



Enhancing digital skills for women to thrive Collective Impact on Future of Work in Bangladesh



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List of Abbreviations

AI	Artificial Intelligence
BGMEA	Bangladesh Garment Manufacturers and Exporters Association
CAIF	Circular Apparel Innovation Factory
C-Cab	Center for Communication Action Bangladesh
DFS	Digital Financial Services
DPoA	Doha Programme of Action
EIS	Employment Injury Scheme
GEAR	Gender Equality and Returns
iDE	International Development Enterprises
LDCs	Least Developed Countries
LEED	Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design
LNOB	Leaving No One Behind
MFS	Mobile Financial Services
BB	Bangladesh Bank
NGO	Non-Governmental Organization
RMG	Ready-Made Garment
SDG	Sustainable Development Goal
SSNP	Social Safety Net Programme
UNCDF	United Nations Capital Development Fund

Foreword

The **ready-made garment (RMG)** industry is a critical pillar of the Bangladeshi economy, providing millions with employment and contributing significantly to export revenue. Women comprise a substantial portion of the RMG workforce, with approximately 2.6 million employed in the sector. Their contribution is vital to the nation's economic growth and prosperity.

Yet, despite their significant role, many workers in the RMG sector, particularly women, face a pervasive digital divide that limits their access to essential digital financial services and hinders their economic independence. This exclusion stems from a combination of factors, including low digital literacy, limited access to technology, and social norms that often restrict women's access to financial information and resources.

Recognizing these challenges, UNCDF, as a part of its broader effort of Leaving No One Behind in the Digital Era, aligned and partnered with the H&M Foundation to contribute to the 'Oporajita – Collective Impact on Future of Work in Bangladesh' project. Under this initiative, UNCDF focused on empowering women garment workers by providing them with the skills and knowledge needed to navigate the dynamic world of digital finance along with the digital finance products required to thrive in an increasingly digital economy. This will help ensure women workers' continued contribution to the RMG sector.

This project, implemented in major RMG clusters across the Dhaka division, has been instrumental in addressing multiple challenges. In partnership with key stakeholders, the project has successfully identified gaps in the digital finance ecosystem and developed sustainable business models to expand the use of digital financial products and social protection services by RMG workers.

A key project component has been collaborating with four commercial partners to develop and deliver mobile digital solutions that increase financial inclusion and empowerment for women working in the RMG sector. These initiatives have focused on providing digital and financial literacy training, digital tools, and financial services tailored to the needs of women workers. The project has also worked to improve access to existing welfare and social security schemes among women garment workers and their families. This has included efforts to enhance the policy environment and promote public-private dialogue to enable effective delivery systems for social protection payments.

This report disseminates the project's intervention strategies and lessons learned and highlights the crucial role digital skills play in enhancing the financial capabilities and overall well-being of women RMG workers. It shows how, by fostering digital inclusion and financial literacy, women working in the RMG sector can be empowered to achieve greater economic independence and participate more fully in the digital economy. The insights and recommendations presented provide a valuable roadmap for stakeholders across the RMG industry, including policymakers, employers, and development partners. By working together, we can create a more inclusive and equitable future for women RMG workers, ensuring they have the tools and opportunities they need to thrive in the digital age.

- Maria Perdomo, Regional Investment Team Lead - Asia and Pacific Region of UNCDF

Foreword

The H&M Foundation is supporting the textile industry to halve its greenhouse gas emissions every decade until 2050, while promoting a just transition for people and the planet. Through our Bangladeshi Collective Impact programme, Oporajita, we are collaborating with partners to ensure a fair and inclusive transition for women garment workers into a low-carbon economy during the Fourth Industrial Revolution.

At this time, the livelihoods of women garment workers are especially vulnerable as many lack the skills needed to adapt to new technologies, including literacy. Deep-rooted stereotypes in Bangladesh that suggest women cannot work with advanced technology or hold leadership positions also pose challenges. Therefore, skills training alone is insufficient.

Oporajita tackles harmful gender norms by implementing perception and attitude change activities at factory, household and community levels. By changing the narrative, Oporajita helps shift power dynamics, amplifying the voices of women workers and providing platforms for them to share their stories, challenges and aspirations.

The work of UNCDF is crucial because it ensures that women workers gain digital and financial literacy, especially in areas like financial well-being and data privacy and security. Beyond simple digital payments, supporting inclusive and innovative digital finance solutions tailored to the needs of women workers and their families can be transformative. Equipped with digital and financial literacy, and related skills, knowledge and behaviors, women workers can experience greater participation in the fast-growing digital economy, increased resilience, and reduced poverty. By working together, women boost their confidence, enhance their decision-making skills, and develop effective strategies to tackle systemic inequalities.

