

Skill formation of female workers in the garment industry: The case of Bangladesh

Abstract

This study examines the inclusiveness and efficiency of the skills formation regime in the Bangladeshi garment industry in enhancing women's participation and ensuring their relative position in the industry. It is based on an analysis of survey data from 100 garment companies, case studies of nine selected companies, and interviews with representatives from various training institutes, government agencies, industrial and labor associations. The study contributes to the literature on the social impact of vocational education and training (VET) by evaluating the link between women's participation in different types of skills development and their relative positions in the labor market. On the one hand, the article points to the underrepresentation of women in formal and non-formal VET programs catering to the garment industry, both at the basic skill level as well as at the technician and supervisory level. On the other hand, women are found to be even less represented at mid- and higher-level employment positions in the garment industry. Both facts are, in the article, explained by the negative social attitudes towards women's employment, but also related to the uncongenial work environment prevalent in the industry. In conclusion, this study argues that there is need for an inclusive skills formation regime to enhance women's participation and positions within the industry and the labor market as a whole.

Keywords: *Skill formation, Gender, Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET), Bangladesh, Garment*

1 Introduction

The great poet Rabindranath Tagore said, "Everything in this world is half made by women and half made by men." However, female's contribution is limited to the language of the poet. In reality, females are victims of discrimination in various ways. This disparity exists in the field of work as well as in education, especially technical education. The ILO report states that gender disparity in technical-vocational education exists in most countries of the world; in fact, in all except 31 out of 133 countries in the world (ILO 2020b). Gender inequality is not only a human rights concern; it also undermines long-term economic progress for all. It is "good economic sense" to promote gender responsive TVET education (Woldemichael 2020). In this context, promoting gender equality and fostering the empowerment of women and girls stand as vital elements in realizing the objectives of Sustainable Development Goal 5, which aims to "Attain gender equality and empower women and girls". This goal not only represents a fundamental human right but also serves as a cornerstone for building a

sustainable global future (Nurhaeni & Kurniawan 2018). Without doubt, a good quality TVET program can provide the labor market with skillful, productive, and competitive human resources (Haolader et al. 2017).

In low- and middle-income countries, women are generally more engaged in household and informal work than men, so they are tagged as less productive, which also limits their access to education and training (ILO 2018; Rosenfeld & Kalleberg 1991; Becker 1981). As a result, their opportunities to engage in formal work are limited.

Women in developing countries lag far behind in the labor market as compared to relatively developed countries. Women have lower incomes and even fewer opportunities in the job market here (ILO 2020b). In Asia, the average female labor force participation rate is 47 percent, which is 32 percent lower than that of men. Arab countries and South Asia have the largest gap in this regard, more than 50 percent (ILO 2016).

As far as OECD nations are concerned, women are underrepresented in vocational programs in approximately 75 percent of these countries (OECD 2022). Notably, discrepancies in gender engagement are more pronounced in upper secondary TVET as compared to higher education. Female students in upper secondary TVET programs frequently specialize in areas like food and nutrition, cosmetology, and tailoring, while male students exhibit higher participation than their female counterparts in Engineering, Manufacturing, Construction, as well as Information and Communication Technology (ILO 2020b).

The vocational and technical education systems in South Asia also exhibit concerning characteristics, including low enrollment rates, high dropout rates, inadequate teacher quality, limited involvement from the private sector, and insufficient budget allocation (Ul-Haq & Haq 1998). Furthermore, these systems present notable gender disparities, with women facing challenges in pursuing education and training, especially in rural areas, due to societal expectations of prioritizing family responsibilities over personal growth (ILO 2020b). Families often invest less in girls' education, perpetuating gender biases. Additionally, women are disproportionately underrepresented in informal apprenticeships, relying more on unstructured on-the-job learning in the informal sector (Nordman & Pasquier-Doumer 2012).

The skill development policies implemented in different countries provide a glimpse of the skill systems of the respective countries. The policy sets out measures to identify and remove barriers to equal access for women and men, particularly disadvantaged groups such as women with disabilities, migrants, or women in rural areas. These policies are designed to promote existing good practices and introduce training systems to further improve access and quality of training. For example, in Bangladesh, with ILO support, the National Skills Development Council (NSDC) has taken various steps to increase the participation of females in TVET (ILO 2020a).

One thing that becomes clear from the above discussion is that female participation in TVET should be sought more vigorously; however, this ambition seems difficult to realize. The aim

of this study is to gain insight into the reasons underlying the challenges to accomplishing such an ambition of increased female participation.

1.1 Aims of the case study

Several articles have shown that the gender gap in TVET is significant, with a notable predominance of male students in technical courses (Masud et al. 2018) as well as employment in the industrial sector (Sevilla et al. 2019). In Bangladesh, only 1.9 million persons (about 2.2 percent male and 1.3 percent female of the total working age population) have participated in a formal training course outside the general school system (BBS 2018). Of them, only 28 percent of students enrolled in technical and vocational training are females (ADB 2017). Evidently, the scenario concerning women's entry into technical and vocational training is less favorable, marked by discrepancies in enrollment based on gender. Skill shortages constitute a critical issue for manufacturing companies, while numerous underserved youths in Bangladesh remain unemployed, perhaps due to inadequate skills training.

