RISE™

Shifting perspectives to accelerate women's advancement and leadership in the garment, footwear and textiles industry

How international buyers and suppliers can take collaborative action

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Contents

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Executive Summary

To address the unbalanced representation of women across their factory workforce, many businesses in the garment, footwear and home textiles industries currently set targets for promoting women from low-paid operator positions to supervisory roles. Despite their best efforts, they often struggle to meet them.

This is because these interventions often take a narrow focus without addressing the entrenched challenges that hinder women's progress, needs, and aspirations across a broader set of opportunities.

This is a key challenge as women, who make up most of the workforce in the industry, are systematically confined to low paid roles as sewing machine operators and helpers. Many of these jobs are at risk because of changes such as automation, AI, and circularity. Women are underrepresented in higher paying, technologically advanced, and leadership roles, reflecting occupational segregation in the sector.[1]

RISE went to the source and consulted women workers in Bangladesh and India on their views about advancement and leadership, as well as their needs and aspirations. We supplemented these discussions with interviews and workshops with male workers, managers, community members, and global stakeholders.

Through this research, we identified **three interlinked factors preventing women's advancement:**

- **normative barriers favor men workers;**

- **unrecognized and unpaid care and domestic work prevent women's advancement in the workplace, and;**

- **unstructured employment practices keep women in low-level roles.**

To co-design interventions that will address these entrenched factors and improve women's prospects at work, income opportunities and agency, RISE consulted more than 80 industry stakeholders and women-led unions and grassroot organizations.

Recommended interventions for suppliers and buyers:

By combining a **multilayered approach that addresses existing challenges with a broader view of advancement and leadership** that recognizes the varied experiences and issues women workers face, the industry can create new career pathways for women of differing backgrounds at all levels.

To achieve this, stakeholders should implement underlined interventions across three key areas:

1 Complement vertical career advancement opportunities with horizontal ones

Create new pathways to access roles that represent a better return on investment for women. This includes creating opportunities for more advanced technical positions and for leadership roles in factories, unions, and social dialogues; improving hiring and promotion practices; and advocating for skills-based rather than education-based promotions and hiring.

2 Collaborate with women workers and their representatives to design business practices that support women's advancement

Brands and suppliers can work together with workers and unions to integrate a set of indicators that reflect a broader view of women's advancement. Buyers can implement improved forecasting systems that help suppliers alleviate the pressure of production demands, which often deters women from advancing to higher roles. Brands, buyers and suppliers should incorporate a gender lens into human rights due diligence to ensure that risks are recognized and addressed as salient human rights concerns in assessments.

3 Recognize the economic value of unpaid care and domestic work

Promote sharing responsibilities for caregiving and household chores to enable an equal distribution of unpaid care and domestic work between men and women; introduce user-centric childcare models that respond to worker's needs; provide flexible work arrangements; and tackle traditional social norms.

ªUser-centered design is an iterative design process in which designers focus on the users and their needs in each phase of the design process.

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Methodology

RISE developed these recommended interventions through a collaborative approach. We engaged multiple stakeholders, including factory workers and managers, across Bangladesh, India, and globally.
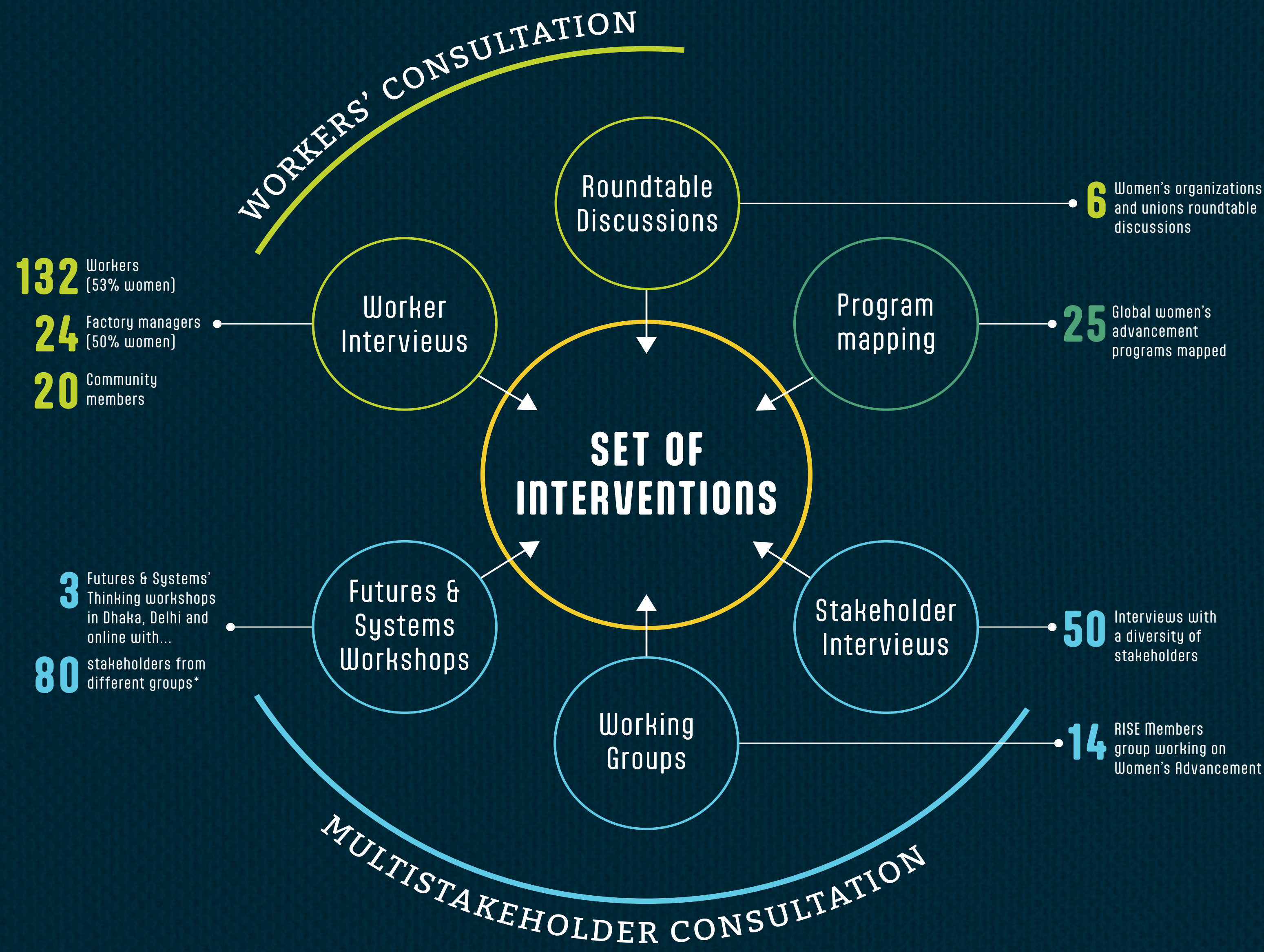

WORKERS' CONSULTATION

132 Workers (53% women)
24 Factory managers (50% women)
20 Community members

6 Women's organizations and unions roundtable discussions

25 Global women's advancement programs mapped

3 Futures & Systems' Thinking workshops in Dhaka, Delhi and online with...
80 stakeholders from different groups*

50 Interviews with a diversity of stakeholders

14 RISE Members group working on Women's Advancement

Worker Interviews

Roundtable Discussions

Program mapping

SET OF INTERVENTIONS

Futures & Systems Workshops

Stakeholder Interviews

Working Groups

MULTISTAKEHOLDER CONSULTATION

Figure 5: Methodology

Introduction

Sticky floors and glass ceilings: the limited prospects for women

A multilayered and collaborative approach to women's advancement in garment, footwear, and textiles supply chains contributes to positive business outcomes, such as worker retention, satisfaction, and productivity.[1] At the same time, it enables businesses to prepare for the future with macro-forces, such as automation, climate change, and new mandatory regulatory frameworks for sustainability impacting the nature of the industry.

