

# Transitions & Futures

## Discussion paper



For workers' rights. For better business.

## Future World of Work

### Implications for gender equality

This discussion paper, drafted by Halima Ahmed, Gender Advisor at ETI, aims to shed some light on what we know so far with regards to the future world of work (FWoW) and potential impacts on gender equality. To date, there has not been a significant amount of research done in this area, nor is there much guidance for the private sector on how to start navigating these changes with workers. Therefore, there is a gap in understanding, policy and guidance that needs to be filled to provide businesses with a roadmap for a future world of work that can ensure sustained gender equality and empowerment of women workers.

#### Context and background

With advances in technology (artificial intelligence, automation, and robotics), increased connectivity, social and demographic changes, and resource constraints the world of work is being transformed. This transformation is expected to affect both the number and quality of jobs in the future, but the transition to these jobs for workers is unlikely to proceed in a linear fashion. It is yet to be fully understood what the impact on workers will be. However, if they are to continue to remain competitive in this changing landscape, workers need to be equipped with new skills that match the jobs of tomorrow.

This is likely to affect women workers in particular. Mckinsey Global Institute research suggests that globally, [40 million to 160 million of them will need to make significant transitions to capture the opportunities presented by the changing world of work](#). Women face many structural barriers that could hinder their ability to successfully make these transitions. Without decisive and deliberate action, we are likely to see a world with widening gender inequalities whereby women and other vulnerable workers could potentially be left behind.



#### What do we know so far?

*This section is adapted from the BSR report [‘How can businesses can build a ‘future of work’ that works for women – a framework for action’](#), which offers the most comprehensive piece of research and guidance currently available to companies on this topic.*

The next few decades are likely to see a change in the quality and quantity of jobs as a result of disruptive technologies. Automation of routine tasks—cognitive as well as manual— will replace entire roles and portions of other jobs. To understand the opportunities and risks to women workers, we need to start from the current situation. Unfortunately, there are already significant inequalities in terms of the kinds of jobs that women perform and the

quality of these jobs. Across most industries, women tend to occupy lower-skilled roles, with a higher probability for displacement due to automation. For example, women are highly represented in the labour-intensive sectors of light manufacturing, garment production, and agriculture. If automation eliminates some of these lower-skilled roles, the resulting job losses and job shifts could significantly impact women's economic empowerment at both micro and macro levels.

Mckinsey Global Institute found that women's jobs are slightly more likely than men's jobs to become partially automated or find themselves working alongside automated systems in existing roles. As a result, women workers will likely need new skills to utilise these automated systems and companies need to invest in re-skilling programmes that are inclusive of all vulnerable women workers.

### What can companies do?

The conversation on the future world of work and the potential impact on gender equality is very much in its infancy. We know that there will be some positive as well as negative impacts for women workers, however, the extent is yet to be determined. The research and guidance for businesses on how to plan for these changes is limited and focuses more on company internal strategies, without much insight on the supply chain.

There are many ways companies can start addressing the implications of changing workplaces and the systemic barriers to employment that women workers currently face, thus increasing the likelihood of a gender equal and inclusive transition.

### **But companies first need to understand what future work trends look like in their sector/industry/supply chain and the potential impacts on workers with a gender lens.**

This would ensure that any actions taken result in decent work opportunities for all, as well as help make progress towards gender equality. Some questions that companies would need to ask themselves could include the following:

- Why is it important for our company, our supply chain, our business partners, and our stakeholders to deploy strategies necessary to ensure that future workplaces are gender inclusive?
- What are the key challenges and opportunities for women workers presented by new ways of working including advances in technology (artificial intelligence, automation, and robotics)?
- How might our business model changeover the next decade because of the emerging workplace trends such as automation, artificial intelligence, and a digitised workplace? How might these trends impact women across our operations and supply chain?

- Which of the forces that are changing the nature of work and which of the existing systemic barriers to women’s economic empowerment are most relevant to our business?
- Where are women workers across our supply chain at the highest risk of losing jobs due to automation or other factors?
- What actions can we start to take that are feasible given financial and other constraints to ensure that the workforce, particularly women workers, are equipped for future changes and transitions?

## ETI Bangladesh: a gender perspective to access to information

**The key findings at the end of an [Occupational Safety & Health](#) project drew attention to access to information by the female workforce. Fifty-nine percent of the 405 workers from 39 garment producing factories interviewed were female. The findings discovered that:**

- ✓ In general, the workers have little access to digital information from the use of smart phones, social media and the internet – it was evident that women have far less access than men – only 14% (female) compared to 58% (male).
- ✓ Only 22% female workers use social media while 58% of male workers have access to social media. A portion of female workers, who have access to social media are sometimes relied on their male family members’ smart phone for using social media.
- ✓ However, most workers are aware of mobile banking services although a gender gap is again visible with 92% of the men compared to 75% of the women interviewed having knowledge about the mobile-based digital banking facility.
- ✓ Patriarchal social norms is a key barrier to female workers’ access to information as they limit women’s mobility, restricts their decision-making power and control over resources, and increase their responsibility for household chores and caregiving roles, hence depriving them to practice their rights to information fully.
- ✓ The gender gap in accessing digital information in Bangladesh is also associated with women having less technical knowledge and a higher unwillingness to use these sources, which also relate to women having less education than men with a higher drop-out rate and grade repetition. This in turn is attributed to child marriage, early pregnancy, and the fear of sexual harassment to name some barriers to education.