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Challenges of Change: An Experiment Promoting Women to Managerial Roles in the Bangladeshi Garment Sector

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Abstract

Women remain disadvantaged in access to management positions around the world. We conduct a field experiment with 24 large garment factories in Bangladesh to test for inefficient representation of women among line supervisors. We identify the marginal female and male candidates for supervisory positions and randomly assign them to manage production lines. Three sets of results emerge: (i) extensive diagnostic testing at baseline reveal few skill differences between marginal female and male supervisor candidates; (ii) initially, marginal female candidates have lower productivity and evaluations from sub-ordinate workers, though after four to six months, these gaps disappear; and (iii) the share of the female candidates retained as line supervisor after the trial is significantly higher than the share of female supervisors in the factories at baseline. This suggests that factories previously promoted fewer women than would have been optimal. Additional surveys and a lab-in-the-field experiment suggest that the initially worse performance stems from negative beliefs of workers about the abilities of female supervisors.

Keywords: Gender Discrimination, Productivity, Export Manufacturing
JEL Codes: J16, J71, M51, M54, O14, O15

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