



Women's Advancement in Banking in Emerging South Asian Countries

MULTI-COUNTRY REPORT COVERING BANGLADESH, NEPAL, AND SRI LANKA

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ABOUT THIS REPORT

In 2022-23, the International Finance Corporation (IFC) initiated a multi-country research study focusing on women's advancement in private commercial banking in South Asia. The study covered 20 private commercial banks across three countries—Bangladesh, Nepal, and Sri Lanka.¹ As the largest global development institution focused on the private sector in emerging markets, IFC recognizes and deeply values the business and social benefits of diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI). It initiated this study—among the first of its kind in the region—to identify opportunities that can help achieve more equitable work outcomes for women employees in the banking industry. Specifically, the study examined the following aspects:

- Current representation of women in the commercial banks' workforce, especially in leadership
- Specific barriers that women employees face in advancing within the industry and how their experience compares with their male counterparts
- Policies, processes, and mechanisms that commercial banks and other organizations in the industry (for example, banks' associations) have in place to support women in reaching leadership positions.
- Solutions that banks and other actors (for example, industry bodies and regulators) should pursue to create an environment that supports women's advancement.

This multi-country report spotlights the key findings and recommendations emerging from the study and is intended to help industry actors—C-suite leaders in commercial banks, policymakers, industry bodies, and investors—direct their efforts to increase women's representation in leadership in the banking industry. Country-specific findings are also included in separate briefs published as accompaniments to this report.



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FOREWORD

Women's representation in leadership holds center stage in public discourse globally. A growing body of evidence suggests that more women in leadership roles in the banking industry makes good business sense. Yet the opportunities for career progression are heavily skewed against women in these institutions.

In South Asia, the representation of women in the banking industry (30 percent) is way behind the global average (52 percent).

Additionally, we do not have a nuanced, data-driven understanding of the challenges they face. That is why IFC initiated a multi-country research study—covering 4,600 employees in 20 commercial banks across Bangladesh, Nepal, and Sri Lanka—on women's advancement in commercial banking in the region.

This report identifies opportunities to help women advance to senior roles while also highlighting the systemic barriers—inequitable hiring, lack of fair evaluations, sociocultural constraints, and others—that tend to hold them back.

Accordingly, our recommendations, using global evidence, are tailored to the context of each country. They include providing women with professional support and mentoring, helping them access informal professional networking, and ensuring objective evaluations. Flexible work hours and on-site childcare are also crucial to helping both women and men achieve work-life balance.

However, it is vital that regulators, industry bodies, investors, and other stakeholders support this shift in the banking ecosystem while promoting committed leadership and safe and equitable workplaces, among others. Industry-level targets can further create a system of public accountability for individual banks.

At IFC, we recognize and deeply value the business and social benefits of diversity, equity, and inclusion. As women continue to face the “broken rung” of the leadership ladder, we hope this study—through actionable insights—will help deepen the industry discourse around effective steps to advance more women to leadership roles.

An inclusive and diverse banking sector is key to South Asia's future resilience.



Imad N. Fakhoury
Regional Director, IFC South Asia

ACRONYMS

DEI	Diversity, Equity and Inclusion
ERG	Employee Resource Group
FLFPR	Female Labor Force Participation Rate
HR	Human Resource(s)
IFC	International Finance Corporation
ILO	International Labour Organization
OECD	Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development



Executive Summary

For commercial banks, greater participation of women in workforce and leadership holds immense business potential.

A growing body of evidence links an increase in women's representation in organizations to better performance on business metrics. In a global enterprise survey, nearly three out of four participating organizations reported improved profits because of higher representation of women. In Asia Pacific, more than three in five enterprises reported the same.² On average, these organizations reported a 5–20 percent increase in profits as a direct impact of efforts to improve women's representation.³ Such impact is also evident for commercial banks. Globally, commercial banks that have 15 percent or more women in senior manager or higher roles, command up to 33 percent higher return on equity than banks where women occupy less than 10 percent of such roles.⁴ Further, banks that have more women occupying senior roles in risk and audit functions (for example, as part of board committees that oversee these functions) demonstrate better risk management.^{5,6} Besides, a more robust presence of women leaders can directly improve a bank's ability to serve new customer segments. The impact extends to other business metrics wherein having more gender-diverse leadership is associated with better talent retention and employee creativity that can help banks become more competitive.⁷

IFC conducted this study in 2022 and 2023 to understand opportunities to advance more women as leaders in the banking sector in South Asia. The primary aim of the research was to surface data-driven insights regarding the status of women in the banking workforce and deepen the industry discourse around steps that need to be taken to advance them. The study employed primary research tools (for example, an employee survey, an organizational survey, qualitative discussions) and covered over 4600 employees of 20 banks across three countries: Bangladesh, Nepal, and Sri Lanka. This report provides salient findings and recommendations across all three countries.

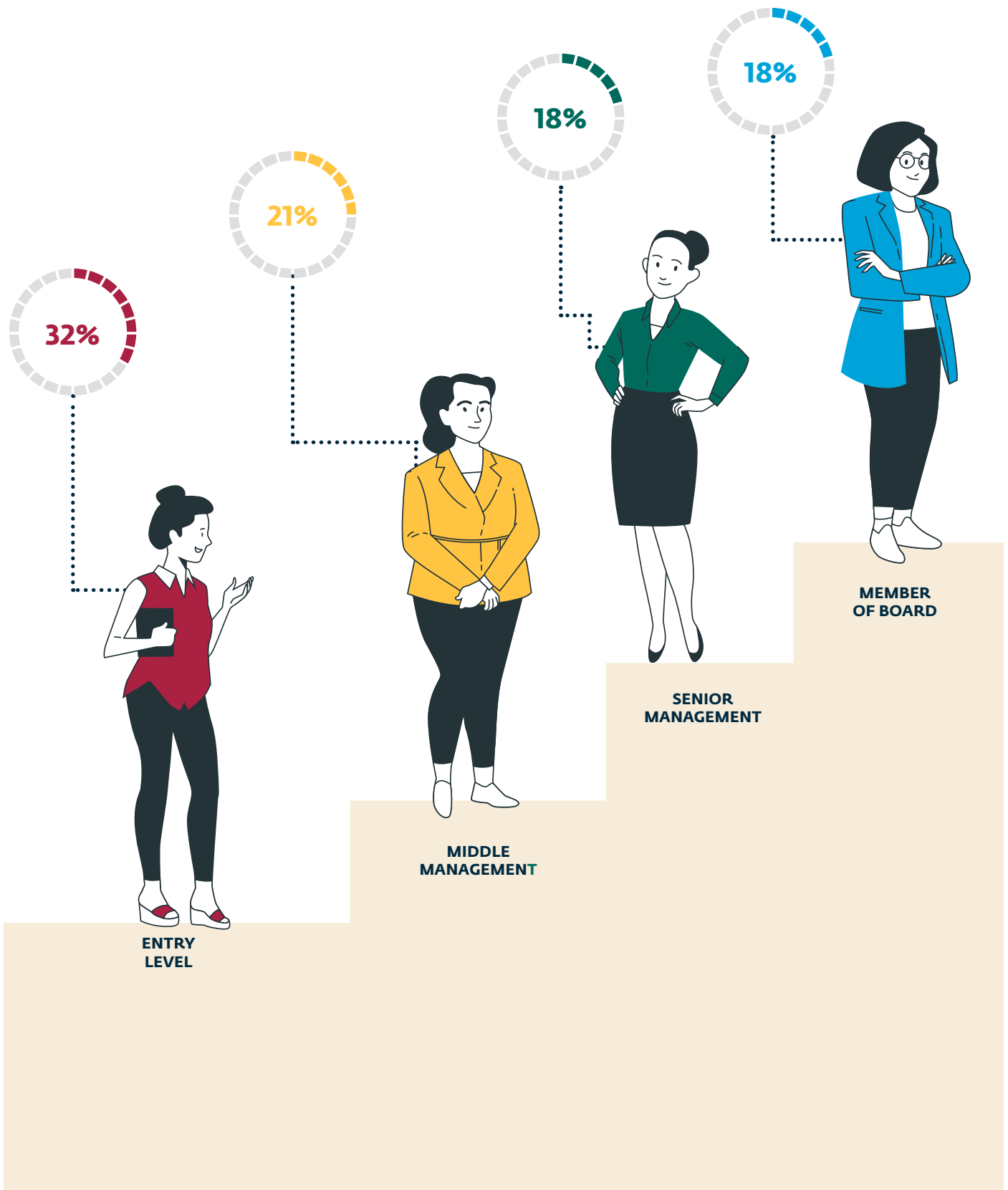
Women's representation in commercial banks varies among study countries, with Nepal nearing parity with men while Bangladesh lags significantly.

Women constitute 30 percent of the banking sector's workforce in the study countries compared to the global average of 52 percent.^{8,9} However, there is a wide variation in these three countries. Nepal is closer to achieving parity than other study countries, with women comprising 42 percent of the workforce in its surveyed banks.¹⁰ Sri Lanka is not far behind, with women accounting for 38 percent of personnel employed in the surveyed banks.¹¹ Compared to these two countries, the representation of women in Bangladesh's banking sector is significantly lower at 18 percent.¹² Across all three countries, women face multiple challenges throughout their careers, resulting in less equitable outcomes.

Most women bankers in the three countries aspire to become leaders, but they are not progressing at the same rate as men.

More than 80 percent of the female respondents—similar to their male counterparts—employed in the surveyed commercial banks want to rise to a leadership role, indicating strong aspiration among women bankers to grow professionally.¹³ However, women occupy only 18 percent of the senior leadership roles in the sector in the study countries compared to the global average of 28 percent.¹⁴ A common trend across the three study countries is the decline of women banking personnel as one moves from entry-level to middle management and eventually to senior management roles. For example, in Sri Lanka, women occupy 40 percent of the entry-level roles but only 27 percent of middle management and 20 percent of senior management positions in the study banks.^{15,16} Limited representation of women in senior leadership despite their strong aspiration to advance indicates that their advancement is constrained by factors other than ambition.

Figure 1: Average share of women employees in surveyed commercial banks



Barriers holding women back are complex, interlinked, and similar for all three countries. First, it is important to recognize that women experience and grow at work very

differently compared to men. Throughout their journey (refer **Figure 1**), women face unique challenges originating from their work and workplace as well as those originating outside of it.

Five key barriers affect the career journeys of women in banking across the three countries:

1.

Inequitable hiring: None of the three countries has achieved gender parity in hiring in the industry. Among surveyed bank employees, 41 percent of female respondents and 17 percent of male respondents believe that women do not have the same opportunities as men of being hired in their organizations. Many recruiters hold unconscious biases around women's ability to manage demanding roles, constraining their entry and advancement.

2.

Inadequate professional development: Nearly all employees across surveyed banks value professional development support, but many of them do not have ready access to development opportunities. This is especially challenging for women who receive such opportunities less frequently than their male colleagues. Across all three countries, less than half of the female respondents reported that they received these opportunities.

3.

Sociocultural constraints: Prevalent social norms place a disproportionate burden of unpaid care work on women. A total of 40 percent of female respondents in Sri Lanka and 28 percent in Bangladesh believe that managing household responsibilities has impacted or will adversely impact their careers. Similarly, many women felt that having children had or would impact their careers. Most banks across the three countries currently do not offer flexible work arrangements that can help women better navigate these challenges around managing unpaid care work.

4.









Lack of fair evaluations: Overall, 70 percent of women and 56 percent of men do not believe they receive fair evaluations from their managers. Feedback given to women tends to be vague and unclear. Many banks also lack standardized criteria to bring objectivity to performance management.

5.

Non-conducive work environment: Many women face microaggressions at work, such as being interrupted while speaking and not receiving respect from colleagues. More than half of the women IFC surveyed did not feel respected by their subordinates. Significantly, both men and women reported facing bullying and sexual harassment at work.

However, the extent to which these barriers affect female bankers in each country varies. Unsurprisingly, socio-cultural constraints and a lack of fair evaluations are major barriers across all three countries (refer **Figure 2a**). The other challenges impact women to different degrees in each of the study countries. Inequitable hiring is most prominent in Bangladesh where fewer women pursue postgraduate studies necessary to be eligible for many banking roles, and policy mandates from Bangladesh Bank (for example, mandatory transfer of bank employees in branches after a three-year tenure) restrict their entry and continuation in the industry. In surveyed banks in Bangladesh and Nepal, fewer female employees, compared to their male colleagues, receive coaching and mentoring support. While the professional development needs of many women remain unmet even in Sri Lanka, the difference between access rates for women and men in the country is negligible. In Bangladesh and Nepal, microaggressions and bullying at work are relatively more common, which further affects women's experience at work. A sub-optimal experience prevents them from contributing to their organizations to their full potential.

Figure 2a: Barriers impacting women's participation, experience and advancement in banking.¹⁷

	1 Inequitable hiring	2 Inadequate professional development	3 Socio-cultural constraints	4 Lack of fair evaluations	5 Non-conducive work environment
	Women are often disadvantaged at the very first step - i.e., gaining a foothold in the industry - as many recruiters hold unconscious biases. Women taking career breaks also find it difficult to resume work.	Lack of access to appropriate professional development prevents women from developing the right suite of skills or gaining the right opportunities that can help them showcase their leadership potential.	Constraints arising due to prevalent socio-cultural norms, such as around managing housework and providing care, impact women's work-life balance. Lack of employer support to navigate these (e.g., with childcare) exacerbates the situation.	Women receive biased feedback even if they are high performers. Managers tend to view all employees from past examples of male-dominated leadership they have seen. Other unconscious biases (e.g., male affinity, visibility in office) also impact evaluation.	Interactions at work disadvantage women further. Many women are frequently interrupted when they speak, face bullying (as do men) and have to also contend with issues of workplace safety.
 Bangladesh	Moderately relevant	Moderately relevant	More relevant	More relevant	More relevant
 Nepal	Less relevant	Moderately relevant	More relevant	More relevant	More relevant
 Sri Lanka	Less relevant	Less relevant	More relevant	More relevant	Moderately relevant
	 Less relevant for country	 Moderately relevant for country	 More relevant for country	 More relevant for country	 More relevant for country

Many banks demonstrate strong intentionality to address the above barriers and advance more women as leaders, but limited leadership buy-in and gender gaps in policy frameworks undermine existing efforts (Figure 2b).

Most banks have initiated steps to aid the progression of their female employees. Almost all of the surveyed banks across the study countries have clearly articulated DEI policies. To further aid women's advancement, banks in the region are currently implementing many practices. For example, 10 of 17 surveyed banks offer at-work coaching programs for women.¹⁸ Similarly, nine of 17 banks conduct training for managers to reduce gender bias in performance evaluations. However, banks' efforts often lose their momentum due to limited leadership buy-in. More than 50 percent of male middle and senior managers across surveyed banks do not believe that having more women can benefit their organizations to be more competitive. Similarly, gaps in study countries' legal frameworks affect the legal protections for women and the mechanisms organizations have to put in place to support women. In fact, the strength of legal frameworks around women's participation in employment mirrors the trend of women's share in employment in the banking sector, with Nepal having the most robust legal framework followed by Sri Lanka and Bangladesh¹⁹:

Nepal's legal and policy framework provides parental leave to mothers as well as fathers in line with international benchmarks. It also has legislation against sexual harassment and discrimination at work. However, no law protects pregnant workers from dismissal. Specifically in banking, no policy mandates exist to foster more accountability around women's representation in banks.

