



Progress and Potential

A Focus on Gender

THEMATIC
BRIEF

KEY FINDINGS

Better Work closes the gender pay gap and curbs sexual harassment

Empowering women is a step to improve working conditions and productivity

Quality jobs can improve lives of women workers and their families



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BetterWork.



The Better Work programme, a joint initiative of the International Labour Organization (ILO) and the International Finance Corporation (IFC), a member of the World Bank Group, has been working since 2007 to improve working conditions and promote competitiveness in global garment supply chains. As a result of their participation in Better Work, factories have steadily improved compliance with ILO core labour standards and national legislation. This has significantly improved working conditions while enhancing the productivity and profitability of factories. An independent impact assessment of Better Work has been carried out by Tufts University. Since the programme's inception, Tufts' interdisciplinary research team has gathered and analysed nearly 15,000 survey responses from garment workers and 2,000 responses from factory managers in Haiti, Indonesia, Jordan, Nicaragua and Vietnam. The analysis of these responses represent an in-depth evaluation of Better Work's effectiveness in changing workers' lives and boosting factory competitiveness.

Evidence presented in this brief demonstrates how the Better Work programme has contributed to significant improvements for women working in garment factories. In particular, Better Work factories have closed gender pay gaps, reduced incidents of sexual harassment, improved women's voice at work and increased access to pregnancy-related health care, among other positive impacts.

1. Introduction

Better Work is playing an important role in promoting gender equality, with factories in Haiti, Nicaragua and Vietnam seeing a substantial reduction in the gender pay gap due to their participation in the programme. In Haiti, women were previously working longer hours for less pay than men. Over the course of the programme, the average number of weekly hours reported by women decreased, while their total pay increased relative to men. Similarly, in Nicaragua, the gender wage gap declines, as does the gap in working hours between women and men. In Vietnam, Better Work's positive impact on closing the gender pay gap intensifies as factories maintain their access to the programme's services over several years.

Previous research from the Better Factories Cambodia programme supports the premise that formal garment sector jobs can play a significant role in reducing the disparate outcomes for men and women². Nationally in 1996, women earned nearly 40 percent less than men in Cambodia. By 2007, the gender wage gap had decreased to 17 percent. This trend accompanied the sharp growth in apparel exports that occurred after the implementation of the U.S.-Cambodian Bilateral Textile Trade Agreement and the establishment of Better Factories Cambodia to ensure compliance with labour standards.

2. Curbing sexual harassment at the workplace

Eliminating workplace sexual harassment is the right and the smart thing to do. For employees, sexual harassment can often result in stress, demotivation, decreased job satisfaction, compromised teamwork and even job loss³. What hurts employees, ultimately hurts businesses and communities. Sexual harassment, unwelcome conduct of a sexual nature that makes a person feel offended, humiliated or intimidated, is widespread in garment factories. Some of the basic characteristics of the export-oriented garment industry make workers particularly vulnerable to sexual harassment. The industry is largely comprised of women workers under the age of 30, many of whom migrate from rural areas or from abroad for their first formal sector job. They often occupy a position of low power in a garment factory, especially in relation to a line supervisor who assesses worker performance. Supervisors can use their position of power to sexually harass workers, and such conduct

may be interpreted by disempowered workers as a condition of their employment or necessary to endure for promotion. In addition to the damaging psychological and physical effects sexual harassment can have on victims, it can negatively affect workplace communication and overall factory productivity.

Workers were asked about their concerns with sexual harassment in their factory. Participating in Better Work has led to a decrease in sexual harassment concerns expressed by workers. The researchers concluded that the improvements were directly attributable to the programme, rather than the result of external factors. The impact of Better Work is clearest in Jordan, where reports of sexual harassment have decreased by 18 percentage points. This may be attributable to Better Work's sexual harassment prevention training⁴. Similar declining trends in sexual harassment concerns are also apparent in Indonesia, Nicaragua and Vietnam.

3. Improving voice and representation

Given the high proportion of women workers, the researchers investigated the extent to which Better Work provides women workers with an opportunity to air their concerns and be represented. Over the course of participation in Better Work, as observed in Tufts' worker surveys over the years, workers demonstrate an increasing willingness to express their opinion on issues that cover sensitive topics, such as verbal abuse or sexual harassment. Responses of "I don't know" or

"I don't want to answer" have decreased significantly since baseline, suggesting that workers are increasingly comfortable with voicing grievances in the factory. This also supports the hypothesis that empowering workers through Better Work activities leads them to be more comfortable in having their voices heard.

Workers also show a greater willingness to take their concerns with abusive behaviour to their supervisor

¹ Fontana M and Silberman A (2013) "Analysing Better Work Data from a Gender Perspective: A Preliminary Exploration of Worker Surveys with a Focus on Vietnam", Better Work Discussion Paper no.13

² Robertson R (2011) "Apparel Wages Before and After Better Factories Cambodia", Better Work Discussion Paper no.3

³ Research from the IFC-led SheWorks global private sector partnership shows that sexual harassment costs a typical Fortune 500 company \$6.7 million per year in absenteeism, low productivity, and employee turnover. The cost of presenteeism amongst victims, bystanders, and perpetrators is also a key concern. "SheWorks: Putting Gender-Smart Commitments into Practice" IFC (2016)

The proportion of women in Better Work Haiti factories who report having access to prenatal check-ups increases from just six per cent to 26 per cent as a result of the programme

or manager, which may suggest greater use or trust in expressing grievances in the factory. Furthermore, evidence from Indonesia suggests that workers are more comfortable expressing their opinions and seeking help from their trade union representative, with a significantly higher proportion of workers discussing their sexual harassment concerns with a trade union representative. This suggests that workers are becoming more aware of their rights and are increasingly confident about seeking help to address the issue.