The garment, footwear, and textiles industry is an important source of employment and regular income for women in many countries. Women represent around 60% of the workforce in the industry worldwide, and up to 80% in some countries.[2] However, they are concentrated in the lowest-paying positions,[3] such as sewing machine operators and helpers—"stuck" to the production floor—and are underrepresented in supervisory and managerial roles within factories. Men, on the other hand, are concentrated in advanced operator roles such as managing automated machines, and supervisory and managerial roles.

Occupational gender segregation, the unequal distribution of female and male workers across and within job types,[4] is prevalent in garment factories. For example, in the Delhi NCR region of India, only 10-25% of women are classed as advanced machine operators, which are usually better paid roles than traditional feminized activities such as sewing.[5] In Bangladesh, the proportion of knit exports has risen significantly since the 1990s and is now higher than woven exports.[6] Knits production involves more advanced technology and larger machines. This, combined with the perception that women's roles are primarily in sewing while men handle more advanced machines, has favored men to be recruited for mechanized roles due to gender stereotypes suggesting they are more skilled with machinery and technology. This has contributed to the decline of the proportion of women in the garment industry from 80% in the 1980s to 53% in 2021.

In addition to the impact of social norms that lead to gender segregation in factories, technology has been shown to significantly negatively disrupt the position of women in garment manufacturing. Studies show that in feminized sectors of manufacturing, the proportion of women workers declines as production becomes more technologically advanced.[7] The implementation of technological innovation in the garment industry has not been sufficiently gender responsive. This has resulted in limited opportunities for women's retention and advancement, raising questions for the future of women's roles in the industry. For example, experts forecast that 60% of the garment jobs in Bangladesh might be at risk due to automation,[8] and most of those jobs are held by women.[9]

The distinction between "women's roles" and "men's roles" is closely tied to the gender pay gap between them; in some other cases, women are paid less than men for performing the same or similar jobs. Globally, women are paid on average 20% less than men in the industry for the same or similar jobs.[10] The disparity is much higher in some countries, such as India, where the gender pay gap reaches 42%, meaning women are being paid just 58% what men earn.[11]

In Bangladesh, 84% of women are in lower-paying roles and only 9% are supervisors and managers, meaning most receive the minimum wage (12,500 BDT or US$107 per month).[12] This is similar to the situation in North India. Figure 3 below highlights the distribution of women workers across various departments and leadership roles in three garment factories in North India, revealing a clear pattern of gender-based occupational segregation and significant underrepresentation in leadership positions.

REPRESENTATION OF WOMEN WORKERS ACROSS VARIOUS DEPARTMENTS AND LEADERSHIP ROLES IN FACTORIES
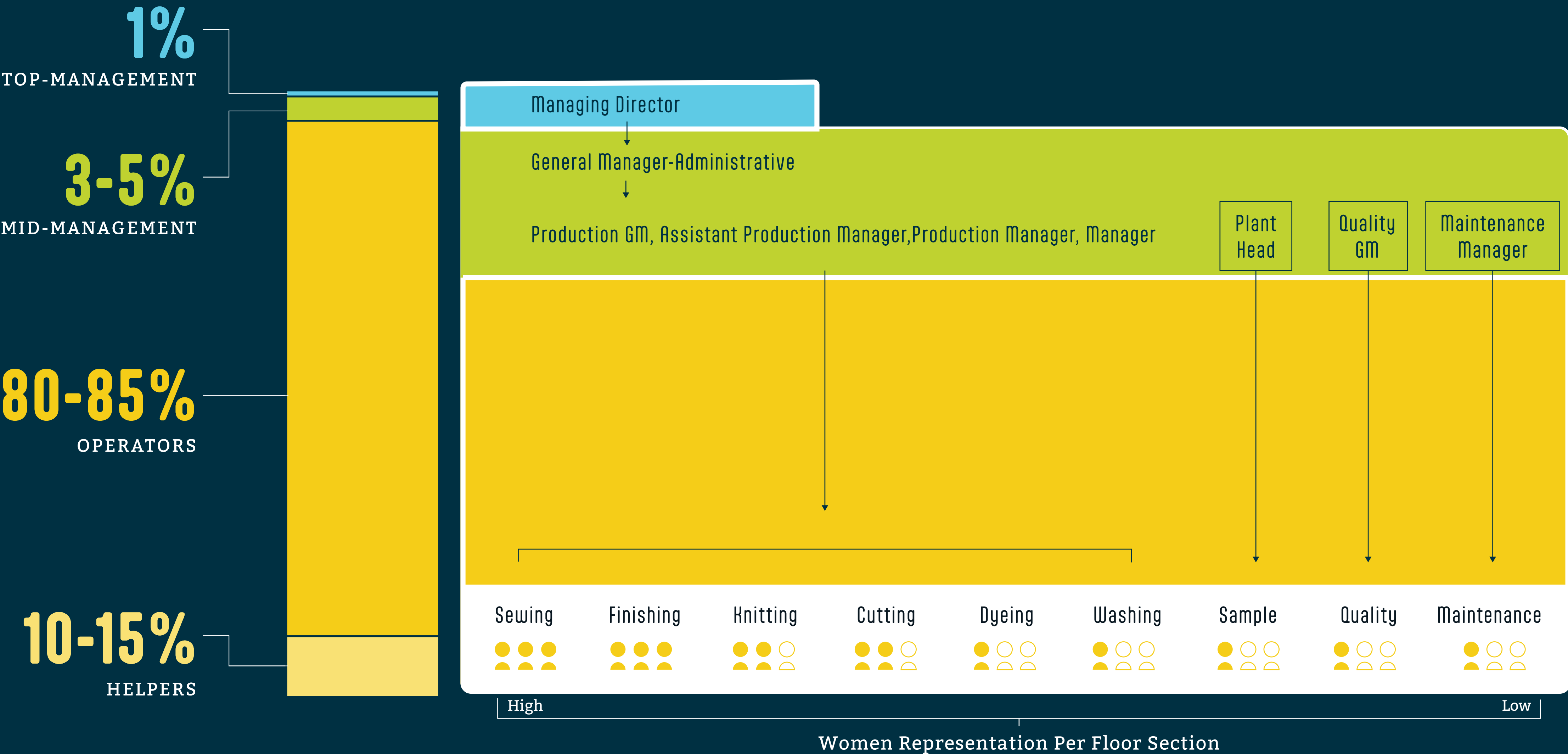
RISE

1%
TOP-MANAGEMENT

3-5%
MID-MANAGEMENT

80-85%
OPERATORS

10-15%
HELPERS

Managing Director

General Manager-Administrative

Production GM, Assistant Production Manager, Production Manager, Manager

Plant Head

Quality GM

Maintenance Manager

| Sewing | Finishing | Knitting | Cutting | Dyeing | Washing | Sample | Quality | Maintenance |

High — Low

Women Representation Per Floor Section

Figure 3: Diagram of the factory floor representation in India based on interviews with three factories in the Delhi region, developed by Colors Consulting. This graph doesn't represent the full industry structure.

In the rare case that women are in managerial roles, they are often concentrated in functional areas that have fewer decision-making powers or are considered less strategic within the company, such as human resources or marketing.[13] Women are also underrepresented in leadership roles in trade unions, which are an essential mechanisms to advance their rights within the workplace.[14] In Bangladesh, the representation of women at decision-making levels in trade unions is around 7%.[15] All these issues create a glass ceiling effect with limited opportunities for women to advance, affecting their future income prospects.

Violence and harassment in the workplace must be addressed alongside the barriers and opportunities outlined in this report. These issues remain among the most significant challenges to women's overall wellbeing, job satisfaction, and safety in factories. A workplace free from violence is the foundation for women's meaningful advancement and leadership.

