



Cutting Through the Cloth Ceiling

Assessing how IFC's Work-Progression & Productivity Toolkit helps female workers achieve promotion and boost productivity in Bangladesh's readymade garment factories

IN PARTNERSHIP WITH





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For the full list of participating factories, please see the annex at the end of this publication.

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Let's Work: <https://letswork.org/>

Innovations for Poverty Action: <https://www.poverty-action.org/>

Better Work: <https://betterwork.org/>





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Executive summary

“When I was offered the opportunity to be a Supervisor, I was really scared and they had to push me and give me confidence. Because of their support I took the opportunity. Other women feel the same way and so need to be pushed as well. They need your training, your words and a boost of confidence from you. You'll see they'll all be able to move up”.

— Mosammot Janata Khatun, Supervisor, Jinnat Knitwears Ltd.

IFC's Work-Progression and Productivity Toolkit (WPT) is a training program for female sewing operators designed to redress the imbalance on sewing lines in Bangladesh's readymade garment (RMG) factories, where more than nineteen of every 20 line supervisors are men despite 80% of line workers being women. The program aims to equip women with the skills necessary to become supervisors.

WPT provides female sewing operators with five days of classroom training in the technical skills required to supervise a production line (production process, solving bottlenecks, line-balancing, pre- and post-cutting activities, method study, work-study, types of needles, machines and motor types, types of pressure foot, guides and folders), as well as four days of soft skills training on leadership, communications, and how to be an effective supervisor. The trainees then apply what they have learned over eight weeks of on-the-job training alongside an experienced supervisor, to prepare them for the step up to supervisor or assistant supervisor.

WPT also includes training for middle- and upper-level managers in how to quantifiably assess the skills and attitude of candidates for promotion; and team building sessions to bring together the learners and their managers.


In 2016-2017, IFC partnered with Better Work Bangladesh (BWB) and Innovations for Poverty Action (IPA) to deliver the training to 144 female sewing operators and their middle-level managers in 28 factories. The trainee supervisors had an average of 6 years' experience in the RMG sector, including 5 as an operator; and 28% of them had an upper secondary education.

This study, led by Professor Christopher Woodruff and Anaise Williams at University of Oxford tested WPT's effectiveness by measuring how many trainees were offered and accepted promotion, as well as by testing the attitudes of the trainees, their colleagues and factory management.

Out of the 144 trainees who completed the program, 92 were offered a promotion to a higher grade with an increase in salary, within weeks of completing the program and about 60% of them accepted the offer. The number of female supervisors in participating factories increased from an average of 5.22% before the training to 11.86% post WPT.

The program improved the confidence of these trainees, although the difference was only statistically significant for those who received both hard (technical) and soft (personal and leadership attributes) skills training. This shows women – like anyone – need training in the technical skills the role requires if they are to have the confidence to seek and accept a promotion.

The study also looked at the effect on line productivity and found that from before to after the training and trialing of female supervisors on the lines, the lines where trained female supervisors worked saw an average efficiency increase of 5%. Absenteeism was also reduced on the lines where trainees went on to work as supervisors or assistant supervisors.



This could very well be linked to how colleagues who remained on the sewing line viewed the successful trainees; operators reported them to be better at remaining calm than typical supervisors, and as slightly better at helping and motivating operators, all of which are clearly beneficial attributes for a leader to have. The trainees' prior attitude seemed to be important here, with operators rating most highly the trainees with the highest initial interest and prior confidence in their ability to do the job.

Aptitude for the job was important in whether management chose to make an offer, but it was the trainees' prior attitude that also gave the best indicator as to whether they would both complete the program and accept a promotion.

Attitude was affected heavily by the years of schooling the trainee had received. Scores on the attitude test related to interest in being a supervisor, support from family, and confidence in their performance in the role were all significantly higher in those with nine or more years of schooling.

Notably, among the individual attitude scores, support from the family is most strongly associated with completion of the training program.

While the trainees' most common response when asked about the most difficult part of their job when trialing as a trainee supervisor was problems around relationships with operators and other management personnel, the study showed that assistant production and HR managers were aware of these negatives attitudes towards trainees. Paradoxically, this gives hope that they may be able to help put in place actions to overcome bias in future programs to support female operators' career progression.

And the study showed that a shift in response to one all important question occurred post-training: "Who do you prefer to work with: male supervisors, female supervisors, or no preference?". Preference for female supervisors increased among trainees; line chiefs and line supervisors; and assistant production and HR managers.

Line chiefs and line supervisors found that WPT trainees in general improved more quickly than a typical supervisor in their first two months of work. With half of factories saying it takes around three months for a new supervisor to be proficient, 30% saying closer to six months and for some up to one year, it is clear the WPT program is preparing new supervisors to swiftly step up to their new responsibilities and become effective supervisors.

The WPT training was piloted in just 28 factories, including ten who had no female line supervisors at the start of the program. Seven of these appointed their first female supervisor and the percentage of women line supervisors across the 28 factories increased from just 5% to almost 12%. And on average, the lines where female trainees were, showed a 5% efficiency increase.

If these gains can be scaled-up in more factories, IFC's Work-Progression and Productivity Toolkit training program has the potential to overturn the industry's gender blind-spot related to career-progression opportunities for women, and in turn benefit both the female supervisors and the factories that promote them.

1. Looking for female leaders

Female workers dominate garment factory workforces, so why do men typically supervise the production line? And what is lost?

“I look around and see the other countries surrounding us – Cambodia, Myanmar, Viet Nam and there are women working at high levels. So why can't we in Bangladesh? Many women from our factories have actually gone abroad to work. So if they can work there, why can't we achieve similar success in our own motherland?”

— Rozina Aktar, Supervisor, Sparrow Apparels Ltd.

The textile and apparel sector is one of the most important employers of female workers in developing countries around the globe. Work in the apparel sector is often the first formal employment opportunity for many women in low-income countries and an essential step toward the economic empowerment they need to lift their families out of poverty.

Since the early 1980s, the readymade garment (RMG) industry has provided large-scale employment opportunities to women in Bangladesh, a country where traditionally women have had little previous experience of formal work outside their home.

There is little doubt that the job opportunities created by the sector have brought women, their families and Bangladeshi society at large, significant benefits. However, data also shows that the economic empowerment the industry brings women only goes so far; there is very little equality of opportunity for female garment workers with respect to promotion within RMG factories. While the sewing line is dominated by women, accounting for four out of every five production line workers, less than one in 20 line supervisors is female.

This means 95% of the supervisory talent on the sewing lines comes from just 20% of the workforce. If indeed workers were promoted on the basis of merit, this would be a stunning indictment on the abilities of half the population. Yet there is no a priori reason to believe men make better supervisors than woman, and we are not aware of any research that demonstrates such a thing.

“If men can do it, why can't I? He's a human being. I am too, right? So what if I'm a woman. If he can do it, I'll show them that I can do it too.”

— Popy Aktar, Supervisor, Sparrow Apparels Ltd.





Indeed, it is more reasonable to suggest that the scarcity of women in supervisor roles is a squandered opportunity. All else being equal, it is clear that factories would do well to broaden their search parameters when hiring for supervisory positions if they really are seeking to find the best talent, and if they wish to reward skill and hard work. Ignoring the potential of 80% of their sewing workforce can only be to their detriment.

As CARE Bangladesh recently showed in a study titled *A Qualitative Enquiry To Gender Specific Constraints Towards Career Mobility in RMG Sector Bangladesh*, few factories invest in formal training for supervisory roles for women. The study shows that females get less time for training than men; there is no concrete factory management plan to upgrade women collectively; and men get priority over women to learn new machine operations. In addition, the study says that training institutions have very few courses available (and convenient) for promoting women from operator to supervisor.

There is a lot at stake. Today Bangladesh has a US \$28 billion textile and apparel industry and it plays a major role in the country's economy. It generates 20% of GDP and more than 80% of export earnings while directly impacting the lives of millions of women who on average account for 60-65% of the sector's workforce.

Ensuring that the impacts of employment in Bangladesh's textile and apparel sector is both positive and beneficial to women, their families, their communities as well as society at large is essential for improving women's economic empowerment, and in building long-term business sustainability.

As a response, Bangladesh's textile and apparel sector is increasingly turning to programs and initiatives to improve working conditions, build skills and promote female garment workers on par with their male colleagues. These programs – led by individual brands, factories, the Government of Bangladesh, NGOs and international organizations – enhance the economic empowerment of female workers and improve their livelihood opportunities. Just as importantly, companies in the supply chain recognize that they are also key for maintaining competitive advantage and ensuring business success.

The study this report discusses is part of this effort. It tests the Work-Progression and Productivity Toolkit (WPT) training designed by the International Finance Corporation (IFC) to address a gap in the market by helping factories prepare their female workers for promotion through training in technical as well as management and personal skills in parallel with on-the-job practice as trainee supervisors.

It works on the assumption that this will be beneficial for the individual workers, their peers on the production line, the factories themselves, and Bangladeshi society at large. Being an academic study, it does, of course, test whether these assumptions are true; the WPT pilot had a robust impact evaluation built in to measure female operators' progression rates, and impact on line productivity.

The study tests whether training is enough to ready women workers for the demands of a supervisor role. Within that, it also tests whether training in soft skills – those related to personal attributes and management styles, for example – is sufficient or whether job-specific training, or training in the so-called hard skills like quality control and production processes, is also required.

