

Female Supervisors in RMG; a case on DBL Group



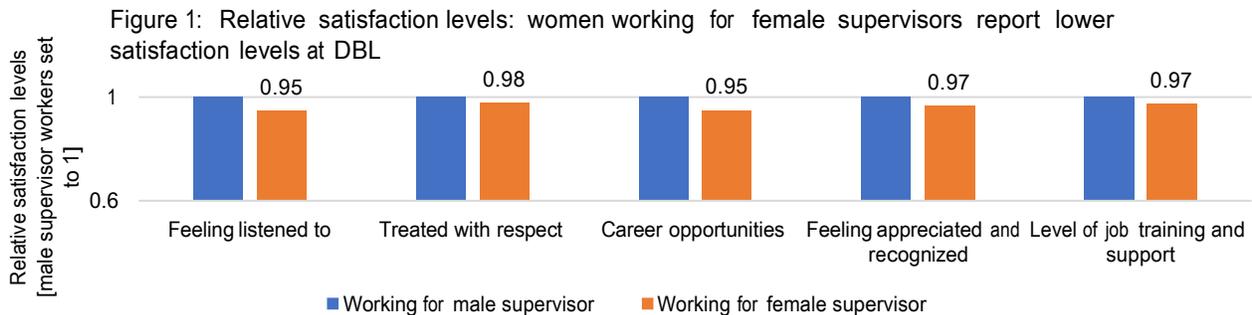
The ready-made garment (RMG) industry has contributed immensely to Bangladesh’s transition towards a major export-oriented economy over the past three decades. Accounting for more than 80% of the country’s export earnings¹, the industry is also a forerunner in women’s employment in Bangladesh. Over half of the 4 million Bangladeshi RMG workers are women². However, the positions available to women remain mostly limited to the machine-operator level. Leading factories are realizing that moving women into management roles is not only beneficial from an image perspective, but increasingly important from a business perspective. The growing economy is creating many opportunities for men, making it more difficult for the RMG sector to compete for talent among cohorts entering the labor force. Our research over the past five years through the Ready-made Garment Productivity Project (RMGPP) shows the challenges of this transition, with gender and social norms having an important role in limiting female promotion.

To better understand the benefits and challenges of promoting female management, RMGPP, based at Oxford University, has worked with factories and other stakeholders over several years to understand the challenges of moving women into leadership positions. In this brief, we describe some of the lessons from that research, drawing on factory administrative data, surveys, and qualitative interviewing from DBL as well as a larger set of factories from the Work-Progression and Productivity Toolkit (WPT)³. Since we specifically are looking at DBL data here, this report is for DBL only. The report is intended to support DBL’s movement towards 50% female line supervisors by 2020.

In the below text, we use factory administrative data, surveys, and qualitative interviewing with operators and supervisors to outline findings on: 1) female worker aspiration, satisfaction and wellbeing on DBL’s all-female lines, 2) operator assessments of trained versus untrained female supervisors (of which we draw from the larger WPT sample), 3) productivity data on DBL all female lines verses male-led mixed lines, 4) DBL operator attitudes towards female management styles.

Female Worker Aspiration, Satisfaction, and Wellbeing

Women at DBL working for female supervisors are significantly less satisfied with “feeling listened to,” “treated with respect,” “career opportunities,” “feeling appreciated and recognized,” and “level of job training and support” (as shown in Figure 1). Reports of operator satisfaction are insignificantly worse among women on the all-female lines as compared to women on the mixed lines. In terms of shouting on the line, those on the all-female lines report insignificantly higher rates of shouting. Harassment on the line, however, is insignificantly less among women working on the all-female lines.