Sri Lanka's legal framework also provides maternity leave, though the current provision (84 days) is less than the internationally recognized benchmark (98 days). No law provides paternity leave or protects workers against discrimination based on gender. While there are government guidelines that require all listed companies to aim to have at least 20 percent of the board seats reserved for women, accountability mechanisms to ensure that banks meet these targets remain weak.

Bangladesh's legal framework provides the most number of days for maternity leave (112 days) but no provision to provide paternity leave exists. There are no specific laws to prevent discrimination based on gender or to penalize sexual harassment at work. However, Bangladesh Bank is more forward-leaning in fostering accountability and regularly collects and publishes data about women's representation in the banking industry's workforce.

To address the above barriers and support advancement of more women, targeted efforts along three areas are needed by banks as well as by industry actors (Figure 2b). Solutions implemented need to be adapted to each country's context.

Inculcating a leadership culture that lays out ambitious organizational commitments and holds the organization accountable to them. While most banks have DEI-related policies, many banks have not put in firm commitments in the form of representation targets for women in their overall workforce and leadership. Defining these targets and regularly tracking progress against them is key to building momentum within the organization across all three countries. However, banks' leadership—especially the C-suite—must become the driving force behind these initiatives and ultimately, be accountable for progress. Therefore, the first step across all three countries is to help banking sector leaders embrace and internalize the business benefits of having more women in leadership, which many current leaders do not fully agree with. In Nepal, where many employees—especially women—are constrained by a prevailing culture that discourages taking leave (which can help employees manage care responsibilities alongside work), leaders would need to be inspired and enabled to act to help reset the culture within the organization. Once such buy-in is secured, leaders will also need support with improving their organization-wide accountability to set targets.

Building a safe and equitable work environment to provide women targeted support to thrive at work. While the above step is crucial to secure leadership buy-in, banks must also undertake and implement practical solutions that directly support women in navigating the challenges they come up against. This includes providing adequate support for professional development (for example, via dedicated mentorship programs), ensuring fair and objective-based evaluations, and providing them the flexibility to strike a balance between their work and personal lives. These further need to be tailored to the context of each country. For example, coaching from their managers is an unmet professional development need for many women in Bangladesh while efforts are required in Nepal to help managers overcome the importance they place on an employee's presence in office after work hours. Across all three countries, employees will also need to be supported with increased flexibility to manage work and personal lives as well as better male allyship at work to help create a safer work environment. Finally, revisions to processes to conduct evaluations objectively will be needed in all three countries.

Fostering engagement within the ecosystem to drive industry-level accountability and support for banks in implementing different solutions. Initiating solutions at the industry level through ecosystem stakeholders such as regulators, industry bodies, and investors can help tackle larger systemic challenges that prevent women's progression to leadership. Ecosystem stakeholders, such as regulators and industry associations, in all three countries can use their influence and mandate goals (for example, minimum targets for the representation of women). In Nepal and Sri Lanka, central banks will also need to take on the mantle of increasing accountability toward these goals (for example, the central bank in Bangladesh publishes data semi-annually on women's representation in the banking workforce at various levels). These actors will also need to plug specific legal and policy gaps such as those around the mandatory transfers of employees every three years in Bangladesh, introduction of paternity leave in Sri Lanka, etc.

Ultimately, concerted efforts in these areas can help the banking industry in South Asia to advance more women to leadership roles. As global data has shown, more women in senior positions can boost innovation, resilience, and the financial performance of banks, contributing to GDP growth and economic prosperity. In chapter five, the report lays down recommendations in the form of common, emerging, and bold practices identified from across the region in more detail. Country briefs produced alongside this report provide more tailored recommendations for each of the study countries.

Figure 2b: Targeted efforts to address barriers and support advancement

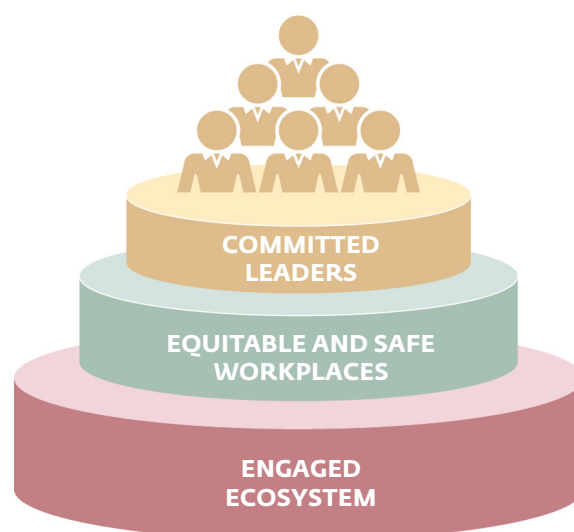




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1.

OBJECTIVES AND METHODOLOGY

WOMEN'S REPRESENTATION IN LEADERSHIP NOW OCCUPIES THE CENTER STAGE IN BUSINESS DISCUSSIONS AND PUBLIC DISCOURSE GLOBALLY. FOR COMMERCIAL BANKS, THE BUSINESS BENEFITS OF HAVING MORE WOMEN IN WORK AND LEADERSHIP ARE WELL-RECOGNIZED.

A NUANCED, DATA-DRIVEN UNDERSTANDING OF THE CHALLENGES WOMEN FACE IN SOUTH ASIA'S BANKING INDUSTRY CAN HELP UNEARTH RELEVANT OPPORTUNITIES TO ENABLE MORE TO REACH LEADERSHIP ROLES.

OBJECTIVES

Around the world, evidence is mounting that greater representation of women in banking leadership leads to better outcomes for investors, management, and employees. There is increasing global recognition of the importance of equity and diversity along various dimensions—including gender—in the business world. Besides social and moral imperatives, there is a compelling business case for greater representation of women in commercial banks. Globally, commercial banks that have more women in senior manager roles command up to 33 percent higher return on equity.²⁰ Further, banks that have more women in senior or leadership roles—especially in risk-related functions—demonstrate better risk management compared to their peers.²¹ Having a more gender-diverse leadership can also allow banks to better retain talent, boost creativity, and tap new markets or customer segments.²²

While this insight is global, the barriers and pathways to having more women represented in leadership vary by country and region.

Therefore, IFC commissioned this study to explore key questions and generate actionable insights into women's advancement in commercial banks in South Asia. Broadly, the study anchored on the following questions:

- What is the current state of women's representation in private commercial banks in different countries in South Asia?
- What does the current trajectory look like for women who join the industry? What roadblocks do they face in their professional development and advancement? How do these challenges play out compared to men?
- How do banks view women's representation and progression? What efforts are they making to help more women advance in their organizations?
- What are the opportunities or solutions that industry actors in each country should focus on to help more women attain leadership roles?

The study explored these questions for three

countries: Bangladesh, Nepal, and Sri Lanka.²³ The focus of the study was limited to private-sector commercial

banks. This report covers the findings from the banking sector in Bangladesh, Nepal, and Sri Lanka.

METHODOLOGY

The study employed a mixed-methods approach. In line with the research questions, the study sought to develop a comprehensive view by understanding the employee as well as the organizational perspective. To achieve this,

IFC recruited commercial banks from the three countries to participate in this study (refer **Figure 3**). Twenty commercial banks from these countries participated.²⁴

Figure 3: Research Tools Deployed and Coverage for the Study



*Note: The total number of participating banks in the study was 20. However, three banks did not provide responses to the HR survey.

For the administration of the surveys, the participating banks remained the primary mode of access. The employee survey link was shared with all employees in the participating organizations via emails from their human resource (HR) departments. To achieve adequate representation, the study set soft targets for women to form at least 40 percent of the respondent pool. This was ensured via continuous monitoring of the survey data and follow-on communications circulated via HR departments of each participating organization. The HR survey links were shared with the key liaisons at the banks' HR departments who filled in the survey on behalf of the organization. Findings included in this report are based on responses received from employees across all 20 banks

and responses to the HR survey received from 17 of the 20 banks.^{25,26}

The study followed several protocols to ensure data and findings from the study are valid, but some limitations remain. The study followed a carefully designed sampling and analysis methodology. To that extent, the findings provide a robust view of current challenges and opportunities to advance women in commercial banks in South Asia. However, the study is limited by restrictions around the survey rollout mechanics, sampling restrictions, and the self-reported nature of the data. More details around the limitations and steps followed to ensure validity of the findings are included in Annexure 1.

2.

STATUS QUO: WHERE ARE WOMEN IN THE INDUSTRY TODAY?

THE BANKING INDUSTRY IN SOUTH ASIA IS UNIQUELY POSITIONED TO DRIVE GREATER PARTICIPATION BY WOMEN AS EMPLOYEES AND LEADERS IN THE INDUSTRY. BANKING IS CONSIDERED A PRESTIGIOUS PROFESSION AND WITH MORE WOMEN SEEKING PROFESSIONAL QUALIFICATIONS, THE INDUSTRY IS WITNESSING A STEADY INFLOW OF FEMALE TALENT.

THIS IS REFLECTED IN THE ENCOURAGING HIRING TRENDS IN THE INDUSTRY, THOUGH THE

SURVEYED COUNTRIES ARE AT DIFFERENT POINTS OF PROGRESS.

DESPITE THESE POSITIVES, WOMEN'S REPRESENTATION IN LEADERSHIP ROLES IS NOT AT PAR WITH GLOBAL METRICS. WOMEN CONTINUE TO FACE THE "BROKEN RUNG" OF THE LEADERSHIP LADDER—THERE IS A SIGNIFICANT DECLINE IN WOMEN'S SHARE OF EMPLOYMENT WHEN MOVING FROM ENTRY-LEVEL TO MIDDLE MANAGEMENT AND EVENTUALLY TO SENIOR MANAGEMENT ROLES.

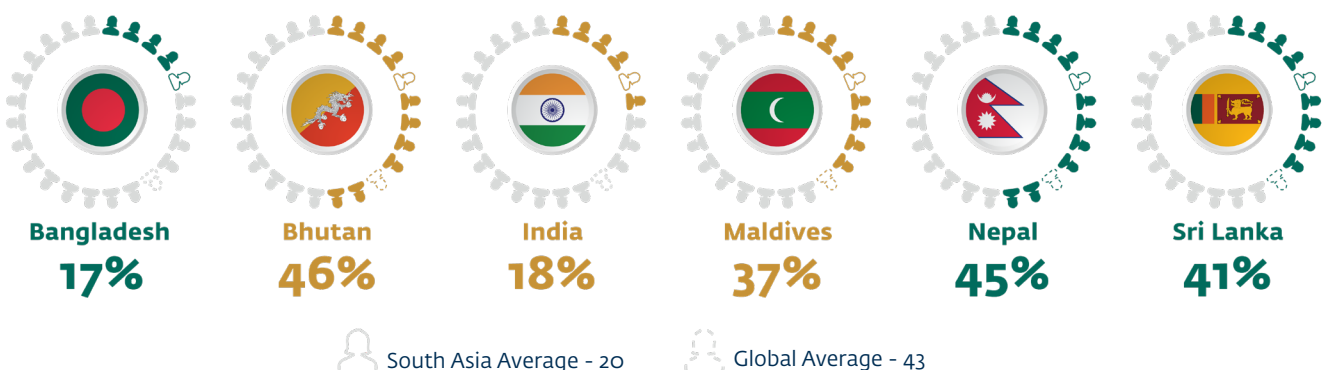
Nepal and Sri Lanka are close to achieving parity for women's employment in the financial services industry, though Bangladesh lags behind.

Women constitute 45 percent of the financial services' workforce in Nepal and 41 percent in Sri Lanka.

Women's representation in financial services in both these countries is better than their respective female labor force participation rates (FLFPR) (29 percent in Nepal and 33 percent respectively).^{27,28}

The representation in Sri Lanka is similar to the global average for women's share of employment in financial services (43 percent). By contrast, the representation of women in the industry in Bangladesh (17 percent) lags behind the global average (43 percent) and the country's FLFPR (38 percent).²⁹ However, over the last seven to eight years, the representation of women has largely remained unchanged; it increased by one percentage point in Bangladesh and fell by four percentage points in Sri Lanka.³⁰

Figure 4: Share of Women in Financial Services Industry's Workforce Across South Asian Nations

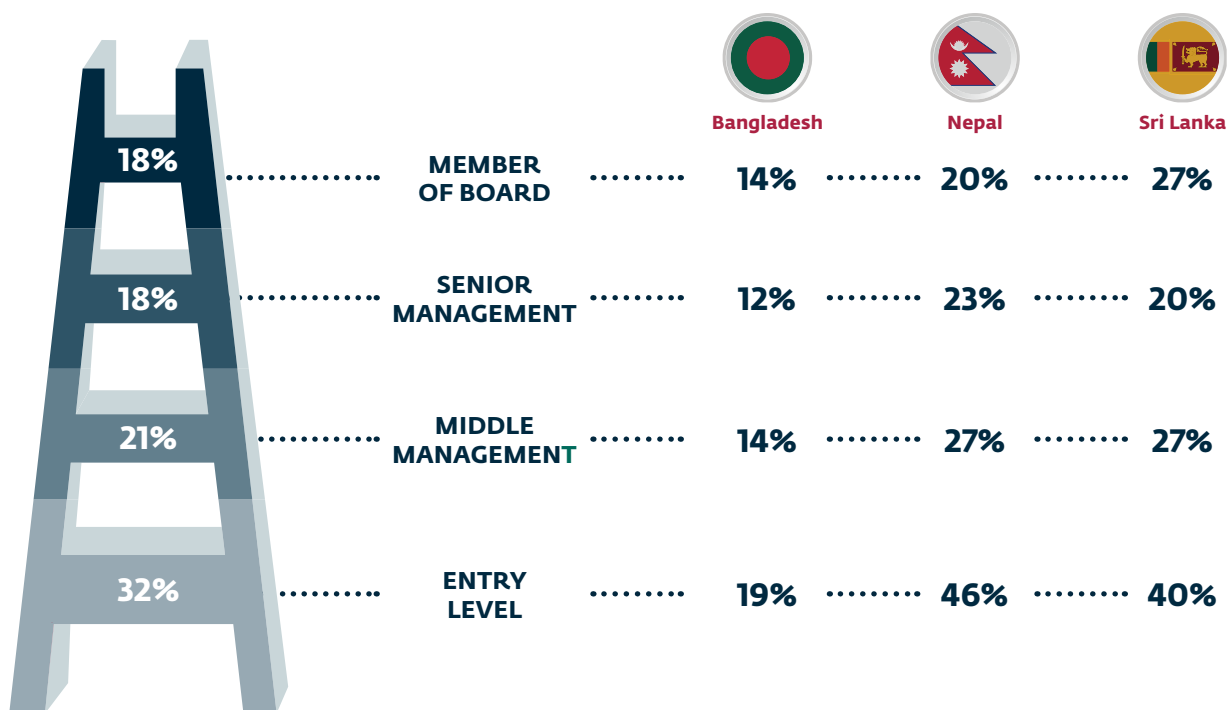


Hiring trends in commercial banks are encouraging, especially in Nepal and Sri Lanka. While not at parity, women constitute 42 percent of the workforce in surveyed commercial banks in Nepal and 38 percent in Sri Lanka.³¹ The rate of hiring of women in both these countries is also encouraging. In 2022, women formed 46 percent of all entry-level hires in the surveyed banks in Sri Lanka and 39 percent in Nepal.³² However, both the countries lag the global average (52 percent) for women's share in the commercial banking workforce.³³ By comparison, women accounted for 18 percent of employees and formed 22 percent of entry-level hires across surveyed banks in Bangladesh in 2022.³⁴

However, women occupy very few senior management roles in banks in all the three countries compared to men. The share of women in banks' workforce steadily decreases as women move up the leadership ladder

(refer **Figure 5**). By the time they reach senior management, women occupy only 12 percent of the total positions in surveyed banks in Bangladesh.³⁵ The representation in Sri Lanka and Nepal is better, with women occupying 20 percent and 23 percent of senior management roles respectively, though much less than their share in entry-level positions.³⁶ While the representation at the board level is marginally better, it is driven by regulatory mandates or guidelines. However, compliance with these mandates or guidelines is not universal. For example, Nepal requires companies to have at least one female board member, but many class-A (commercial) banks do not have female representation on their boards.³⁷ Similarly, the guidance for companies in Sri Lanka is to aim to have women occupy at least 20 percent of the board seats. However, more than 40 percent of the local banks that are listed do not meet this criterion.³⁸

Figure 5: Share of Women in Commercial Banks at Various Levels Across Bangladesh, Nepal, and Sri Lanka



Almost all female bankers aspire to attain leadership roles indicating that their lack of progression is driven by extrinsic challenges. Men and women employed in the banking sector in the three countries hold similar career aspirations regarding career advancement. Overall, 81 percent of women and 89 percent of men

indicate that they want to move to a more senior role with greater responsibility in the banking sector.³⁹ The low representation in leadership despite strong levels of ambition indicates that extrinsic challenges constrain women's advancement. These are discussed in detail in the following two chapters.