This report considers a way forward, setting out interventions for buyers and suppliers to implement in partnership with other industry stakeholders, including women's organizations, industry

associations, trade unions, civil society, care service providers, in close collaboration with women workers. It aims to rethink women's advancement in garment supply chains, taking an approach that addresses social norms and women's specific needs, realities, and aspirations. It looks at complementing vertical advancement opportunities with alternative pathways for career progress, with the ultimate goal of improving women's prospects at work, income opportunities, and agency.

The report also considers how these alternative pathways enable businesses to prepare for the future with macro-forces such as automation, climate change, and new mandatory regulatory frameworks for sustainability impacting the industry. This report uses examples from Bangladesh and India, reflecting the scope and limitations of the research and RISE's extensive experience in these countries. However, it is designed for global application and could be adapted to local contexts where relevant. Additional research may also be required—depending on the country context—for effective adaptation.

"An approach that addresses social norms and women's specific needs, realities, and aspirations. It looks at complementing linear advancement opportunities with alternative pathways for career progress, with the ultimate goal of improving women's prospects at work, income opportunities, and agency."

Vertical and horizontal advancement

Vertical Advancement

- Promotion to supervisory or managerial opportunities, including leadership roles in the industry.
- Leadership roles in unions and social dialogues.

Horizontal Advancement

- Access to good quality and in-demand jobs. This type of advancement allows women to strengthen and gain new technical and soft skills and to access different jobs that are otherwise dominated by men.
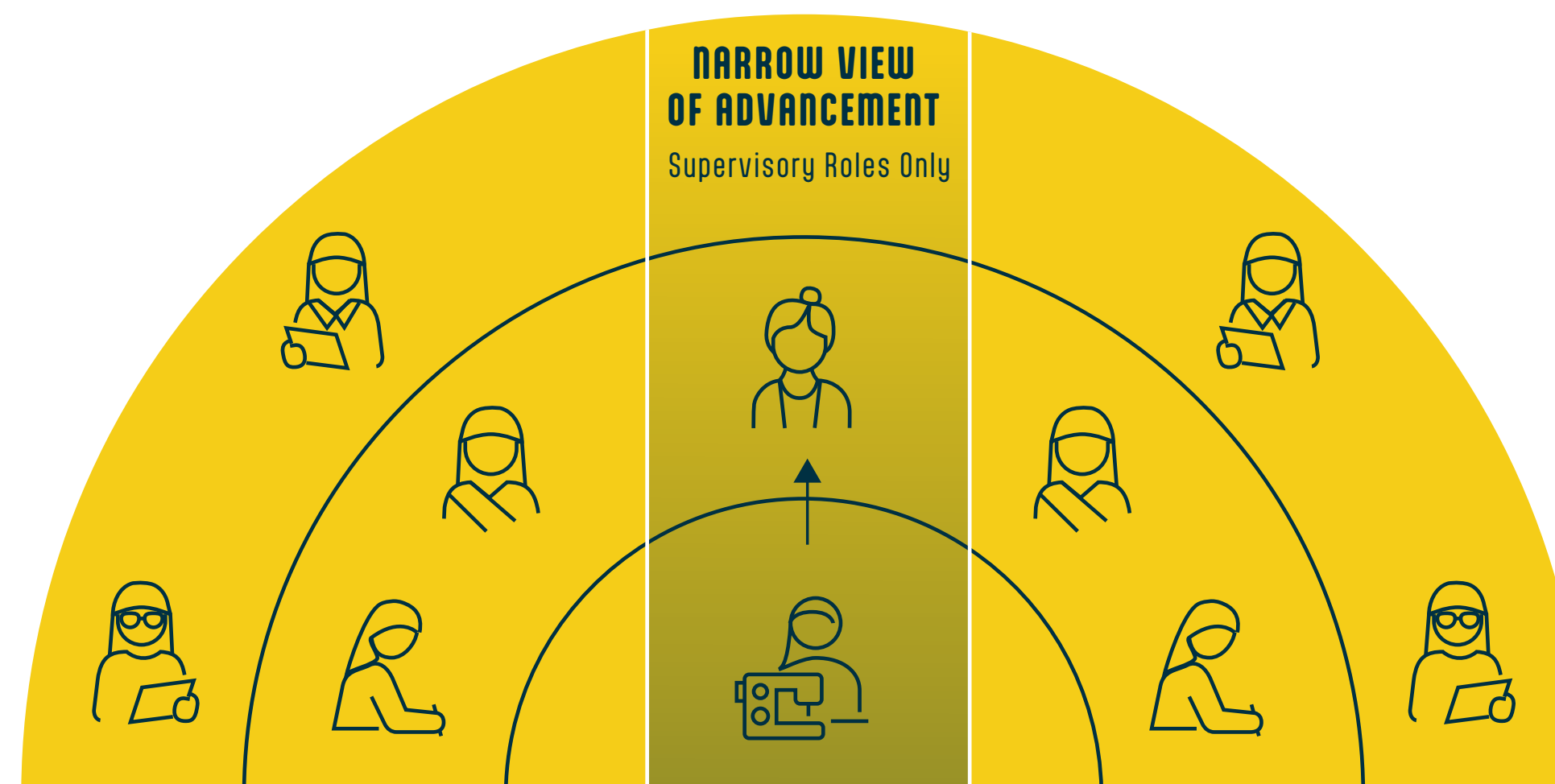

NARROW VIEW OF ADVANCEMENT
Supervisory Roles Only

Figure 1: From a narrow view to an expanded view of women's advancement and leadership

Women's Advancement: Perceptions and Realities

A common approach to women's advancement in the garment industry focuses on promotion to supervisor positions. This has resulted in numerous programs focused on training women to gain the skills to access supervisory roles and engaging with management to open these roles for women. These programs have improved women's income and reduced absenteeism in factories. However, they are not fully addressing women's advancement aspirations and needs.

RISE research found that women have significant concerns about advancing into supervisory roles because of the potential impact such a move could have on them, including increased stress and backlash from family. These findings are supported by a recent study by Global Worker Dialogue, which found that 65% of women workers in Bangladesh reported not being interested in becoming supervisors.[16] During interviews and focus group discussions in Bangladesh and India women workers reported that they considered advancement to be more than just moving into a higher role. In addition to looking for upward mobility, women are interested in more technical positions and roles that offer the prospect for better wages. Women also highlighted income stability, flexibility, and time to care for their families as important priorities in their career journey.

"Within the company, there is less scope of promotion for women as they cannot go beyond a certain level. There are no women supervisors in my company. I have not seen any women progressing in their career within the company. They join in tailoring department as helpers and operators and work till the end without promotion."

Female operator, Production Department, India

Concerns identified by women about moving into a supervisory role

- **Significant increase in stress** and work responsibilities for little extra reward

- **Risk of being subject to new forms of violence** and harassment

- **Risk of being ostracized** from the community and family due to societal expectations of women

- **Risk of not being able to adequately balance family** responsibilities and the demands of a new role

- **Loss of rights** in some countries, where women may lose their ability to unionize and access mandatory childcare and maternity leave when they become supervisors

Through our research, we identified three barriers to women's advancement and leadership that any intervention should address to have meaningful impact:

1. **Both formal systems, such as regulatory frameworks, and informal systems, such as social norms, impede women's career advancement**

Women face systemic hurdles in their pursuit of progress in the factory due to both formal systems, such as legislative frameworks, and informal systems, such as entrenched social norms and biases.[17] A recent global study indicates that legal frameworks in many countries result in women in the workplace having access to less than two-thirds of the legal rights granted to men.[18]

In some countries such as Bangladesh, regulatory frameworks do not adequately protect women who advance into supervisory positions. This is because supervisors are classified as staff rather than workers and thus lack access to labor organizations and support from unions. They may also lose out on the mandatory benefits to childcare in factories, which workers classified as operators have access to, because supervisors are not covered under the labor law. This creates further issues for women wishing to progress to supervisory roles, making those jobs less attractive to them.[19] At the same time, social norms defining "acceptable roles" for men and women workers mean factory management often choose men over women to fill leadership positions or advanced machine operation roles. Even some women workers hesitate to accept female supervisors, perceiving them as less capable of managing operations effectively. Traditional male traits, such as a loud voice and a propensity to control

others, are preferred by factory management. Workers report that, in some cases, female supervisors use a more forceful or abrasive tone than male supervisors to drive productivity and to prove their capability in traditionally male-dominated roles. This unintended effect highlights the challenges of placing women in roles originally structured for men, leading many women to avoid these positions altogether. At the same time, in some factories women are expected to possess much higher technical and leadership skills than men, to prove themselves suitable for higher roles. This could result in discrimination or unconscious bias influencing management's perception of women's capabilities to succeed in senior or technical roles.