¹The World Bank (2016) *With Reforms and Investments, Bangladesh can Become an Export Powerhouse*. Available at: <http://www.worldbank.org/en/news/feature/2016/11/14/reforms-investments-bangladesh-come-export-powerhouse>

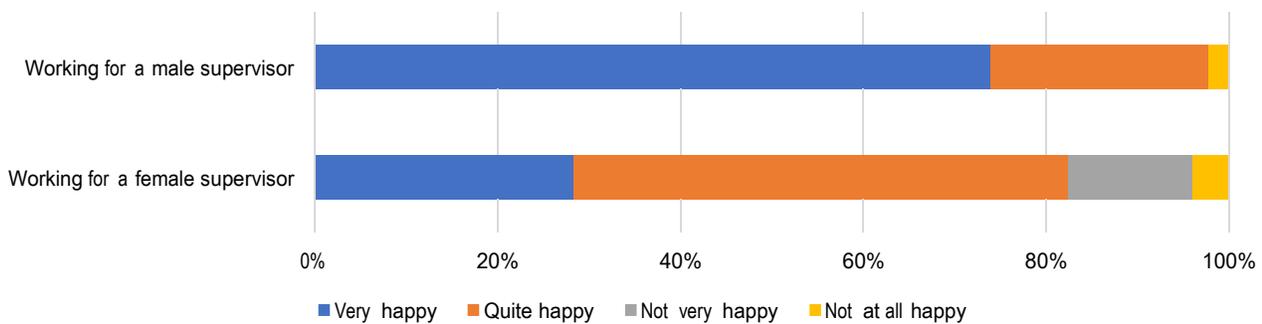
²ILO (2015) *Improving working conditions in the ready-made garment industry: Progress and achievements*. Available at http://www.ilo.org/dhaka/Whatwedo/Projects/WCMS_240343/lang--en/index.htm

³ This project was funded by the International Finance Cooperation and implemented by IPA and BetterWork

Women on the all-female lines at DBL show insignificantly different aspiration levels as compared to women working for men at DBL. In terms of self-ratings of supervisor ability, female workers working for females rate themselves insignificantly worse than female workers working for men rate themselves. Reflective of this, female workers working for women are not significantly more likely to say they would accept a promotion in the future to a supervisor role if offered. However, women working for women were insignificantly more likely to say that they will likely be offered a promotion in the future.

Women on the all-female lines are significantly more anxious. Further, though insignificantly, female workers working for women rank themselves lower on the “life ladder” exercise, in which they convey where on the ladder they would rate their life at this point, with 0 being their worst possible life and 10 being their best possible life. The women on the female-led lines report being significantly less happy than the women working on the male-led lines (Figure 2).

Figure 2: Reports of happiness over the last two weeks show women working for women as significantly less happy at DBL



Supervisor Assessment

There is no significant difference between how female workers at DBL working for females rate their supervisor’s ability as compared to a typical supervisor ability and how female workers working for males rate their supervisor’s ability as compared to a typical supervisor ability, across a set of supervisor skills and controlling for age, tenure, education, and marital status. We also find that female workers at DBL working for women report that they significantly prefer working for women.

From the WPT project, we took a larger set of factories that are comparable to DBL (27 total) and found useful findings around how female operators assess trained, newly trialing female supervisors as compared to untrained, newly trialing female supervisors. Figure 3 outlines that female operators working for trained female supervisors rate their supervisor’s ability significantly higher than those working for untrained female supervisors. This same trend holds for supervisor ratings on the ability to motivate operators (figure 4), the ability to understand machines (figure 5), and the ability to correct mistakes (figure 6). The average number of times a trained trialing supervisor praises her operators per month is significantly higher than that of an untrained trialing female supervisor, as shown in figure 7.

