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ILO Brief

Assessment of gender equality and social inclusion gaps in the skills and TVET system of Bangladesh

► Why the assessment?

A gender equality and social inclusion gaps assessment was conducted as part of the Promoting Gender- Responsive Enterprise Development and TVET Systems (ProGRESS) Project. The Project is working to support the Government of Bangladesh, social partners and other involved actors in achieving their targets and promoting gender-responsive enterprise development in the technical and vocational education and training (TVET) sector. The assessment was designed to pinpoint areas for intensive targeting of Project activities.

This is an urgent issue because it has bearing on the country's graduation from least developed country status. Although Bangladesh has crossed the threshold value of three sets of progress indicators required to qualify for least developed countries list graduation by 2026, it has been given an extended preparatory period of five years in the areas of economic and environment vulnerability. Bangladesh acknowledges the urgent need to invest further in its human capital and to intensify its efforts in developing a skilled and productive workforce that can meet the demands of the national and global labour markets. This includes improving access to skills and other technical training and thus to decent employment for young women and other disadvantaged young people, such as people with a disability or from an ethnic minority group.

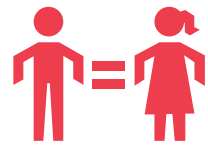
The assessment entailed a review of policies, barriers and ongoing reform efforts through a literature review as well as group discussions and individual interviews with women entrepreneurs and representatives of the Government and social partners, which then led to recommendations on how to better mainstream gender equality and social inclusion into the TVET sector. The assessment also covered the cultural and normative barriers that marginalized groups experience when seeking skills and other technical and vocational development.

► Findings

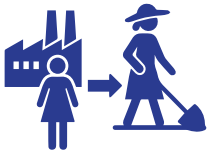
Literature review

Significant progress has been made in girls' education, the female maternal mortality rate and women's empowerment and gender equality over the past **15–20** years. This progress led to Bangladesh being ranked 99th among **146** countries (ahead of its neighbours India, Nepal and Sri Lanka) for five consecutive years by the World Economic Forum in its **Global Gender Gap Report 2024**.

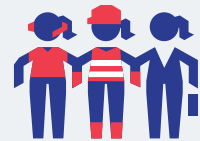
Yet, formidable challenges and persistent inequalities remain, particularly in the areas of economic and social empowerment. The favourable World Economic Forum ranking is mainly attributed to the progress in political empowerment.



Bangladesh has one of the lowest levels of gender equality in economic parity (**31.1%**) according to the Global Gender Gap Report **2024**.



Overall labour force participation rates for women increased from **36.4** per cent in **2016–17** to **42.7** per cent in **2022**; however, women shifted away from industrial urban employment (at **22.6** per cent) to rural agricultural work (at **50.9** per cent). The increase was a partial result of increased income pressure in families due to the COVID-19 pandemic.¹



Only **1.7** per cent of formal enterprises in a **2017** World Bank report had female majority ownership, and only **10** per cent of micro, small and medium-sized enterprises in the formal and informal sectors were owned by women. Around **91.5** per cent of women worked in the informal economy, resulting in high levels of vulnerability and wage inequalities.²

Women are particularly vulnerable to exploitation and discrimination when migrating and when returning from their migration journey.



Despite the laws to protect women and girls, gender-based violence and sexual harassment remain a significant challenge in Bangladesh. According to the UN Women's Baseline Study Report on Gender-Based Violence findings from **2019**, **54** per cent of women had experienced domestic violence at least once in their life.

Perspectives from the interviews and group discussions

- **Deeply rooted biases and stereotypes result in limited opportunities, safety concerns, biased TVET placements and biased perceptions from employers and the entrepreneurial ecosystem:** Disadvantaged and marginalized groups, including people with disabilities, informal workers, religious and ethnic minorities and returned migrants, face discrimination and limited opportunities due to the biases and negative attitudes in society and the labour market. These barriers influence their aspirations and choices.
- **Limited stakeholder participation:** Despite increased involvement of TVET actors in policy design (such as the private sector role in industry skills councils), assessment participants reported feeling excluded from design and implementation processes. They are also uncertain about their roles. Private sector representatives, trade unions, training providers and civil society organizations want a stronger role in policy development, implementation and coordination.
- **Lack of operational clarity:** Stakeholders want guidance on implementing policies due to limited clarity on how they are to be operationalized, regulated, budgeted and implemented. The National Skills Development Policy **2022** lacks a systematic approach for long-term sustainability. Unpacking the policy and further contextualizing it is necessary to clarify roles, particularly for gender equality and social inclusion.
- **Gaps in a unified understanding of gender equality and social inclusion:** Limited discussion hampers the effective application of interventions targeting the diverse array of barriers faced by different groups in skills development. Addressing intersectionality, especially for women, is necessary.

1. Arifur Rahaman Tuhin, "Women Participation in Labour Force Rises: Urban Areas See Drop in Female Employment Due to Lack of Opportunities", Business Post, 26 May 2023.
2. World Bank, Breaking Through the Glass Ceiling Challenges to Female Participation in Technical Diploma Education in Bangladesh, 2017.