> **"Social norms are the perceived informal, mostly unwritten, rules that define acceptable and appropriate actions within a given group or community, thus guiding human behaviour. They consist of what we do, what we believe others do, and what we believe others approve of and expect us to do. Social norms are therefore situated at the interplay between behaviour, beliefs and expectations."**
>
> **UNICEF, 2021**

At the same time, family members often discourage women from pursuing career progress in the industry due to social norms that designate women's primary role as caring for the family, stepping in as secondary income earners only when necessary. They are generally discouraged from seeking higher positions in factories because male partners may feel threatened if their wives have higher positions or income.

"It is imperative that we work toward promoting gender equality and challenging traditional stereotypes. Smaller factories often exhibit a higher male dominance, whereas larger factories have implemented systems to ensure fairness and equal treatment for women. There is a pressing need to foster behavioral change in other men-dominated roles."

Woman Manager, Human Resources, India

2. Talent management and employment policies lack standardized processes

Factories often lack structured processes for hiring, retention, and promotion, which, combined with deeply entrenched social norms, can perpetuate discrimination against women, limiting their access to leadership or technical positions. This poses compliance challenges for suppliers, as nondiscriminatory practices are fundamental to labor law standards and the codes of conduct required by buyers. For example, there is often no consistent or clear understanding of the skills and qualifications required for specific roles within the factory. As a result, similar roles might be assigned different levels, with male-dominated positions receiving higher pay or better benefits compared to female-dominated roles, even when the required skill levels are comparable.

This lack of structure also impacts worker morale and turnover rates. Employees seeking career advancement are left frustrated and demotivated due to unclear expectations or skill requirements for moving to the next level. Managers and supervisors often assign roles without standardized or transparent assessments, which disproportionately excludes women from senior positions such as production coordinator, quality control, or floor in-charge. Social norms, assumptions about educational qualifications, and perceived skill gaps further limit women's opportunities for advancement. Additionally, this lack of clarity leaves women workers uncertain about which jobs they qualify for, leading many to accept whatever roles are assigned to them without the opportunity to advocate for better positions.

The gender pay gap in some factories for supervisors and across work of equal value is large. Workers interviewed reported that women supervisors do not end up earning more because they do not get paid a premium for overtime and they do not get the same salary boost from promotions as men do. In addition, employment benefits and salaries do not always increase in line with roles, promotion, or years of service, which may further contribute to the gender pay gap.

A combination of these factors creates a workplace where women are consistently hired and trained to work in low-level roles, are considered only useful for these types of tasks, and lack opportunity to acquire skills for more advanced roles.

3. Lack of functional childcare facilities and unequal distribution of unpaid care and domestic work

In many garment export countries, caring and household roles like cooking, cleaning, and grocery shopping largely fall to women, resulting in a double working shift for women garment workers.[20] Women interviewed reported that caring and providing for their family is an important duty they associate with success and societal status. However, in some factories, managers and male peers reported that these duties get in the way of women's factory work. As a result, management teams are not motivated to invest in women's advancement because they do not believe women have the time to commit to it. Women reported struggling to balance their factory work with care responsibilities at home and, as a result, are increasingly leaving the industry.[21] They also said they were reluctant to consider supervisory positions because of the extra responsibility, as they might not be able to balance their caring and domestic responsibilities. Women wanting to access higher roles or better-paid jobs often need to study or acquire new skills. However, many women feel they do not have time for this amid their existing responsibilities. As a result, it is considered socially acceptable for women to be kept in lower positions rather than promoting them into higher positions.

"Though my husband never supported my work, my two sons have consistently shared household responsibilities, enabling me to step out and pursue my career. This support has allowed me to flourish professionally, and now I am acknowledged as a leader in my company!"

Woman operator,
Production Department, India

Childcare is an essential service that enables women and families to thrive. However, its unavailability often holds women back from advancing in their careers due to the overwhelming load of balancing access to good quality and sufficient childcare as a key reason for not pursuing career advancement, because caring for their children consumes most of their time and energy outside of paid work.

Though many factories provide daycare, these facilities and services have limitations. For example, women need to travel to the factory with children on public buses, often in difficult weather conditions, including heavy rains and heat waves. In some cases, workers reported that those in "helper"[b] positions were not permitted to use the facilities. Due to the limited availability of public and private childcare services, women workers often rely on family or community support to care for their children. It is common for migrant women to bring their mothers or mothers-in-law from their home villages to assist with childcare, or alternatively, to send their children back to the village to be cared for by their grandparents.

While unequal distribution of unpaid care and domestic work is a broader equality issue, for working women it is strongly connected to advancement. In Bangladesh, women garment workers spend nearly three times more time on unpaid work and care than men.[22] Therefore, to make a lasting impact, it's important to address unpaid care and domestic work when supporting women's career growth.

When women earn higher salaries by accessing better jobs (leadership or technical roles), it can incentivize a more equitable distribution of unpaid care and domestic work within households. Men begin to recognize the economic advantages of women earning a higher income, which can help challenge and gradually shift social norms. This creates a positive cycle: As women progress in their careers, they take on less unpaid care work, allowing them to earn more and help break down these barriers. Conversely, when women are unable to advance professionally—partly due to unpaid care responsibilities—they earn less, reinforcing the cycle of disproportionate care work and limiting their opportunities to progress in the workplace.[23]

Change in women's advancement will be significantly slower without mechanisms that promote the equal sharing of care and domestic responsibilities between men and women, such as maternity, paternity, or parental leave and strong childcare policies, along with a shift in mindset among both women and men.

How Buyers and Suppliers Can Support Women's Advancement and Leadership

Issues facing women's advancement in the garment, footwear, and textiles supply chains are a result of multiple, interlinked factors, including social norms, inequitable regulatory frameworks, unstructured management systems and policies, and lack of access to childcare. These factors create an uneven playing field that makes it very difficult for women to progress in their careers. Taking a broader approach to women's advancement is critical to improving women's income, experience, and well-being at work, while also contributing to better business outcomes, including improved worker retention, productivity, and satisfaction.

The diagram below, "Six Conditions for Systems Change Framework,"[24] highlights the multilayered issues that need to be tackled to enable women garment workers to move forward in their careers.

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The Six Conditions of Systems Change, a framework developed by FSG, a nonprofit consulting firm, is a tool that aims to drive long-term change within complex systems. It outlines various factors that influence human systems and categorizes them into three levels: structural, relational, and transformative. Within these levels, the framework highlights six interrelated conditions that need to be tackled to create sustainable change. At the same time, these conditions are divided into explicit (more visible) and implicit (less visible) factors.

The framework suggests that for sustainable change to happen, interventions need to address all three levels, and not only the structural change level, which is a common entry point.

STRUCTURAL CHANGE

EXPLICIT LEVEL

- **Policies:** formal rules, laws, and regulations that guide actions and behaviors in a system such as workplace policies, systems, and practices.
- **Practices:** day-to-day activities and routines within the system, including decision-making processes and operational norms.
- **Resource Flows:** allocation and distribution of resources like funding, time, information, and human capital within the system.

RELATIONAL CHANGE

SEMI-EXPLICIT LEVEL

- **Relationships and Connections:** the quality of relationships, communication, and trust between stakeholders in the system.
- **Power Dynamics**: how power is distributed among system actors, including who has influence and decision-making authority.