3.

BARRIERS TO PROGRESS: WHAT IS HOLDING WOMEN BACK?

WOMEN FACE COMPLEX BARRIERS SPANNING THEIR ENTIRE PROFESSIONAL JOURNEY—RIGHT FROM THE TIME THEY SEEK TO JOIN THE INDUSTRY—

THAT PREVENT THEIR ADVANCEMENT TO LEADERSHIP IN COMMERCIAL BANKS.

Five key barriers impact women's professional growth and their tenure in banking. **Figure 6** summarizes these challenges and the extent to which they are relevant for each country. Their journeys are made more challenging due to the limited support they receive from their co-workers, organizations, and families to navigate these barriers. This lack of support creates a unique set of circumstances for women:

- Many women opt for career breaks to manage care responsibilities. Lack of effective re-entry mechanisms to help resume their careers means they are unable to rejoin their organizations and continue in the industry.
- Women miss out on critical development support early in their careers since banks often do not provide tailored professional development support like mentorship and coaching.
- Social norms across countries place the burden of care work on women and compound other challenges. Limited support from workplaces and families to simultaneously navigate professional responsibilities alongside unpaid care-related expectations impede

women's ability to strike a balance between the two and affect their well-being and productivity. It may also preclude them from pursuing important professional opportunities.

- Performance evaluations tend to be subjective, and women are often disadvantaged by these. Many banks have yet to institute performance-evaluation criteria or training for managers to enable them to conduct objective evaluations.
- Finally, women face subtle biases and bullying behavior that adversely impact their workplace experience and their ability to maximize their contribution to their organizations.

The above challenges are often interlinked. Women face gendered microaggressions at work where their opinions often remain unheard or are shot down. This can lead to a perception of lesser contribution to team goals and influence leaders' view of their competence. Similarly, managing social expectations at home means women face time poverty and cannot invest as much in their professional development. These factors combine with biased notions managers have around women's abilities, leading to skewed performance evaluations.

Figure 6: Typical Barriers Women Face in Their Career Journeys in Banking

3.1 Inequitable hiring	3.2 Inadequate professional development	3.3 Socio-cultural constraints	3.4 Lack of fair evaluations	3.5 Non-conducive work environment
Women are often disadvantaged at the very first step - i.e., gaining a foothold in the industry - as many recruiters hold unconscious biases. Women taking career breaks also find it difficult to resume work.	Lack of access to appropriate professional development support prevents women from developing the right suite of skills or gaining the right opportunities that can help them showcase their leadership potential.	Constraints arising due to prevalent socio-cultural norms, such as around managing housework and providing care, impact women's work-life balance. Lack of employer support to navigate these (e.g., with childcare) exacerbates the situation.	Women receive biased feedback even if they are high performers. Managers tend to view all employees from past examples of male-dominated leadership they have seen. Other unconscious biases (e.g., male affinity, long hours at office) also impact evaluation.	Interactions at work disadvantage women further. Many women are frequently interrupted when they speak, face bullying (as do men) and have to also contend with issues of workplace safety.

3.1 INEQUITABLE HIRING

Fewer women than men—especially in Bangladesh—believe that the chance of being hired is equal for men and women.

- Across the three countries, 59 percent of female respondents believe that women have an equal chance as men of being hired in their organization. By contrast, a greater share of male respondents (83 percent) believe so.
- The difference is the most pronounced in Bangladesh where 61 percent of women vs. 88 percent of men believe that men and women have an equal chance of being hired. The difference is the least pronounced in Sri Lanka. The difference in perception is reflected in hiring data that indicate fewer women than men are hired across banks in each of the three countries.

Unconscious bias during recruitment affects hiring of women but many banks have yet to undertake comprehensive action to counter this.

- Bias among recruiters is a crucial driver of fewer women being hired in the industry. Among surveyed

employees who do not believe men and women have the same chance of being hired, more than half (57 percent) say that recruiters hold reservations against women (for example, notions that women cannot manage demanding roles, or work and home responsibilities simultaneously).

- Only nine out of the 17 surveyed banks provide guidance or training to recruiters to counter such biases.



When a vacancy opened up in my department, my manager expected me to hire a male candidate because the work sometimes involved a bit of travel or out-of-hours work. He automatically assumed that only a man would be able to do it."

- Mid-level male banker, Sri Lanka

Many women across the three countries take career breaks, primarily due to care responsibilities, but few banks offer them avenues to resume their careers.

- Women’s representation in the banking workforce declines from 32 percent at entry-level to 21 percent at middle management level, indicating that many women stagnate or exit at this stage (refer **Figure 7**).⁴⁰
- Social expectations around unpaid care work, including childcare, could result in many women leaving the industry. Across the study countries, in the prime working age group (25–54 years), FLFPR for single women is between 36–53 percent, but drops to 29–40 percent if they have at least one child below 6 years of age.⁴¹ In-depth interviews indicate that such trends are also relevant for women in the banking industry.

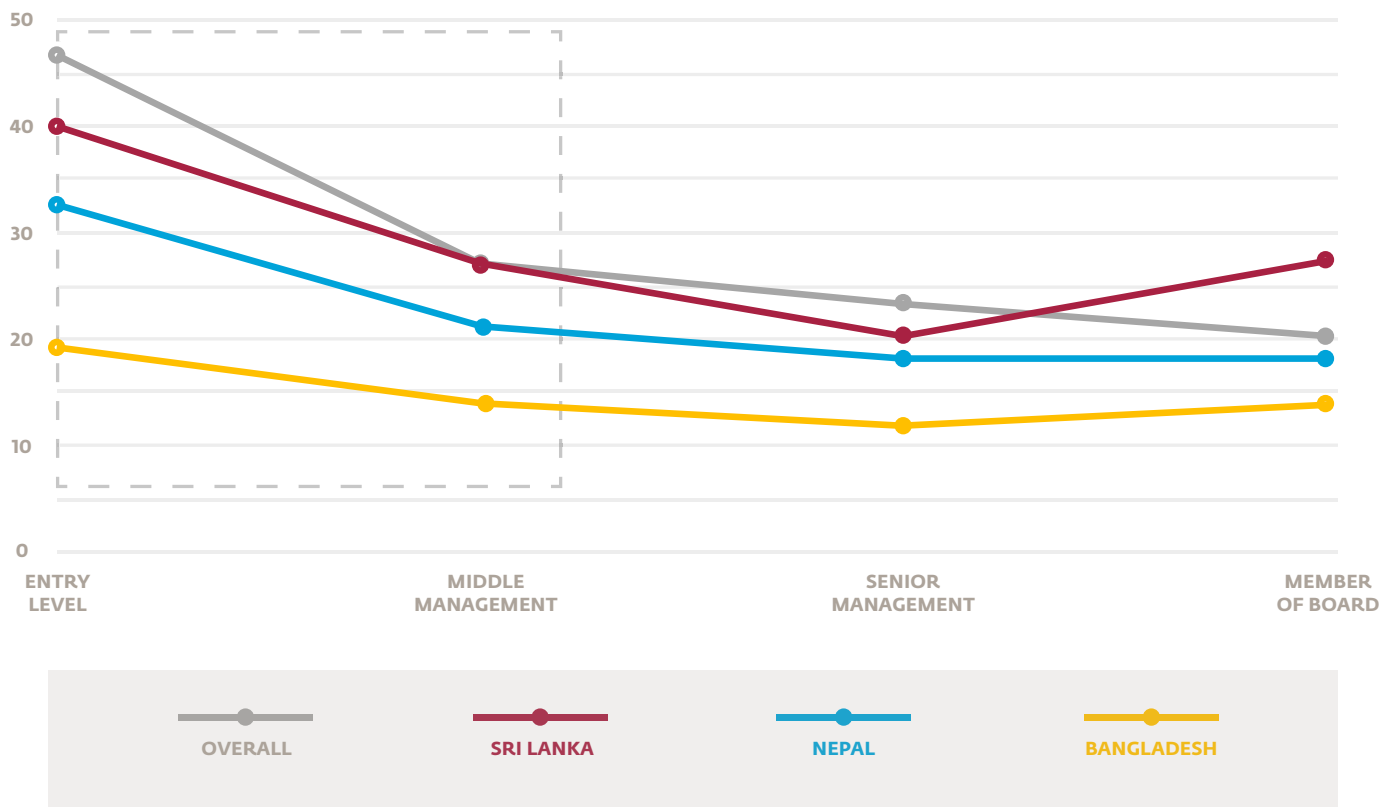
- None of the surveyed banks reports having programs to facilitate the return of women bankers who wish to resume their careers, leading to a smaller pool of female talent in the leadership pipeline.

“The dual responsibility that women must carry is the main factor that holds them back. If a woman wants to rise, she must give more than her 100 percent. After office hours, women are also expected to do household chores.”

- Senior female banker, Nepal

Figure 7: Decline in Representation of Women from Entry-level to Management Roles

VARIATION IN PROPORTION OF WOMEN EMPLOYEES BY SENIORITY IN SURVEYED BANKS
N = 17 | % OF WOMEN EMPLOYEES IN WORKFORCE



3.2 INADEQUATE PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Women as well as men have much less access to professional development support compared to demand, but women are particularly disadvantaged.

- More than 88 percent of women and men surveyed consider training, mentorship, coaching, and critical projects as crucial for their professional development. Nearly 70 percent of women and men cited sponsorship as important too.
- Many senior female employees indicate that access to such professional development support early in their career proved critical to their progression to leadership roles by helping them pursue relevant opportunities and build the right skills.
- However, access to such professional development support at work is significantly below demand for all

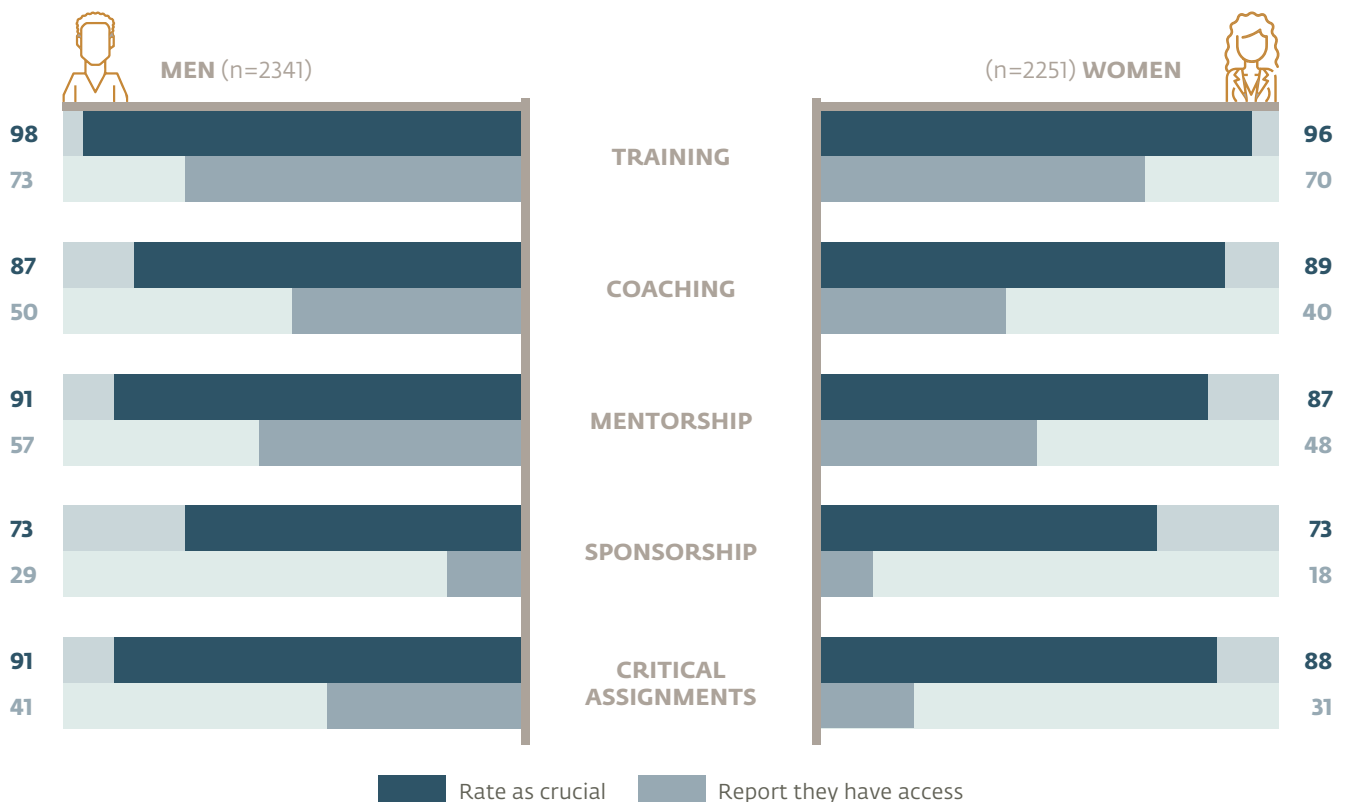
employees. Access to these systems can also differ based on gender—women report having less access or facing other challenges to avail such support (refer **Figure 8**).



Luckily, I had a female mentor who supported me in moving ahead in my career. The initial phase is the most challenging, and having a female mentor gives you emotional support and helps you manage time.”

- Senior female banker, Nepal

Figure 8: Employee Access to Professional Development Support (%)⁴²



All banks offer technical training and employees have equal access to them.

- Recognizing the importance of technical training, all 17 banks that responded to the organizational survey reported having dedicated training programs for the staff, including leadership development programs. The design of these programs is based on needs assessment exercises each bank conducts to understand the development needs of employees.
- A total of 10 out of the 17 banks that responded to the organizational survey have professional development programs for female staff; nine out of the 17 surveyed banks also have a management trainee program specifically for women employees. While all six of the surveyed banks in Bangladesh have management trainee programs specifically for women, only 1/5 banks in Nepal and 2/6 banks in Sri Lanka have such programs.
- Given the above and the relative importance banks assign to training, access to them is similar for women and men.