At the industry level, the inclusiveness landscape for women is equally disheartening. In the garment sector in 2018, women constituted the majority of the workforce at 60.5 percent, totaling over 2 million individuals. They play a significant role in the nation's export and economic growth (ADB 2017). Despite this, women's presence in senior positions remains at a mere 5 percent, and their representation in the technology sector hovers around 24 percent (ADB 2017). The majority of employees in the RMG sector are concentrated in the "production" segment, where 80.8 percent of male workers and 97.1 percent of female workers are employed. The production section has seven salary grades, with Grade 1 being the highest and Grade 7 the lowest. The report highlights that in the production section, more men occupy higher roles (Grades 1 and 2), while more women are positioned in lower roles (Grades 3 to 7) (ILO 2020a).

Bangladesh has declared a national strategy for promotion of gender equality in TVET and established a framework for actions related to gender equality (ILO 2012). Nevertheless, gender-based disparities persist in employment status, resulting in limited women's participation in specific roles. Despite the gradual growth of Bangladesh's industrial sector, with its contribution to GDP rising from 36.01 percent in FY 2020–21 to 37.07 percent in FY 2021–2022, women, who are crucial contributors to this growth, continue to face unequal opportunities and positions. Notably, the manufacturing sector, particularly the garment industry, stands as the dominant force, accounting for 83 percent of exports (approximately USD 31.456 billion) in the 2020–21 fiscal year (GoB 2022).

In view of the above discussion, the **main question** that this article addresses is:

How successful is Bangladesh's Skill Formation Regime in engaging women in Vocational Education and Training (VET) at various occupational levels in the garment industry? giving rise to a couple of **sub questions**:

1. How effective is skill formation regime in increasing female’s participation in TVET institutions?
2. How does the skill formation regime work in the participation of female in different occupational levels in the garment industry?

Girls' participation in education and training essentially represents the externalization of social, cultural and symbolic capital. This theoretical lens will be discussed in detail below.

2 Literature

2.1 Globally female participation in TVET

The ILO report *World Employment and Social Outlook: Trends for Women* (ILO 2018) identifies several key gender gaps in the labor market at the global level. First, women's participation in the labor force is much lower than that of men. Second, a small proportion of women who participate in the labor force are employed, especially in both developing and emerging countries. Such differences largely point to social and cultural factors that hinder women's employment in certain regions of the world. In recent years, girls and women have been left out despite various initiatives to motivate girls and women to pursue STEM-related fields, technical education and work. Persistent biases and gender stereotypes are thought to be the cause for this (Carli et al. 2016; McKinnon & Connell 2020).

In Asian countries, the experience of VET outcomes is mixed. Policies adopted by the government are playing a major role in these countries. This system has not been successful in most parts of South Asia (Agrawal 2013). Japan, Korea and Singapore are the best examples of well-established VET systems (ADB 2004; Cantor 1985). Bangladesh, China, India, Myanmar, Nepal and Pakistan, on the other hand, have “patchy” VET systems (Tilak 2002). TVET has long been neglected in Bangladesh. The TVET reform project was adopted in 2007 with support from ILO and funding from the European Union with the aim of increasing student participation as well as female participation (ILO 2015).

A recent study by the ILO (2020b) and a study by the African continent found that women are less enrolled than men in TVET in different countries (Bray-Collins et al. 2022). Women are usually enrolled in vocational training courses such as secretarial work, beauty, childcare, etc., in those positions considered low paid services in the workplace. On the other hand, there is a lack of participation of women in traditional “technical” training such as electricity, construction, plumbing, welding, etc. (UNESCO 2013). Bray-Collins and her co-authors (2022) reviewed the literature on gender and TVET in Africa and stated that TVET institutions and their services exhibit deep gendered characteristics, reflecting the broader socio-cultural dynamics of the societies they operate in. These societal dynamics, rooted in patriarchy, form intricate socio-cultural, political, and economic networks that establish systems of gender inequality. They also posit that in the absence of gender-responsive reforms aimed at addressing the drivers of inequality within African TVET institutions,

TVET may tend to perpetuate gender inequality rather than serve as a potential site for transformation.

There are many gendered stereotypes about the ability and suitability of girls in science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM) subjects (Bray-Collins et al. 2022). STEM-related occupations are viewed as male domains by families, teachers, coaches, and even girls themselves (Agbara et al.2018). Even in secondary school-like TVET programs, girls rarely choose STEM-related fields that almost always lead to more secure and higher-paying jobs in the formal sector. As a result, girls are entirely left out of the available STEM job market (Bray-Collins et al. 2022). Furthermore, women in rural areas face challenges in fulfilling family and social responsibilities as well as receiving education and training. Among the many reasons for this are the inflexibility of institutionalized training institutions in many cases, and families underinvesting in girls' education because it is socially assumed that women will focus more on family work (ILO 2020b).

2.2 Female participation in Bangladesh

In 1972, Bangladesh enacted a Constitution affirming equal rights for men and women in all aspects of public and state life (GoB 1972). The Constitution allows the State to make special provisions for the advancement of women, children, or backward citizens (Article 28.4). The National Women Development Policy outlines 22 objectives aiming to uphold women's rights in line with the Constitution (GoB 2011a). The National skills Development Policy 2011 specifically focuses on objectives like developing educated and skilled female human resources and ensuring their active participation in socio-economic development, striving to bridge the gap in female participation in technical education and various industries (GoB 2011b).

Socio-cultural expectations regarding the roles of men and women constrain choices because they are assumed to be natural and inevitable (Cundiff & Vescio 2016). In vocational education and training, social institutions such as family and school often legitimize the participation of a particular gender in certain areas where girls' participation is very limited (Heilman & Parks-Stamm 2007). It is understood that individual and societal values, social norms, practices and opportunity structures all have a significant impact on women's participation in vocational education (Atkins 2017).