TRANSFORMATIVE CHANGE

IMPLICIT LEVEL

- ..**Mental Models:** beliefs, values, assumptions, and mindsets that shape how individuals and groups perceive the world and make decisions.

POLICIES — Public policy and regulations

PRACTICES — Workplace policies, systems and practices

RESOURCE FLOWS — Skills development; Job opportunities

RELATIONSHIPS & CONNECTIONS

POWER DYNAMICS — Distribution of unpaid care and domestic work

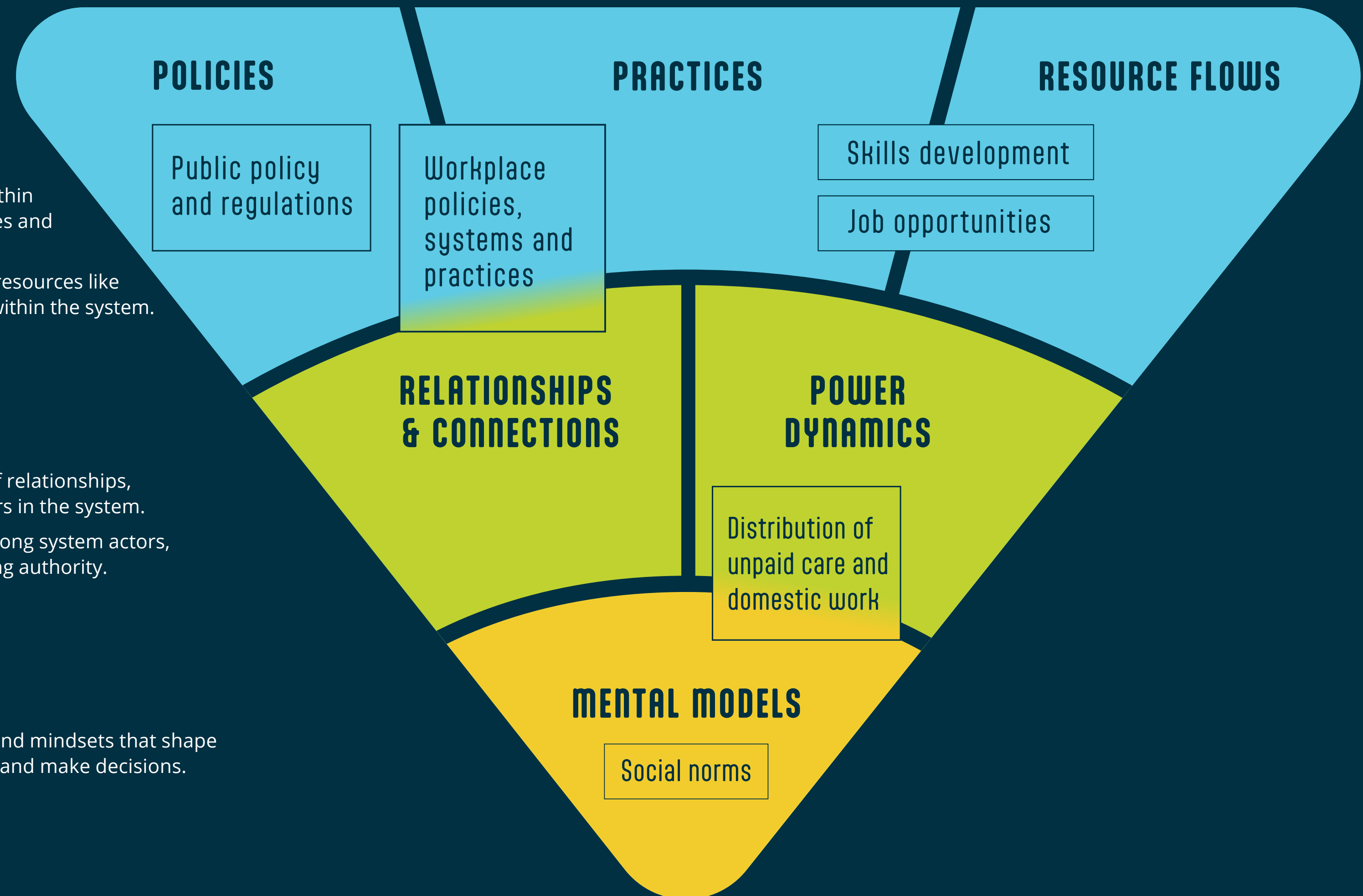MENTAL MODELS — Social norms

Figure 6: Six Conditions framework

Rethinking women's advancement is important for business and for women. A multilayered approach looks at women's advancement on a broad spectrum, allowing for various advancement pathways. This includes upward mobility, horizontal movement, and other approaches that address structural barriers such as the unequal distribution of unpaid care and domestic work, and social norms.

An example of a systems change intervention in the industry is Oporajita, a transformative initiative designed to help women garment workers in Bangladesh thrive within the changing nature of the garment industry. This two-year-long initiative brings together 12 partners for implementation. These partners work on complementary areas such as skill development, care service provision, and support for micro-entrepreneurship with shared impact indicators.

Strategies for a broader approach to women's advancement should also consider future changes expected in the garment, footwear, and textiles supply chains. These include disruptions due to climate impacts, job changes resulting from automation, AI, and circularity trends, and the growing policy requirements around mandatory human rights due diligence. Amid these changes, governments and stakeholders have an opportunity to enhance female labor participation, paving the way for greater economic growth in key garment-exporting countries.

During the intervention workshops, RISE presented insights drawn from women's views of advancement to 80 industry stakeholders. A number of ideas were discussed (see the annex for the full list of interventions), but three key areas of intervention were identified to address the issues around women's advancement and leadership. Activities were then prioritized in each area (these areas of intervention are expected to evolve as perspectives shift):

1 **Complement vertical career advancement opportunities with horizontal ones**

2 **Collaborate with women workers and their representatives to design business practices that support women's advancement**

3 **Recognize the economic value of unpaid care and domestic work**

Within each priority area, key interventions are detailed and a clear pathway for implementation is outlined. For most interventions, examples and tools are provided to guide their development. However, some proposed interventions are emerging concepts that have not yet been implemented, and therefore lack publicly available background documents or tools. **While these interventions are primarily targeted at buyers and suppliers, collaboration with other key industry stakeholders is essential throughout the design and implementation phases. Potential partners are also suggested for each action. Training providers, NGOs, international organizations, governments, and industry bodies can leverage these recommendations to enhance their programs or policies.**

While each intervention is essential on its own, addressing interventions on all levels of the systems at the same time aims to illuminate how they collectively drive transformative change for women's advancement in the industry. By improving policies, fostering collaboration, and adopting new mental models, these changes will create a ripple effect that influences stakeholders, strengthens ecosystems, and ultimately reshapes the industry to better support women's advancement.