However, access to one-to-one support like coaching and mentoring is limited for all employees, more so for women.

- Majority of the women (and many men) do not have access to mentoring or coaching in their organizations. The gap between the demand for and access to this support at the entry level is stark. More than 85 percent of female respondents at the entry level in each of the three countries rated mentoring and coaching as important. However, only 38–47 percent of the women respondents in these countries have access to it.
- The gap exists despite nine out of 17 surveyed banks offering dedicated career mentorship and coaching programs, indicating that provision of programs alone does not ensure access.
- Mentors and coaches often do not have the time or the right incentives to offer the required support. When they do offer such support, men have easier access than women. This is reflected in the greater share of men (as compared to women) in each of the three countries who report having access to such support.



Access to critical projects is limited for all employees, but women's access is also determined by biases managers hold around women's capabilities or availability.

- Most male and female employees report not having access to critical projects. The gap is starker in Sri Lanka and Nepal where fewer than 30 percent of respondents—men and women—report having access to such projects.
- Across the countries, 38 percent of women from middle management report having access to such assignments. The lack of such projects adversely affects their prospects to build relevant skills, showcase their performance, and build visibility to be able to highlight their case for progression.
- Women's chances of receiving such assignments are also affected by unconscious biases their managers or supervisors might hold. Managers often tend to assume that female employees have restrictions around travel or lack the capabilities to undertake critical assignments. As a result, they tend to withhold opportunities from women. In Nepal, managers assume that women will not take up opportunities lying outside urban centers like the Kathmandu valley region and prefer to assign such opportunities to men (for example, for credit appraisal projects that require traveling outside of the valley).⁴³

Similarly, few employees receive sponsorship. For women, it prevents them from pursuing the most relevant opportunities at work.

- Very few surveyed employees, especially in Sri Lanka and Nepal, report having sponsors. Across the study countries, only three out of the 17 surveyed banks have a formal sponsorship program.
- Fewer women than men have access to sponsors. Senior female bankers indicate that having a sponsor can accelerate a female bank employee's career. They can encourage women employees to take up roles and responsibilities for which they would not otherwise apply. The sponsor's backing and encouragement in such cases can help women land crucial opportunities at work.

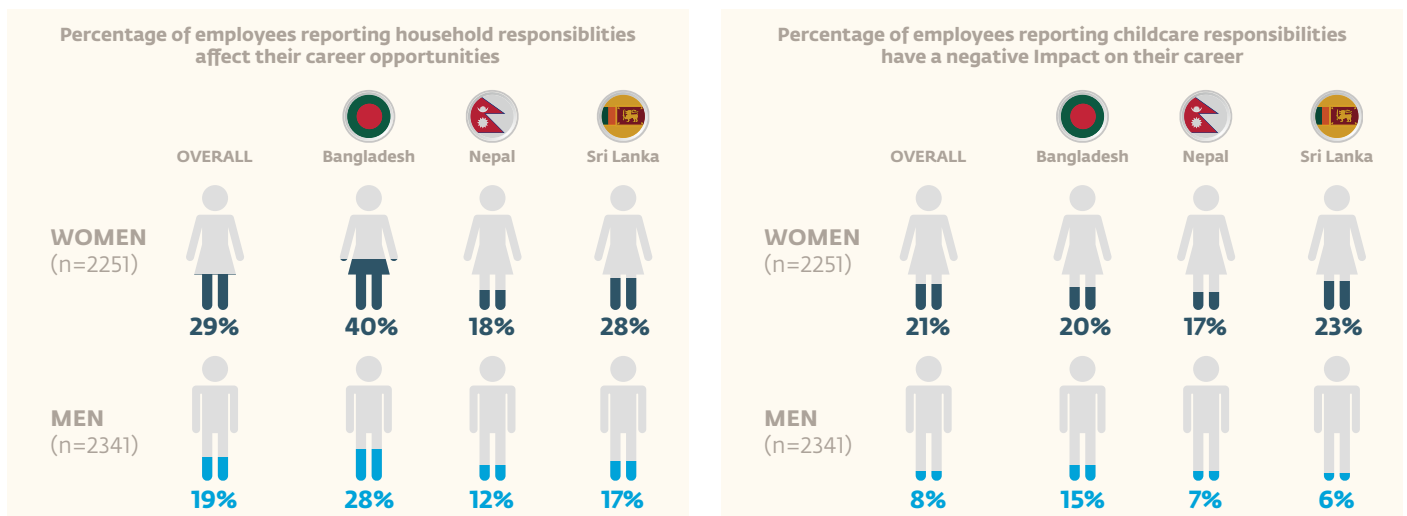


3.3 SOCIO-CULTURAL CONSTRAINTS

Women bear a disproportionate share of care responsibilities, and the resulting time poverty impacts their ability to strike a work–life balance,

maintain productivity, and invest in their professional development. While this is applicable for all three countries, it is most stark in Sri Lanka and Bangladesh.

Figure 9: Adverse Impact of Social Constraints on Progression⁴⁴



- Prevalent social norms compel women to undertake many care responsibilities in their personal lives whereas men are subjected to such norms to a lesser extent. The resulting challenges in managing these expectations alongside professional responsibilities and the time poverty adversely impacts women bankers' careers.

- More women than men (29 percent of women vs. 19 percent of men) believe that family expectations around managing housework can adversely impact their career. The difference between men and women is most stark in Sri Lanka (refer **Figure 9**).

- Overall, 21 percent of female respondents across the three countries—nearly 2.5 times the percentage of men—indicate that having a child can negatively impact their career. The difference is starker in Bangladesh where 23 percent of women compared to 6 percent of men indicate that having a child can negatively impact their career.

- Managing a disproportionately large share of housework and childcare responsibilities can impact women's productivity and reduce well-being. Often, this results in women carefully calibrating their time in office while male colleagues who may not have such restrictions are able to spend longer hours at work, thus boosting their visibility. The time poverty also prevents women from building strong networks or keeping up with changes in the industry. Not keeping up can adversely impact their chances of progression compared to their male colleagues.

Women also face restrictions around mobility that could prevent them from taking up important opportunities.

- Banks often prefer to relocate employees when they advance them to provide exposure to different regions and functions. In the case of Bangladesh, banks are mandated

to transfer all employees tagged to a branch once they complete a tenure of three years.⁴⁵

- For many women, relocation requirements are in conflict with family expectations that limit their mobility (for example, to stay where the spouse is located or due to concerns around safety). This can limit the opportunities that women can pursue as the sector is characterized by transfers, especially as employees advance.

Many employees, both with and without children, indicate that flexible working arrangements and other support with caregiving can help them to better manage work and personal lives.

- Flexible working arrangements (such as work from home options) can help employees—especially working

parents—manage care responsibilities alongside work.

- Arrangements currently offered by banks are helpful for many employees: 35 percent of surveyed employees who have children (35 percent of women and 36 percent of men) said that the current arrangements support their needs. However, 18 percent of surveyed employees who have children (23 percent of women and 16 percent of men) believe that better flexible working arrangements are needed.

- A total of 34 percent of working mothers who responded to the survey also expressed a need for other support with caregiving (such as on-site childcare). Only five out of 17 surveyed banks offer on-site childcare. Three of these banks are in Bangladesh, which is also the only country mandating the provision of on-site childcare.⁴⁶



3.4 LACK OF OBJECTIVE EVALUATIONS

Most employees, especially women, believe they do not receive fair performance evaluations.

- Fewer women (30 percent) than men (44 percent) believe they receive fair evaluations during performance reviews (refer **Figure 10**). In Sri Lanka and Nepal, 25 percent women believe so.

- More women (22 percent) than men (12 percent) in middle management explicitly disagree with the statement that performance evaluations are fair and reflect their performance accurately.
- Fewer women (38 percent) compared to men (54 percent) believe that they receive clarity on performance expectations from their managers.

Figure 10: Employee Perceptions of Fairness and Expectation Setting



Subjective factors and unconscious bias among managers adversely impact the objectivity of performance evaluations as well as clarity of feedback that women receive.

- Many subjective factors unrelated to performance can influence and adversely impact performance evaluations for employees, especially women. For example, in Nepal, managers and supervisors value workplace visibility and consider employees who stay longer in office as more dedicated. This can adversely impact performance evaluations of women who often have other responsibilities to tend to on the home front and avoid extended hours in office.

- Managers' biases aligned with those of social expectations around the role of women or their abilities also impact performance evaluations. Overall, 10 percent of women respondents across the three countries report that their managers asked about their plans to have children. Of those women, 37 percent said that it was in relation to a discussion of their roles and responsibilities.



In some banks, taking leave, even within your quota of leaves, gives the feeling that you are not as loyal to your organization, irrespective of performance. They prefer a male employee who works till 9pm over a woman performing equally well but leaving early or taking her leave. And this will be mentioned in her year-end appraisal.”

- Senior female banker, Nepal

- Research indicates that managers tend to give more vague feedback to women than they do to men. Women tend to receive comments like “You had a great year!” whereas men receive more insightful and actionable feedback like “You need to deepen your domain knowledge in the X space.”⁴⁷ Similar factors can lead to unclear and vague feedback for women bankers.
- Managers’ expectations of leadership traits that they look for in employees is biased toward traditional norms of leadership. Studies show that managers report a significant overlap between their expectations of good leadership traits and leadership traits typically observed in male leaders (such as assertiveness) while not acknowledging other traits that may be equally important.^{48,49,50}
- Even when women display traits that managers associate with good leadership, they tend to be overlooked since these traits do not conform to managers’ expectations of leadership demonstrated by women. Women, especially those with high leadership potential and a strong track record, are disadvantaged when managers base their feedback along such expectations.



Performance appraisals are often biased for women. ‘Is she aggressive enough? But she doesn’t do sales meeting as I did; her relationship managers don’t have the same respect and fear as they do for her male counterpart.’ So, a lot of times, what the line manager thinks is good performance also affects appraisal.”

-Senior female banker, Bangladesh

Many banks have yet to initiate steps to make their performance evaluations more objective.

- Some banks have revised their performance evaluation approaches to counter bias, but most have yet to do so. Only five of the 17 banks report having standardized metrics to evaluate employee performance. Similarly, only seven of 17 banks report introducing practices such as collecting 360-degree feedback to make the evaluations more objective and bias-free.



3.5 NON-CONDUCTIVE WORK ENVIRONMENT

Many female employees face gendered microaggressions at work and, as a result, do not feel confident in contributing in team settings.

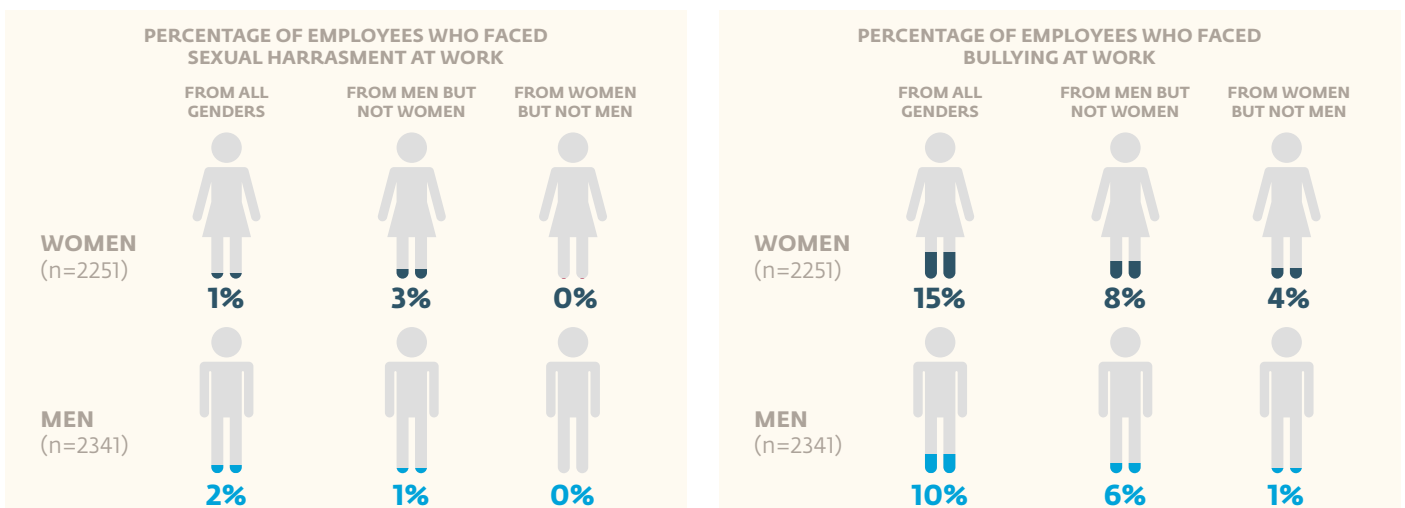
- Female employees across all levels, especially in Nepal and Sri Lanka, experience microaggressions in subtle ways. These include being interrupted while speaking or having their opinions questioned:
 - One in 10 surveyed women who face issues voicing their opinions in team settings say they tend to be the only woman in the room.
 - One in four surveyed women report that they are frequently interrupted and spoken over.
 - At the middle management level, one in three surveyed women report that their advice is often shot down or questioned.
- Nearly half the women surveyed do not feel respected by subordinates of any gender. This can impact their experience at work and overall performance, especially if their subordinates do not cooperate.
- As a result, fewer than half of the women surveyed

in Nepal and Sri Lanka report feeling confident about contributing in team settings. Being frequently interrupted and lacking confidence can also reflect in the perceptions managers form around women's contribution at work and their ability to lead, resulting in adverse performance evaluations.

Banks are far from becoming zero-incident workplaces; many employees face bullying or sexual harassment at work.

- Despite policies enacted by banks and other safety provisions, many employees face such adverse incidents. Overall, 27 percent of women and 17 percent of men indicate they have faced bullying at their workplace.⁵¹ Majority of them report experiencing bullying from male as well as female colleagues (refer **Figure 11**).
- Four percent of women and men indicate they have experienced sexual harassment at work. There were no significant differences in respondents' answers across countries. These experiences indicate that banks have yet to create workplaces free from incidents of harm for all employees and ensure a safe working environment for them. Further, it is plausible that the incidence of sexual harassment at work may be underreported in this survey.

Figure 11: Prevalence of Incidents of Bullying and Sexual Harassment in the Organization⁵²



Despite banks instituting policies and systems for employee safety, many employees—including men and women—are not confident that adequate measures are in place.