IFC's toolkit is accompanied by training for middle- and upper-level managers in how to quantifiably assess the skills and attitude of candidates for promotion. The theory is that this will help them identify those most likely to be successful in a senior role – rather than simply choosing external male hires with purported supervisory experience, or workers who have been working on the production line the longest.

Onboarding training rounds out the program by emphasizing to lower-level managers the effectiveness of female line supervisors and giving them tools to support female line supervisors in succeeding in their new role. Lastly, a half-day team building session brings together the newly-trained supervisors, existing supervisors, line chiefs, industrial engineers, and other middle managers so that trainee supervisors can start building their network of support to succeed in their new role.

“I've been here for eight years and noticed that most of the floors have a majority of women. And there was not a single female supervisor or line chief at that time. Management themselves realized the need to support women to move up the leadership pipeline. Management supported us in this objective.”

— Mahbub Hoshen, Assistant Manager, HR department, Jinnat Knitwears Ltd.

Through surveys of workers who went through IFC's training as well as other operators and managers, the study also looks at all the factors that may have contributed to female under-representation in supervisory roles, such as the effect of entrenched ideas about gender roles. It seeks to understand what could be holding back those who clearly have the attitude and skills to excel in a supervisory role – or at the very least perform as well as their male counterparts – and how to turn these obstacles upside down.

Wide-spread – but far from ubiquitous – patriarchal structures in Bangladeshi society that limit women from managing men are a significant driver of a cycle in which workers who see less likelihood of promotion do not invest in acquiring additional skills; this in turn perpetuates the myth that women do not have what it takes to be supervisors. This study asks what is needed to interrupt this cycle and allow more women to seize new opportunities.

The WPT study also looks at whether there are benefits for factories that promote women, either directly with regards to measurable factors like line efficiency or defect rates, or indirectly through things like reducing turnover rates as women are shown that they are valued and will be rewarded with promotion for their skill and hard work. It is well known that high turnover brings with it large costs in terms of resource and efficiency losses.

This study was on too small a sample size and of too short a duration to really test for the long-term impact on turnover rates and other intangible workplace benefits from women supervisors, but it is only the beginning. Results will help IFC improve the toolkit and our approach to rolling it out – particularly with regards to trainee selection and training methodologies – so it can be scaled up to a greater number of factories and over a longer time period.

There is no doubt that the RMG industry has fueled economic growth and changed society in Bangladesh for the better. But there is still so much unfulfilled potential. Imagine how much more the industry can do if it can overcome gender inequality and make full use of the talent of the four-fifths of its workforce currently laboring on its production lines with few opportunities to fulfill their aspirations.

“When we promoted women to higher level positions, they seem to be much more loyal and remain in the company for a longer period of time.”

— Shovon Islam (Shawn), CEO/Managing Director, Sparrow Apparels Ltd.



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2. Redressing the balance

Introducing a training toolkit to prepare female operators for supervisory roles, and to prepare factories to promote them.

“I didn’t really know much about the garment world. The vast beginning-to-end of the production process of one single garment is something this training opened my eyes to.”

— Jesmin Akter, Supervisor, Jinnat Knitwears Ltd.

IFC’s Work-Progression & Productivity Toolkit (WPT) is a series of training interventions designed to provide female operators with skills that prepare them for promotion to supervisory positions. This is a mix of training in so-called soft and hard skills, as well as on-the-job training alongside an existing supervisor for at least eight weeks whenever the trainee is not in classroom training. A module for managers includes on-boarding training, selection training and team building sessions.

The hard skills training focuses on the technical side of being a supervisor. During five full days of classroom training, trainees learn about production processes, sewing machines, quality control, cutting, finishing, printing, embroidery, as well as what a supervisor role requires. The overall target of the training is to lay the basic technical foundation for the female supervisor.

Soft skills training takes place over four days with participants discussing breaking barriers, increasing self-confidence, developing leadership skills, practicing effective communication and listening, fostering a healthy working environment, and being a team player and role model for workers. The training additionally focuses on understanding harassment, developing integrity and fairness, workers’ rights and responsibilities, and human resources management, including types of management styles.

It is expected that the classroom training will equip the trainees with the skills required of a line supervisor and the on-the-job training will give them the opportunity to apply what they learned in a real-world setting.



IFC partnered with 28 readymade garment (RMG) factories to evaluate whether WPT is effective. These factories are relatively large overall, with an average of 3,148 workers (ranging from 660 to 13,553 workers). All export to large western buyers. They are located in the vicinity of the city of Dhaka in the areas of Gazipur (12), Ashulia (7), Narayanganj (3), Savar (4), Mirpur (1), and Mirzapur (1).

Senior managers at each factory were asked to nominate a number of female operators to participate in the program based on their expected needs for new supervisors. These managers were asked to rank their nominees according to how likely they thought they would be to succeed as line supervisors, and they were also asked to provide replacements in case any of their nominees were unable or unwilling to take part.

From the 367 workers nominated (including those nominated as replacements), 201 who met basic numeracy and literacy requirements were randomly allocated to three treatment groups: one group received soft and hard skills training, one received soft skills training only, and the third group was a control group. This was to determine whether soft skills training or hard skills training is a more effective and efficient means for promoting female advancement. Each treatment group had a similar number of trainees.

At the start of the program, the average trainee had 6.3 years of garments' experience and only 28.25% had any upper secondary education (over 9 years of education), as shown in Table 1.

Table 1: Trainee demographics

Average age	25.7 years
Average years of education	8.4
Percentage of trainees with upper secondary education	28.3
Percentage of trainees who are married	75.7
Average number of children	1.1
Average years of experience in garment sector	6.3
Average years of experience as an operator	5.4



Source: WPT research

Factories were divided into five sessions of five to six factories each for training, as shown in Table 2. This table also shows the number of trainees who completed the program in each trial group¹. The first training session for 'hard and soft' and 'soft-only' groups began in November 2016 and the fifth began in March 2017. All training for these treatment groups was finished in May 2017. At the same time as they received classroom training, they were also assigned to a production line to complete eight weeks trialing as a trainee supervisor.

All nominees were eventually offered the full suite of training regardless of which group they were assigned, including those in the control group. This training began for the control groups in August 2017 after they had completed their eight weeks trialing as trainee supervisors and been contacted for the initial follow up survey. Their training was completed in October 2017.

At the beginning of the program, 341 lower level managers in the production department at 28 factories, including line chiefs and supervisors from the lines where the trainees were assigned to trial as trainee supervisors, were given Onboarding Training. This emphasized the effectiveness of female line supervisors and gave managers tools to support female line supervisors in succeeding in their new role. Then at the end of the classroom training, 410 participants, including all trainees, supervisors, line chiefs, and industrial engineers in charge of the respective trial lines took part in a team-building session designed to ease the trainee's transition to the management team.

¹ Over the eight-week trial, 56 trainees left the program, leaving 144 "completers". The number of dropouts was highest in the control group, in large part because 22 decided they did not want to be a line supervisor after the eight-week trial but before their classroom training sessions started. This was likely in part due to the delayed starting date of the control group training.



Table 2: Trainee completion status

Session	Hard & Soft	Soft Only	Control	Total
1	12	12	8	33
2	9	9	8	26
3	8	11	4	23
4	10	11	4	25
5	16	17	5	38
Total	55	60	29	144

Source: WPT research

Testing aptitude and attitude

All of the nominees were given a series of diagnostic tests measuring aptitude and various aspects of attitude. The aptitude tests included a literacy test, a numeracy test, a test of fluid intelligence (or processing speed) and a test of their knowledge of garments. We also asked a series of questions intended to measure how supportive the nominee's spouse/family was of them taking on the role of supervisor, how interested in the position they were themselves, and how confident they were in their ability to perform in the role.

Eligibility for the program depended on scoring above 0% on both the literacy and numeracy test, and above 25% on one of them, but not on results in any of the other diagnostics. Table 3 displays the scores for the various key measures at baseline across the treatment groups. Generally, trainees had low numeracy and processing speed scores.

Table 2: Average trainee baseline diagnostic scores by percentage

	Literacy	Numeracy	Processing speed	Garments knowledge	Family support	Interest	Confidence
Overall	45	37	30	52	68	66	68
Hard + Soft	58	46	33	55	72	71	74
Soft only	56	48	31	54	74	79	73
Control	56	50	36	54	75	72	74

Source: WPT research

Selection training

Promotion to a supervisor position clearly first requires a candidate to be selected for promotion by management. Therefore, in addition to testing the impact of the toolkit on worker skills and readiness, the study tested whether training managers in candidate selection could also make a difference.

Fifteen of the factories involved in the program were randomly selected and the 160 senior managers at these factories that had earlier been involved in nominating the trainees were provided Selection Training. This taught them to use standardized worker evaluations to better evaluate how likely a line operator would be to succeed in a supervisor position.

Following the training, the managers were asked to reconsider the line operators that they wanted to put forward for the WPT program. This gave them the chance to reconsider nominees based on their results in the aptitude and attitude tests. The idea was to test whether the new selection methods resulted in the selection of trainees with the mix of skills and personal characteristics that would make them more likely to be successful in a supervisor job.