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AREAS OF RECOMMENDED INTERVENTION

Provide paternity leave for male workers and managers

Integrate flexible working arrangements

Design and roll out talent management frameworks, and skills and performance assessments

Map relevant roles and skills required and implement certified skills training program

Design a user-centered approach to childcare that is accessible, high quality, and affordable

Advocate to move to skills-based role requirements rather than educational qualifications

Embed indicators that reflect a multifaceted approach to women's advancement and include them in scorecards

Include a gender perspective to human rights due diligence

Support women to enter leadership roles in collective action and social dialogues

Develop improved forecasting systems and production target-setting processes to help alleviate the pressure and stress associated with advanced and leadership roles

Develop social norms-change programs

POLICIES

PRACTICES

RESOURCE FLOWS

RELATIONSHIPS & CONNECTIONS

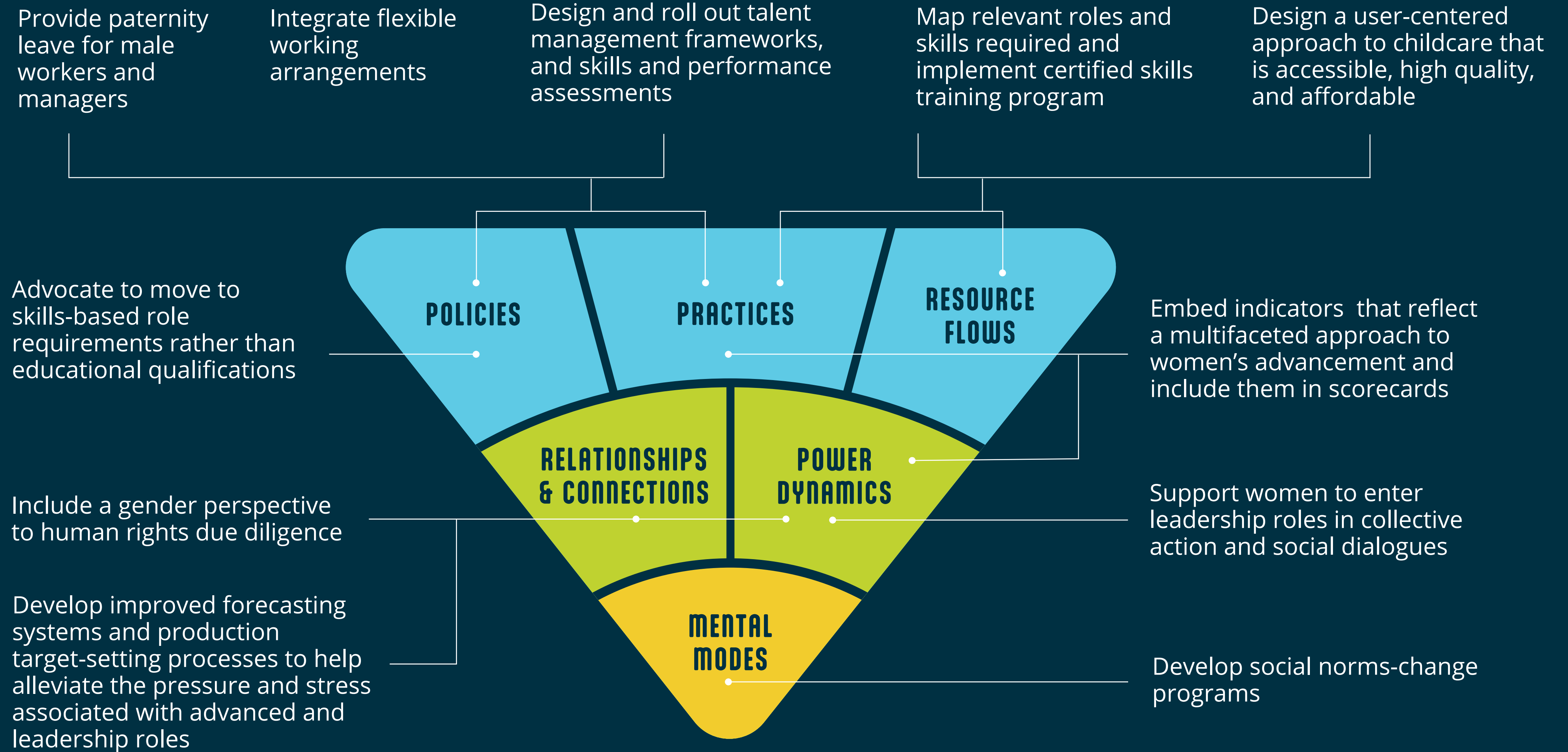**POWER DYNAMICS**

MENTAL MODES

Figure 7: Six conditions framework against women's advancement and leadership

1 Complement vertical career advancement opportunities with horizontal ones

Interventions promoting upward mobility have proven beneficial and align with international frameworks such as the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

Flagship programs supporting women to become supervisors in the industry include GEAR (Gender Equality and Returns), focuses on career progress opportunities for women in Better Work partner factories. It has helped promote 395 women workers to supervisory positions[25] and promoted women supervisors received a 39% wage increase in Bangladesh since its pilot in 2016.[26] GBL STITCH program, which focuses on screening and training to help identify and build managerial talent, has improved productivity amongst supervisors by 7.3%[27] and enabled a salary growth by 6% for trained supervisors[28] in India.

However, not all women want to become supervisors. Some have different aspirations for their career, such as advanced machine operation roles traditionally performed by men or future jobs shaped by circularity, sustainability, and technology. **Complementing vertical advancement with**

horizontal approaches is therefore key to providing women with a broader spectrum of pathways for advancement.

This complementary approach is at the heart of Shimmy Technologies , which aims to improve the future of work in the garment industry by upscaling women workers to adapt to automation and gain hard skills. Instead of training workers to get promoted to vertical roles, their upskilling program helps workers to secure technical roles. Their trainees have landed higher level positions with better salaries—more than 50% have been promoted to advanced machine roles after participating in its training program, 72% of whom are women.[29]

This shows that combining vertical and horizontal approaches will contribute to more systematic and sustainable advancement paths for women workers in all their diversities. At the same time, further mapping of these vertical and horizontal opportunities is needed to uncover a full set of potential roles for women. Leadership positions in worker representative organizations, such as unions and worker committees, should also be better recognized as opportunities for advancement, since these roles are demanding and play a crucial role in ensuring the well-being of all factory workers.

(1.1) Map relevant roles and skills required and implement a certified skills training program

Mapping existing and future roles in the factory, including income level and associated benefits, will support women looking to advance their career through alternative pathways, such as different areas of work and emerging roles connected to key trends impacting the industry. Mapping these roles is a crucial step in understanding how they can enhance women's experience and increase their salaries within the factory. At the same time, it contributes to increased awareness of these opportunities among management and women workers.

The goal would be to develop a mapping tool, in consultation with women workers, that buyers and suppliers can use to identify and analyze roles within their own supply chains and factories. This comprehensive analysis would provide a snapshot of roles available across the industry supply chains in different geographies, and would then be followed by informative sessions with women workers and managers to discuss the roles available.

Building women's skills so they can perform these mapped roles is crucial. This will ensure that women are in a better position for new roles in the garment industry and suppliers remain competitive. Otherwise, there is a risk of reinforcing social norms as men will be more likely to get roles linked to ever-expanding automation, AI, and circularity.

A certified skills program—developed by industry associations or program service providers, or the enhancement of existing industry programs (vertical and horizontal)—would signal to employers that women have the technical and soft skills needed for these roles. This program would help women access new job opportunities in existing, changing and emerging roles. These include pressing, quality control, production management, cutting, sampling, patternmaking, green and circular jobs, and floating roles.

(1.2) Design and roll out talent management frameworks and performance assessments

Establishing a structured and standardized framework that clearly sets out the pathways for recruitment, progress, and promotion within the company and the associated skills and time required—including relevant gender-inclusive policies, guidelines, and practices—would support women wishing to advance into higher roles and other technical roles. This would also make the hiring and promotion process more inclusive and equitable, especially when combined with the other recommendations outlined in this report. It would also allow women to plan their own career path within an organization or in the industry. Collaborating between international buyers and supplier groups to create an industrywide framework would also avoid duplicated requests to suppliers.

Linking this framework to a performance tool with clear evaluation criteria would provide transparency in promotions and salary increases and help to ensure equal opportunities across the factory. Providing in-factory technical support for rollout and socialization with workers and managers of the talent management framework and performance assessment would ensure successful adoption and standardized implementation across factories.

1.3 **Support more women to enter leadership roles in collective action and social dialogue**

More women in leadership positions in unions and worker committees would enable them to advocate more effectively to support women workers' causes, rights, and advancement, influencing changes that benefit their career growth.

Women-led unions and grassroots organizations consulted during the research highlighted three key factors to consider when supporting women in taking on leadership roles in collective action initiatives.

1. **Ensure unions and worker committees are safe spaces for women to raise their voice and exercise leadership roles,** because women claiming positions of power in collective action are often targets of violence, harassment, and retaliation, including losing their jobs.[30]

2. **Strengthen the functionality of unions and committees,** where suppliers play a critical role in ensuring that social dialogue spaces are active and effective, not merely symbolic. This includes organizing regular meetings and establishing clear agreements and expectations to foster meaningful engagement.