- All surveyed banks have policies prohibiting sexual harassment in the workplace. A total of 15 out of the 17 banks also have policies prohibiting bullying, including 12 banks that also prohibit cyber-bullying.
- Overall, 16 out of 17 surveyed banks report that they provide transport facilities for late-night work to their employees. However, only eight of these banks covered all of their locations, which can limit the efficacy of this provision.
- While policies are present in all banks, some of them do not have comprehensive mechanisms to tackle adverse incidents. Four of the 17 surveyed banks (of which three are in Bangladesh) do not have any channels to report such incidents whereas one other bank does not ensure anonymity for employees who report such incidents.
- Nearly half of the surveyed employees do not believe that appropriate action would be taken by the organization

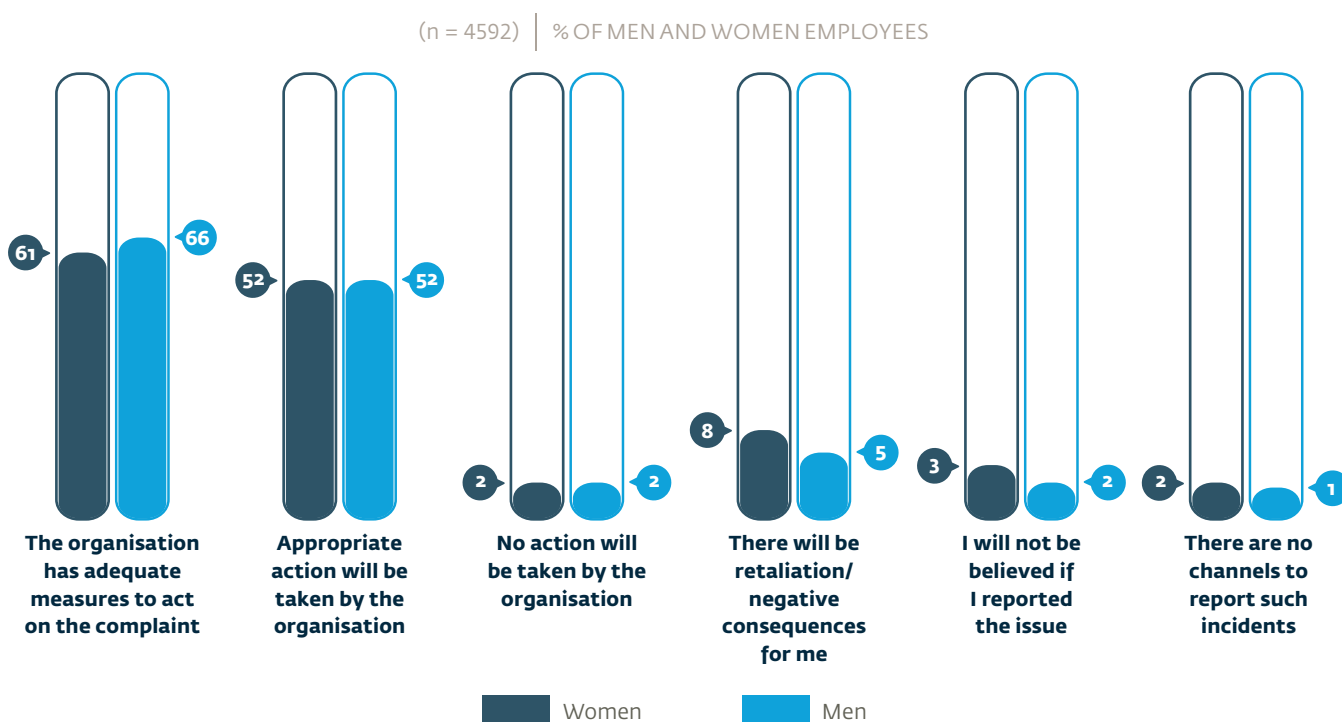
in response to a sexual harassment or bullying-related complaint. Some employees also feel that the bank’s policies are not adequate. Lack of organizational intent to address complaints or lack of male allyship can also result in such complaints getting suppressed.

“There was a huge fiasco about harassment [around a particular incident] and most of the men didn’t want to take action. They would rather have it subside and make sure it doesn’t blow into a big thing. I stood up against supervisors; made sure the person was nailed down. [Speaking up] was actually a black mark for my record; so I doubt people would take the same action for women employees.”

- Senior female banker, Nepal*

*Quote has been lightly edited for clarity.

Figure 12: Employee perception of adequacy of measures and organizational response to a sexual harassment/bullying complaint⁵³



4.

HEADWINDS:

WHAT IS PREVENTING CHANGE?

A MAJORITY OF THE SURVEYED BANKS IN THE THREE COUNTRIES HAVE CLEARLY ARTICULATED GENDER DIVERSITY AND INCLUSION POLICIES.

MANY OF THEM HAVE ALSO SET GENDER BALANCE TARGETS FOR THEIR WORKFORCE.

However, two cross-cutting challenges limit the effectiveness of these policies and targets and underpin the limited success banks have had in tackling the barriers laid out in the previous chapter:

- Limited leadership buy-in within the banks regarding the importance and business benefit of having more women in leadership can dilute the importance of existing initiatives to support women and the attention they receive within banks.
- Lack of robust policy and regulatory frameworks and guidelines at the national level to promote women's participation in the workforce limits the incentives for organizations to commit to women's leadership initiatives.

As a result, while banks have defined policies for greater women's representation, these are not supplemented by strong organizational systems to ensure their efficacy. Major gaps still exist in terms of monitoring progress on these policies, making leadership accountable for adherence, and providing dedicated staff and resources to implement these programs.

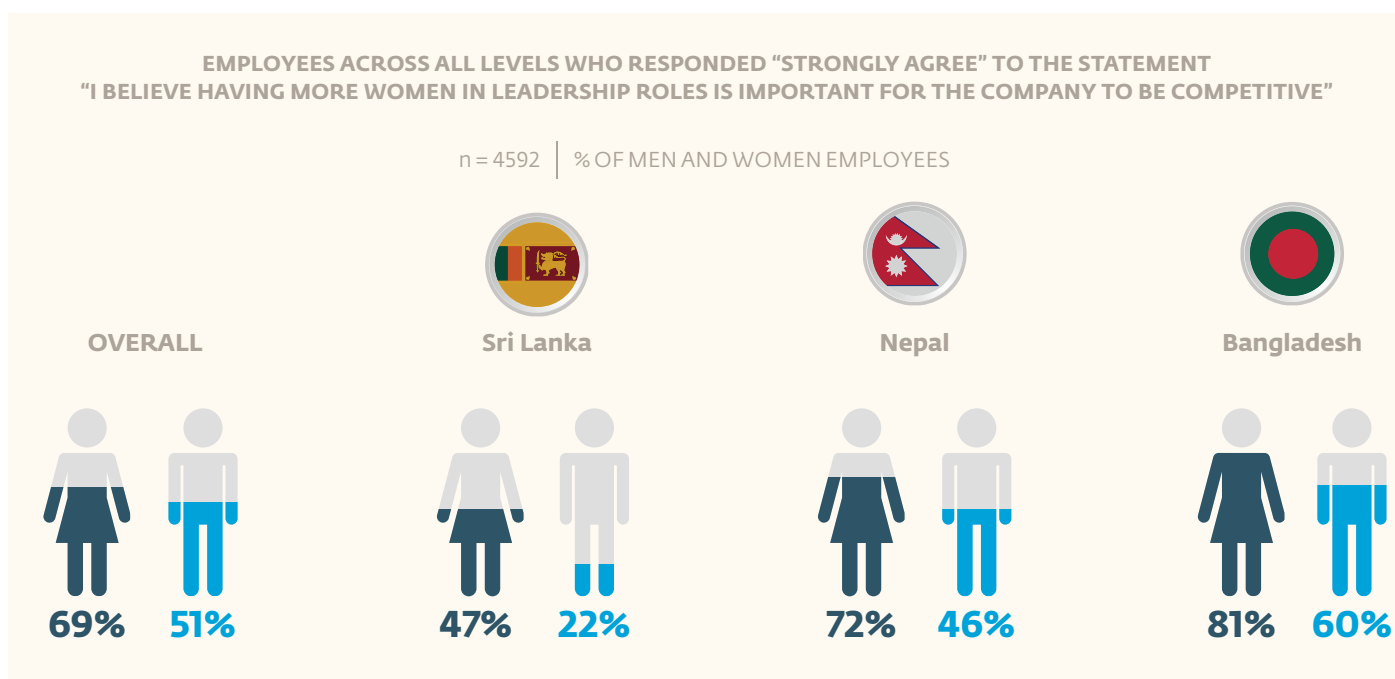
Ultimately, these cross-cutting challenges result in limited progress toward increasing women's share in the workforce and leadership of commercial banks in the study countries.

Nearly half of the surveyed men do not fully believe greater women's representation is crucial for their organizations to be competitive.

- Across all surveyed countries, men and women have starkly different views on having more women in leadership. Men are less likely than women to believe that more women in leadership positions in their organizations can help their organizations become competitive (refer **Figure 13**).

- The difference in men and women's perceptions is the largest in Sri Lanka. Only one in five surveyed male bankers in the country believe that their organizations would benefit from more women in leadership. At the middle management level, more than half of the surveyed male employees (56 percent) in Sri Lanka do not agree with this view.
- A total of 15 percent of surveyed senior management leaders (men and women) did not agree that having more women in leadership roles was important.

Figure 13: Employee Perception of the Positive Impact of More Women Leaders on the Company



Efforts to bring more women to leadership roles are unlikely to succeed unless banks and their leaders show ownership, role modelling, and accountability toward these efforts.

- Nearly half of the surveyed banks do not implement anti-bias training for their leaders. This could impact prevalent attitudes among men and women leaders toward having greater representation of women and lead to sub-optimal traction for these policies.

- Many banks have set gender balance goals, but have not supplemented these with the necessary support and infrastructure to drive ownership and accountability. For instance, while 13 banks report that they have clearly articulated gender diversity and inclusion goals, only five of these banks have allocated budget and resources to implement programs to achieve these goals.
- Similarly, banks lack accountability measures to achieve these goals. None of the surveyed banks plans to prioritize increased accountability for existing diversity initiatives in the short term.

While all three countries have enacted laws to promote women's participation, gaps in the national policy and legal frameworks adversely impact women's progression to leadership.

- Nepal has the most robust legal framework among the study countries for supporting women's employment and countering gender-based discrimination.⁵⁴ Its framework is the closest to achieving legal gender parity across countries in South Asia. In contrast, Bangladesh lags the regional average in having a robust framework.⁵⁵
- Across all three countries, several gaps stand out in the current frameworks:
 - **Nepal:** Laws provide parental leave for mothers (98 days) as well as fathers (14 days) in line with international benchmarks (as mentioned earlier, workplace culture may discourage men from using these). However, current laws do not protect pregnant employees from dismissal.⁵⁶
 - **Sri Lanka:** Women are guaranteed maternity leave of 84 days, which is less than the internationally recognized benchmark of 98 days; men are not entitled to any paternity leave by law. Further, no law exists against discrimination in employment based on gender.⁵⁷
 - **Bangladesh:** There are no explicit laws to prevent gender-based discrimination in employment or to prohibit sexual harassment. While the longest maternity leave (112 days) is provided to women, there are no provisions that provide paternity leave.⁵⁸
- Policy support that enables working parents to access quality childcare is also limited across all three countries. While Bangladesh has laws that mandate employers to provide childcare facilities in the workplace, a similar



In many banks, the awareness and willingness to implement change is not really there among the senior leadership, who are mostly male. There is still very much that culture of thinking that women should not be leaders.”

- Senior female banker, Nepal

provision was repealed from the existing labor code in Nepal. Across the study countries,

- Only three out of six surveyed banks in Bangladesh report that they provide on-site childcare despite the mandate for employers. Additionally, one bank in Sri Lanka and one bank in Nepal currently provide on-site childcare.
- Lack of technical assistance can affect banks' ability to comply. IFC research conducted in 2019 in Bangladesh found that more than 40 percent of the companies needed guidance (on setting up childcare centers, quality standards, and financing) as the most important resource in planning childcare centers.⁵⁹
- None of the countries provides financial support to parents or providers of childcare services to make these services affordable. By contrast, 100 percent of OECD countries and 60 percent of East Asia and Pacific countries offer such support.⁶⁰

Even when banks have instituted specific gender diversity and inclusion policies, critical gaps in monitoring and implementing these policies remain.

- Overall, 13 out of 17 surveyed banks have clearly articulated gender diversity and inclusion policies. However, nearly half of these banks do not train their staff on these policies. Only two out of 17 surveyed banks have communicated their gender commitments publicly via their websites and press releases.
- A total of 12 out of 17 surveyed banks have set gender balance targets but half of these banks have not set targets for promotions. Further, only five banks have allocated budget and resources to implement initiatives to achieve these targets and only four banks monitor progress against them.



You can't fix what you don't measure. The first step is to carefully report and monitor how women are progressing and uncover the reasons that limit this. Only then can you identify the issues and start fixing them."

- Senior male banker, Sri Lanka



5.

TAKING ACTION: WHAT CAN THE INDUSTRY DO TO ADVANCE MORE WOMEN TO LEADERSHIP?

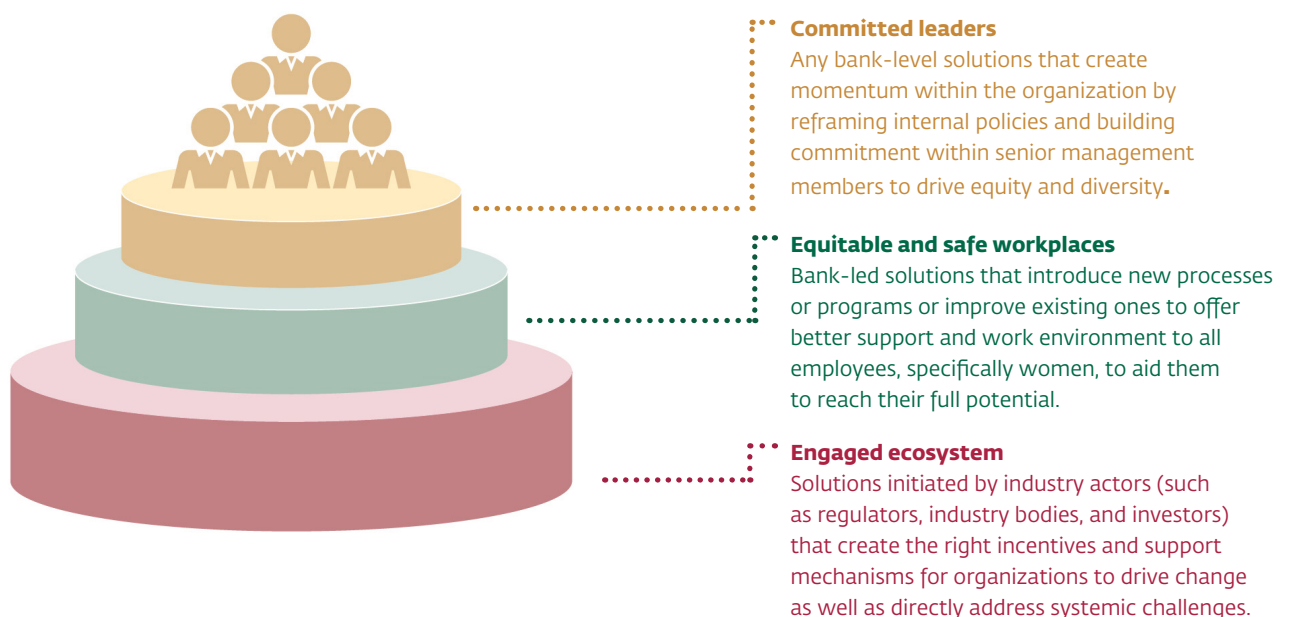
ONE-OFF SOLUTIONS IMPLEMENTED BY BANKS ARE UNLIKELY TO ADDRESS THE MULTITUDE OF CHALLENGES FEMALE BANKERS FACE. INSTEAD, CONCERTED ACTION IS NEEDED TO ADDRESS THESE CHALLENGES AND KEEP ORGANIZATIONS AND INSTITUTIONS ACCOUNTABLE TO PROGRESS. FURTHER, THESE ACTIONS SHOULD ADDRESS BARRIERS, WHETHER POLICY, PROCESS, OR CULTURE-RELATED, IN A TARGETED MANNER.

