

## HELD Academia-Industry Nexus Report, Volume 1

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# Wonder Women – Women Empowerment in the Bangladeshi Textile and Education Sector



**PROJECT**

Higher Education and Leadership Development for Sustainable Textiles in Bangladesh (HELD)

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## PREFACE

As part of the project Higher Education and Leadership Development for Sustainable Textiles in Bangladesh (HELD), implemented by GIZ, we emphasized fostering meaningful dialogue between the education sector and private industry on sustainability within the textile and education spheres. At the core of this initiative is the Academia-Industry Nexus, which focuses on strengthening collaboration between academic institutions and industry stakeholders.

This initiative is brought to life through a structured cooperation network that brings together representatives from higher education, vocational training institutions, government bodies and the textile industry. As part of these efforts, we have organized multiple events addressing contemporary issues related to higher/vocational education and industrial growth. The insights and discussions from these events are compiled as a series of report volumes.

This report has been prepared by Reed Consultancy Bangladesh (RCB) and published by GIZ Bangladesh. We extend our sincere gratitude to RCB, the speakers, participants, and panelists for their invaluable contributions to this publication.

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## ABBREVIATIONS

AUST	Ahsanullah University of Science and Technology
BGMEA	Bangladesh Garment Manufacturers and Exporters Association
BTEB	Bangladesh Technical Education Board
BUTEX	Bangladesh University of Textiles
CPD	Centre for Policy Dialogue
GBV	Gender-based Violence
GIZ	Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit
HELD	Higher Education and Leadership Development for Sustainable Textiles in Bangladesh
ISC	Industrial Skills Councils
NGO	Non-governmental Organization
R&D	Research and Development
RMG	Ready-made Garment
SANEM	South Asian Network on Economic Modeling
SRSTI	Shahid Abdur Rab Serniabat Textile Institute
UCEP	Underprivileged Children's Educational Programme
UGC	University Grants Commission
UN	Women United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women

# 1. INTRODUCTION

Bangladesh has become an influential force in the global textile sector, establishing itself as the second-largest exporter of apparel after China. In Bangladesh, women have been an integral part of the textile industry, especially in the apparel industry, which historically made up the majority of the labour force and has greatly boosted the economy of the nation. In fact, until 1994, it was estimated that more than 80% of total workforce in Bangladesh's apparel sector were women.<sup>1</sup> However, a study found that the ratio of women and men in the workforce in the textile and apparel sector has shifted significantly from 80% over the years and measured to 53.65% in 2021.<sup>2</sup> On

the other hand, Bangladesh has expanded educational opportunities, especially for women. In 2023, the total enrollment of girls was 51.3% of around 20 million students, taught by 62.6% of female teachers at Pre-Primary to Primary level,<sup>3</sup> 50.52% of girls of total students were taught by 28.22% of female teachers in post-primary education. Amongst college and higher-level education, 48.75 % of students of higher secondary level were girls of around 3.5 million students in public and private institutions and 45.57% of tertiary degree, such as Masters, PhD, others students were female.<sup>4</sup>

In addition, since the textile sector of Bangladesh has been the most significant force behind the remarkable socio-economic rise of the country's women in recent decades, textile education also holds immense potential for empowering women. This report is based on insights gathered from a network as part of the work under Output 4 (Academia-Industry Nexus) of the bilateral project "Higher Education and Leadership Development for Sustainable Textiles in Bangladesh (HELD)", to strengthen the application-oriented competencies of future specialists and managers in the textile industry and related sectors in Bangladesh.

**A study found that the ratio of women and men in the workforce in the textile and apparel sector has shifted significantly from 80% over the years and measured to 53.65% in 2021. On the other hand, Bangladesh has expanded educational opportunities, especially for women.**

<sup>1</sup> [https://www.ethicaltrade.org/sites/default/files/shared\\_resources/ETI\\_GIZ%20Study%20on%20Women%20Workers.pdf](https://www.ethicaltrade.org/sites/default/files/shared_resources/ETI_GIZ%20Study%20on%20Women%20Workers.pdf)

<sup>2</sup> <https://etibd.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/03/ResearchReport-GIZ-ETI-BRACU.pdf>