2.3 Formal TVET in Bangladesh

In Bangladesh, Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET) historically held limited social and political importance. Prior to independence, a few Vocational Training Institutes (VTIs) and post-secondary polytechnics were run under the Ministry of Education. Post-independence, short-term practical courses (360 hours) were introduced at Technical Training Centers (TTCs) to boost national economic growth (BMET 1979). However, VET expansion slowed in the 1980s to mid-1990s due to a focus on general secondary education

(CAMPE 2006; Rafique 1998) and restricted educational mobility within VET (Rafique 1994b).

In the mid-1990s, policymakers diversified higher secondary education, establishing the Bangladesh Technical Education Board (BTEB) to standardize VET curricula and examinations (Rafique 1994a; 1996). The 2005 Poverty Reduction Strategy Paper proposed further VET expansion, emphasizing accessibility for individuals with limited basic education (GoB 2005). An EU-funded TVET reform project, conducted by ILO from 2007 to 2015, aimed at delivering demand-driven, modular, competency-based skills training for disadvantaged groups, school dropouts, and low-educated women (ILO 2015). This initiative led to the formulation of the Skill Development Policy 2011 and the National Technical and Vocational Qualifications Framework (NTVQF). These reforms aimed to consolidate VET programs under one umbrella, offering enhanced program options and progression pathways for students (GoB 2011b). As a result, enrollment rates in VET programs like SSC (voc) and 360-hour certificate courses have risen, with junior secondary graduates viewing them as alternatives to dropping out. However, the expansion of HSC (voc) programs has been limited, while certain courses like electrical maintenance and computer science remain in high demand for trainees (BANBEIS 2023).

3 Methodology

This article is the result of „Skills for Industry”, a comparative multi-country research project. At the start of the initiative, each country identified at least two industries that contribute significantly to their country’s GDP, and the readymade garment industry proved to be one of them, on which the article about women’s skill formation in Bangladesh is based. The project aimed to map the company’s growth and transformation through a company survey conducted between 2012 and 2017. The survey covered workplace organization, technological and product changes, workforce growth, and wage, employment, and gender inclusion. The survey asked companies about the VSD programs they typically use during employee recruitment and the effectiveness of these programs in meeting their skills needs. Additionally, the survey also inquired about the extent to which skills shortages negatively impact their transformation and growth. Out of approximately 4,000 companies listed in BGMEA, 400 were randomly chosen for this project, and 100 RMG companies in Bangladesh were systematically surveyed. Additionally, data from BANBEIS, BTEB and SEIP were also collected and utilized in the quantitative analysis of the article, along with data from the company survey.

Among the companies that participated in the company survey, nine companies were purposively selected for the case study to ensure the inclusion of both companies that had or had not experienced company growth, in order to maximize contrast. To explore the nature of the transition in more depth and to understand the relationship between worker skills, work organization, technology, and product change, a senior management representative and a production manager from each company were selected as respondents. Conversely,

interviews were conducted with 18 training providers, 12 representatives from diverse government agencies engaged in TVET, and four representatives from various industry associations. The objective of these interviews was to grasp the demand and supply dynamics of skills formation regimes (formal, non-formal, and informal) in various companies. Qualitative interviews and case study data were collected through a structured open-ended questionnaire and Likert scales, based on the interview schedule. The detailed methodology of the project is discussed in depth in Marock et al. (2020) and Kalam & Shimu (2020).

To reiterate, this article explores the participation of Bangladeshi women in training and the industrial sector, seeking to understand the process of their skill formation and the reasons for their lagging behind. Case studies and qualitative interviews form the basis of the body of this article and were analyzed using qualitative content analysis (Gläser & Laudel 2019; Kuckartz 2018). At the end of each statement, interview references, such as “IntX_RMG_HR/PM” for case studies and “IntX_BGPX/BPPX” for providers/other stakeholders are provided in brackets.

3.1 Theoretical frame

The theoretical framework employed in this study draws insights from Pierre Bourdieu’s conceptualization of capital. He considers social and cultural capital to be disguised forms of economic capital (Bourdieu 2018). Utilizing this framework as a sociological lens, this study aims to analyse and comprehend the challenges confronted by women within both TVET programs and professional settings in Bangladesh. Bourdieu’s categorization of different types of capital offers a valuable perspective for understanding how discriminatory practices are entrenched in social structures (Bourdieu 1986). This theoretical framework serves as a robust tool, enabling an examination of the intricate interplay among social connections, cultural capital, and symbolic violence in shaping women’s experiences. It elucidates how disparities in social, cultural or symbolic capital contribute to challenges faced by women in the realms of TVET education and workplaces. While Bourdieu’s framework constitutes a substantial theoretical underpinning for this analysis, it is not restrictive. Instead, the study integrates empirical evidence and real-world examples to provide a comprehensive understanding of gender disparities in both TVET programs and professional settings. This inclusive approach facilitates a nuanced and multi-dimensional exploration of the issues, enriching analysis beyond a singular theoretical perspective.

In light of this theoretical framework, the subsequent sections of this study delve into empirical analyses and real-world examples, applying Bourdieu’s concepts to illuminate the intricate dynamics of gender disparities within both TVET programs and professional settings in Bangladesh.