Importantly, it was also designed to test whether it is possible to drive the systemic and behavioural changes needed in factory culture to seriously address the gender imbalance in supervisory roles. Factory managers are traditionally more comfortable evaluating and considering men for supervisory roles, so this training sought to see if this mindset could be overturned.

Survey methods

The training program was supported with surveys of trainees, supervisors, managers, and line operators before, during and after completion. There were two broad survey data collection aims:

1. Assess the impact of the training on productivity in the factories by:

- a. Detecting productivity changes through analysis of factory production data.
- b. Understanding the channels through which training affects productivity by asking about:
 - i. Work practices within the factories
 - ii. Worker attitudes to work and to each other
 - iii. Worker and manager assessments of trainees, and trainees' self-assessment
 - iv. Worker relationships with supervisors (including female supervisors) and management more generally

2. Better understand the RMG industry by developing a broader picture of practices and trends in the sector, including:

- a. Increased knowledge about the type of people that are working in the industry, how much experience they have, their education and family background, as well as their career history in the sector
- b. Improved understanding of existing managerial practices and attitudes toward those practices
- c. Improved understanding of communication within the factory

In total, 3,322 baseline surveys were conducted between November 2016 and March 2017; 2,636 weekly trainee surveys took place between January 2017 and August 2017; and 2,624 follow-up surveys were conducted in the initial round between April 2017 and October 2017. As noted above, the initial follow up survey was conducted in each factory before trainees assigned to the soft skills only or control groups were offered the complete training program.

The statistical analysis is not presented in this paper but is available in the academic paper by University of Oxford.

3. One stitch at a time

How the program helped some women workers win promotion, and what this meant for them and their colleagues.

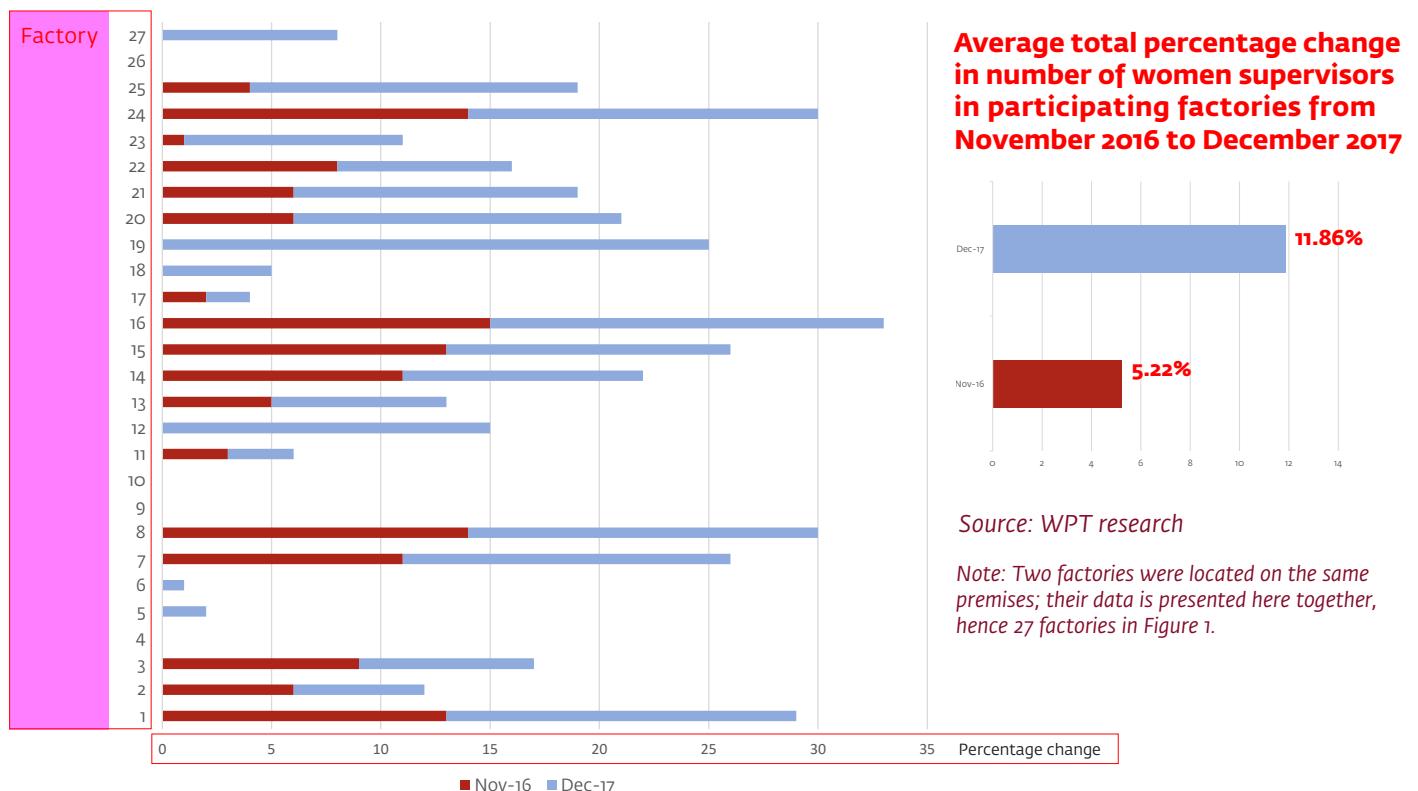
“I used to be really scared before this training and I really struggled with confidence because I wondered if I could actually move up the ranks as a woman. I wasn't even interested in pursuing this track because as a woman I didn't think it was possible. This training gave me that boost of confidence and I've been actually feeling pretty free and unburdened since the training.”

— Jesmin Akter, Supervisor, Jinnat Knitwears Ltd.

Redressing the gender imbalance in supervisory positions in readymade garment (RMG) factories will take time, no matter how suited women workers are to the demands of the role and how effective IFC's Work-Progression & Productivity Toolkit (WPT) is in leveling the playing field so they will be considered for promotion.

The factories that took part in the program, and that offered promotions, were not especially inclined to promote females to supervisory roles, at least before the program began. Indeed, just 5% of supervisors across the factories at the start of the program were women despite them accounting for 80% of all line operators. Ten of the 28 factories had no women supervisors at all. Only one large factory bucked the trend, but even here just 19% of supervisors were women.

Figure 1: Percentage change in number of women supervisors in participating factories from November 2016 to December 2017



Attitudes clearly changed as a result of IFC's program. In January 2018, approximately two months after the control group training was complete, another round of surveys with trainees was conducted. This survey reached 162 trainees, including 134 women who had completed the training and 28 who had pulled out during the training. We could not reach 11 of the 144 trainees who had completed the program.

Fifty-one of the 162 women who started the training and who could be contacted were working as line supervisors or assistant line supervisors at the time. This number included two women promoted before they completed the program. For these 51 women, the program has unequivocally been a major personal success.

And of the 10 factories without any female supervisors at the start of the program, eight promoted at least one trainee during the program, and the average proportion of female supervisors overall increased to just under 12% (11.86%) across all factories. This is a major step in the right direction.

A further 27 of the women who completed the program were also offered a promotion, but they turned it down, as did 14 women who dropped out. While this is disappointing, it gives valuable information about how to fine-tune and improve the training. It also means – and this is important – that more than half of the 162 women who began the program and that we could reach for follow up surveys (92 women, or 56.79%) were considered by managers to be suitable for promotion.

Other studies have shown that promotion rates continue to increase for a lengthy period after the completion of training as more positions open up. In fact, just over a quarter of trainees said in the January 2018 survey that they would certainly or very likely be promoted within the next three months.

Lead and I will follow

“The most important thing I learned from this training was how to move beyond fear and step into courage. Because if I am brave, I can communicate effectively to actually motivate my operators to be efficient and disciplined. Also, they will hold me in respect, neither seeing me as their best friend, nor as someone so distant that they can't reach me. They also see me as someone they can trust and are comfortable with.”

– Rozina Aktar, Supervisor, Sparrow Apparels Ltd.

Leadership is clearly about more than just technical capabilities. Four operators on each of the lines where trainees were assigned to work during the trial period were asked to rate out of ten the performance of the trainee on their line as compared to a typical supervisor and a typical female supervisor.

Overall, they reported that trainees demonstrate similar ability to that of a typical supervisor and are more able than a typical female supervisor (Figure 2). On specific skills and abilities required by line supervisors, operators reported that trainees are better at remaining calm than typical supervisors are, and are slightly better at helping and motivating operators, all of which are clearly of benefit in the work environment (Figure 3).

Those who worked a higher percentage of the days they were supposed to as a trainee supervisor were also rated more highly by the operators. This could be because better trainees were kept on the line longer, but it could equally be because those who trialed longer acquired more skills.