Figure 3: Female operators working for trained female supervisors rate their supervisor's **overall performance** significantly higher than those working for untrained female supervisors

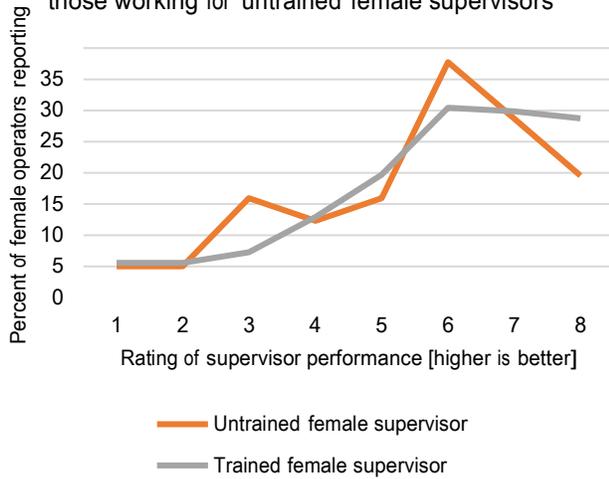


Figure 4: Female operators working for trained female supervisors rate their supervisor's **ability to motivate operators** significantly higher than those working for untrained female supervisors

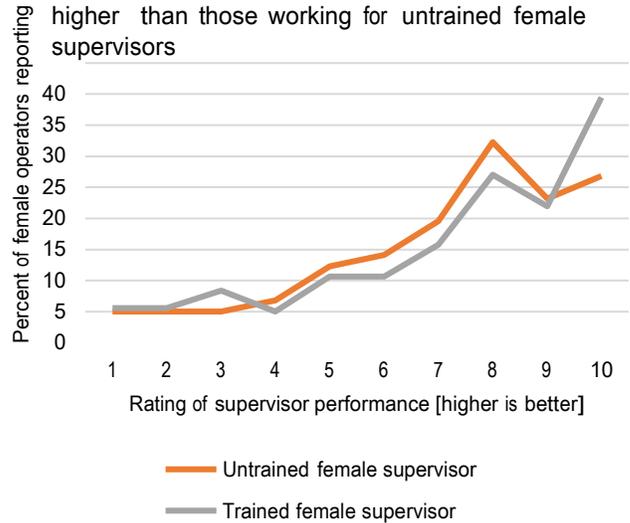


Figure 5: Female operator working for trained female supervisors rate their supervisor's **ability to understand machines** significantly higher than those working for untrained female supervisors

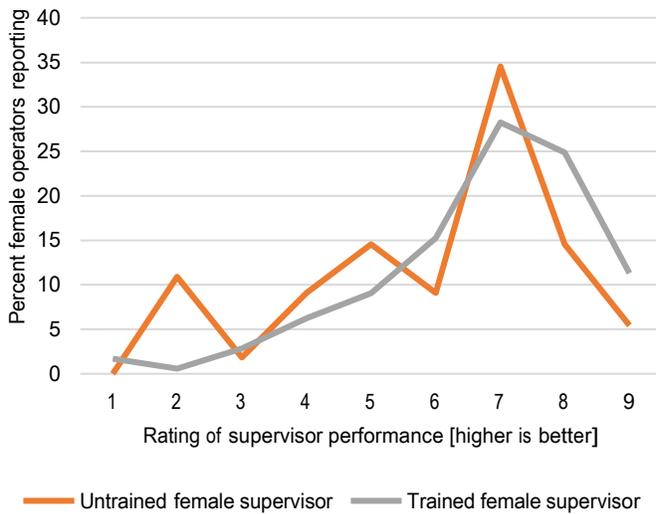


Figure 6: Female operator working for trained female supervisors rate their supervisor's **ability to correct mistakes** significantly higher than those working for untrained female supervisors