We are deeply grateful for the collaboration with UNCDF and its valuable contributions to Oporajita. With the support of UNCDF, all partners have enjoyed a continuing transfer of knowledge about the gaps in the digital finance ecosystem and sustainable business models for better utilization of digital financial products and social protection services by women workers. UNCDF's comprehensive data and analysis on the status of garment workers regarding digital financial literacy, financial products and services, and social protection programs has greatly benefited the collective understanding.

This report shares the lessons learned by UNCDF after the first phase in Oporajita, emphasizing the importance of digital skills in improving the financial abilities and well-being of women garment workers. It shows that by promoting digital inclusion and financial literacy, women workers can gain greater economic independence as they engage more substantially in the digital economy, which is a crucial component in their emancipation.

We look forward to continuing cooperation with UNCDF in phase 2 of Oporajita (2025-2027) and enhancing our efforts in climate mitigation and adaptation. We will continue to require the industry to change policies, practices and resource flows, and hope to see additional stakeholders working closely together in long-term initiatives with reinforcing activities. To take the necessary giant leap, we need to tackle inequality and poverty, and ensure full gender empowerment while transitioning to clean energy.

- Charlotte Brunnström, Program Director, Collective Action, H&M Foundation

Executive summary

Ready-made Garment (RMG) manufacturing remains a vital component of Bangladesh's economic framework, driving export earnings and providing employment to millions of men and women. While the sector has contributed to women's economic empowerment in Bangladesh, gender-based social norms and disparities in financial literacy and access to digital and financial services limit women's involvement in financial decision-making, exacerbating their marginalization and hindering their financial stability and independence.

The strong growth of Bangladesh's digital mobile communication services, including digital financial services (DFS), provides an opportunity to empower women RMG workers. Despite infrastructure, financial and cultural limitations, as well as digital literacy gaps and cybersecurity risks, DFS – encompassing mobile financial services (MFS), internet banking and digital payment platforms – can enhance financial inclusion and boost economic development.

The 'Collective Impact on Future of Work in Bangladesh' project ran from January 2023 to December 2024. Part of UNCDF's Leaving No One Behind (LNOB) in the Digital Era initiative, the project worked with partners to enhance financial independence and improve access to social protection schemes for RMG factory workers, particularly women. Implemented in major RMG clusters in the Dhaka division, the project identified gaps in the digital finance ecosystem and developed self-sustaining business models that expanded the use of digital financial products and social protection services by women RMG workers.

The project had two main components:

Collaboration with four commercial partners to enhance access to mobile digital solutions to increase the financial inclusion and empowerment of women RMG workers. These initiatives, implemented in 30 factories, offered digital tools and financial services designed for women along with digital and financial literacy training.

01.

Collaboration with an industry association to develop and deliver a communications campaign to increase awareness and uptake of social protection and welfare services by women RMG workers. Activities included outreach and capacity building with garment workers, training for union representatives, and engagement with factory social welfare teams.

02.

Aligned with UNCDF's global strategy of prioritizing partnerships to drive systemic change in financial inclusion and economic development, the project collaborated with 15 partners at the institutional level through H&M Foundation's 'Oporajita' project. This initiative works to support a socially inclusive and environmentally sustainable textile industry through skills training, women's empowerment, and initiatives to prepare for a digitalized and automated future.


At the organizational level, UNCDF collaborated with four commercial partners to develop and deliver digital financial solutions and training aimed at women workers:



AponTech Ltd provided access to credit and discounted household essentials through a digital application and at physical stores in factories.



Bank Asia PLC developed a mobile application to enhance digital and financial literacy and improve access to digital financial tools.



BRAC Bank PLC, a subsidiary of the development organization BRAC, introduced a digital microlending solution paired with financial literacy training.



Zaynax Health Ltd combined digital and in-person training to offer health education and improved access to health insurance.

Separately, partnership with the Bangladesh Knitwear Manufacturers and Exporters Association (BKMEA) delivered an awareness campaign that promoted access to social protection and welfare services for RMG workers.

These partnerships brought together diverse expertise, resources and networks to address systemic and individual barriers to financial inclusion. By sharing risks, resources and perspectives, stakeholders developed innovative, scalable and sustainable solutions that addressed both immediate needs and long-term challenges. Project partnerships allowed financial, technical and human resources to be shared, increasing the efficiency and reach of interventions. They also strengthened alignment with local and global priorities, enhanced credibility, and created a foundation for embedding gender-sensitive financial services and social protections within the sector's socio-economic framework. A collaborative approach ensured more significant impact and resilience.

UNCDF provided critical financial and strategic services to mitigate the risks associated with investments targeting low-income, marginalized populations, supporting the delivery of digital financial solutions and knowledge to an underserved group. By providing resources, technical assistance and strategic guidance, UNCDF contributed to operational stability and the potential to drive systemic change, enhancing sustainability and scalability, and encouraging innovation by de-risking investments with the aim of developing a pipeline of investable projects. Uniting diverse stakeholders through a shared vision and joint working ensured local ownership and alignment with global commitments such as the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), enhanced credibility and legitimacy, amplified impact, and helped build innovative and resilient social and technological systems.