Figure 2: Line operator overall perception of supervisor ability

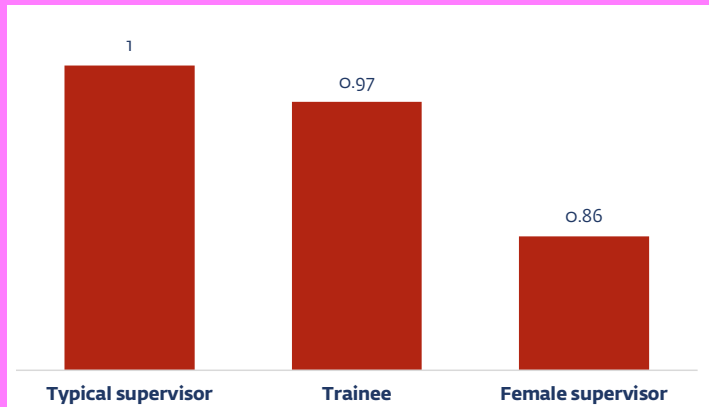
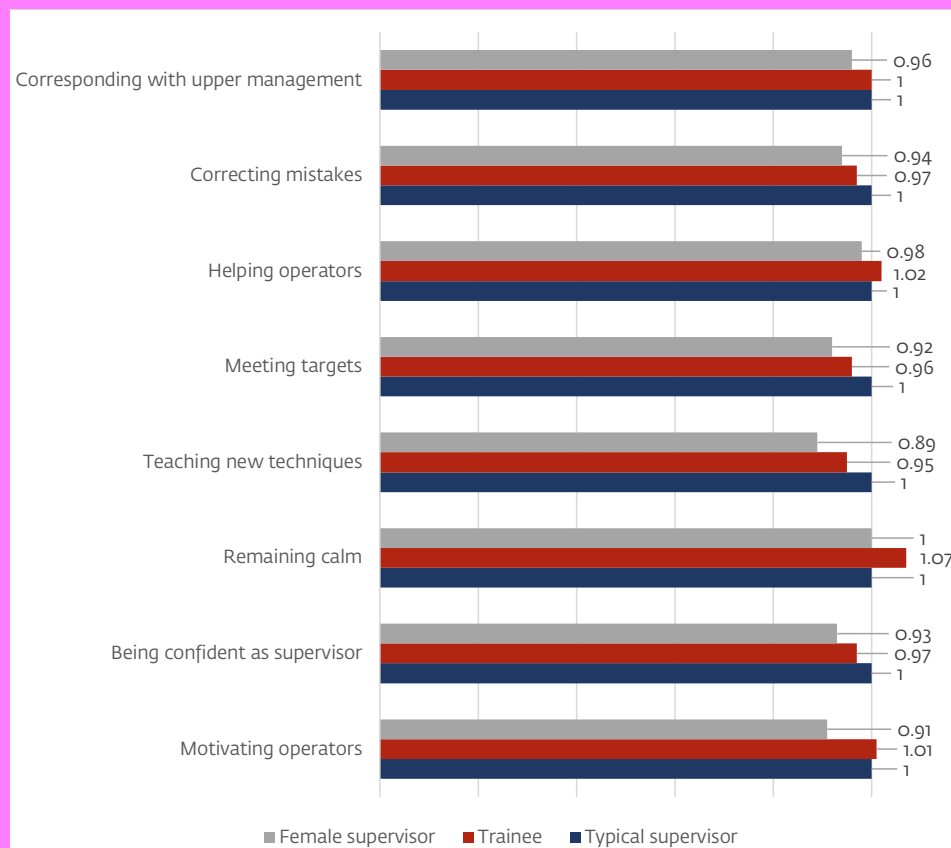


Figure 3: Line operator perception of trainee ability



Source: WPT research



Importantly, trainee supervisors rated more highly by operators were significantly more likely to be offered promotion and to accept the promotion. A one standard deviation increase in the rating of the trainee is associated with a 10-percentage point increase in the likelihood of being offered a promotion and a 17-percentage point increase in the likelihood of being promoted (i.e. accepting the promotion).

These results suggest that perhaps either managers take the operator’s reactions to the trainees into account, or operators and managers both see potential in the same trainees.

Operators were also asked whether trainees performed six actions more or less than a typical supervisor in order to understand whether the trainees have a different supervisory style than typical supervisors, and whether training affects that style.

Responses were given on a five-point scale, from “much more frequently” to “much less frequently.” The six actions were: 1) giving more support to less-skilled operators; 2) using praise to motivate operators; 3) using shouting or abusive language to motivate operators; 4) solving problems herself rather than consulting superiors; 5) practically demonstrating techniques; and 6) sitting down and sewing when operators are on a toilet break.

Operators reported that trainees have a more cooperative supervisory style than typical supervisors. Just over half of operators felt that trainees give extra support, motivate operators, and use respectful language more than typical supervisors do. The supervisors who employ the more cooperative supervisory style were also viewed by operators as being more effective supervisors.

Attitude rather than training appeared to be the driving factor here. Trainees with higher attitude diagnostic scores were reported to use the cooperative supervisory style more frequently, and this was irrespective of which treatment group they were in or whether they were in the control group that received no classroom training.

These attitude characteristics include such things as initial interest in the job and family support, and we discuss the implications of attitude on success in the program and as supervisors in a later section.

Supercharge Me: Learning the right skills is a key for boosting confidence

“The production manager assured me that the training would actually help me cut through the fear. The training itself taught me how to speak to people at different levels, how to behave as a professional, and how to keep track of my work and calculate production and efficiency in an organized way. Efficiency calculations were important, because I didn’t use to understand when an operator was falling behind. I’d just force him to be more productive rather than acknowledging his capacity and accordingly supporting him or moving him elsewhere after speaking with upper management. These are the things I’ve learned through the training.”

— Popy Aktar, Supervisor, Sparrow Apparels Ltd.

Previous work on training female operators to become supervisors has shown they typically have lower levels of confidence in their ability to do the job than males being considered for promotion (see Macchiavello et al, 2017.) However, Macchiavello et al showed that a six-week training course was sufficient to raise the confidence of the female trainees to a level much closer to that of male trainees.

A key component of IFC’s WPT program was to reduce the amount of time required to increase the confidence of potential female supervisors so that they are ready and willing to take any promotions on offer.

Trainees were asked on a scale of one to ten to rate themselves and a ‘typical supervisor’ on how they believed they would perform ten specific tasks that are part of a supervisor’s job, such as teaching line operators new jobs and meeting production targets on the line. They were also asked to assign an overall performance rating.

Trainees who received soft skills training only rated themselves slightly higher on average following training, though the effect was not statistically significant. This is despite modules to increase self-confidence being included in the soft skills training.

In contrast, training in both hard and soft skills increased trainees’ confidence by 0.65 points out of ten, which is comparable in magnitude to the difference in confidence reported by Macchiavello et al for the six-week training. This suggests that there really is no substitute for giving a trainee the technical skills and knowledge she needs for the position to give her confidence in her ability to perform in the job. Training to boost a trainee’s self-confidence is important in its own right, but women line workers also need more opportunities to learn technical skills if the gender imbalance is to be overcome.

“First off, learning about behaviour was valuable for me. There’s a time and place for different behaviour, and the workplace requires certain professionalism.

I generally treat everyone with respect, and if one of the workers struggles to understand a process I clarify it for them.

Sometimes I myself will sit on the line to cover for a worker who’s gone to the toilet so that their target can be fulfilled.

I help out wherever I can when there’s a problem that needs resolving.”

**— Jesmin Akter, Supervisor,
Jinnat Knitwears Ltd.**



4. Factory effect

Trained female supervisors boost their efficiency by 5%, and that's a compelling business benefit.

“What we found [from previous assessments] is [women] have an efficiency of 2.98% on average higher than the male supervisors in the same line ...if you're doing on average 150 pieces per hour of production then in 10 hours [this is] 1500 pieces ...3% means that each supervisor is contributing 45 pieces extra, so these 45 pieces multiplied by 36 people ...multiplied by 26 working days into 12 months is almost 505,000 pieces which multiplied by \$2.5 gives you a value of \$1.2 million ...this is the value of addition that comes from having female supervisors in your organization. It's purely a business case.”

— Mohammad Zahidullah, Head of Sustainability, Jinnat Knitwear Ltd, DBL Group

A big question for factories taking part in this study – and those who may be interested in being involved in future iterations, or simply in promoting more women supervisors – is the impact of the program on productivity. If women supervisors can boost productivity, then of course factories will look to address the gender imbalance.

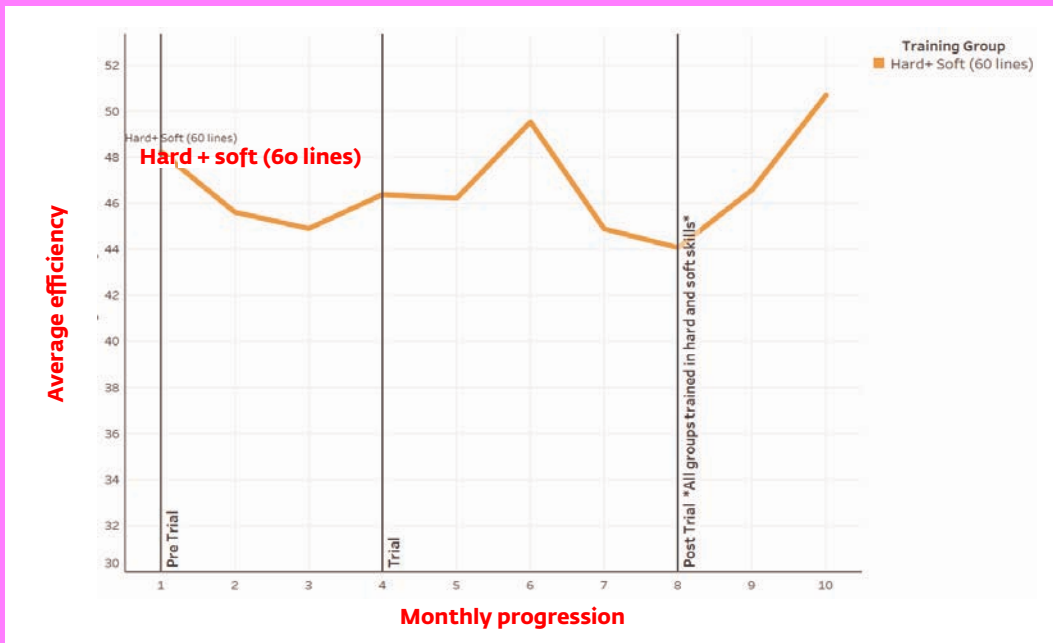
This line of thinking isn't without its dangers. Requiring women supervisors to do better than their male counterparts in order to simply have the same opportunities is a heavy burden. Success should be measured in terms of women workers doing as well as their male counterparts, not better, and it should also take into account that a newly promoted worker is going to be less productive than someone already experienced in the role. Indeed, half of factories said it takes around three months for a new supervisor to be proficient, while 30% said it takes closer to six months and some said up to one year.

