members. Managers from both factories have requested for GEAR's training materials for internal use.

5. [Training sessions with multiple factories should be organized according to production type to boost knowledge sharing](#) - One of the recommendations from Factory B's management was to group together training participants from lingerie factories, which could provide an opportunity to exchange practices regarding familiar production processes; they noted that GEAR's technical component focuses more on knit/woven production, which was not entirely aligned to their production needs.
6. [Properly implement and expand participant selection criteria](#) – Female supervisors promoted outside of GEAR recommended that the selection criteria should further emphasize aspects such as motivation, technical skill level, confidence, and communication skills, rather than higher educational qualifications (as long as they can perform basic record keeping tasks). There were selected cases in both factories where management prioritized workers with a quality background because of higher educational qualifications even though they lacked technical skills. Management at Factory A noted that GEAR's minimum 10-participant threshold was difficult to meet due to which some candidates had been enrolled to meet the headcount even though they lacked strong interest.
7. [Review conditions of employment, including wages, for both male and female supervisors](#) – Considering the case of Factory A, assessing the employment conditions of line supervisors through Better Work's advisory or assessment services could help identify potential discriminatory practices and track relevant data such as gender disaggregated pay and supervisory promotions.
8. [Incorporate additional indicators to monitor and align program success more closely to its objectives of women's empowerment and workplace transformation](#) – The reverse scenarios of Factories A and B clearly indicate that the number of female supervisors promoted at the end of training provides a limited view of changes as a result of GEAR. Long-term indicators such as the retention and overall job satisfaction of promoted female supervisors, and promotion of female supervisors outside of GEAR are essential determinants of lasting impact on the factory environment and in the lives of female garment workers.

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APPENDIX I – INTERVIEW LIST

Category	Factory A	Factory B
GEAR Trainees – promoted	1. Sharmin - Assistant supervisor 2. Taslima - Assistant supervisor 3. Nazma - Supervisor	1. Tasnima - Assistant supervisor 2. Shomi - Assistant supervisor 3. Rabeya - Assistant supervisor 4. Afroja – Input Man (promoted later)
GEAR Trainees – promoted and resigned	4. Hamida – machine operator	5. Shirin – housewife
GEAR Trainee- dropped out and resigned	n/a	6. Shanta - operator
GEAR Trainees – not promoted/ declined offer	5. Rohima - Sample operator <i>(Note: assigned to supervisory role for 1 year but did not receive official promotion afterwards)</i>	7. Ayesha - Operator 8. Sufia – Senior quality inspector <i>(Note: both were assigned to supervisory roles, but discontinued after 2-3 months)</i>
Non-GEAR, female supervisors	6. Samira – Supervisor (Sewing) 7. Halima – Supervisor (Cutting)	9. Selina – Supervisor (Sewing) 10. Shahana – Supervisor (Sewing) 11. Hena – Supervisor (Sewing) 12. Jyoti – Supervisor (Sewing) 13. Zakia – Supervisor (Sewing)
Male supervisors	8. Shopon – Senior supervisor / technical skills trainer/ GEAR trial line supervisor 9. Arif – Senior supervisor 10. Kobir – Supervisor	14. Kawsar - Senior supervisor 15. Tanim - Senior supervisor/ GEAR trial line supervisor 16. Hossain - Supervisor
Workers under GEAR trained supervisors	11. Labiba – Operator 12. Momtaz - Operator 13. Kashem - Operator (Sample) 14. Hamid – Operator (Sample)	17. Bulbuli – Junior operator 18. Tahmina - Operator 19. Tonni – Junior operator 20. Lamia – Junior operator 21. Brishti – Operator (floater)
GEAR Trial Line Supervisor	15. Habib – Line Chief	22. Partho - Supervisor

Management in-charge of hiring supervisors	16. Shahid – Deputy General Manager, Compliance and Human Resources	23. Amir – Deputy General Manager, Production
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APPENDIX II – INTERVIEW GUIDES

Recently promoted GEAR participants (FGD)

1. How did you decide to join the GEAR programme?
2. What were your expectations when you first started? Have these been met?
3. What were the most important lessons that you learned from GEAR?
4. Was there something that could have been improved in the training?
5. What did your family think about your decision to participate? Did anyone try to stop or support you?
6. Division of labour at home- Did roles change in recent times?
7. Since GEAR, have you experienced any changes in your relationships with: family/ co-workers/ management?
8. What challenges do you face when performing supervisory work? How do you manage these? (inquire about working late, COVID, and if anyone supports them)
9. What are key barriers preventing women from seeking leadership positions? Did you face any?
10. What options for work did you have before you joined GEAR? What options do you have after?
11. What do you think is the best kind of work for women?
12. What other kinds of leadership or skilled opportunities could be made available to women at the factory level?