<sup>3</sup> [https://www.dpe.gov.bd/sites/default/files/files/dpe.portal.gov.bd/publications/bfe86b94\\_5ace\\_4216\\_8d21\\_05b99550b57f/Final%20Report%20APSC%202023.pdf](https://www.dpe.gov.bd/sites/default/files/files/dpe.portal.gov.bd/publications/bfe86b94_5ace_4216_8d21_05b99550b57f/Final%20Report%20APSC%202023.pdf)

<sup>4</sup> <https://banbeis.portal.gov.bd/sites/default/files/files/banbeis.portal.gov.bd/npfblock/Bangladesh%20Education%20Statistics%202023%20%281%29.pdf>



## 2. METHODOLOGY

The report has been prepared based on the network session on women empowerment and a literature review of existing reports, publications, websites, and other publicly available resources of related organizations. This report highlights the multifaceted relationship between women empowerment in the textile and education sectors in Bangladesh. In this regard, a network session on women empowerment, namely 'Academia-Industry-Nexus Session on Women Empowerment in the Bangladeshi Textile Sector (Higher Education and Workplace)' was held on 29 May 2023 in Dhaka, Bangladesh. The network session was a combination of a presentation, two group works and a panel discussion on women empowerment. With 25 participants, the session offered a great possibility to delve into the possibilities of women empowerment in the Bangladeshi textile and education sectors.

**The apparel industry has played a crucial role in rebuilding the nation and its economy, which currently generates the highest amount of export revenue for Bangladesh with a share of 83% of the nation's entire export revenue.**

<sup>5</sup><https://www.bgmea.com.bd/page/AboutGarmentsIndustry>

<sup>6</sup>[https://www.academia.edu/7019443/Paulo\\_Freire\\_and\\_Critical\\_Literacy\\_Relevance\\_for\\_Bangladesh](https://www.academia.edu/7019443/Paulo_Freire_and_Critical_Literacy_Relevance_for_Bangladesh)



### 3 BACKGROUND STUDY

Following its independence in 1971, Bangladesh was among the world's poorest nations due to the discriminatory attitudes and actions of the administration of the then-West Pakistan. Although the restoration of the war-torn nation with limited assets seemed to be the greatest obstacle, the apparel industry has played a crucial role in rebuilding the nation and its economy, which currently generates the highest amount of export revenue for Bangladesh with a share of 83% of the nation's entire export revenue.<sup>5</sup> The sector was single-handedly responsible for the transformation of the country, and women were the major workforce behind it. Thus, the report focuses on three distinct yet interconnected topics: Women empowerment, contribution and opportunity of women in the textile and education sector.

#### 3.1 Women empowerment

The origin of the concept of women empowerment can be traced back to the Brazilian humanitarian and educator Freire, who emphasized education as an instrument to liberate marginalized people through challenging social inequalities in Latin America.<sup>6</sup> Bangladesh has made significant progress in women's lives over the past 20 years, with an improved dimension of women's rights and privileges due to more women receiving education and continuous expansion of women's participation in the labor force by promoting and advocating women's entrepreneurship, women's leadership in society and empowering women.<sup>7</sup> However, many challenges remain, particularly violence of rights and inadequate personal and professional growth opportunities.<sup>8</sup> On the other hand, Bangladesh has seen a positive trend in women's participation within the education sector, playing a crucial role on both sides of the classroom as learners and educators in recent times. Compared to the past, female enrollment in primary and secondary education has skyrocketed in Bangladesh, even surpassing some neighbouring countries in terms of gender parity in this regard,<sup>9</sup> along with the dramatic rise in the number of female educators, particularly in primary schools which is having positive impacts for young girls.<sup>10</sup> In primary schools, women teachers now make up the majority, exceeding 60% of total teachers.<sup>11</sup>

#### 3.2 Textile and Apparel Sector in relation to women empowerment

Since its establishment, the apparel industry in Bangladesh has grown exponentially from a smallscale business to a major player on the international stage. There is special distinction between textile and apparel industry in terms of workforce employed. Apparel

<sup>7</sup> <https://www.usaid.gov/bangladesh/gender-equality-and-womens-empowerment>

<sup>8</sup> <https://cri.org.bd/publication/2019/April/Women-Empowerment/Bangladesh-The-Role-Model-in-Women%27s-Empowerment.pdf>