Nevertheless, when comparing the efficiency of lines with WPT-trained female supervisors to lines with untrained female supervisors, we see that the training has an effect on efficiency of 4.8%. This makes a strong case for the training's ability to produce strong supervisors. Further, before-to-after data showed that efficiency increased five percentage points on average across the 60 lines where trainees assigned to the training were working as supervisors (Figure 4)². This shows that when factories change their behavior and promote women it translates into business benefits for everyone, providing a compelling reason to create opportunities for more female supervisors.

It must be cautioned that only preliminary analysis was possible given the complexity of collecting and analyzing production data from factories. Making it particularly difficult is that factories tend not to record where workers – and therefore trainees – are working each day. The analysis is therefore from cross-referencing information from phone surveys with trainees with production data, but it nevertheless provides initial patterns and allows for a preliminary assessment of the effectiveness of the trainees as supervisors.

² While efficiency appears to decrease towards the end of the trial period, this is possibly linked to the fact that trainees completing the program were only trailed as assistant supervisors for about two-thirds of the time they were supposed to. This means they only received about five weeks, or 30 days, of on-the-job training despite factories agreeing to give them work experience for the full eight weeks. Nevertheless, the post-trial spike is clear.

Figure 4: Average efficiency in hard and soft lines across months



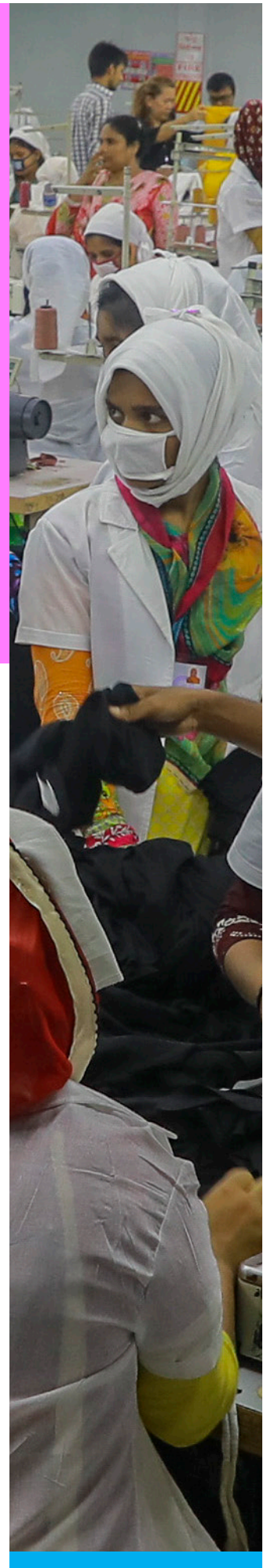
Source: WPT research

Alteration rates were even more difficult to assess. Superficially, training appeared to have a negative impact with alteration rates increasing after the trial period. However, other factors may be at play, such as seasonal patterns in the types of products being produced or that data was taken during peaking production times, leading to longer working hours and hence more mistakes.

It could also indicate that trainees are more vigilant as line supervisors and send more work back to the operators to be fixed at an earlier stage; if this is true, promoting women could result in a long-term decline in alteration rates as line operators get used to requirements for higher standards.

Absenteeism is an important measure of supervisor leadership ability and another key factor influencing productivity. Absentee rates saw a stark drop post-trial, indicating a positive influence from female supervisors on women working beneath them.

While the study is far from conclusive given the limitations discussed above, the trends suggest that there is a lot to be gained for factories willing to join this program or any other program that helps increase the representation of women among supervisor ranks.



5. Management is not for everyone

Some women just aren't ready for promotion, so target the ones who are.

“Often times we see women face a lot of restrictions from their homes and family members when offered a promotion to be a supervisor. If they're married, the husband will say “No, you cannot be a supervisor” or their parents may say “No we can't allow it.”. Because she's entering an area where it's all men; a girl cannot always suddenly take the decision on her own to work as a supervisor alongside men.”

— Abdul Halim, Industrial Engineer Manager, Sparrow Apparel Ltd.

The number of women workers who turned down promotion following the program was surprisingly high, but it provides a wealth of valuable information for future iterations of the Work-Progression & Productivity Toolkit (WPT).

As noted in an earlier section, 92 of the program completers who could be reached in the January 2018 survey said they were offered a promotion to supervisor or assistant supervisor, but only 52 accepted, or 56.8%. That leaves 40 who turned down the opportunity. When asked why they declined the promotion to supervisor or assistant supervisor, almost half cited health reasons, either sickness and pregnancy; 28% gave responses indicating a lack of interest in the increased responsibility and 20% said their family did not support them taking the job.

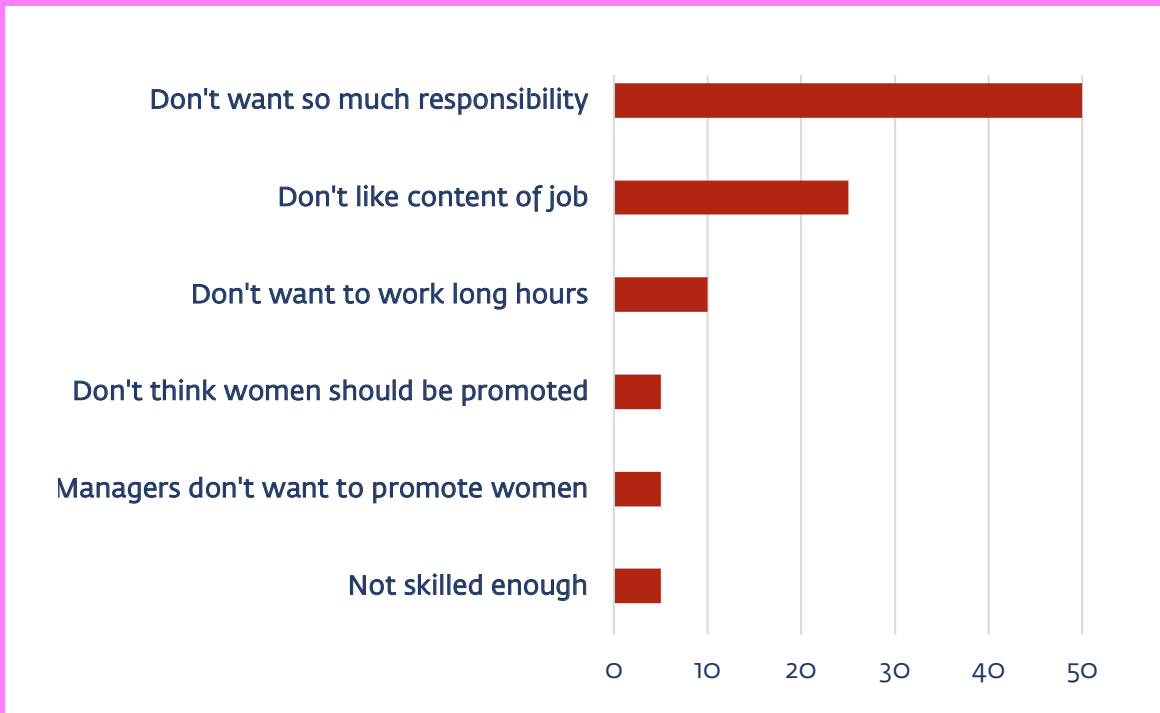
All trainees, whether they had completed the program or not, were asked whether they would want to be promoted in the future, and about 70% said they would accept an offer. This is higher than the percentage of trainees who were actually offered and accepted a promotion.

Of those who said they would not accept an offer, around 75% said it was because they didn't like the content or responsibility of the job and another 10% said they believed that the hours are too long. A further 5% said they believe managers do not want women to be promoted and 5% said they personally don't think that women should have supervisor roles (Figure 5).

The results are encouraging in two ways. Firstly, the low number of respondents who believe that women should not be promoted – or that managers don't think women should be promoted – indicates gender biases may not be particularly widespread. With the majority simply not liking the content, responsibility or hours of the job, this indicates there is ample room to improve the selection criteria for the program to weed out those who are not inclined to accept promotion in the first place. It also provides an opportunity for factory management to invest in creating a culture that encourages and promotes female leadership. Indeed, the next section shows that the prior attitude of trainees towards the program is an important factor in program outcomes.