3. **Strengthen women's leadership skills** to enable women to enhance their voice and representation in unions and committees.

Partnering with global and local unions and organizations that support women-led unions and grassroots initiatives would help buyers and suppliers in addressing the above recommendations.

Programs strengthening women's collective action include EKATA, a model developed by CARE Bangladesh and replicated in Indonesia and Vietnam. It seeks to promote workers' rights to encourage women's leadership and empowerment within the garment industry. The program creates groups of women workers to provide safe spaces for collective action to discuss and raise grievances with employers and improve working conditions. These groups collaborate with existing unions in the factory. The program also engages trade unions and federations, training them on gender considerations and providing them with tools and resources to support women workers' representation. Since the program was implemented in 2011, 59% of women say they now have equal opportunities to get promoted; 90% of women say they now have the skills to meet their future goals; and 85% say they have the confidence to do it.[31]

Other examples of programs strengthening women's representation in unions are "Strengthening Industrial Relations in Indonesia Project" and training workshops such as "Collective Strength: Building Female and Unionist Capacities in Jordan's Garments Sector," both of which are led by ILO-Better Work.

"We have never heard of a labor union and don't know what purpose it serves."

Female helper, Production Department, India

1.4 **Advocate to move to skills-based requirements for roles rather than educational qualifications**

Higher positions and other advanced technical positions often have specific requirements, such as having a diploma, despite studies showing that experience is more valuable than formal education for these roles.[32]

While it is important for more women to have the opportunity to earn diplomas, changing job requirements to be skills-based would enable more women workers to access these higher positions with the appropriate skills training. Buyers and suppliers can advocate for these changes with industry associations and government bodies, depending on the specific geography.

2 Collaborate with women workers and their representatives to design business practices that support women's advancement

Supply chain management and business practices that put women at the center, are co-designed with women, raise standards, and incentivize suppliers are key to helping women advance in the garment, footwear, and textiles supply chains in a strategic and sustainable way.

New regulations, like the Corporate Sustainability Due Diligence Directive, are addressing important issues related to human rights risks. In industries with a high percentage of female workers, such as the garment industry, these risks are closely connected to women's advancement. These include eliminating discriminatory business practices, ensuring favorable working conditions, providing fair and sufficient wages, guaranteeing freedom of association, and promoting equal treatment in employment.

2.1 Embed indicators that reflect a multilayered approach to women's advancement and include them in scorecards

Designing industry standardized scorecards that include indicators on enabling conditions for women's advancement, such as parental leave, childcare support, etc., will help suppliers develop a strategy for women's advancement.

Suggested indicators include (gender disaggregated):

- Percent of women in supervisory and managerial positions (proportional to workforce)
- Percent of women accessing training related to technical and leadership roles
- Percentage of men and women in each department
- Gender pay gap
- Number of workers reporting they have access to and use childcare services
- Number of workers taking maternity/paternity/parental leave and returning from leave (to the same job/role)
- Percent of women in leadership positions in committees and unions
- Gender-responsive grievance mechanisms and workers' trust that workplace issues relating to advancement can be raised and resolved through these channels
- Standardized job descriptions, hiring and promotion processes
- Flexible work arrangements policy

2.2 Include a gender perspective to human rights due diligence

Incorporating a gender perspective into human rights due diligence is crucial in identifying the key risks and barriers women face in advancing in the workplace. This includes conducting factory assessments that effectively uncover issues related to discrimination in employment practices, such as recruitment, renumeration, promotion, and overall treatment. A gender responsive approach must be central to human rights due diligence, ensuring auditors have the skills to assess these issues through a gender lens, making women's specific needs visible. This approach is particularly important in light of upcoming regulations like the Corporate Sustainability Due Diligence Directive, which presents a valuable opportunity for companies to tackle salient human rights risks in their supply chains, with a focus on women's experiences. For example, data on gender segregation, leadership roles, and the pay gap show that discriminatory practices and limited opportunities for women compared to men are major human rights issues in garment supply chains.

The Fair Wear Foundation's "Incorporating gender-responsive human rights due diligence" and Women Win's "Launching the Gender-Responsive Due Diligence Platform" are practical tools to help companies in the industry apply a gender lens to human rights due diligence.

2.3 Design improved forecasting systems and production target setting

Improved forecasting systems by buyers and more accurate orders have the potential to allow for better planned resources in factories and greater flexibility for suppliers and workers, helping them cope with climate change and other macro-forces. AI offers the potential for significant impact to improved business for all stakeholders enabling better forecasting systems.

Our research found that realistic and clear production target-setting may encourage more women to move into leadership positions or advanced roles as the stress of performing these roles will be reduced.[33] Better forecasting could contribute to designing jobs that fit women's needs and aspirations and jobs they want to perform.

**TAJMIRA,
SEWING OPERATOR**

3 Recognize the economic value of unpaid work

Unpaid care and domestic responsibilities are often viewed as burdens and obstacles in the workplace. However, these activities play a vital role in driving economic growth[34] and are essential to the functioning of industries, including garment production. Businesses can recognize and support the economic value of unpaid care and domestic work by designing and investing in quality, affordable childcare services, offering paternity leave, implementing flexible work arrangements, and encouraging their male workers and managers to contribute equally to care giving and household chores. These measures not only acknowledge the significance of unpaid care work but also promote women's advancement in the workplace. Oxfam has developed a Private Sector Rapid Care Analysis Toolkit for businesses to address unpaid care and domestic work and further outlines the benefits of taking action.[35]

3.1 Design a user-centered approach to childcare

Although many garment export countries mandate the provision of in-house childcare for workers, women rarely use these facilities due to their location, quality, or otherwise not being suited to their needs. Women often find it inconvenient to bring their children to the factory because they start work too early or, if the factory is far from home, they prefer to leave their children in the community or, in the case of migrant women, send them to their village.

Investing in employer-supported childcare has mutually reinforcing benefits for businesses and workers, improving workforce stability, skills, and productivity while enhancing family income and well-being.[36]

Without providing childcare and addressing the unequal distribution of unpaid care and domestic work, we are unlikely to see sustainable change in women's advancement and leadership. Exploring a shared childcare model with well-designed, user-centric infrastructure and services both at the workplace and community level will support women workers and their families. Offering safe transportation could contribute to strengthening the use of onsite childcare models, as women would be less hesitant of traveling with their children to work.

There are various childcare models available, with several proven practices from the manufacturing sector that could guide businesses in the garment industry in developing cost-effective solutions. These models aim to ensure that childcare is accessible, affordable, and high-quality. The International Finance Corporation (IFC) has developed a comprehensive toolkit that presents diverse models, ranging from on-site childcare facilities to partnerships with community-based providers, such as municipalities and service organizations. Additionally, the toolkit advocates for businesses to engage with governments to promote childcare incentives and support services for working parents.[37]

3.2 Provide paternity leave for male workers and managers

Without paternity leave, relevant parental leave, or implementation of such policies, social norms are reinforced and responsibilities around childcare revert to women. Paternity leave can lead to more equitable sharing of unpaid care and domestic work.

Most existing research and design of paternity leave policies have been developed with corporate settings in mind. Exploring paternity leave schemes that address the unique challenges of the manufacturing sector in production countries could make a significant impact on women's advancement, both in the short and long term, by helping to shift traditional social norms. Buyers and suppliers can take this action directly, with support from a consulting body or NGO to design and pilot the initiative.

Currently, there is no international labor standard specifically addressing paternity leave, and many garment-exporting countries lack labor laws mandating companies to offer paternity leave. Partnering with relevant stakeholders to raise awareness on appropriate maternity/paternity/parental leave provision in legislation and encouraging companies to adopt parental leave policies will support more equitable sharing of unpaid care and domestic work.