4 Findings

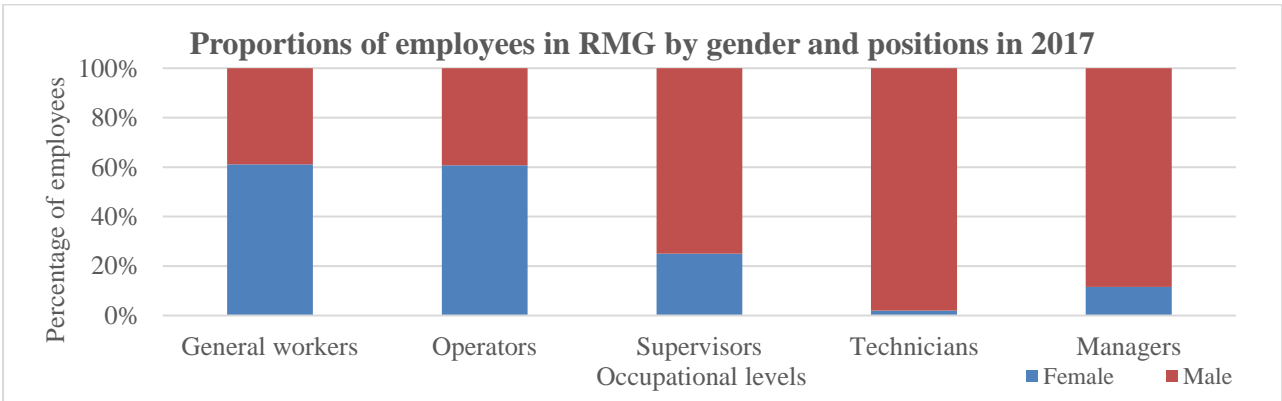
4.1 Female participation in Informal TVET (in-firm)

Bangladesh has seen remarkable manufacturing sector growth, with 46,110 factories, including 3,000 large ones as documented in 2022 (Shah 2022). In the same year, the workforce numbered 70.78 million, with about one-third of the workers, approximately 24.99 million, being women (BBS 2023).

Over the past three decades, women’s participation in the labor market in Bangladesh has significantly increased, notably driven by the readymade garment (RMG) industry. According to Bangladesh Investment Development Authority (BIDA) data, the RMG sector, employing 4 million workers, of which 58 percent are women has played a vital role in enhancing female workforce engagement. Yet, despite growing school enrollment rates among women, 36.4 percent of female workers in the industry lack formal education, limiting them to unskilled, low-paying, and low-productivity roles, inhibiting their ascent to higher-level positions within professions (Raihan & Bidisha 2018).

In line with other studies on the RMG industry in Bangladesh, the company survey from the Skills for Industry project indicates an increase in the number of female workers between 2012 and 2017 at different occupational levels, ranging from lower to higher ones. However, it also documents the fact that men still largely occupy mid- to high-level positions. In the garment sector, there is a concentration of female workers in lower roles such as general workers (43%) and operators (48%), with fewer in middle to higher positions (supervisory, technical, or managerial).

Figure 1: Comparison of employees by gender and occupational levels in RMG (Source: Company survey data, Skills for Industry project 2018)



In addition, case study data from the Skills for Industry project underscore a notable trend in the recruitment of female workers in specific roles, particularly helpers and operators directly associated with production. This pattern is influenced by societal perceptions of women as

being meticulous and caring, aligning with the requirements of these positions. Human Resource (HR) managers emphasize that certain tasks demanding precision and attention to detail are often entrusted to female workers, as they tend to exhibit these qualities more reliably than male workers. A Human Resource (HR) manager stated in this regard:

„We have a significant number of female employees working in the finishing section. Some tasks require extra care, and we tend to prefer assigning them to female workers, as male workers may exhibit less attention to detail.” (Int5_RMG_321_HM)

Typically, many female employees commence their careers as helpers and progress through them by working closely with operators and facilitated by informal on-the-job training. However, ascending to mid-level roles like those of supervisors or production managers remains uncommon due to various socio-economic factors. Female workers, often hailing from lower-income families with limited education, find it challenging to access informal training opportunities and defy societal norms which discourage late-night overtime work, which, in turn, hampers their advancement to mid-level positions. One of the HR managers explained:

“Girls work more as helpers or operators and less as supervisors or electricians because of the overtime work in the garment industry. In most cases, regular production work continues after regular office hours. Sometimes, the supervisor and technicians have to stay until twelve at night, and so girls do not show interest in becoming a supervisor or an electrician.” (Int6_RMG_19_HM)

The workload within the garment industry significantly impacts workers, affecting gender-based responses negatively, as many of the female workers cease to participate in informal on-the-job higher-level training programs. Male workers participate in higher-level on-the-job training and tend to cope better with the demands of the job at hand, while female workers, constrained by family and societal roles, face barriers to progression. This leads to a disparity in informal skill development within the companies, influenced both by women avoiding higher-level training due to their dual household and professional work burden, as well as the reluctance on the part of the companies to recruit women for mid- and high-level roles.