There were another 56 trainees who dropped out before the program finished, which was again more than expected. The main reasons individuals gave for dropping out were that they simply did not want the position. Others reported family issues, including that their families did not want them working in a senior role. Again, this indicates prior attitude is critical in the selection of trainees for future iterations, and that the Selection Training of managers discussed earlier can have a big impact on selecting the right candidates.

Figure 5: Reasons for not being willing to accept a promotion (response percentage)



Source: WPT research

Choose me: Why attitude matters

“I actually think there are high levels of confidence among women. Even so, after doing the training my confidence went even higher. Also, there are two other women alongside me, so in seeing role models women will naturally think “If they can do it. Why can’t we? They’re women too. So why can’t I succeed?”

— **Rozina Aktar, Supervisor, Sparrow Apparels Ltd.**

As discussed earlier, trainees were tested on a series of diagnostics measuring aptitude and various aspects of attitude. The differences in diagnostic scores by age were modest (not shown), but Figure 6 shows there are marked differences in the aptitude portion of the diagnostic tests for literacy, numeracy and processing speed between those who have nine or more years of schooling, and those who have less. This difference is more pronounced among the 13% of trainees who had 10 or more years in education than those who had exactly nine years, while garments knowledge also shows a pronounced increase in this more educated group.

What is perhaps less obvious is that there is also a marked difference in the attitude of the nominee towards the role across education categories, as shown in Figure 7. The scores on interest in being a supervisor, support from family, and confidence in performance in the role all increase with education, with the difference applying to those with nine years of schooling as well as those with 10 or more, although confidence scores are much lower in this better educated group for a so-far-unexplained reason.



Figure 6: Years Schooling and Aptitude Scores

Figure 7: Years Schooling and Attitude Scores



Source: WPT research

But do these aptitude or attitude scores predict which trainees will complete the training, and which will accept promotion if offered?

Regression analysis on data from the follow-up phone surveys conducted in December 2017, by which time all of the trainees had received all of the training sessions, suggests that attitude is important – and more important than aptitude – in whether a trainee completes the program as well as whether they accepted a promotion and are actually working as a Line Supervisor.

A one-standard deviation increase in the attitude score is associated with an increase of 12 percentage points in the completion rate, and an 11-percentage point increase in the likelihood of working as a supervisor (i.e. accepting an offer of promotion). Notably, among the individual attitude scores, support from the family is most strongly associated with completion of the training program.

While attitude matters more than aptitude in determining whether a trainee completes the program or accepts a promotion, we found that aptitude is most strongly associated with being offered a promotion in the first place. This indicates managers responsible for offering promotion do rank technical skills associated with the job more highly than attitude, perhaps because they find it easier to observe and quantify these attributes.

Four operators on each of the lines where trainees were assigned to work during the trial period were also asked to rate the performance of the trainee as compared to a typical supervisor and a typical female supervisor. These operators rated trainees who had higher scores on the attitude diagnostic significantly higher than those with lower scores. Interest in the job and confidence at baseline were most closely associated with being highly rated.

Operators did not appear to link aptitude perception of their performance, and there was no difference in perception of effect from whether trainees received training in both hard and soft skills or only in soft skills.

The results indicate that selecting trainees with more years of schooling, as well as higher attitude scores, could improve the effectiveness of the training over future iterations. While a minority in the factory (just over one quarter of the 367 nominees for whom we have data) had nine or more years of schooling, this more highly-educated minority may be better prepared to take on supervisory roles.

A Closer Look:

Management behavior in hiring and training supervisors

Three out of every four supervisors hired come from outside a factory, and more than nine of ten are male. This practice discourages ambitious workers in that factory, and is more costly than simply promoting talented and proven operators.

Usually, line supervisors, production managers, and industrial engineers on the floor identify potential candidates when there is a supervisor vacancy. Some factories then hold discussions between Human Resources and the people who identified the candidates. In most cases, the production manager or the Human Resources executive makes the final decision on who to promote. It should be noted that 19 of 28 factories surveyed said they assign a mentor to each new supervisor.



As 80% of factory sewing operators are women, it follows that management would be better served by promoting more women operators in their factories to be supervisors, and eventually line chiefs. Given that operators already have a working relationship with their supervisors and their responsibilities, as well as years of experience on the operation lines, there are strong arguments for training up the most suitable and profiting from their knowledge of the given factory's production practices. There is also sufficient evidence that women make strong supervisors when given equal training and opportunity.

Select for success: Why promotion is more than hit or miss

“They motivated me though and told me that I’d go through training and get the support I need. But I still didn’t feel confident. The Production Manager assured me that the training would actually help me cut through the fear. The training itself taught me how to speak to people at different levels, how to behave as a professional, and how to keep track of my work and calculate production and efficiency in an organized way.”

— Popy Aktar, Supervisor, Sparrow Apparels Ltd.

At the start of the program, Selection Training sessions were conducted with mid- and high-level management in 14 of the 28 factories to teach them to use standardized worker evaluations to better evaluate how likely a line operator would be to succeed in a supervisor position. The theory was that the training would lead managers to select trainees better suited for supervisory positions, resulting in lower dropout rates and higher promotion rates.

As discussed earlier, managers were asked to re-rank nominees for the program after the Selection Training, taking into account trainee scores on the aptitude and attitude diagnostic tests. The changes were substantial. Of 150 nominees in the Selection Training factories, 25 were moved up from the second substitute group to the priority training group by managers. A further 15 dropped out of this priority training group and were placed in the first or even second substitute group.

The changes increased both the aptitude and attitude scores of the trainees, as expected. The effect was somewhat stronger on attitude scores, indicating that managers possibly already had reliable information on aptitude from observing the nominees at work and that their instincts regarding attitude were less accurate, causing them to reevaluate for attitude when presented with the nominees’ actual scores.

There was also an effect of Selection Training on whether a trainee completed the program. Trainees in factories where managers received training were around 6.7 percentage points more likely to complete the program, suggesting again that re-ranking them after taking into account aptitude and attitude scores resulted in the selection of more suitable candidates. It also indicates that managers trained in the process of promotion may provide a better overall environment for trainees to succeed in their new roles.

The small sample size means this difference was not statistically significant and there was also no similar effect on promotion rates, so it is not possible to draw a more definitive conclusion on this point. However, the willingness of managers to use new information to assess the potential of line operators for supervisory positions shows that the program has strong potential to help these same managers recognize the leadership abilities of the female operators that they currently tend to disregard for promotion.



6. Thread jam

Negative perceptions persist, but they can be cleared.

“Well, women and men are working together on the floor. What we typically see is all the lines have male supervisors and male line chiefs. Suddenly, a woman supervisor steps into that scenario and feels out of place. It’s almost an impossible position. In that case, everyone, including management was in need of support to build confidence and help her succeed in her position.”

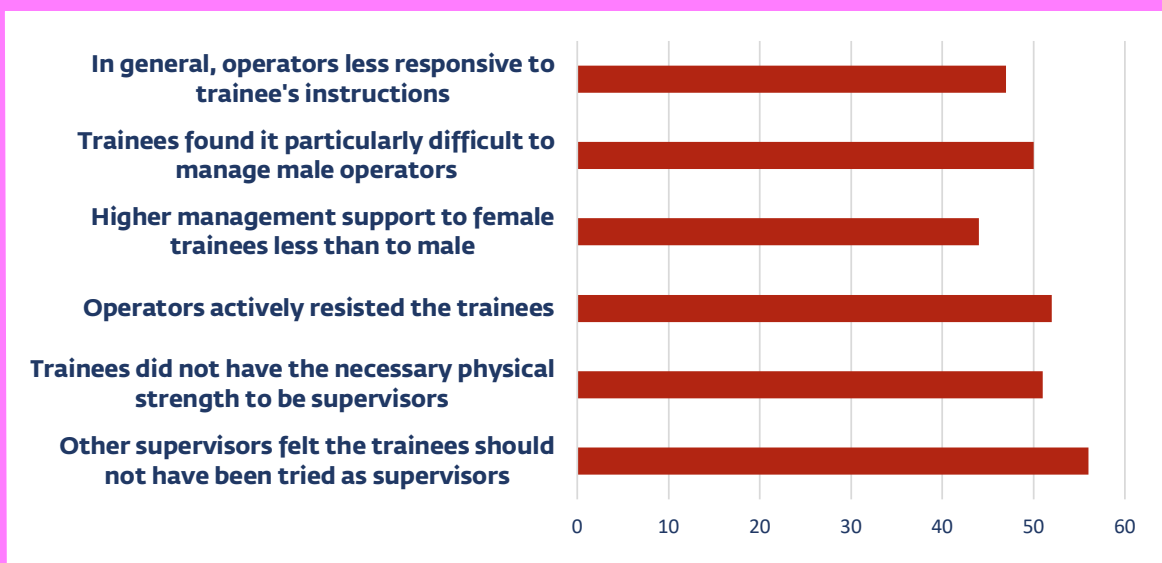
— Abdul Halim, Industrial Engineer Manager, Sparrow Apparel Ltd.

Surveys with line chiefs and line supervisors (LCLS) as well as operators indicate that there is stubborn resistance from factories towards the training and towards trainees trialing on the line (Figures 8 and 9). More than 50% of operators and LCLS reported they felt that typical supervisors did not think trainees should be trialing as a supervisor, which may explain why trainees typically did not receive their full allotment of on-the-job training in many factories.