<sup>9</sup> <https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2021/07/bangladesh-girls-education-women-work-world-bank/>

<sup>10</sup> [https://bbs.portal.gov.bd/sites/default/files/files/bbs.portal.gov.bd/page/4c7eb0fo\\_e780\\_4686\\_b546\\_b4fa0a8889a5/BDcountry%20project\\_fina%20draft\\_010317.pdf](https://bbs.portal.gov.bd/sites/default/files/files/bbs.portal.gov.bd/page/4c7eb0fo_e780_4686_b546_b4fa0a8889a5/BDcountry%20project_fina%20draft_010317.pdf)

<sup>11</sup> <https://theconfluence.blog/behind-the-success-of-female-education-inbangladesh/#:~:text=In%20order%20to%20promote%20the,1997%20with%20its%20vibrant%20success.>

<sup>12</sup> [https://www.ethicaltrade.org/sites/default/files/shared\\_resources/ETI\\_GLIZ%20Study%20on%20Women%20Workers.pdf](https://www.ethicaltrade.org/sites/default/files/shared_resources/ETI_GLIZ%20Study%20on%20Women%20Workers.pdf)



industry is considered as low-tech cutting-stitching-packing unit, which is female worker dominated, while textile industry is the backward linkage of the apparel sector producing fibre, yarn, fabric, and is usually high-tech and male-dominated. In 2023, a study was conducted by Brac University, GIZ, and the Ethical Trading Initiative (ETI) to explore the shifting number of women workers in the Bangladesh apparel industry and understand the underlying factors.<sup>12</sup> Citing various sources the report stated that 80% of workers were women in the total garment workforce between 1980 and 1994, which declined to 76% in 1995 and then to 70% in 2005 (citing BGMEA), to 63.4% in 2010 (citing UN WOMEN), 58.4% in 2012, 53.2% in 2016 (citing CPD), 61.17% (citing SANEM), and 53.65% in 2021.

Although the data presented in the study seems valid, we could not track those original data sources for their verification. Based on these studies, Figure 1 shows the percentage of women workforce in the RMG sector over the last four decades.

The recent decline in women workforce in the garment industry of Bangladesh is driven by several factors, work environment and family conditions are two of the major

reasons in this regard.<sup>14</sup> According to recent studies, women workers in Bangladesh's garment industry confront several difficulties despite their enormous contributions, such as unsafe workplaces, inadequate wages, long working hours, unstable employment, and gender-based violence at a disproportionate rate because of their vulnerability and socio-economic status.



### 3.3 Textile Education Sector in relation to women empowerment

Over the past few decades, Bangladesh has gained international recognition for significantly expanding access to textile educational opportunities, particularly for women. In 2021-2022 session, female student's enrollment was about 12.5% on average in nine textile colleges of 1084 students, 10% on average in 12 textile institutions of 1476 students. In 2023, female student's enrollment was about 25% on average in 41 textile vocational institutes of the country of 3880 students.<sup>15</sup> However, the percentage of female students in the private textile institutes could not be traced.

<sup>13</sup> [https://www.ethicaltrade.org/sites/default/files/shared\\_resources/ETI\\_GIZ%20Study%20on%20Women%20Workers.pdf](https://www.ethicaltrade.org/sites/default/files/shared_resources/ETI_GIZ%20Study%20on%20Women%20Workers.pdf)

<sup>14</sup> <https://etibd.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/03/ResearchReport-GIZ-ETI-BRACU.pdf>

<sup>15</sup> [https://dot.portal.gov.bd/sites/default/files/files/dot.portal.gov.bd/page/593d4efb\\_60a9\\_4b79\\_9d20\\_5e20b6b5b230/2023-10-12-11-25-47d4f95a24e71a5b641d4eb03d3a8e2c.pdf](https://dot.portal.gov.bd/sites/default/files/files/dot.portal.gov.bd/page/593d4efb_60a9_4b79_9d20_5e20b6b5b230/2023-10-12-11-25-47d4f95a24e71a5b641d4eb03d3a8e2c.pdf)

## 4 WORKSHOP FINDINGS

### 4.1 Presentation on Women Empowerment

In the Presentation by UN Women Bangladesh, promising practices and lessons learned on women empowerment, mostly in educational institutions, were shared by Ms. Tosiba Kashem, Project Coordination Analyst at the UN Women programme "Ending Violence Against Women." She discussed contemporary concerns and methods for preventing gender-based violence (GBV) in academic institutions, with a particular emphasis on universities. She also presented case studies of Cumilla University and Patuakhali Science & Technology University, along with data from the monitoring database of the University Grants Commission (UGC) to highlight UN Women's research on gender-friendly educational institutions in Bangladesh. The "Women's Empowerment Principles," which were introduced by UN Women and the UN Global Compact in 2010, provided an overview of workplace empowerment for women at the end of the presentation.