THIS CHAPTER LAYS OUT THE KEY RECOMMENDATIONS FOR BANKS AND OTHER INDUSTRY ACTORS (FOR EXAMPLE, REGULATORS AND INDUSTRY BODIES) IN THE THREE COUNTRIES TO BETTER SUPPORT WOMEN'S PARTICIPATION AND ADVANCEMENT IN COMMERCIAL BANKING. DETAILED SOLUTIONS ARE PRESENTED IN THE ANNEXURE.

To make sustainable progress in advancing more women to leadership, the industry's efforts should be channeled along three directions: committed

leadership, safe and equitable workplaces, and an engaged industry ecosystem. These are laid out in Figure 14:

Figure 14: Achieving Equity Will Require Focus Along Three Areas



For each of these directions, banks and industry actors are already pursuing opportunities to better support women, but a move toward more specific and actionable solutions is needed to tackle barriers that women face. Across the region, banks and industry actors are already pursuing ideas and solutions that can better support women in overcoming the myriad challenges they face. Several of these are now common practices being implemented by more than half of the organizations

in the region.⁶¹ In fact, there are at least 10 common practices or solutions being implemented by more than half of the surveyed banks.⁶² However, ensuring greater representation of women in the workforce and leadership would require pushing beyond these common practices and seeking inspiration from emerging ideas and bold bets that a few banks and organizations in other sectors are implementing.⁶³ **Figure 15** provides this classification of common, emerging, and bold ideas.

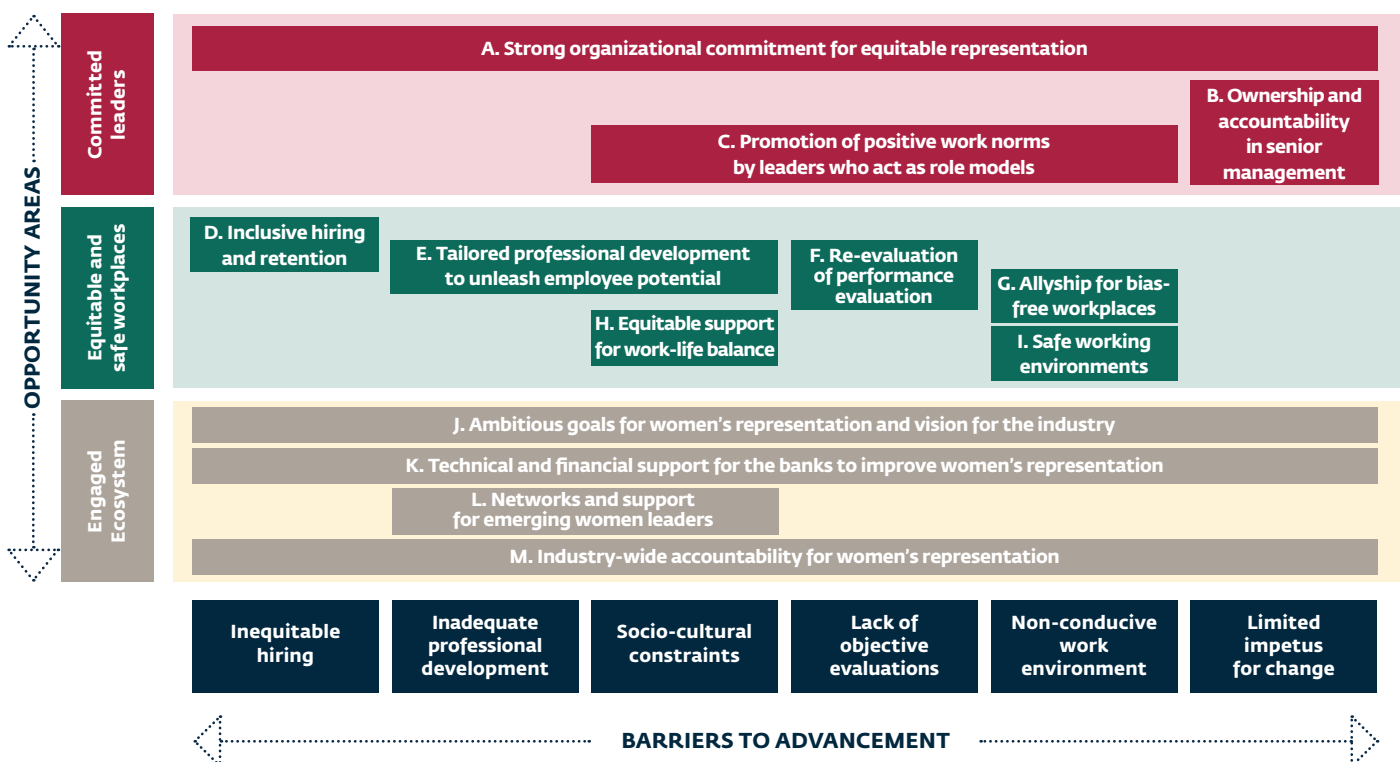
Figure 15: Classification of Solutions for South Asia's Banking Sector to Implement



Figure 16 summarizes the most prominent opportunity areas to focus on in the region. However, adopting these would also require a tailored approach to contextualize these practices for the most prominent barriers in each

country. The country briefs produced as part of this research delve deeper into specific, contextualized solutions for each country.

Figure 16: Classification of Solutions for South Asia's Banking Sector to Implement



5.1 RECOMMENDATIONS TO DEVELOP MORE COMMITTED LEADERS

Developing leadership commitment to advance more women to leadership requires banks to ensure their leaders receive the right support to decondition their own biases and embrace the value of having more women in leadership. This needs to be complemented with clear gender representation targets and mechanisms to track progress toward these targets. The tracking mechanism

is vital to assign accountability of achieving these goals to a leadership member. Lastly, banks need to propagate leadership practices where leaders role-model cultural shifts in the organization and ensure greater uptake of their programs. **Figure 17** lists two common practices, three emerging practices, and two bold bets that banks in the region could pursue.

Figure 17: Solutions for Banks to Drive Equitable Representation Through Organizational Commitment

		1 <u>COMMON PRACTICE</u>	2 <u>EMERGING PRACTICE</u>	3 <u>BOLD BETS</u>
Committed leaders	A. ORGANIZATIONAL COMMITMENT FOR EQUITABLE REPRESENTATION OF WOMEN	Diversity townhalls: Regular firm-wide communication on efforts to increase women's representation	Equi Power: Set clear targets for women's representation, promotions, etc.	
	B. OWNERSHIP AND ACCOUNTABILITY IN SENIOR MANAGEMENT	Diversity Pulse: Regularly track progress on diversity metrics	Chief diversity officer: Designate a senior executive to steer diversity efforts	Diversity-linked compensation: Tie C-suite incentives to progress on diversity targets
	C. PROMOTION OF POSITIVE WORK NORMS BY LEADERS WHO ACT AS ROLE MODELS		Visible leader: Build capacity of leaders to role-model inclusivity	Diversity sentinels: Train leaders to recognize and unlearn own biases

5.2 EQUITABLE AND SAFE WORKPLACES

Banks need to reform the workplace to be safer and provide more equitable opportunities for women to grow professionally. They can do so by introducing policies and programs that improve current practices (like reducing bias in hiring processes or making performance evaluation more objective) or address some previously unmet needs (like providing formal sponsorship programs). Providing

more flexibility to women—and indeed to all employees—to manage their work and personal lives as well as creating a culture where employees feel safe from harm and microaggressions can help them thrive. **Figure 18** provides common and emerging practices as well as bold ideas that emerged from South Asia – and primarily the three countries - that banks can consider pursuing.

Figure 18: Solutions for Banks to Support Women Through Different Policies and Programs

		1 COMMON PRACTICE	2 EMERGING PRACTICE	3 BOLD BETS
Equitable and safe workplaces	D. INCLUSIVE HIRING AND RETENTION	Equi Hire: Revise hiring processes to reduce bias	Gender-anonymized job roles: Remove gendered descriptions in JDs	Returnships: Hire women returning from a career break
	E. TAILORED PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT TO UNLEASH EMPLOYEE POTENTIAL	Catalyst for her: Contextualize professional development for women	New horizons for her: Rotation program to provide critical exposure	25th hour: Easy-to-consume training content for professional development
			Women for women: Resource group for peer learning and networking	Sponsored by: Formal sponsorship program for emerging women leaders
	F. RE-EVALUATION OF PERFORMANCE EVALUATION	On second thought: Manager training around objective evaluations	Transparent evaluations: Clear criteria & improved evaluation transparency	De-bias merit: Track promotion ratings and correct for biases
	G. ALLYSHIP FOR BIAS-FREE WORKPLACES	Inclusive us: Mandatory annual trainings on DEI for all employees	I support her: Encourage and equip men to act as allies	
			Speak up, speak out: Build a culture to allow surfacing of relevant issues	
	H. EQUITABLE SUPPORT FOR WORK-LIFE BALANCE	Normalize flexi-work: Flexible (but restricted) working opportunities	On-site childcare: Provision of lactation rooms, crèches, etc.	Caring for working parents: Pilot new ways to provide childcare support
			Bank parent: Employee resource group for peer support for parents	Bring your plus one: Engage spouses/families to generate at-home support
			Balance for well-being: Stress management programs and resources	Unrestricted hybrid work: Move fully to hybrid operations
I. SAFE WORKING ENVIRONMENT	Confidential Vigilance: Anonymous channels for reporting incidents	Visible leader: Build capacity of leaders to role-model inclusivity	Unequivocal trust: Build trust in organization commitment to act	
	Travel Assistance: Safe transport for after-hours work travel			

5.3 ENGAGED ECOSYSTEM

Industry actors, such as regulators and investors, can create appropriate directives and incentives for banks to prioritize women's advancement to leadership roles. Leveraging these industry actors will allow the banking sector to address the complex policy and structural issues

that prevent women's advancement and provide them the necessary expertise to undertake change. An active ecosystem can also initiate positive change in allied industries, such as insurance and financial technology.

Figure 19: Solutions for Industry Actors to Create Momentum in the Banking Sector

		1 COMMON PRACTICE	2 EMERGING PRACTICE	3 BOLD BETS
ENGAGED ECOSYSTEM	J. AMBITIOUS GOALS FOR WOMEN'S REPRESENTATION AND VISION FOR THE INDUSTRY	Zero-tolerance workplace: Policies and guidelines for workplace safety	Industry diversity targets: Guidance for banks on targets for women's representation	Empirical policy hub: Generate evidence on what works Inclusi-vision: Cross-country collaboration of region's regulators
	K. TECHNICAL AND FINANCIAL SUPPORT FOR BANKS TO IMPROVE WOMEN'S REPRESENTATION		Project-linked funding: Financial support to banks to launch initiatives Concessional funding: Link diversity to loans/ investments to banks Diversity Center of Excellence: Forum to share best practices	Gender advisory network: Group of experts to advise banks on increasing women's representation Behavioral lab: Pilot and scale nudges to transform culture
	L. NETWORKS AND SUPPORT FOR EMERGING WOMEN LEADERS		Womens bankers association: Forum to advocate for women Women leaders bootcamp: Networking and training platform	
	M. INDUSTRY-WIDE ACCOUNTABILITY FOR EQUITABLE WOMEN'S REPRESENTATION	High-visibility signalling: Public communication effort on equitable representation of women in the industry	Gender taskforce: HR leaders' group to monitor industry-wide progress	Bank employee diversity index: Public report on progress in women's representation

A more detailed description of each of these recommendations is provided in **Annexure 3**.



ANNEXURE 1

METHODOLOGY AND LIMITATIONS

METHODOLOGY

We conducted primary research in three countries: Bangladesh, Nepal, and Sri Lanka. The study anchored on four research methods:

1.

Employee survey of 1,000+ employees each in all three countries: Understand the experiences, views, and perceptions of employees at banks to gauge the presence and effectiveness of organizational efforts to improve women's representation. Data for number of employees in banking industry and for the surveyed commercial banks in each of the three research countries was used to apply survey weights while analyzing the data from the surveys.

2.

HR survey in each country: Understand the approach, policies, and initiatives undertaken by banks in each country to achieve greater women's representation and drive inclusion across levels.

3.

Focus group discussions (FGDs) with employees in participating banks, across gender and hierarchy: Understand barriers employees and organizations face and evaluate solutions that can be implemented.

4.

Expert interviews with prominent individuals in banking and other sectors: Identify important barriers and ecosystem factors preventing women's progression and the drivers behind them as well as existing solutions to building inclusive organizations.

Implementation of the research incorporated several steps to ensure respondents' confidentiality.

The survey instruments did not include any personal identifiers, to protect respondents' identities. The survey links were hosted on an independent server and the participating banks did not have access to the servers on which the surveys were hosted or to the response data. The survey script also informed the participants of these measures and allowed them to opt out of the survey at any point. To create an appropriate environment for open and objective conversations, the FGDs were held either online or in neutral venues. They did not include senior leaders of participating organizations, who were interviewed separately. All data from the surveys and FGDs were anonymized. Further, this report does not tie findings or observations to any bank except where the information is in the public domain or explicit permission from the bank has been obtained.



LIMITATIONS

Our study is limited by restrictions around sampling, limited responses from key groups, self-reporting, and differences in interpretation. We have strived to ensure

the validity of the data to the extent possible through the sampling methodology, careful design, and pre-testing of the questionnaires. However, the following limitations remain:

1.

The sample set of banks for the survey was not random and was based upon banks with which IFC had prior relationships. The findings therefore cannot be deemed as representative of the industry. We chose a mix of private commercial banks and validated high-level findings with senior leaders from other banks. Given this, and participation of a sizeable number of banks from each country, we remain confident that the findings are directionally correct.

2.

The employee survey was rolled out by the HR department of each particular bank. We followed key protocols such as aligning with banks that data will not be shared directly with them, removing personal identifiers from the survey, hosting the survey on independent servers of research partners, requesting banks to circulate survey links to all employees, clarifying to respondents at the beginning of the survey that the responses were anonymous, etc. to minimize bias in employee responses. However, the banks remained the direct link to employees filling the survey, which could have impacted the responses received from the employees.

3.

We received limited responses from senior management members in banks. We have tried to account for this by including weights in the survey analysis that seek to mirror the representation of these groups in the banking industry at the population level.

4.

The data collected from both surveys are self-reported and, therefore, limited by respondents' willingness and ability to answer.

5.

The survey was conducted in English and the most widely spoken languages in the country. This included Bangla in Bangladesh, Maithili in Nepal, and Tamil and Sinhala in Sri Lanka. While we ensured that the survey instruments were translated by qualified professionals, the questions may have been interpreted differently based on linguistic differences, and this may have affected the overall results.

ANNEXURE 2

LIST OF COMMERCIAL BANKS THAT PARTICIPATED IN THE STUDY

S. NO.	COUNTRY	BANK NAME
1.	Bangladesh	BRAC Bank
2.	Bangladesh	Eastern Bank
3.	Bangladesh	Bank X*
4.	Bangladesh	Mutual Trust Bank
5.	Bangladesh	Prime Bank
6.	Bangladesh	Standard Chartered – Bangladesh
7.	Bangladesh	The City Bank
8.	Nepal	Laxmi Bank*
9.	Nepal	Machhapuchchhre Bank
10.	Nepal	NMB Bank

*Laxmi Bank participated in this survey prior to its consolidation with Sunrise Bank in 2023.