GEAR participants in a supervisory position for more than 1.5 years (FGD)

1. Do you recall the GEAR programme? What were the most important lessons learned from the programme?
2. What were your expectations when you joined GEAR? Have these been met?
3. Was there something that could have been improved in the training?
4. Compared to 1.5 years ago, what differences do you see in yourself e.g. an individual, a supervisor, skill level?
5. Since you started working as a supervisor, has there been any changes in your relationships with: family/ co-workers/ management?
6. Division of labour at home- Did roles change in recent times?
7. What challenges do you face when performing supervisory work? (inquire about working late, COVID, resources for support)

8. Any changes over time in how you deal with such problems?
9. Did any workers express interest to become a supervisor/ learn supervisory skills? (men/women?)
10. What are key barriers preventing women from seeking leadership positions? Did you face any?
11. What do you think is the best kind of work for women? Why?
12. What other kinds of leadership or skilled opportunities could be made available to women at the factory level?

GEAR participants who have not been promoted (FGD)

1. Why did you decide to join the GEAR programme?
2. What were your expectations when you first started? Have these been met?
3. What were the most important lessons learned from the programme?
4. Which part of training did you find the most challenging?
5. Was there something that could have been improved in the training?
6. What did your family think about your participation in GEAR? Did anyone try to stop or support you?
7. Division of labour at home? How does this affect your work life?
8. Why do you think you were not offered a promotion at the end?
9. What are the main barriers preventing women from seeking leadership positions? Did you face any?
10. Since GEAR, have you experienced any changes in your relationships with: family/ co-workers/ management?
11. What other kinds of leadership or skilled opportunities could be created for women at the factory level?
12. What do you think is the best kind of work for women? Why?
13. What options for work did you have before you joined GEAR? What options do you have after?

GEAR participants who declined offer or dropped out (FGD)

1. Why did you decide to join the GEAR programme?
2. What were your expectations when you first started? Have these been met? Why/why not?
3. Which part of training did you find the most challenging?
4. Was there something that could have been improved in the training?
5. Division of labour at home? How does this affect your work life?
6. What did your family think about your participation in GEAR? Did anyone try to stop or support you?
7. Why did you drop out/decline offer for promotion? Did anyone influence your decision?
8. Since GEAR, have you experienced any changes in your relationships with: family/ co-workers/ management?

9. What are the main barriers preventing women from seeking leadership positions? Did you face any?
10. What other kinds of leadership or skilled opportunities could be created for women at the factory level?
11. What do you think is the best kind of work for women? Why?
12. What options for work did you have before you joined GEAR? What options do you have after?

Recently promoted male supervisors (FGD)

1. How did you get recruited as a supervisor?
2. Where did you learn supervisory skills?
3. What are some of the challenges you face when performing supervisory work?
4. Did any workers express interest to become a supervisor/ learn supervisory skills?
5. What are essential qualities of a good supervisor?
6. What types of opportunities do workers have to learn these skills?
7. Are these opportunities equally available to both men and women?
8. Are there any differences between male and female supervisors (if any)?
9. Have you worked with any female supervisors? What was your experience?
10. Do you know about the GEAR program? Do you think this affects you in any way?
11. How many people at your household? division of labour at home?
12. What do you think is the best kind of work for women? Why?

Machine operators/helpers working under GEAR trainees (FGD)

1. What are essential qualities of a good supervisor?
2. Where can workers learn these skills?
3. How are supervisors recruited?
4. Are these opportunities equally available to both men and women?
5. Are there any differences between male and female supervisors (if any)? Describe your experiences.
6. What are some barriers preventing women from seeking leadership positions? Did you face any?
7. What other kinds of leadership or skilled opportunities could be made available to women at the factory level?
8. Do you know about the GEAR programme? What do you think about this?
9. Would you be interested to become a supervisor? Why/why not?
10. Did you ever approach anyone to learn supervisory skills/ become a supervisor? If yes, what was your experience?
11. What do you think is the best kind of work for women? Why?

Manager in charge of recruiting supervisors (Individual interview)

1. What are essential qualities of a good supervisor?

2. How do workers learn these skills?
3. Does the product type i.e. knit, lingerie, woven, affect types of skills/time required for training supervisors?
4. How do you normally recruit supervisors?
5. Has there been any changes in recruitment practices in recent times?
6. Do you think any of these procedures can affect men and women differently?
7. Approximately how many new supervisors did you promote in the past year? Any women promoted outside of GEAR?
8. Are there any differences between male and female supervisors (if any)?
9. What are your thoughts on the performance of newly promoted female supervisors?
10. What are some key challenges faced by female supervisors? Were any steps taken to address these?
11. Are you in the factory's GEAR advisory committee?
12. What are your thoughts on the GEAR programme? Anything that can be improved?

Existing supervisor supporting GEAR trainees in the Trial Lines (Individual interview)

1. How did you get recruited as a supervisor?
2. Where did you learn supervisory skills?
3. Are similar learning opportunities available at this factory?
4. Do you have experience working with other production types i.e. knit, lingerie, woven? If yes, does the product type affect types of skills/time required for training supervisors?
5. Please describe how you are involved with the GEAR program.
6. What is the objective of the GEAR programme?
7. Are there any differences between male and female workers and supervisors?
8. What are some common challenges faced by female supervisors? Were any steps taken to address these?
9. What are your thoughts on the performance of newly promoted female supervisors?
10. Do you think the program could be improved?
11. How does participation in GEAR affect factory's production?
12. What do you think is the best kind of work for women? Why?

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