### 4.2 Panel Discussion

The panel discussion on women empowerment at the workplace focused on the creation of a supportive atmosphere for women in the workplace and in the education sector. In this discussion, lack of awareness and motivation were identified as critical elements impeding women empowerment. It was also mentioned how crucial it is to close the gender gap in STEM fields (science, technology, engineering, and mathematics). Girls and young women should be encouraged to pursue STEM education and careers through focused measures to overcome existing barrier as well as mentorship programs and scholarships. Establishing support systems, such as professional forums and associations for women in the workforce, can give women an environment to interact, share experiences, and get access to opportunities for professional growth and mentorship opportunities fostering a sense of belonging, providing guidance, and empowering women to overcome challenges they may face in their careers.

### 4.3 Group Work on Women Empowerment in Higher Education and Workplace

In the group work on women empowerment, three groups have worked on three different thematic areas, namely GBV Prevention, Enabling/women-friendly environment and Norm Changing/awareness raising. These themes were covered concerning workplaces and educational institutions. The conversations were guided by questions that addressed women empowerment in the workplace and in educational institutions. The world café methodology was used to convey the results at the very end where selected group members from each group presented it to the other groups, incorporating their ideas. The main findings of group work on women empowerment in higher education and the workplace are presented in the following table:

### 4.3.1 GBV Prevention

<b>General Challenges</b>	<p>Societal norms and practices play a vital role in gender-based violence through personal blame and fear of further harassment / mental pressure due to a lack of awareness and negative perception. Though there are existing reporting committees to prevent gender-based violence, the reporting committee's support does not reach the beneficiaries along with no examples of previous resolutions of complaints / following punishment. Prioritization of production issues and fear of job security are two of the additional challenges at the workplace in this regard.</p>
<b>Current Practices and Mechanisms</b>	<p>A common current scenario in gender-based violence is the creation of entities/positions such as complaint proctorial body, hall provost, and student welfare director who work on the written or verbal complaints, followed by the official investigation. Counselling sessions, and sharing with coordinators, course teachers, faculty members, friends, batch mates and seniors also plays a significant role in this regard. Unlike previous days, victims of gender-based violence are informing family members to get their support.</p>
<b>Future Opportunities</b>	<p>With the increasing female participation in the complaint committees, ensuring the functionality of the committee by making the committee victim-friendly along with complaint boxes in different places and/or online accessibility for complaints, the scenario can get better. Practicing moral values at the institutional level, regular awareness training for students, faculties and staff and institutional reporting to higher bodies can create an enabling environment for women. Policies by apex bodies (BGMEA) and compliance codes/buyer requirements for women leadership can avail further opportunities.</p>

### 4.3.2 Enabling/women-friendly environment

<b>Current Environment for Females</b>	Female quotas regarding admission into educational institutes, ample R&D opportunities for women and dedicated restroom facilities are some of the common facilities for women in Bangladesh's textile and education sector. In the diploma level, 100% of female students are getting stipend.
<b>Challenges And Opportunities to Make That Environment More Female-Friendly</b>	Women friendly environment can be ensured by community engagement and event participation. However, women are continuously facing social and financial barriers, hygiene issues, lack of safe transport facilities with minimum of female teachers/managers. All of these are getting more complicated by the hesitation to lodge written complaints
<b>Policy Advocacy Opportunities/ Approaches with Relevant Government Stakeholders</b>	Relevant government stakeholders can play their part in ensuring proper law implementation, efficient awareness programs, and free education materials while keeping a close eye on controlling cybercrime.