4.2 Female participation in formal TVET

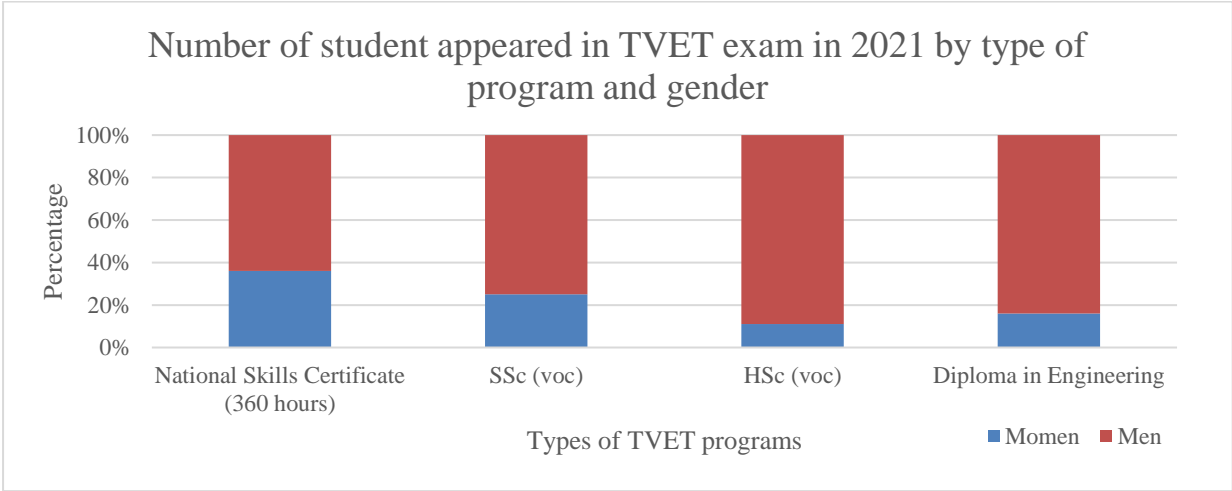
Despite the increasing participation of females in general education, female enrolment in TVET remains low in Bangladesh. Programs catering to the garment industry show minimal female representation, particularly in lower-level positions (BANBEIS 2022; BTEB 2022). In 2021, there were 172,796 admissions in national skills certificate (360-hours) courses, with female trainees constituting one-third of the total. A majority of these female trainees opted for courses in sewing machine operation and apparel manufacturing and sewing, these being the entry/basic- level courses in the industry (BTEB 2022). Bangladesh’s formal education system also introduced vocational certificate courses alongside regular academic curricula for Secondary and Higher Secondary School Certificate (SSC and HSC) levels. In SSC (voc),

two subjects are available: dressmaking and dyeing, and printing and finishing. Data from 2021, however, indicate low female participation in SSC (voc) examinations, with just a little over a quarter of the candidates being girls (Figure 2). Only 12 percent female students participated in the HSC (voc) examination in the same year (Figure 2).

The diploma is considered the formal middle-level occupational qualification in Bangladesh. Typically, garment companies prefer recruiting textile engineers, mechanical engineers, and electric engineers with diplomas, as these are deemed more valuable than other formal vocational education and training courses. However, in the year 2021, female participation in diploma courses was only 14 percent (BANBEIS 2022; BTEB 2022, Figure 2).

On the other hand, the post-graduate diploma offered by five universities under the Skills for Employment Investment Program (SEIP) includes management-level courses related to textile and RMG, particularly in two of the universities. Nevertheless, similar to the diploma degree, these management-level post-graduate diploma courses are predominantly attended by male students, reflecting the limited opportunities for females to secure employment in such positions within the industry.

Figure 2: Number of students who appeared in the TVET examination in 2021, by type of program and gender (Source: BTEB 2022)



Unlike participation in informal training, the reasons for lower levels of female participation in formal TVET courses are different and complicated. At the diploma level, one reason for lower female participation in the engineering department, with a focus on employability in the garment industry, is the discriminatory pay structures against females there. One of the instructors of a diploma institute said:

„Despite completing higher education, only a few girls are offered managerial positions, and those who receive such offers decline due to the comparatively low salary.” (Int 1- Bpp1_DMPI)

This statement clearly shows that women are not willing to enroll in the diploma course due to the persistent discriminatory pay structure at the company level. However, other reasons for rejecting still relatively high-paying managerial positions may be companies' relatively negative perception of female diploma graduates' skills (which goes against women's polytechnic institutes). In reply to this perception, the instructor added:

„If our girls aren't recruited, how can we identify the need for course improvement? Despite discrimination, some defy it, taking low-paid mid-level jobs, but this accounts for only up to 10%.“ (Int 1- Bpp1_DMPI)

It is evident, therefore, that due to a lack of job opportunities as well as a discriminatory payment structure, females are reluctant to participate in technical and supervisory courses, and the women's polytechnic institute has also stopped offering these courses to women. Consequently, these mid-level formal TVET training courses are becoming increasingly male-dominated, further attenuating female participation in the industry. Thus, formal TVET training programs are also failing to attract females to their mid- and higher-level training programs and position them in roles at the higher levels of the industry.

4.3 Female Participation in non-formal TVET

In Bangladesh, non-formal skill development is divided into public, private, NGO-based, and private (commercial) categories under the Skills for Employment Investment Program (SEIP). Within the SEIP project, a total of 782,104 individuals were enrolled from July 2014 to November 2023, with 31.47 percent (246,150) being women. Additionally, 474,849 individuals secured job placements, of which 34.6 percent (164,170) were women. In this project, 209 courses are being offered through 574 institutes to basically develop lower-level occupational skills for industries. Here, women's participation in mid-level training courses is extremely limited, except for machine operator training for the RMG sector, where female participation is almost at 100 percent.