About half of operators and LCLS reported other negative attitudes and actions towards trainees, such as beliefs that trainees are not physically strong enough, receive less support from higher level management than male counterparts, and face resistance from operators. About half of respondents said that operators are generally less responsive to trainee’s instructions than to a typical supervisor’s instructions and that some trainees had difficulty managing male operators.

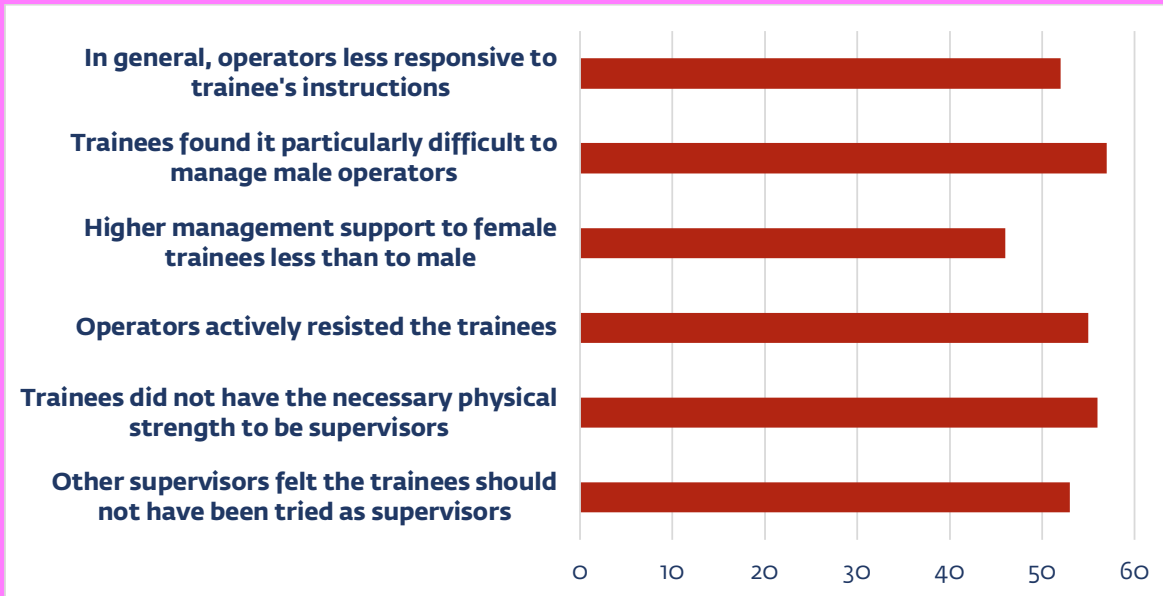
The negative perceptions appear to be held equally by women and men indicating that this is structural gender bias rather than the result of negative attitudes only from men.

Figure 8: Operator perceptions of resistance from factory (response percentage)



Source: WPT research

Figure 9: LCLS Perceptions of resistance from factories (response percentage)

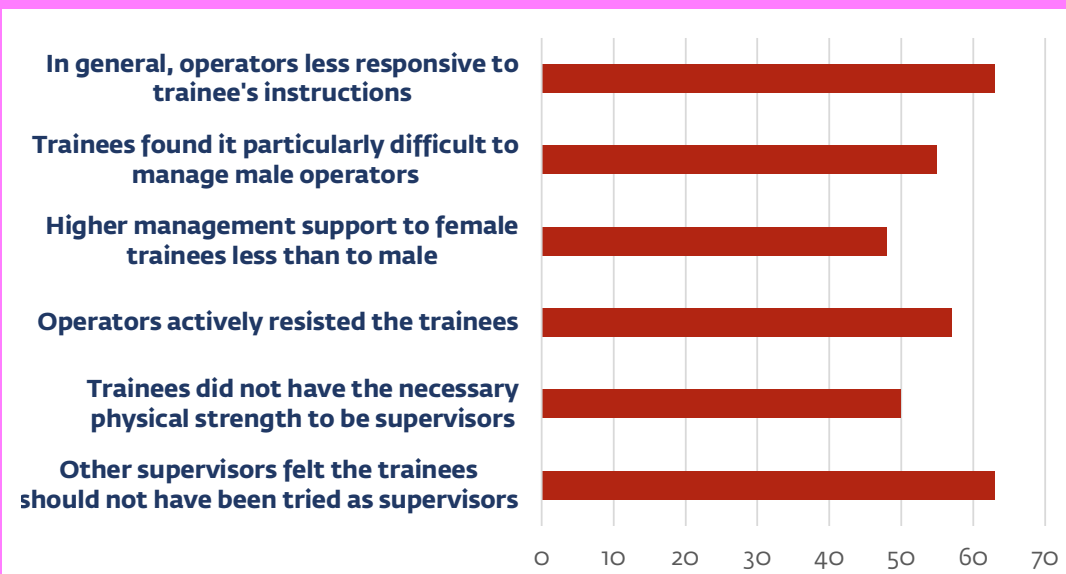


Source: WPT research

Perhaps in reflection of this, the most common trainee responses when asked about the most difficult part of their job when trialing was problems around relationships with operators and other management personnel. This was rated as the biggest problem by 24% of respondents (a further 1% identified problems with other supervisors), suggesting low support for trainees, which could have led to low levels of confidence and interest in promotion.

Reports of negative actions and attitudes towards trainees was even higher among assistant production and Human Resource managers (APMHR), and they also felt that people supported WPT trainees less than they support both typical supervisors and female supervisors (Figure 10). Paradoxically, this gives a ray of hope; if senior managers are aware of the bias against female trainees they may be more inclined to help put in place actions to overcome bias in future trainings.

Figure 10: APMHR Perceptions of resistance from factory (response percentage)



Source: WPT research

Female operators that rated the trainees assigned to their production line during the trial period only rated them one-fifth of a point (out of ten) higher than did their male counterparts, indicating virtually no difference. However, female operators who reported having previously worked at least two months under a female supervisor tended to give trainees higher ratings than those with little prior experience.

This indicates that a snowball effect might be possible if the WPT program is rolled out further in which operators will become more accepting of working with female supervisors and more receptive to their promotion the more that they see them in leadership positions.

Male operators were not influenced by past exposure to female supervisors in the same way, so the weight of numbers may not be enough to shift attitudes here. However, the survey results showed that male operators are affected by the attitude of the trainee – their ratings are correlated with trainee attitude scores for interest in the job and confidence – rating them more highly than trainees who score lower on these diagnostics.

Taking the attitude of both genders into account, promoting more women will slowly start changing attitudes among both male and female line operators, as long as they are women with the right attitude. There is little to be gained from training a woman for promotion only to see her fail or turn down promotion because she didn't want the promotion in the first place.

A line operator may not be ready or willing to work as a supervisor – be they man or woman – but training programs need to be careful not to put women in a position where they may feel like they have failed if they don't end up working in a more senior position.

New fashion: How some attitudes clearly changed

“Why should they be left behind? They can do anything they try their hands at. Whatever a male operator is doing, a female is doing just as well. Targets are being met the same despite gender. So why can't they be supervisors?”

— Mahbub Hoshen, Assistant Manager, HR department, Jinnat Knitwears Ltd.

During the baseline and follow-up surveys, factory employees ranging from managers to the operators working on the trial lines were asked a series of questions related to whether they would prefer to work with a female or male supervisor, and if they thought men or women were better at completing ten tasks that supervisors need to perform. Respondents were also able to answer that they had no preference or if they thought there was no difference attributable to gender.

One question was “Who do you prefer to work with: male supervisors, female supervisors, or no preference?” Figure 11 shows preference for female supervisors increased among trainees; line chiefs and line supervisors (LCLS); and assistant production and HR managers (APMHR). Preference for male supervisors naturally decreased at the same time amongst all three groups, while “no preference” decreased among trainees and increased among management personnel.