Bangladesh



Nepal



Sri Lanka



S. NO.	COUNTRY	BANK NAME
11.	Nepal	Prabhu Bank
12.	Nepal	Siddhartha Bank
13.	Nepal	Standard Chartered – Nepal
14.	Sri Lanka	Commercial Bank of Ceylon
15.	Sri Lanka	Development Finance Corporation of Ceylon (DFCC) Bank
16.	Sri Lanka	Hatton National Bank (HNB)
17.	Sri Lanka	Hong Kong and Shanghai Banking Corporation (HSBC) Bank- Sri Lanka
18.	Sri Lanka	National Development Bank (NDB)
19.	Sri Lanka	Bank Y*
20.	Sri Lanka	Standard Chartered – Sri Lanka

*The bank wishes to remain anonymous.

ANNEXURE 3

DETAILED LIST OF SOLUTIONS AND RATIONALE FOR BANKS TO IMPLEMENT

5.1 RECOMMENDATIONS TO DEVELOP MORE COMMITTED LEADERS

SOLUTION DESCRIPTION	RATIONALE	COMMON PRACTICE	EMERGING PRACTICE	BOLD BETS
A. ORGANIZATIONAL COMMITMENT FOR EQUITABLE REPRESENTATION OF WOMEN				
Diversity townhalls: Create townhall-like forums and other communication channels for leadership to interact directly with employees to stress the importance of equitable women's representation and seek feedback on existing policies and priorities.	Regular internal communication directly from the leadership signals importance of goals set for women's representation to staff in the organization and serves as a useful feedback channel.			
Defined targets: Set clear, time-bound targets for women's representation at each level, particularly in promotions. Focus for banks in Sri Lanka differs from others in the region where many banks still need to define overall gender balance targets.	Setting detailed targets for women's representation throughout the employee journey (not just hiring) and communicating them can help banks sustain a pipeline of female talent.			
B. OWNERSHIP AND ACCOUNTABILITY IN SENIOR MANAGEMENT				
Diversity pulse: Identify clear and comprehensive metrics to gauge progress on goals for increase in women's representation. Regularly monitor these at the board level and take corrective action as needed.	Defining metrics and monitoring progress can lend structure and urgency to achieving equitable representation goals while helping organizations to correct course.			

SOLUTION DESCRIPTION	RATIONALE	COMMON PRACTICE	EMERGING PRACTICE	BOLD BETS
B. OWNERSHIP AND ACCOUNTABILITY IN SENIOR MANAGEMENT				
<p>Chief diversity officer: Designate an executive team member (for example, Chief human resources officer) to lead and steer efforts for greater women’s representation. Enable the diversity officer by committing specific budget and resources for efforts to improve women’s representation.</p>	<p>Appointing a senior diversity officer who builds ownership for equitable representation goals and amplifies the women’s representation agenda within the leadership.</p>			
<p>Diversity-linked compensation: Tie a part of the compensation structure or incentive package for the chief executive officer, other C-suite executives, and the board to achievement of diversity-linked targets set by the organization.</p>	<p>Linking executive compensation to achieving women’s representation targets can ensure it is part of leadership key performance indicators and that they accord it importance.</p>			
C. PROMOTION OF POSITIVE WORK NORMS BY LEADERS WHO ACT AS ROLE MODELS				
<p>Visible leader: Train senior leaders on the dos and don’ts of inclusive behaviors and around role-modelling key workplace norms (for example, encouraging employees to take rightful leaves without penalty, avoiding microaggressions at work, etc.) within their teams and rest of the organization.</p>	<p>Defining metrics and monitoring progress can lend structure and urgency to achieving equitable representation goals while helping organizations to correct course.</p>			
<p>Diversity sentinels: Train senior leaders to recognize shortcomings or biases in own behavior (for example, assigning critical projects to women, addressing microaggressions toward women) and organization’s approach to women’s representation (for example, addressing gaps in performance-evaluation processes). Build their capacity to address these observations within oneself and the wider organization.</p>	<p>Aligning senior leaders to prioritize greater equity for women can help shift toward a more inclusive culture and processes within an organization.</p>			

5.2 EQUITABLE AND SAFE WORKPLACES

SOLUTION DESCRIPTION	RATIONALE	COMMON PRACTICE	EMERGING PRACTICE	BOLD BETS
D. INCLUSIVE HIRING AND RETENTION				
<p>Fair Hiring Practices: Revise hiring approach to be more intentional in hiring women. Unlike other countries, fewer banks reported that they take specific measures to recruit more women. Make the recruiting process more equitable by using a diverse interview panel for senior hires and training interviewers to protect against their biases around women’s ability to manage senior roles.</p>	<p>Establishing a diverse recruiter panel and providing anti-bias training reduces the chances of gender bias impacting the recruitment process.</p>			
<p>Gender-anonymized job roles: Remove any explicit or implicit gender-linked references from role descriptions for internal and external job postings as well as from curricula vitae and applications received for job postings to prevent recruiter bias.</p>	<p>Eliminating gender references in role descriptions prevents recruiters from associating job requirements with a certain gender and encourages more candidates to apply.</p>			
<p>Returnship Programs: Launch dedicated recruitment programs aimed at hiring women who took career breaks and support them via training and upskilling to relaunch their careers at the organization.</p>	<p>Instituting a structured program can enable a smooth return to the workforce for women who have opted for a career break and can help firms retain potential female leaders.</p>			
E. TAILORED PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT TO UNLEASH EMPLOYEE POTENTIAL				
<p>Catalyst for her: Launch and tailor training, coaching, and mentoring programs provided to all employees. Design these programs to meet the unique needs of female employees at different levels.</p>	<p>Conducting in-depth needs assessment for women’s professional development can uncover gaps in the design and access of existing programs.</p>			

SOLUTION DESCRIPTION	RATIONALE	COMMON PRACTICE	EMERGING PRACTICE	BOLD BETS
E. TAILORED PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT TO UNLEASH EMPLOYEE POTENTIAL				
New horizons for her: Create rotation programs for emerging women leaders to provide them exposure to critical projects and functions.	Rotation programs ensure that women are exposed to different lines of business and have the breadth of experience needed in leadership roles.			
Women for women: Create an employee resource group (ERG) for women employees to network and seek peer support (for example, peer-led trainings, fireside chats with female leaders).	An ERG can help women seek advice from colleagues who have faced similar challenges and feel like part of a community.			
25th hour: Launch platforms or initiatives that can be leveraged by women experiencing time poverty during the day to provide relevant learning content in easily digestible formats and channels (such as podcasts, short articles, etc.)	Providing custom learning content in innovative formats assists employees in skilling up without compromising on personal commitments (especially in roles with long working hours or when they have care responsibilities).			
Sponsored by: Create a program to connect high-potential employees, especially women, to senior leaders who can serve as active sponsors and pave the path to progression for the employees they are sponsoring.	Sponsorship provides a platform for women to highlight their contributions and a spokesperson who can make a case for their progression.			
F. REEVALUATING PERFORMANCE EVALUATIONS				
On second thought: Train managers to recognize and counter individual biases (for example, anchoring on visibility or traditional notions of leadership) when providing evaluations. Also build their capacity to engage female subordinates and channel clear feedback to them.	Training managers to be aware of gendered inequities in employees' career journey improves the quality of manager coaching and mentoring, giving an employee the best chance to progress.			



SOLUTION DESCRIPTION	RATIONALE	COMMON PRACTICE	EMERGING PRACTICE	BOLD BETS
F. RE-EVALUATING PERFORMANCE EVALUATIONS				
<p>Transparent evaluations: Set and communicate standardized evaluation metrics against which employees' performance can be assessed. Introduce other processes, such as seeking 360-degree feedback, making senior management promotion decisions by a committee, reviewing all promotions by a diversity monitor, etc.</p>	<p>Greater transparency as well as checks and balances in performance evaluation can help ensure evaluations are objective and prioritize merit.</p>			
<p>De-biasing merit: Undertake a review of evaluation ratings and their statistical correction to identify and remove inherent biases. Close the loop by providing feedback to individual managers/teams to bring greater accountability.</p>	<p>Statistical correction of performance ratings is increasingly becoming a global best practice and ensures that performance is objectively assessed.</p>			
G. EMPLOYEE ALLYSHIP FOR BIAS-FREE WORKPLACES				
<p>Inclusive us: Ensure all employees undergo mandatory annual trainings on gender sensitivity, gender diversity and inclusion policies, workplace behavior, and creating a culture of respect.</p>	<p>Ensuring mandatory annual trainings can ensure employees understand what are the firms' values/principles on gender, equip them to be more gender-sensitive, and set a norm for what is expected of employees.</p>			
<p>Speak up, speak out: Create a fear-free culture where employees feel confident of raising relevant issues (such as microaggressions within teams) for themselves as well as on behalf of their colleagues.</p>	<p>Empowering employees to voice concerns can help surface relevant issues that otherwise go unaddressed, keep the management accountable, and build greater trust in the organization.</p>			
<p>I support her: Provide trainings and avenues for male employees to explore how they can be better allies within their teams (for example, ensuring women get credit for their contributions, creating space for women to speak up during meetings, calling out other employees' microaggressions, etc.)</p>	<p>Male allyship is being recognized globally as a best practice to create a more inclusive, collaborative, and safer workplace for women and indeed all employees.</p>			



SOLUTION DESCRIPTION	RATIONALE	COMMON PRACTICE	EMERGING PRACTICE	BOLD BETS
H. EQUITABLE SUPPORT FOR WORK-LIFE BALANCE				
<p>Normalize flexi work: Pilot flexible working programs (for example, work from home, flexi hours, etc.) or institutionalize practices, if already present, at least for new parents and other relevant segments (such as employees with care responsibilities). Normalize accessing such programs (for example, by encouraging senior leaders to participate).</p>	<p>Flexiwork policies provide greater agency to the employee to manage their professional and personal commitments, improving productivity in many cases.</p>			
<p>On-site childcare: Provision of facilities (for example, in-house daycare, lactation rooms, etc.) to help employees manage their responsibilities of parenting alongside work commitments.</p>	<p>On-site childcare options can help working parents with young children come to work without concerns around managing care and can lead to better productivity.</p>			
<p>Bank parent: Create an ERG for employees (of all genders) who are about to become or have become parents to share access to parenting networks, peer advice, etc.</p>	<p>ERGs can help employees better manage the transition to parenthood and provides employees with the support to balance their care and professional work.</p>			
<p>Balance for well-being: Create a program that engages employees and supports them in achieving better wellbeing through stress management support and other well-being resources.</p>	<p>Stress management and other wellbeing resources can help employees better manage the demands of their roles with their personal commitments.</p>			
<p>Unrestricted hybrid work: Transition to hybrid work which allows employees to work remotely with or without some mandatory office presence. Launch this for all functions where remote work is possible without any age or segment restrictions (for example, not limited to new parents).</p>	<p>Remote work is proven to be effective in helping employees strike the right balance with personal responsibilities and contribute more to work.</p>			



SOLUTION DESCRIPTION	RATIONALE	COMMON PRACTICE	EMERGING PRACTICE	BOLD BETS
H. EQUITABLE SUPPORT FOR WORK-LIFE BALANCE				
Bring your plus one: Pilot a program for spousal engagement that helps spouses/partners better understand the employees' work and feel pride in it. The program could also help them see the importance of their support and help shift their attitudes over time. This is especially relevant for Sri Lanka where social/family expectations emerged as a key driver of women's sub-optimal experience.	Spousal support helps employees navigate social expectations around care work and strike a better balance with their work lives.			
Caring for working parents: Pilot new ideas to support parents (for example, childcare allowance, partnerships with daycare centers, allowance for a caregiver to accompany them on official trips, mandatory paternity leave) and scale ideas that resonate most with parents/employees.	Childcare support is a critical identified need and can help working parents manage their care responsibilities better alongside work.			



SOLUTION DESCRIPTION	RATIONALE	COMMON PRACTICE	EMERGING PRACTICE	BOLD BETS
I. SAFE WORKING ENVIRONMENT				
Travel assistance: Provisions to ensure safety of women during travel (after-hours transport services, apps for emergency alert systems during outstation visits).	Women employees can travel back and forth safely between work and home. Being less concerned about safety can also help them be more visible at work.			
Confidential vigilance initiative: Focus on demonstrating zero tolerance and inspiring confidence by creating a platform that allows employees to anonymously report incidents of harm.	Demonstrating a strong stance against sexual harassment and bullying increases the trust employees have in the bank's processes and creates a safer working environment for all employees.			
Unequivocal trust: Build trust in organization's commitment to act on instances of harm by regularly communicating channels available to employees to seek redressal and printing/communicating annual progress on actions taken to promote safety.	Building trust is key to ensuring employees step forth to report incidences of harm—which may otherwise be underreported—and seek redressal without fearing backlash.			

5.3 ENGAGED ECOSYSTEM

SOLUTION DESCRIPTION	RATIONALE	COMMON PRACTICE	EMERGING PRACTICE	BOLD BETS
J. AMBITIOUS GOALS FOR WOMEN'S REPRESENTATION AND VISION FOR THE INDUSTRY				
<p>Zero-tolerance workplace: Enhance policies and guidelines for workplace safety by covering prevention of sexual harassment, bullying, etc. and mandating set-up of necessary mechanisms to ensure compliance with these policies/guidelines.</p>	<p>Communicating a strong, sector-level stance against sexual harassment and bullying can compel banks to implement stronger measures and make banking workplaces safer for employees.</p>			
<p>Industry diversity targets: Set policy targets or guidelines that push banks to aim for greater women's representation at different levels and achieving them in a time-bound manner.</p>	<p>Industry-level targets create a system of public accountability for individual banks. Banks that perform well on these targets benefit commercially (in a competitive environment) from better access to women applicants.</p>			
<p>Inclusion Leadership: Cross-country collaboration for region's regulators, ministries, and other industry stakeholders to align on and set a target for the region.</p>	<p>Collaboration across regulators can help share best practices and ensure greater action from regulators if they sign up for targets on an international stage.</p>			
<p>Empirical policy hub: Generate research and a strong body of evidence that helps policy design and advocacy efforts to modify national policies or helps banks to commit to revising policies around paternity leave, flexi-work, mandatory transfers, etc.</p>	<p>Evidence-backed research can help generate an ecosystem shift toward greater equity for women and a better balance of professional and personal responsibilities.</p>			

SOLUTION DESCRIPTION	RATIONALE	COMMON PRACTICE	EMERGING PRACTICE	BOLD BETS
K. TECHNICAL AND FINANCIAL SUPPORT FOR BANKS TO IMPROVE WOMEN'S REPRESENTATION				
<p>Diversity center of excellence: Create a knowledge hub that synthesizes evidence on women's leadership and provides resources (such as best policy practices, toolkits on monitoring diversity internally, etc.) for banks to access. Consider convenings or facilitating knowledge exchange between different institutions including the region's regulators, banks, etc.</p>	<p>A common, open library of knowledge allows all banks and their leadership to learn from each other and from other industries and countries that have successfully implemented programs for greater women's representation.</p>			
<p>Project-linked funding: Create a grant fund or provide subsidies for banks to implement employee support solutions (for example, on-site childcare, creation of training platforms, etc.) to support women employees.</p>	<p>A fund to implement equity initiatives removes any cost barriers banks may have in providing adequate support to women employees.</p>			
<p>Concessional funding: Step beyond assessing women's representation as an investment screening criteria to providing lending rate concessions and cheaper capital to banks (for example, by lowering borrowing rates) that meet or exceed certain diversity criteria.</p>	<p>Providing banks with a commercial incentive to be explicit about women's representation goals can accelerate the progress toward a more balanced representation of women at all levels.</p>			
<p>Behavioral lab: Business research group that runs microexperiments around nudges and behavioral interventions online and at work can create more inclusive behavior. Prepare a repository to share or help bank deploy comms and nudging strategies to strengthen programs.</p>	<p>Collecting empirical evidence for policy recommendations can help design locally adapted equity initiatives.</p>			
<p>Gender advisory network: Permanent group of consultants associated with the central bank or the industry body that acts as a resource for banks to draw upon for advice, support with data analysis, monitoring systems, etc. to design and implement initiatives for greater women's representation.</p>	<p>Convening an advisory group provides banks with the necessary expertise to design programs for greater women's representation more effectively and avoids unintended negative consequences.</p>			