Panel discussion with representatives from UN Women as well as private and education sectors moderated by Ms. Laura Schnieders, Advisor HELD, GIZ

### 4.3.3 Norm changing/awareness raising

<b>Current Environment for Females</b>	<p>Social taboos and cultural / family barriers such as early marriage and lack of knowledge/awareness are creating barriers in the path of effective women empowerment. Awareness campaigns (e.g., via social media, billboards, political/religious leaders), awareness training targeting students, parents, and employees and motivational programs for females by females can encourage actions to overcome the current scenario.</p>
<b>Ways to Attract More Females to Textile Engineering Studies/Working in Textile Factories</b>	<p>By creating a women-friendly environment, ensuring safety and security and availing further training/promotion opportunities, women can benefit from Increased salaries and other financial incentives by neutralizing the traditional wage gap.</p>
<b>Ways to Make Women More Aware of Their Career Opportunities and How to Improve Job Placement</b>	<p>To make women aware of their career opportunities and growth potential, job placement/ job fairs and career counselling at universities, motivational speeches by female role models from the industry, inclusion of a career development module into the curriculum and symposium involving industry and academia and collaboration with Industrial Skills Councils (ISCs) can play a vital role.</p>



The group working on GBV prevention led by Prof. Dr. Ummul Khair Fatema, Dean, Faculty of Textile Chemical Engineering, BUTEX



## 5 RECOMMENDATIONS

The textile and education sectors can play a significant role in empowering the women of Bangladesh by finding out the existing education, skillset and policy gaps, taking necessary preventive steps and implementing them along with constant policy advocacy with the partnership of NGOs or relevant organizations.

**Formation of safe network spaces:** Establishment of safe network space for discussing workplace challenges and personal issues to share experiences, advice, and encouragement, can be a good start for women empowerment. These safe spaces can be utilized to arrange skillbuilding workshops, discussions, and support group meetings where women can participate, gather and share experiences.

**Digital literacy training for women:** Digital skills are essential for modern education and the workforce, which will enable women to access online educational materials, resources, and platforms and most importantly, build confidence in using technology for learning, and communication. Training can be conducted through hands-on workshops through offline/online modules to provide flexible practical training, allowing participants to learn at their own pace.

**Specific skill development programs:** Training can be provided in specialized areas of textile production and management, equip women with the skills necessary for growth within the industry and encourage women to explore further career development within textiles. These development programs can focus on technical training, management training and leadership development.

**Targeted scholarship programs:** The scholarship offer can boost the number of women enrolling in education by enabling women to pursue careers in education, textile and other sectors by targeting the women in need of scholarship support. For targeting, surveys and research can be used to identify the specific barriers women face in accessing education and tailor the scholarship program accordingly. This approach can assist in developing a clear, accessible application process that encourages a diverse range of candidates.

**Personal and professional life-based mentorship programs:** Guidance and mentorship for career advancement and professional development enhance personal growth,

**Proper implementation can be enhanced by pairing mentees with mentors based on shared interests, career goals, and areas of expertise and considering factors like professional experience, personality, and communication style for effective mentorship matching.**

including life skills to establish a community of women who can share experiences, resources, and encouragement. Proper implementation can be enhanced by pairing mentees with mentors based on shared interests, career goals, and areas of expertise and considering factors like professional experience, personality, and communication style for effective mentorship matching.

**Awareness campaigns:** Awareness is a key and should be a continuous process. It can help women to know about opportunities within the textile industry, encourage participation in skill enhancement programs that lead to better job prospects and foster discussions around equality in the workplace and community. The primary target audience can be female workers in the textile sector, young women considering careers in textiles and community members, including families and local leaders. These campaigns can focus on women's roles in the textile industry, workers' rights and labour laws and storytelling and testimonials from successful women in the sector to inspire and motivate others.

## 6 CONCLUSION

Women empowerment in Bangladesh's textile and educational industries is essential for the socio-economic development and transformation of the country. Despite the advancements, obstacles still exist, including societal norms and workplace safety concerns. To promote a more inclusive atmosphere, the government, non-governmental organizations, and community groups must keep up their effort. The participants of the network session recognized the importance of creating an inclusive environment that fosters equal opportunities for women in higher education and the workplace. They acknowledged that empowering women not only benefits individuals but also contributes to the overall progress and development of the country.



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