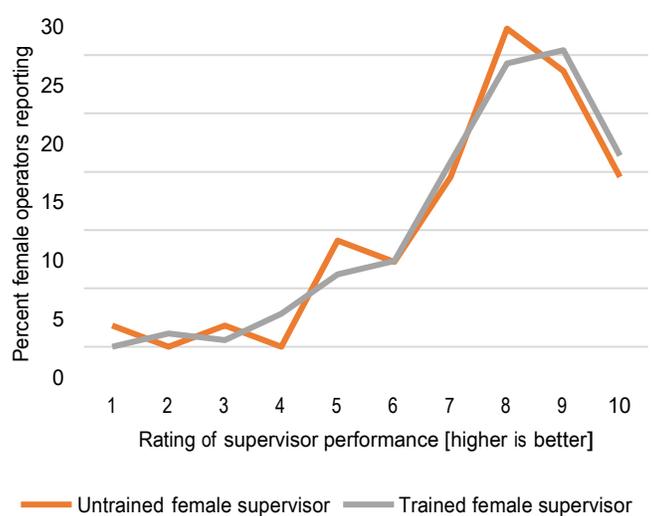
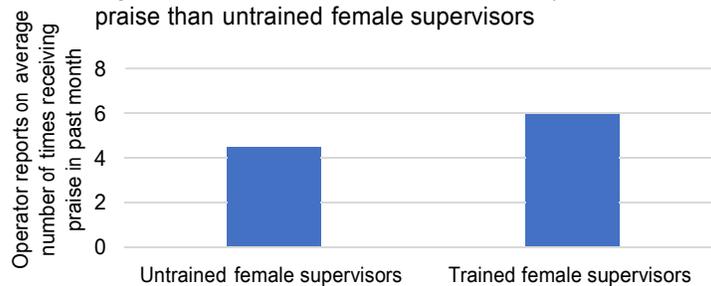


Figure 7: Trained female supervisors may offer more praise than untrained female supervisors



Productivity Findings

In many cases, gains in perceptions and attitudes towards female leadership do not come at a cost to efficiency. DBL productivity data show that, on average, female supervisors work on lines that are roughly as efficient as those run by male supervisors. Using administrative production records, data from dozens of factories across several projects indicate that lines with female supervisors or assistant supervisors function at similar efficiency and quality levels as male-led lines. DBL, in particular, appears to have benefitted from promoting more females to management positions, with the all-female lines having the same efficiency and significantly better quality than mixed-lines during the period following the initiation of the female lines (figures 8 and 9).

Figure 8: DBL All-Female/Mixed Line Efficiency

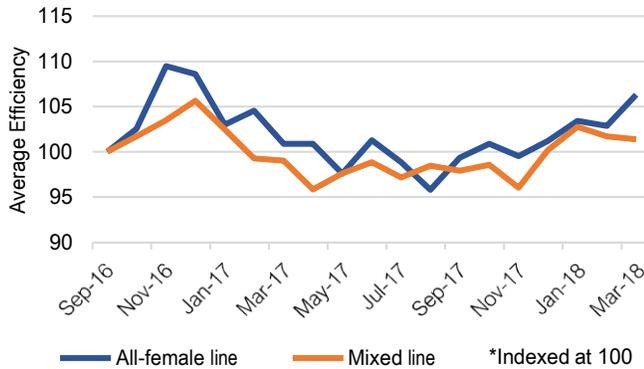
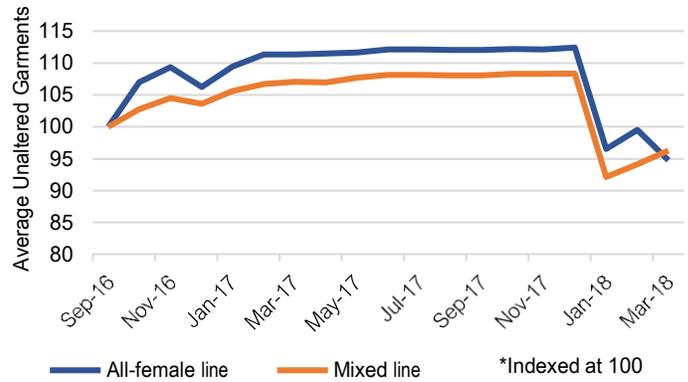


Figure 9: DBL All-Female/Mixed Line Quality



DBL female operator attitudes towards female management styles

In December 2018 we conducted a focus group discussion with seven female operators on their perceptions of female versus male production line management skills. Overall, we found that women supervisors struggle with being listened to by operators and often need support from management, however, many female workers feel more comfortable with female supervisors and find female supervisors to be more engaged on the line.