3.3 Integrate flexible working arrangements

The demanding and inflexible nature of garment production work often makes it challenging for women to balance their job and household responsibilities, limiting their opportunities for career advancement. With better childcare support, a more equal sharing of responsibilities with men, and flexible work arrangements, women would have more opportunities to pursue other roles. This approach also allows men to free up time for unpaid care and domestic tasks. For instance, in households where the husband holds a more flexible job—often in the informal sector, such as rickshaw[d] pulling—and the wife works as a garment worker, men are more

likely to take on household responsibilities and childcare. This is because they recognize their greater flexibility compared to their wives. Flexible working arrangements would also help business to be more resilient in the future. For example, increasingly, climate change is affecting the way people work around the world. Heatwaves make workers sick and flooding blocks roads, preventing them from reaching their workplace, which has caused workers in Bangladesh to lose 10% of their salaries per month.[38] Factories that allow flexibility will support a changing work environment, as the world moves forward amid a shifting climate. For instance, creating a relief team system in factories to replace workers when they are absent would ensure that women (and men) can take time off when needed and feel less stressed, while disruption to supply lines is reduced and productivity increased. Garment factories that have tried these types of relief teams have found that the benefits more than covered the added expense.[39]

Flexible ways of working also bring additional benefits, such as reducing unauthorized absences, improving production planning and line efficiency, and therefore increasing worker satisfaction. With AI, buyers may incorporate better forecasting systems and more accurate orders, in turn reducing pressure on suppliers, allowing better resource planning, and supporting greater worker flexibility.

As a next step, more applied research is necessary to explore additional flexible work arrangements that can be tailored to the unique demands of garment production.

3.4 Develop social norms-change programs

Promoting equitable caregiving and domestic work, and actively engaging men to support women's roles in the factory, are two cornerstone actions essential for building a sustainable strategy for women's advancement. Women may face reputational risks when taking on roles traditionally dominated by men, making it essential to transform men's mindsets as part of the process.

Programs that engage men in care responsibilities, aimed at fostering more equitable attitudes, can help promote greater task-sharing between men and women. These initiatives should also emphasize the economic value of unpaid care work, aiming to shift the perception of it as undervalued and encourage both men and women to view it more positively. By changing the narrative around unpaid care work, the industry can support a more equitable distribution of these responsibilities. These programs could be community based or set up in factories by training providers and could include broader communications campaigns aimed at changing workplace behaviors.

The program could draw on existing initiatives, such as Care School for Men or MenCare's Program P, which educate men through interactive workshops and learning strategies in caregiving skills and household chores, fostering a cultural shift of social roles.

Encouraging men to take on other roles in the factory, such as care workers in the childcare facilities, also contributes to tackling traditional social norms where women are seen as the sole care provider.

A planned approach to actively support[40] and advocate for underrepresented groups, such as women is foundational to support women's advancement and leadership. This strategy is crucial for shifting men's and women's mindsets to recognize women as equally capable of excelling in leadership, technical, and advanced roles. HeForShe by UN Women developed a Male Allyship Toolkit and Promundo created a manual on Engaging Men for Gender Equality in the Workplace, both of which offer relevant content for companies to engage men with the purpose of advancing women in the workplace.

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Conclusion

The challenges limiting women's advancement in factories are complex and intertwined. At the same time, businesses are increasingly operating in uncertain and changing environments. The current response is linear and limited, focusing primarily on attainment of supervisory roles as success, limiting the potential of both women and business.

To make genuine progress, we must move to a broader and shared view of advancement that recognizes the diverse experiences and challenges women workers face and put their voices at the center of any intervention design process. This requires a multilayered approach that dismantles existing barriers and creates new opportunities and additional paths for advancement for women at all levels, vertically and horizontally.

It is important that buyers and suppliers' partner with other industry stakeholders, and in close collaboration with women workers, in the design and implementation of interventions to enhance their impact and efficiency. Establishing clear and tangible incentives for suppliers is also crucial in encouraging their commitment to advancing women. Engaging men in the process and considering future trends impacting the industry will ensure social norms are transformed to benefit women and businesses.

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Annex

List of contributors

During the project, the RISE team involved over 80 diverse stakeholders from across the garment, footwear, and textiles industry in Bangladesh, India, and globally. We are grateful to all these organizations and individuals for their ideas, insights, and guidance. We note this participation does not mean that these organizations and individuals endorse the conclusions and recommendations of the draft paper or represent their organizations/individual position.

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Target

Upfront

List of all interventions brainstormed during the workshops in Dhaka, Delhi, and globally

Intervention	Overview
Care schools for men	Bringing the focus to men as agents of change, to create care schools for men where they are sensitized on the importance and value of such work and are mentored and trained to take on care work at home. Care schools could be community based or even set up as "sensitization and training" programs within factories.
Certifications for workers	Providing industry certifications to workers that recognize the type of skills they hold and their level of proficiency will help with systematic recognition of their skill levels. This supports the implementation of systematic skilling programs aligned with job and worker needs, promotes upskilling, enhances role mobility, incentivizes skill development, recognizes workers' skills, and helps them showcase their expertise to employers and the industry.
Cluster approach to childcare services	Identifying or creating industrywide collaboration to provide shared facilities for childcare or other support at manufacturing hubs (i.e., a cluster approach to offering childcare and similar services such as co-funded community facilities).
Decoding flexibility	Finding opportunities to create flexible working environment; lack of flexibility is a significant barrier for women's advancement. There is a need for consistent (not part time) but flexible work.
Documented commitments from brands	Having documented commitments from brands to influence policy and practice changes in the industry (which includes brands themselves and suppliers) that support women's advancement
Guidelines and mechanisms to improve the functioning and capacity of worker committees	Establishing guidelines and mechanisms to improve the functioning of worker committees and develop their capacity to support workers' causes and rights, particularly women's advancement.
Industry coaching program	Developing a coaching program designed for C-suite leaders from different backgrounds in the industry that encourages a uniform understanding of where the industry can and needs to go and the best practices needed in the sector.
Mapping jobs and skills for horizontal advancement	Identifying what are the types of jobs and roles that offer flexibility or are in high demand or offer higher pay for women workers (all of which contribute to horizontal advancement). Also recognizing opportunities for women workers to float between different jobs and roles.

Intervention	Overview
Moving from education-based to skills-based advancement	Transitioning from education levels to a government policy that will mandate industry and sector-wide recognition of skill levels as the core criteria for advancement at the workplace.
Nonwage benefits packages	Designing and providing packages that offer benefits and access to services or facilities customized to the needs of women workers in different contexts and serve to recognize advancement.
Paternity leave for male workers	Exploring paternity leave schemes and options for parents that fit under the sector productivity/production paradigm.
Performance assessment frameworks	Designing and implementing strong and industry-standardized performance assessment frameworks that consider the roles and skills needed by workers in the context of both (a) the next generation of industry advancement (e.g., roles and skills needed for green jobs or as a result increasing automation and use of AI) and (b) for new types of roles and jobs for women workers relevant to their horizontal advancement (e.g., as mentors, holding floating roles on the factory floor, or as childcare carers).
Platform for concentrated action	Building an exclusive platform that concentrates power, resources, and commitments on areas where there is a need for—and the most potential for—change. This exclusive group can build the narrative and the agenda around what the high potential areas of change are for the industry, including for women's advancement.
Purchasing practices	Ensuring that parental leave (and other benefits that enable flexible working and that consider care work) is factored into supplier scorecards will incentivize suppliers to offer such benefits.
Social dialogue	Having spaces and opportunities for brands, suppliers, worker committees and representatives, and factories to listen, talk. and learn will help with building trust, altering power dynamics, and offering opportunities for discussion and negotiation as needed, to further women's advancement.
Talent management journeys for workers and for factories	Establishing a structured and industry-standardized framework that clearly details pathways for women's advancement and includes the associated policies, guidelines, and practices to support women workers' advancement.

Footnotes

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Our Partners*:

This report does not reflect the views of any partner.