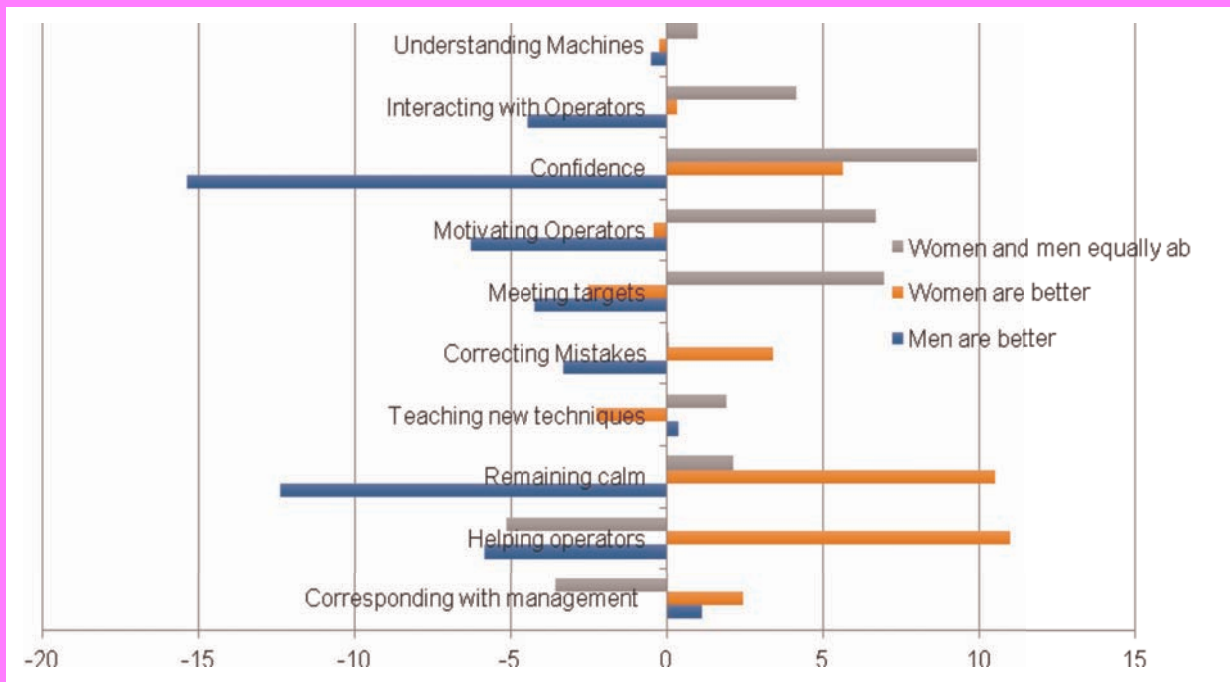
With regard to specific skills, the percentage of LCLS respondents saying, “men are better” decreased between baseline and follow-up for seven out of ten supervisor skills, as shown in Figure 12.

Figure 11: Percentage difference in preference from baseline to follow-up



Source: WPT research

Figure 12: LCLS percentage change in perception from baseline to follow-up



Source: WPT research

There is also evidence that lower level management feel the program prepares trainees to do well in their new role if promoted. While LCLSs reported that their program trainees and a typical female supervisor in their factory both have about 90% of the overall ability of a typical supervisor (Figure 13), they said the WPT trainees they knew in general improved more quickly than a typical supervisor in their first two months of work (Figure 14).

This is despite feeling that a typical female line supervisor generally improves less quickly than a typical new supervisor. The program is clearly having the intended effect.

Figure 13: LCLS perception of overall supervisor ability at follow up

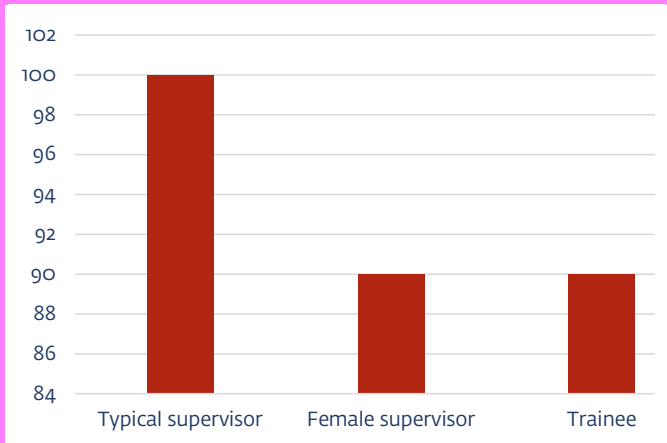
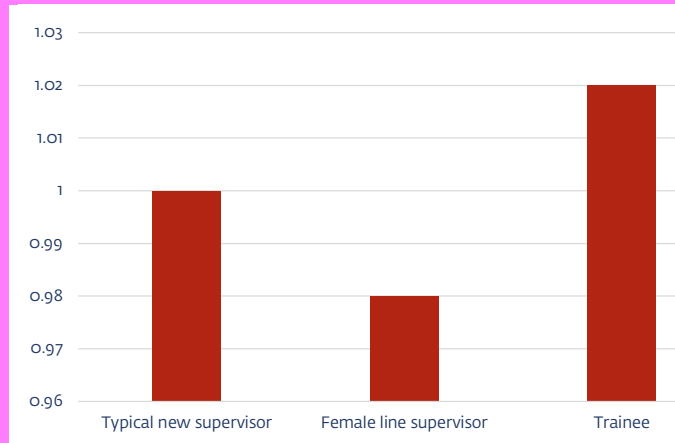


Figure 14: LCLS perception of improvement in first two months relative to typical



Source: WPT research

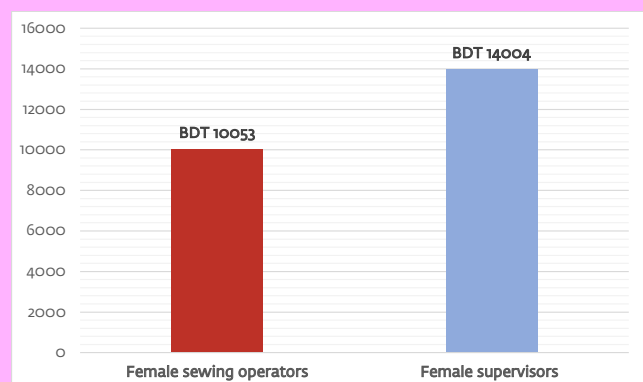
A Closer Look:

Busting the myth that female supervisors earn less than female operators who earn overtime.

The appeal of attempting to secure a promotion to a supervisor position for women from their operator positions has suffered from the false notion that operators can earn more when overtime is factored into their average salaries than they could as salaried supervisors.

A WPT-trained female supervisor currently supervises on an average of 30 workers (about 7 male and 23 female). As supervisor, her fixed salary earnings are, on average, BDT14,004, 39% higher on an average after they have been promoted from sewing operators. The average earnings of female operators are BDT10,053 (salary and overtime).

Average monthly wage of female sewing operator and female supervisor



Source: Better Work Bangladesh

7. System change (Conclusion)

Why the Work-Progression and Productivity Toolkit should be repeated, and on a larger scale.

“I think this program is very unique because it's very integral – meaning it really taps into the different ways of learning different skills sets. So I think it is potentially very effective we're seeing it being effective but on a larger scale I think it can have a systemic impact.”

– Ashna Chowdhury, IFC WPT Soft Skills Designer and Trainer

The Work-Production and Progression Toolkit (WPT) can be considered a success. Fifty-two women gained promotion to supervisor or assistant supervisor roles, and many more felt that they would soon be promoted. These women would likely not have had these opportunities without IFC's WPT program.

Of the ten factories with no female line supervisors at the start of the program, seven promoted at least one trainee. Overall, the percentage of women line supervisors across the 28 factories increased from just 5% to almost 12%. This in turn will give other women the confidence that they too have the requirements for the role, and show factory management that their traditional preference for promoting men doesn't stand up to scrutiny.

And if they're in doubt, preliminary evidence suggests that having a trained female supervisor on a sewing line can increase line efficiency by 5% compared to lines led by untrained female supervisors. Line workers report that trainees have a more cooperative supervisory style than typical supervisors, giving extra support and motivation, and using more respectful language.

The supervisors who employ the more cooperative supervisory style were also viewed by operators as being more effective supervisors, which links back to the increase in efficiency and reduced days off from workers.

There were some disappointments, most notably in the number of trainees that dropped out, and the number that turned down offers of promotion. But this gave valuable insights. Success, as measured in being offered and accepting promotion, in part depends on the trainees' prior attitude. For future iterations of the program, this will be taken into account.

Managers have a big role to play in selecting the female line operators who might be more predisposed to moving into a more senior role. Selection Training, whereby managers were taught to use standardized worker evaluations taking into account attitude and aptitude for the job, resulted in them nominating candidates for the job that were more likely to accept a promotion by the end of it.

This study is small, but the results are encouraging. The benefits from providing career progression pathways for women workers are already becoming clear, both for the workers, their colleagues and the factories themselves.

And it is equally clear that rolling out the WPT training on a wider scale will go a long way to redressing the imbalance on the sewing line to ensure that women have the opportunities to take up supervisory positions in proportions commensurate to their numbers behind the sewing machines.

Annexes



Participating factories

Adhunik Poshak Shilpa Ltd.
AKH Knitting & Dyeing Ltd.
Ananta Garments Ltd.
Arabi Fashion Ltd.
Birds RNR Fashions Ltd.
Birds Fadrex Ltd.
Columbia Apparels Ltd.
Cortz Apparels Ltd.
Crescent Fashion and Design Ltd.
Esquire Knit Composite Ltd.
Essential Clothing Ltd.
Esses Fashions Ltd.
Fakir Fashion Ltd.
Genesis Denim Ltd.
Interstoff Apparels Ltd.
Jeacon Garments Ltd.
Jinnat Knitwears Ltd.
Knit Asia Ltd.
Raquef Apparel Washing & Packaging Ind. Ltd.
Safaa Sweaters Ltd.
Shams Styling Wears Ltd.
Sinha Knitting Ltd.
South East Textiles (Pvt.) Ltd.
Sparrow Apparels Ltd.
Standard Group Ltd.
Sterling Styles Ltd
That's It Garments Ltd.
Vintage Garments Ltd.

Annex 2

Photos from the WPT-organized “Feedback Meeting with Factory Managers” attended by mid-level management of participating factories



Annex 3

Photos from the WPT organized Trainee Supervisor Conference to collect feedback from trainees for improving the scale-up





ওয়ার্ক-প্রোগ্রেসন এন্ড প্রোডাক্টিভিটি টুলকিট

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ট্রেইনি
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