Both public, private and NGO-run training institutes offer lower-level and mid-level management courses approved by BTEB, which are occasionally modified in consultation with relevant companies. These programs, in principle, prioritize the participation of economically disadvantaged women; in reality, however, females are predominantly enrolled in lower-level training courses and occupy lower-level positions in factories where no men are present. On the other hand, mid-level/technical positions (supervisor, machine maintenance, etc.) are mostly attended by men. Despite these facts, a few companies, in collaboration with NGOs, are making strides by recruiting women for such positions. The Skills Development Program (SDP) by BRAC provides outstanding non-formal training courses for current female employees, aiming to elevate them to supervisory roles through collaboration with companies. According to an SDP manager of BRAC:

“We insist that the company selects existing operators who are capable of assuming supervisory positions and take selected female employees to our training center for 4

to 5 days, providing them with soft skills training to enhance their managerial capacity. Since the program's inception in 2021, we have promoted 380 females to supervisory positions.” (Int3_bgp6_BRAC SDP)

No doubt, this is an exemplary initiative, providing numerous women with the opportunity to contribute to higher-level occupations in this sector. However, overall, women's participation in higher-level on-the-job non-formal training courses is hindered by social attitudes towards women workers, their dual burdens, and other workplace-related issues that should be addressed rigorously.

5 Discussion

The study highlights the dynamics of skills formation regimes in Bangladesh concerning the participation of females in various occupational levels, particularly in the garment industry. Both public and private training institutes follow the Bangladesh Technical Education Board's (BTEB) curriculum and regulations for formal assessment and certification processes. However, the study underlines that the formal skills formation regime has a limited impact on encouraging females to enroll in higher-level occupational training courses, including technical, technological, and supervisory programs.

Lower-level occupations typically employ inexperienced workers who receive on-the-job training or learn through working alongside experienced colleagues. Mid-level supervisor positions are often filled through internal promotions, requiring candidates to possess at least an HSC qualification and display leadership qualities. Unfortunately, girls are seldom appointed to these positions, mainly due to the absence of fixed working hours, further exacerbating gender disparities.

In the non-formal vocational training sector, funding heavily relies on donor support, with a specific focus on the participation of girls. Training institutions predominantly offer low-level occupational training, such as sewing machine operator training, resulting in higher participation rates among girls. Nonetheless, this non-formal skills formation primarily facilitates girls' entry into the industry at lower levels and does not ensure their upward mobility towards occupational inclusiveness, especially in the garment industry. The only targeted training initiative, conducted by BRAC's skills development program in collaboration with the garment industry, has shown promise in elevating female positions from operators to supervisors. However, such targeted efforts remain exceptions rather than the norm.

Moreover, for technician positions, individuals with diplomas, predominantly men, are favored, with women rarely participating in such training. Higher-level professionals often seek to enhance their skills through training courses, but females are reluctant due to the unfavorable working environment and societal perceptions. Gender-based stereotypes, discrimination, and societal norms significantly influence women's ability to assume leadership roles. Girls often perceive supervisor positions as unsuitable due to the additional

skills required, such as basic accounting and communication skills, which they feel limited education hasn't adequately equipped them for.

Inclusive growth within the garment industry necessitates challenging these norms and stereotypes. The study stresses the importance of having female role models in higher-level courses, supervisory positions, and technician roles, highlighting the need for commitment and cooperation between training providers and the garment industry.

The skills formation regime for female workers encompasses the framework for developing and enhancing their skills, as shaped by government policies, educational institutions, labor markets, and societal norms. Access to information about educational opportunities and financial resources is crucial for female workers, and socio-economic factors play a significant role in determining their accessibility to these resources.

6 Conclusion

The TVET program (in Bangladesh) strives to enhance economic development by promoting employability and inclusivity for disadvantaged women. Despite efforts to increase diversity, gender disparities continue to exist, especially in the garment sector. As we have seen, women are underrepresented in both formal and non-formal TVET programs, limiting their access to mid- and upper-level jobs. Women continue to be concentrated in lower roles in the ready-made garment (RMG) industry, a significant contributor to female labor involvement, preventing their advancement to supervisory and managerial positions. Women are hesitant to engage in formal mid-level courses due to societal biases, family roles, and discriminatory wage structures, resulting in a male-dominated environment in these programs.

The study found that addressing gender bias in skills development requires tailored interventions with consideration for diverse women's circumstances based on factors such as age, cultural background, education, and occupation (ILO 2020a). To enhance female representation in mid- and high-level roles, donor-funded projects should prioritize advanced training for women, and in a way that promotes inclusivity. Collaborations between NGOs and firms have introduced non-formal training, encouraging girls to pursue mid-level roles in the garment sector—this approach merits wider adoption. In order to overcome socio-cultural barriers, it is important that a gender and development component be integrated into all training programs with stakeholders' consent. The study also underscores that enhancing women's participation in the workforce and promoting inclusivity is a complex challenge shaped by socio-economic forces and the structure of skills-formation regimes.

In conclusion, using Bourdieu's concept of different types of capital as a critical lens, this study clearly illuminates the entrenched gender disparities within the TVET programs as well as in the garment sector in Bangladesh. The perpetuation of women's concentration in lower roles, reluctance to pursue formal mid-level courses, and the persistence of discriminatory practices at the company level highlight the need for tailored interventions. Addressing these

issues requires further research and coordinated measures to dismantle barriers and foster a more inclusive industrial landscape.