- ▶ **Lack of unified vision for gender equality and social inclusion mainstreaming:** Even though actors in the skills development and TVET sectors focus on expansion and meeting targets for women and disadvantaged groups, they neglect a gender equality and social inclusion-responsive culture that addresses the root causes of discrimination. Achieving equitable training and labour outcomes requires questioning the conditions for enhancing employability and sustainable opportunities. Developing an enabling environment and addressing barriers through a coordinated effort involving non-government and civil society organizations, the private sector and funding agencies are crucial for gender equality and social inclusion mainstreaming.
- ▶ **Lack of awareness of the intersection of barriers:** There is a need to sharpen the focus and develop a unified understanding of the diverse barriers faced by different groups before, during and after skills development. This intersectionality must be addressed for all people.
- ▶ **Governance challenges and lack of a unified framework:** Assessment participants acknowledged the ambitious nature of the National Skills Development Policy and the National Action Plan for Skills Development (2022–2027), but they need clarity on regulation and implementation. They emphasized the need for a consolidated framework that includes processes, procedures, laws and regulations. A road map with milestones is also necessary for effective implementation and monitoring.
- ▶ **Coordination challenges:** Overlapping mandates currently create confusion and fragmentation within the skills and TVET systems. A unified approach is required for gender equality and social inclusion mainstreaming in the skills development and TVET sector. The assessment participants highlighted the absence of a coordination body to negotiate a vision, lobby for budgets, set milestones and oversee implementation. Overlapping mandates between the National Skills Development Authority and the Technical and Madrasah Education Division leads to confusion. Reviving working groups and empowering government agencies were suggested for effective coordination.
- ▶ **No enactment of or missing legislation for mainstreaming gender equality and social inclusion:** Assessment participants expressed concern about the current approach to gender equality and social inclusion mainstreaming. They emphasized the need for an overarching policy and binding legislative framework that includes an implementation plan, dedicated resource allocation and monitoring of progress. Intersectionality should be analysed for inclusive outcomes.
- ▶ **Limited application of a gender equality and social inclusion lens in skills development and entrepreneurship development:** Traditional trades need rebranding to attract women and persons from disadvantaged groups. Gender equality and social inclusion should be integrated into curricula and training materials. The practical application of labour rights, gender equality (addressing both men and women) and sexual harassment training are lacking. The statutory body responsible for curriculum development struggles with staff shortages and requires technical assistance for gender equality and social inclusion integration.
- ▶ **Limited engagement with the private sector:** Workplace training is crucial. Employers' organizations need to adopt gender-sensitive and inclusive practices. Data collection and monitoring systems require improvement to assess training quality and impact. Awareness campaigns should be evaluated for effectiveness.
- ▶ **Limited institutionalization of safeguarding measures in training provision and enterprises:** Gender-responsive training environments should be safe and require improvement, including the addition of childcare facilities, safe transport and occupational safety and health measures. Safeguarding measures introduced in TVET institutions and partner enterprises are not fully effective and should become an integral part of the organizational culture. Dedicated committees and resources are needed for monitoring.
- ▶ **Inadequate budgeting limiting operational and flexible expenditure and mainstreaming:** Lack of budgets and budget constraints hinder the space for flexible expenditure for gender equality and social inclusion mainstreaming initiatives. A specific budget or fund for mainstreaming is lacking, thus affecting its institutionalization and sustainability. Resources are required for training, mentoring and implementation. Funding should align with gender equality and social inclusion objectives.
- ▶ **Gaps in teacher quality and female representation in TVET faculties:** Staff shortages and lack of qualified teachers compromise the delivery of quality training and gender equality and social inclusion implementation. Female representation in TVET faculties and leadership positions is low. Recruitment practices, mobility rules and inadequate facilities contribute to the gender gaps. Gender equality and social inclusion considerations are needed in recruitment and career development, along with supportive measures to achieve targets.

► Recommendations

The assessment led to a variety of recommendations, divided into two strategic entry points of the skills and entrepreneurship ecosystem:

Bangladesh state administration, responsible for shaping, coordinating and executing TVET-related policies, strategies and action plans.

Private sector actors, social partners, businesses, community-based and non-government organizations and development partners involved with TVET, employment and entrepreneurship development and the concerns of women and marginalized groups.

The following recommendations target the strengthening of the Government's execution of TVET policies, strategies and action plans. Essentially, the consolidation of policies, legislation and governance should be continued to establish a unified TVET sector with a clear vision, regulations, roles and functional clarity.



Immediate actions

- Allocate sufficient resources: Ensure adequate funding and human resources for gender equality and social inclusion initiatives.
- Establish a gender equality and social inclusion task force: Create a dedicated task force to oversee mainstreaming of gender equality and social inclusion practices across the TVET sector.
- Review and amend policies: Ensure that existing policies and regulations align with the gender equality and social inclusion framework.
- Develop a gender equality and social inclusion framework: Develop a clear framework defining principles and outlining specific actions for mainstreaming.
- Strengthen stakeholder engagement: Increase participation of social partners, the private sector and marginalized groups in policy development and implementation.



Medium-term actions

- Develop gender equality and social inclusion-responsive training programmes: Integrate gender equality and social inclusion principles into curriculum design, teacher training and assessment methods.
- Promote gender equality and social inclusion-responsive workplace practices: Encourage businesses to adopt gender-sensitive policies and practices.
- Strengthen local TVET institutions: Empower local TVET providers to become more autonomous and responsive to local needs.
- Enhance data collection and analysis: Improve data collection and analysis to inform evidence-based decision-making.



Long-term actions

- Create a gender equality and social inclusion-inclusive TVET ecosystem: Ensure that the TVET system is fully integrated with gender equality and social inclusion principles, thus fostering a safe and equitable learning environment for all.
- Foster a culture of gender equality: Promote a cultural shift towards gender equality and social inclusion within the TVET sector.
- Empower marginalized groups: Provide targeted support and opportunities for marginalized groups to access and benefit from TVET and entrepreneurship.

Contact details
Pedro Jr. Bellen
CTA, ProGRESS
Email: bellen@ilo.org

International Labour Organization
ILO Country Office for Bangladesh
Block-F, Plot-17/B&C, Agargaon Administrative Zone,
Sher-e Bangla Nagar Dhaka-1207

T: IP Phone +880 9678777457
E: @ilo.org/bangladesh
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