The researchers investigated whether the cornerstone of Better Work's advisory services, Performance Improvement Consultative Committees (PICCs),

comprised of worker representatives (including trade unions, where present) and managers, lead to improvements in working conditions, and whether they change worker and manager perceptions of social dialogue. They concluded that empowering women is critical. Having female representatives on the PICC and training female supervisors are key strategies for achieving better working conditions and improving productivity, by as much as 22 per cent. When women take part in the PICC in numbers reflective of the overall workforce, this significantly improves outcomes for workers, particularly in terms of reducing workers' sexual harassment concerns. Managers are also more likely to see worker committees in a positive light, and supervisors are less likely to be stressed.

4. Focus on pregnancy and postnatal health care

Better Work has expanded access to pregnancy-related healthcare, a vital service for many young women working long hours in the garment sector. In Haiti, only six per cent of female workers reported having access to prenatal check-ups at the outset of the programme. This increased to 26 per cent after five years. In Vietnam, Better Work's impact in improving prenatal care was apparent within the first two years of participation in the programme. In this area, research

results suggest the compliance assessment process drives this improvement. Similar results were observed for Indonesia, and the programme achieved an even greater impact on pregnancy-related healthcare, both pre- and post-natal, in Jordan. By the fourth year, the probability of having access to both types of pregnancy care increased significantly, driven both by compliance assessments and engagement with Better Work's advisory services in between assessments.

5. Impact beyond the workplace

A quality job has an impact on workers' health and their children's health. Workers in Better Work Haiti factories, for example, reported lower frequencies of headaches, fatigue and thirst while at work in the 2014–2015 period, relative to earlier years. The health status of workers' families was initially precarious: nearly a quarter of workers in Vietnam rated the health of their children as fair or poor. After several years in

the Better Work programme, workers are more likely to report better health outcomes for their children. Child health outcomes improve when parents work fewer hours and receive more pay. Since Better Work has significantly reduced hours and increased pay, particularly for women, researchers conclude there is an indirect positive effect of the programme on child health.

⁴ For more information on Better Work Jordan's sexual harassment prevention training, see the case study on addressing sexual harassment available from betterwork.org.

Quality jobs also have implications for supporting garment sector workers in creating education opportunities for their children and siblings. Encouragingly, close to 90 per cent of children of workers in Better Work factories are enrolled in school in Vietnam and Indonesia, and these high rates are maintained and even boosted slightly the longer a factory remains in the programme. In Nicaragua, baseline surveys show almost 1 in 5 workers report one of their children is out of school due to financial constraints, a proportion that declines after at least one year of participation in Better Work Nicaragua.



EMPOWERING WOMEN AND PROMOTING FACTORY PRODUCTIVITY

Supervisors play a key role in garment factories—not only overseeing the quality and quantity of work produced, but also shaping workers’ experiences and serving as a link between workers and managers. Yet supervisors are often promoted as a result of their skills as an operator, and have no formal training in management skills. As a result, they may struggle to motivate workers in an effective and humane way while dealing with pressure from managers to meet production quotas. Better Work’s Supervisory Skills Training (SST) focuses on the key soft and tactical skills needed by supervisors to succeed in this challenging role. Tufts University’s evaluation of the SST programme shows that the training significantly boosts supervisor confidence and the quality of overall workplace relations. Furthermore, SST, particularly among female supervisors, increases productivity by 22 per cent. The training also helps to lower both supervisor and employee turnover. Finally, it reduces the occurrence of unbalanced production lines (where work piles up for some workers while other workers are sitting idle).

Babbitt, Laura (2016) “Supervisory Skills Training Impact Evaluation” Better Work discussion paper no. 22



EMPOWERING WOMEN AND PROMOTING FACTORY PRODUCTIVITY

Better Work has affected women's lives in positive ways beyond the factory, as attested by focus group discussions and in-depth interviews with workers in Better Work Lesotho factories. Through Better Work's workplace cooperation and financial literacy training, workers state that they have acquired communication skills and knowledge that they have transferred to their households. Workers report that they have been able to also transfer the knowledge gained from training on occupational safety and health to their homes and thereby improve the health and safety of their families. Due to improvements in communication and relations at work, workers report less tension and stress in their home environment:

"Better Work has taught us to be open with each other, man and wife. Now we are able to put down salary and discuss a way forward to build the family"

Nearly half of workers interviewed in Lesotho mentioned Better Work's influence in their home life through health trainings, specifically Better Work's HIV/AIDS training. Workers who underwent this training felt better equipped to treat the disease in themselves or others, felt more comfortable addressing the topic and discussed how their improved knowledge to prevent and treat the disease has imparted a greater sense of empowerment in their lives:

"Since the Better Work training, when we come back from the clinic and we are told that we're HIV positive, before it was going to be difficult to tell my partner that I'm infected. Now we are able to discuss this illness openly. And we have been trained that we can even have a child when we are both positive. And even having to train our other siblings about this disease, that you can be able to eat the food that has been prepared by an HIV positive person."

Pike, Kelly and Godfrey, Shane (2015) "Two Sides to Better Work: A Comparative Analysis of Worker and Management Perceptions of the impact of Better Work Lesotho," Better Work discussion paper no. 20

Progress and Potential thematic briefs present a focused look at particular topics from the impact assessment of Better Work.

CORE DONORS TO BETTER WORK

The Better Work Global programme is supported by the following key donor partners (in alphabetical order):

- Australia (Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, DFAT)
- Denmark (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Danida)
- Netherlands (Ministry of Foreign Affairs)
- Switzerland (State Secretariat for Economic Affairs, SECO)
- United States (US Department of Labor, USDOL)



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