References

Agbara, W., Chagbe, M. B., & Achi, T. T. (2018). Challenges of women in technical and vocational education: A case study of federal college of education (technical), Gusau. In: *International Journal of Vocational and Technical Education*, 10, 1, 7-13.

Agrawal, T. (2013). Vocational education and training programs (VET): An Asian perspective. In: *Asia-Pacific Journal of Cooperative Education*, 14, 1, 15–26.

Asian Development Bank (ADB). (2004). *Improving technical education and vocational training: Strategies for Asia*. Manila: ADB.

Asian Development Bank (ADB). (2017). *Bangladesh gender equality diagnostic of selected sectors*. Manila: ADB.

Atkins, L. (2017). The odyssey: School to work transitions, serendipity and position in the field. In: *British Journal of Sociology of Education*, 38, 5, 641-655.

Bangladesh Bureau of Educational Information and Statistics (BANBEIS). (2022). *Bangladesh educational statistics 2021*. Dhaka: Ministry of Education.

Bangladesh Bureau of Educational Information and Statistics (BANBEIS). (2023). *Bangladesh educational statistics 2022*. Dhaka: Ministry of Education. Online: <http://banbeis.portal.gov.bd> (retrieved 20.12.2023).

Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics (BBS). (2018). *Report on labour force survey (LFS) 2016-17*. Dhaka: Ministry of Planning, Government of the People's Republic of Bangladesh.

Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics (BBS). (2023). *Statistical yearbook Bangladesh 2022*. Dhaka: Ministry of Planning, Government of the People's Republic of Bangladesh.

Bangladesh Technical and Education Board (BTEB). (2022). *SSC Vocational and Dakhil Vocational Routine 2022*. Dhaka: The Bangladesh Technical Education Board.

Becker, G.S. (1981). *A Treatise on the Family*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.

Bourdieu, P. (1986). The forms of capital. In Richardson, J.G. (ed.): *Handbook of theory and research for the sociology of education*. New York: Greenwood Press, 241–58.

Bourdieu, P. (2018). Cultural reproduction and social reproduction. In: *Knowledge, education, and cultural change*, 71–112. London: Routledge.

Bray-Collins, E., Andrade, N., & Wanjiru, C. (2022). Gender and TVET in Africa. In: *Futures of Education, Culture & Nature – Learning to Become*, 151-171.

Bureau of Manpower, Employment and Training (BMET). (1979). *Annual report 1978*. Dhaka: Bureau of Manpower, Employment and Training.

- Campaign for Popular Education (CAMPE). (2006). The state of secondary education: progress and challenges. Dhaka: Campaign for Popular Education.
- Cantor, L. (1985). Vocational education and training: The Japanese approach. In: *Comparative Education*, 21, 1, 67-75.
- Carli, L., Alawa, L., Lee, Y. A., Zhao, B., & Kim, E. (2016). Stereotypes about gender and science: women # scientists. In: *Psychology of Women Quarterly* 40, 2, 244–60.
- Cundiff, J. L. & Vescio, T. K. (2016). Gender stereotypes influence how people explain gender disparities in the workplace. In: *Sex Roles*, 75, 3–4, 126–138.
- Gläser, J. & Laudel, G. (2019). The Discovery of Causal Mechanisms: Extractive Qualitative Content Analysis as a Tool for Process Tracing. In: *Forum Qualitative Sozialforschung*, 20, 3, Art. 29.
- Government of the People’s Republic of Bangladesh (GoB). (1972). The constitution of the people’s republic of Bangladesh. Dhaka: Government of the People’s Republic of Bangladesh.
- Government of the People’s Republic of Bangladesh (GoB). (2005). Unlocking the potential: national strategy for accelerated poverty reduction. Dhaka: General Economics Division, Planning Commission.
- Government of the People’s Republic of Bangladesh (GoB). (2011a). National women development policy 2011. Dhaka: Ministry of Women and Children Affairs.
- Government of the People’s Republic of Bangladesh (GoB). (2011b). National skills development policy 2011. Dhaka: Ministry of Education.
- Government of the People’s Republic of Bangladesh (GoB). (2022). Bangladesh economic review 2022. Dhaka: Finance Division, Ministry of Finance.
- Haolader, F.A., Foysol, K.M., & Clement, C.K. (2017). Technical and vocational education and training (TVET) in Bangladesh: Systems, curricula, and transition pathways. In: *Technical and Vocational Education and Training*, 24, 201–27.
- Heilman, M. E. & Parks-Stamm, E. J. (2007). Gender stereotypes in the workplace: Obstacles to women’s career progress. In: *Social Psychology of Gender*, 24, 7, 47–77.
- International Labour Organization (ILO). (2012). National strategy for promotion of gender equality in TVET. Geneva: ILO. Online: https://www.ilo.org/dhaka/Whatwedo/Projects/WCMS_222688/lang--en/index.htm (retrieved 16.11.2023).
- International Labour Organization (ILO). (2015). National skills development system in Bangladesh. Geneva: ILO. Online: https://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---asia/---ro-bangkok/---ilo-dhaka/documents/publication/wcms_445255.pdf (retrieved 25.11.2023).
- International Labour Organization (ILO). (2016). Gender equality in the labour market in Asia and the Pacific and the Arab States. Geneva: ILO.