As expected, a main benefit of working under a female supervisor as a female worker is the level of transparent communication; women are much more comfortable speaking with a female supervisor about family issues and women-related health issues. Further, female operators appear to be more comfortable with female supervisors about production issues as well:

“In a female supervisor line when we have a problem, we can tell her to check the problem. A male does not respond to us in the way that a female does. A male scolds us to check but female checks herself the problem by sitting at the machine. Then if there is a problem in the machine, she will call mechanic or inform the in-charge. It helps us. That’s why working under female supervisor is better. We can share everything with a female but not with a male”

While female operators shared that they can be more openly communicative with female supervisors, they also noted that this heightened communication also means that female supervisors can use slang with female workers in a way that male supervisors cannot. This can lead to female operators experiencing more aggressive or derogatory language at work when working on a line led by a female supervisor as compared to a male supervisor.

The discussion revealed a trend of operators overall being less influenced and intimidated by female supervisors as compared to male supervisors, as several operators explained:

“if a male supervisor scolds then the operator and the helper are afraid, but they do not become afraid with a female supervisor”

“if a female supervisor can’t give solutions then she goes to the in-charge, but the male supervisor can solve the problems himself because an operator listens to a male supervisor, but does not give importance to a female supervisor. A female supervisor needs support of line chief or in-charge”

“the female supervisor calls in-charge, the in-charge scolds and then operator works properly. Male supervisor can handle it himself. He becomes angry and operator works properly.”

As shown here, operators expressed that female supervisors often do not address issues on the lines themselves, but must go through management, unlike male supervisors. Operators discussed, for example, that male supervisors are much more likely than female supervisors to feel free to independently make the decision to move operators around and from line-to-line.

A main positive finding regarding female supervisor ability is that female supervisors are perceived by operators to be more engaged with workers and with production. Female operators expressed that, overall, female supervisors are more supportive and present on the line. For instance:

“She [a female supervisor] praises us and discusses about our hard work to the line chief and in charge, but males do not do this. She praises more and I get more support from her.”

“When we work under a male supervisor, he doesn’t visit the line very frequently. Once or twice he comes and instructs us to work. But a female supervisor always stays at the line to look after the work.”

Going forward

The findings above outline that there are challenges in supporting women in supervisory roles, but also benefits that deserve recognition. In the upcoming months, RMGPP will conduct a series of surveys in a set of factories that are similar to DBL to investigate further the wellbeing and satisfaction of women working for women as compared to women working for men. Through this upcoming study, which will use a sample much larger than the one used here, we hope to present more conclusive findings on these issues. Recognizing that the industry is and should move towards higher percentages of female supervisors, we undertake this research with the aim of informing supervisor training programs for women.

We have found that tailoring supervisor training for women may have significant impacts on their abilities to succeed. In a sample of factories that went through a hard and soft skills training program for female workers, we found that lines led by new female supervisors receiving training had significantly higher efficiency in the initial months as compared to similar lines led by new female supervisors who had not been trained. Further, we found that training female supervisors has a positive, though statistically insignificant, effect on generalized anxiety and happiness among female operators on their lines. Lastly, effective training has the potential to boost female confidence in carrying out supervisory duties. In the larger set of factories that received supervisor training for female operators, the self-rated overall ability to be a supervisor significantly increased among female training supervisors who received both technical training and a course on confidence building, as compared to the change in confidence among training female supervisors who did not receive both hard and soft skills training.

Our cross-project findings show that while the transition to female management as a norm has its challenges, promoting female leadership roles on production floors matters. With the correct training and support for female workers, positive change is possible.

“We never thought that we can work in this position. We started our journey as operators and we thought that we will finish it as operators. But now my life has been changed” – Female Supervisor, DBL Group