SOLUTION DESCRIPTION	RATIONALE	COMMON PRACTICE	EMERGING PRACTICE	BOLD BETS
L. NETWORKS AND SUPPORT FOR EMERGING WOMEN LEADERS				
<p>Women leaders bootcamp: Create a cross-organization structured training program for high potential women employees to build leadership skills and equip them with tools and networks to advance careers.</p>	<p>Leadership training in the absence of management trainee programs for women can develop necessary leadership skills.</p>			
<p>Women bankers association: Create an association of women bankers that provides members with networking opportunities and mentoring from industry stalwarts in the country. The association can also discuss barriers to progression for women and advocate for change.</p>	<p>A cross-organizational banking association bridges the gap women face in networking and receiving mentorship in the absence of such programs within the banks.</p>			
M. INDUSTRY-WIDE ACCOUNTABILITY FOR EQUITABLE WOMEN'S REPRESENTATION				
<p>High-visibility signaling: Launch a series of high-profile, high-visibility communications anchored by the industry to publicly signal commitment to workplace diversity and women's progress in the industry.</p>	<p>Public commitments, especially written commitments, create public accountability for banks to achieve targets set for women's representation and inspire trust among employees about the bank's priorities.</p>			
<p>Gender taskforce: Panel that includes HR representatives and DEI experts who recommend and co-opt pathways for the industry, monitor and report progress, and ensure collaboration for all banks to commit to women's representation targets.</p>	<p>Body with HR professionals can serve as a good forum for banks to collaborate on efforts to improve women's representation, co-opt into targets, etc.</p>			
<p>Bank employee diversity index: Mandate collection of key gender disaggregated workforce metrics (such as employee breakdown by levels and gender, promotion rates, hiring rates, etc.). Publish these on a periodic basis to allow public and researchers to access these data and as a signal to banks.</p>	<p>Mandated reporting enforces tracking and external disclosure of gender-disaggregated data through an industry authority to monitor progress toward greater women's representation and equity.</p>			



ENDNOTES

- ¹ The study also covered the non-banking financial companies sector in India. The results of the study in India are not covered in this report.
- ² International Labour Organization (ILO). 2019. "The Business Case for Change." https://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/-/dgreports/-/dcomm/-/publ/documents/publication/wcms_700953.pdf.
- ³ *ibid.*
- ⁴ Credit Suisse Research. 2016. "The CS Gender 3000: The Reward for Change." <https://www.credit-suisse.com/media/assets/corporate/docs/about-us/research/publications/csri-gender-3000.pdf>.
- ⁵ Yu, Bing. Mary Jane Lenard, E. Anne York, and Shengxiong Wu. (2015). "Women Leaders in Banking and Bank Risk." In Proceedings of World Business Research Conference, Hotel Novotel Xin Qiao, Beijing, China, June 11-13, 2015. <https://studylib.net/doc/13320687/proceedings-of-world-business-research-conference>.
- ⁶ Credit Suisse Research. 2016. "The CS Gender 3000: The Reward for Change." <https://www.credit-suisse.com/media/assets/corporate/docs/about-us/research/publications/csri-gender-3000.pdf>.
- ⁷ ILO. 2019. "The Business Case for Change." https://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/-/dgreports/-/dcomm/-/publ/documents/publication/wcms_700953.pdf.
- ⁸ Based on workforce composition of 17 surveyed banks in Bangladesh, Nepal, and Sri Lanka for 2022.
- ⁹ Ferrary, Michel. 2017. "Gender diversity in the banking industry An international comparison." Skema Business School. <https://www.skema.edu/skema-news/research-gender-diversity-in-banking-industry>.
- ¹⁰ Data based on workforce composition of surveyed banks (five banks) in Nepal as of December 31, 2022; A 2022 article not associated with this research indicated women's representation in private commercial banks is 40 percent. Source: Pande, Sabin Jung, and Ayusha Chalise. 2022. "Women in Banking Leadership: A Grim Reality." The Farsight. <https://farsightnepal.com/news/65>.
- ¹¹ Data based on workforce composition of surveyed banks in Sri Lanka (six banks) as of December 31, 2022. Industry-level data via external sources were not available for Sri Lanka.
- ¹² Data based on workforce composition of surveyed banks in Bangladesh (six banks) as of December 31, 2022; The central bank's report on women's representation in the banking sector released in 2022 stated that women represent 16 percent of all employees in the banking sector in Bangladesh. Source: Bangladesh Bank. 2022. "Gender Equality Report of Banks & Fis." <https://www.bb.org.bd/pub/halfyearly/sfd/geneqjul-dec2022.pdf>.
- ¹³ All similar findings that report employee responses/perceptions are derived from the employee survey rolled out as part of the research effort, unless specified otherwise.
- ¹⁴ Official Monetary and Financial Institutions Forum. 2022. "Gender Balance Index 2022." <https://www.omff.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/04/GBI-2022.pdf>.
- ¹⁵ Here and elsewhere in the report, when reporting results from the survey, we define entry-level roles to mean non-managerial and junior management roles.
- ¹⁶ Data based on workforce composition of surveyed banks in Sri Lanka as of December 31, 2022. An independent research paper published in 2018 indicates women hold 25 percent of middle management and 21 percent of senior management positions in the banking sector in the country. Source: Jayatilaka, Wijaya, and Shamalka Uduwella. 2018. "Impact of Glass Ceiling Factors on Women Career Development in Banking Sector: Evidence from Non-state Banks in Colombo District." 15th International Conference on Business Management. <http://dr.lib.sjp.ac.lk/bitstream/handle/123456789/8246/Impact%20of%20Glass%20Ceiling%20Factors%20on%20Women%20Career%20Development%20in%20Banking%20Sector%20evidence%20from%20Non-state%20Banks%20in%20Colombo%20District.pdf?sequence=1>.
- ¹⁷ The relevance is based on the most prominent challenges observed in each country and are not relative to each other. The prominence in each country is assigned based on the findings from the employee survey (for example, the extent of difference between responses of men and women on sociocultural expectations or professional development).
- ¹⁸ All similar findings that report on the presence of a certain policy or practice among banks are derived from the HR survey rolled out as part of the research effort, unless specified otherwise.
- ¹⁹ Based on the score provided to each country's legal framework for women's economic participation as covered in Women, Business and the Law. 2023. World Bank. <https://wbl.worldbank.org/en/wbl>.
- ²⁰ Credit Suisse Research. 2016. "The CS Gender 3000: The Reward for Change." <https://www.credit-suisse.com/media/assets/corporate/docs/about-us/research/publications/csri-gender-3000.pdf>.
- ²¹ Yu, Bing. Mary Jane Lenard, E. Anne York, and Shengxiong Wu. (2015). "Women Leaders in Banking and Bank Risk." In Proceedings of World Business Research Conference, Hotel Novotel Xin Qiao, Beijing, China, June 11-13, 2015. <https://studylib.net/doc/13320687/proceedings-of-world-business-research-conference>.
- ²² ILO. 2019. "The Business Case for Change." https://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/-/dgreports/-/dcomm/-/publ/documents/publication/wcms_700953.pdf.

ENDNOTES

²³ The study also covered non-banking financial companies in India. Findings for the India phase of the study are not covered by this report.

²⁴ Refer Annexure 2 for a list of these organizations.

²⁵ Data reported on policies and bank's systems are based on the responses of these 17 banks.

²⁶ In the rest of the report, results quoted from the HR survey are based on data from these 17 banks. The phrase "surveyed banks" when reporting the findings refers to these 17 banks. Employee survey findings or results pertaining to employee's perceptions are based on data received from employees of all 20 banks.

²⁷ ILO. 2022. "Labor Force Participation Rate (Percentage of Population Ages 15+) (Modelled ILO Estimate)." <https://www.ilo.org/shinyapps/bulkexplorer7/>.

²⁸ ILO. 2022. "Economic Activity (ISIC) 64 - Financial Service Activities, Except Insurance and Pension Funding." <https://www.ilo.org/shinyapps/bulkexplorer7/>.

²⁹ *ibid.*

³⁰ *ibid.*

³¹ Data based on workforce composition of surveyed banks in respective countries as of December 31, 2022.

³² Data based on the representation of women in new recruitments for the year 2022 in surveyed banks in respective countries.

³³ Ferrary, Michel. 2017. "Gender diversity in the banking industry An international comparison." Skema Business School. <https://www.credit-suisse.com/media/assets/corporate/docs/about-us/research/publications/csri-gender-3000.pdf>.

³⁴ Data based on workforce composition and new recruitments in surveyed banks in Bangladesh for 2022.

³⁵ Data based on workforce composition of surveyed banks in Bangladesh. Women occupy 9 percent of senior management roles in Bangladesh as per the central bank report released in 2022. Source: Bangladesh Bank. 2022. "Gender Equality Report of Banks & FIs." <https://www.bb.org.bd/pub/halfyearly/sfd/geneqtjul-dec2022.pdf>.

³⁶ Data based on workforce composition of surveyed banks in respective countries. Women constitute 21 percent of senior management roles in the banking sector in Sri Lanka as per an independent research paper published in 2018. Source: Jayatilaka, Wijaya, and Shamalka Uduwella. 2018. "Impact of Glass Ceiling Factors on Women Career Development in Banking Sector: Evidence from Non-state Banks in Colombo District." 15th International Conference on Business Management. <http://dr.lib.sjp.ac.lk/bitstream/handle/123456789/8246/Impact%20of%20Glass%20Ceiling%20Factors%20on%20Women%20Career%20Development%20in%20Banking%20Sector%20evidence%20from%20Non-state%20Banks%20in%20Colombo%20District.pdf?sequence=1>; Women constitute 9 percent of senior management roles in the banking sector in Nepal as per an article published in 2022. Source: Pande, Sabin Jung, and Ayusha Chalise. 2022. "Women in Banking Leadership: A Grim Reality." The Farsight. <https://farsightnepal.com/news/65>.

³⁷ Dhakal, Pabitra. (2021). "Board of Directors of 8 'A' Class Banks Void of Women." Nepal Press. <https://english.nepalpress.com/2021/03/26/board-of-directors-of-8-a-class-banks-lacking-women/>; Data collated from official websites of all commercial banks listed on Central Bank's website as of July 6, 2023.

³⁸ Economy Next. 2019. "Women on Sri Lankan Listed Firm Boards to Be Mandatory: Budget 2019." <https://economynext.com/women-on-sri-lankan-listed-firm-boards-to-be-mandatory-budget2019-13262/>; Data collated from official websites of regional banks mentioned on Central Bank's website as of June 7, 2023; information was only available for 13 banks.

³⁹ Based on employees responding "strongly agree" (in the survey rolled out in study banks) to the statement, "In the future, I want to move to a senior role with greater responsibility in my current organization/industry."

⁴⁰ Data based on workforce composition of surveyed banks as of December 31, 2022.

⁴¹ ILO. 2020. "Labour Force Participation Rate by Sex, Age, and Marital Status (percent)." <https://www.ilo.org/shinyapps/bulkexplorer7/>.

⁴² The difference between the responses of men and women is not statistically significant for a 95 percent confidence interval for training.

⁴³ Challenges such as restrictions around mobility affect the ability of some employees, including women, to pursue such opportunities (refer Section 3.3). However, this may not be applicable for all employees and women; those who may not face such restrictions are often precluded from consideration for such projects.

⁴⁴ The difference between the responses of men and women is not statistically significant for a 95 percent confidence interval for childcare responsibilities for Sri Lanka.

ENDNOTES

⁴⁵ Bangladesh Bank. 2018. "BRPD Circular No. 15: Regarding Employee Transfer and Mandatory Annual Leave." <https://www.bb.org.bd/mediaroom/circulars/brpd/oct252018brpd15.pdf>.

⁴⁶ Bangladesh Labour Act No. 42 of 2006 requires all employers with 40+ women to provide childcare facilities.

⁴⁷ Correll, Shelley J., and Caroline Simard. 2016. "Research: Vague Feedback Is Holding Women Back." <https://hbr.org/2016/04/research-vague-feedback-is-holding-women-back>.

⁴⁸ Fiske, Susan T., and Steven L. Neuberg. 1990. "A Continuum of Impression Formation, from Category-based to Individuating Processes: Influences of Information and Motivation on Attention and Interpretation." *Advances in Experimental Social Psychology* 23: 1–74. <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/abs/pii/S0065260108603172?via%3Dihub>.

⁴⁹ Higgins, E. Tory, and John A. Bargh. (1987). "Social Cognition and Social Perception." *Annual Review of Psychology* 38:369–425. <https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev.ps.38.020187.002101>.

⁵⁰ Dennis, Michael Robert, and Adrienne Dennis Kunkel. 2004. "Perceptions of Men, Women, and CEOs: The Effects of Gender Identity." *Social Behavior and Personality: An International Journal* 32, no. 2: 155–72. <https://doi.org/10.2224/sbp.2004.32.2.155>.

⁵¹ Bullying behavior at work is when an individual intentionally uses aggressive or unreasonable behavior or comments to hurt or isolate an employee; for example, through hurtful jokes, teasing, scolding or rude dismissal, yelling, or shouting.

⁵² The difference between the responses of men and women is not statistically significant for a 95 percent confidence interval.

⁵³ The difference between the responses of men and women is not statistically significant for a 95 percent confidence interval.

⁵⁴ World Bank. 2023. "Women, Business and the Law". <https://openknowledge.worldbank.org/server/api/core/bitstreams/b60c615b-09e7-46e4-84c1-bd5f4ab88903/content>.

⁵⁵ *ibid.*

⁵⁶ *ibid.*

⁵⁷ *ibid.*

⁵⁸ *ibid.*

⁵⁹ IFC. 2019. "Tackling Childcare in Bangladesh." <https://www.ifc.org/content/dam/ifc/doc/mgrt/ifc-tackling-childcare-in-bangladesh-final-report.pdf>.

⁶⁰ World Bank. 2022. "Toward Available, Affordable, and Quality Childcare in South Asia." *Women, Business and The Law 2022*. <https://documents1.worldbank.org/curated/en/09984341223229520/pdf/IDUoeaa3deb5043ca048cco4d8oda019092a3ao.pdf>.

⁶¹ Common practices are defined as solutions or practices being recommended by more than 50 percent of the banks or at least two industry bodies or regulators in the region.

⁶² Refer Annexure 3 for a list of these practices.

⁶³ Solutions being implemented by more than 25 percent of the banks but less than 50 percent of them are identified as an emerging practice while other solutions being implemented by less than 25 percent of the banks as well as promising solutions being implemented in other industries in the region are classified as bold bets.



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