- International Labour Organization (ILO). (2018). World employment and social outlook: Trends for women. Geneva: ILO. Online: https://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---dgreports/---dcomm/---publ/documents/publication/wcms_619577.pdf (retrieved 29.01.2024).
- International Labour Organization (ILO). (2020a). Understanding the gender composition and experience of ready-made garment (RMG) workers in Bangladesh.
- International Labour Organization (ILO). (2020b). The gender divide in skills development: Progress, challenges and policy options for empowering women. ILO Policy Brief. Geneva: ILO. Online: https://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---ed_emp/---ifp_skills/documents/publication/wcms_244380.pdf (retrieved 12.12.2023).
- Kalam, M. A. & Shimu, S. S. (2020). Perceived Roles of Skills in Growth and Transformation of Ready Made Garments and Pharmaceutical Industries in Bangladesh: Results from an Industry Survey. In: Asian Journal of Education and Training, 6(4), 671–682.
- Kuckartz, U. (2018). Qualitative Inhaltsanalyse. Methoden, Praxis, Computerunterstützung. Weinheim: Beltz Juventa.
- Marock, C., Teutoburg-Weiss, H., & Allais, S. (2020). The Complexity of Evaluating the Contribution of VSD Programmes to Industrial Growth and Transformation in Developing Countries (Skills for Industry Working Paper G3). Zurich: Zurich University of Teacher Education.
- Masud, R., Mutalib, A. A., & Ismail, I. (2018). Gender Inequality: A Comparative Study of Participation in Technical Courses. In: Journal of Counselling and Educational Technology, 1, 1, 10-13.
- McKinnon, M. & Connell, C. (2020). Perceptions of stereotypes applied to women who publicly communicate their STEM work. In: Humanities and Social Sciences Communications, 7, 160.
- Nordman, C. & Pasquier-Doumer, L. (2012) Vocational education, on-the-job training and labour market integration of young workers in urban West Africa. Working Paper. DIAL (Développement, Institutions et Mondialisation). Online: <https://econpapers.repec.org/paper/diawpaper/dt20121> (retrieved 13.09.2023).
- Nurhaeni, I.D.A. & Kurniawan, Y. (2018). Gender-mainstreaming in technical and vocational education and training. In: IOP Conf. Series, Materials Science and Engineering, 306, 1, 1-6.
- OECD. (2022). Education at a glance 2022: OECD indicators. Paris: OECD Publishing.
- Rafique, A. (1994a). A case study on innovative strategies of the Bangladesh TVET system to cope with the changing national labour market demand. Dhaka: UNESCO-UNEVOC.
- Rafique, A. (1994b). Case studies on technical and vocational education in Asia and the Pacific: The development of technical and vocational education in Bangladesh - A case study in quality improvement. RMIT Report for UNESCO. Dhaka: UNESCO/Centre for Occupational Research and Education.

Rafique, A. (1996). The challenge of TVE for human resource development: Policy planning strategy. Dhaka: Bangladesh Technical Education Board.

Rafique, A. (1998). The study on articulation of vocational, technical and general education programmes as a means of providing opportunities to the secondary school graduates to acquire employable skills and academic excellence. Dhaka: UNESCO/Centre for Occupational Research and Education.

Raihan, S. & Bidisha, S. H. (2018). Female employment stagnation in Bangladesh. Online: https://asiafoundation.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/12/EDIG-Female-employment-stagnation-in-Bangladesh_report.pdf (retrieved 10.01.2024).

Rosenfeld, R. A. & Kalleberg, A. L. (1991). Gender inequality in the labor market: a cross-national perspective. In: *Acta Sociologica*, 34, 3, 207–250.

Sevilla, M.P, Sepúlveda, L., & Valdebenito, M. (2019). Gender differences production in secondary technical vocational education. In: *Pensamiento Educativo, Revista de Investigacion Educativa Latinoamericana*, 56, 1, 1–17.

Shah, J. (2022). Industries see growth from 313 factories to 46,000. Online: <https://en.prothomalo.com/business/industries-see-growth-from-313-factories-to-46000> (retrieved 24.11.2023).

Tilak, J. B. G. (2002). Vocational education and training in Asia. In Keeves, J.P. & Watanabe, R. (eds.): *The handbook on educational research in the Asia Pacific region*, 673-686. Berlin: Kluwer.

Ul-Haq, M. & Haq, K. (eds.). (1998). *Human development report in South Asia 1998*. Delhi: Oxford University Press.

UNESCO. (2013). *Status of TVET in the SADC Region. Assessment and Review of Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET) in the Southern African Development Community Region and of the Development of a Regional Strategy for the Revitalisation of TVET*. Paris: UNESCO.

Woldemichael, A. (2020). Closing the gender gap in African labor markets is good economics. In: *Foresight Africa: Top priorities for the continent 2020-2030*. Washington D.C.: Brookings Institution. Online: https://www.brookings.edu/wpcontent/uploads/2020/01/ForesightAfrica2020_20200110.pdf (retrieved 24.11.2023).

TVET@asia The Online Journal for Technical and Vocational Education and Training in Asia

CITATION:

Shimu, S. S. (2024). Skill formation of female workers in the garment industry: The case of Bangladesh. In: *TVET@Asia*, issue 22, 1–18. Online: <https://tvet-online.asia/startseite/skill-formation-of-female-workers-in-the-garment-industry-the-case-of-bangladesh/> (retrieved 29.01.2024).

This document is published under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivs3.0 License



Author(s) Profile



Sheikh Shahana Shimu

BRAC Institute of Educational Development, BRAC University, Bangladesh

E-mail: sheikh_shimu@yahoo.com;
Shahana.shimu@bracu.ac.bd