At the conclusion of project activities on 31 December 2024:

AponTech's initiative had equipped 9,001 RMG workers (54 percent women) with improved decision-making abilities regarding financial solutions, and 3,992 (41 percent women) demonstrated improved health and nutrition habits.

Bank Asia had reached 61,807 RMG workers (71 percent women) through promotional activities and onboarded/registered 5,053 (78 percent women). In all, 4,548 workers (80 percent women) had completed the training, and 4,207 (77 percent women) had completed the training with passing test scores.

BRAC Bank had equipped 4,300 RMG workers (30 percent women) with improved financial literacy.

Zaynax Health had onboarded/registered 50,996 RMG workers (79 percent women), with 38,516 (80 percent women) completing the training and 15,390 (82 percent women) completing the training with passing test scores. In addition, 1,649 RMG workers (98 percent women) were converted to Zaynax customers.

Project implementation faced multiple challenges due to widespread and continuous political unrest, labor protests, and economic instability. Security risks, including curfews, restricted factory access and delayed and disrupted activities, required operations to be scaled back and adjustments made, such as shifting endeavors from factories into the community. Official internet shutdowns further hindered day-to-day communications and the delivery of training material and digital solutions, undermining the reliability of services. Broader disruptions, including energy shortages and falling global demand, strained the entire RMG sector, distracting factory management concerned about business stability and sustainability, and workers concerned about wages and job security.

Structural and systemic challenges also impeded progress. Gendered norms and limited smartphone ownership among women workers, due to the high cost of devices relative to their wages, create significant barriers to accessing digital services. Low education levels and heavy workloads among workers further compounded difficulties in delivering effective training, requiring repeated sessions, revised content, and one-on-one mentoring. Compliance with banking regulations regarding digital microlending and consumer protection also delayed roll-out and limited some initiatives. Overall, persisting gendered social norms restricted women's autonomy and challenged the project's goals.

Nevertheless, the project demonstrated the effectiveness of interventions sensitive to individual needs, including gender-specific group-based activities that generate mutual support and shared learning. Collaborative efforts among women build confidence, strengthen decision-making, and amplify collective agency, creating viable pathways to address systemic inequalities. Future initiatives should plan to navigate practical challenges, such as securing the willing and enthusiastic participation of manufacturers and factory owners. Outreach in home or community settings offers an alternative approach but risks becoming a time-intensive door-to-door activity and still needs to take account of time and energy constraints on working women.

The project highlights the importance of building strong relationships among stakeholders, including manufacturers, development actors, and women workers, while emphasizing the private sector's key role in expanding digital services. Strategic investments and targeted interventions to close the digital divide, address gender norms, and build digital confidence are essential. While technology alone cannot resolve systemic challenges, enhanced digital access and literacy will deliver far-reaching benefits for women workers, including improved access to health, education and welfare services. Collaborative efforts can transform the RMG sector into a model of gender-inclusive industrial development, ensuring disadvantaged populations are not left behind in the digital era.

Introduction

The 'Collective Impact on Future of Work in Bangladesh' project ran from January 2023 to December 2024. Part of UNCDF's LNOB in the Digital Era initiative, the project worked to enhance financial independence and improve access to social protection schemes for RMG workers, particularly women. Implemented in major production clusters in the Dhaka division (Savar, Gazipur, Narayanganj), the project was designed to identify gaps in the digital finance ecosystem and develop self-sustaining business models to improve the use of digital financial products and social protection services by RMG workers.

A cornerstone of the national economy

The RMG sector in Bangladesh stands as a cornerstone of the national economy, significantly contributing to employment, export earnings and overall economic growth. In 2024, the sector employed approximately 4.4 million individuals – including over 2.6 million women – in more than 5,000 factories, underscoring the industry's pivotal role in promoting women participation in the workforce and women's economic empowerment.

In 2023, Bangladesh's annual RMG exports reached an estimated value of US\$47 billion, a significant increase from \$42.6 billion in the previous year, positioning the country as the second largest exporter of ready-made garments globally. With the United States the largest export destination, accounting for around 21.5 percent of total national exports, the sector is growing robustly, providing approximately 80 percent of national export earnings.

The global textile trade

Textiles rank as the world's seventh most traded product, with a total trade value of approximately \$882 billion. China leads the industry, not only in exports but also in production and retail. In 2022, the value of China's textile exports, including clothing and accessories, reached \$323 billion, a 2.53 percent increase from the previous year. Bangladesh, the second-largest exporter, shipped textile products worth \$46.2 billion in 2021, predominantly items such as knit T-shirts, non-knit men's suits, and knit sweaters. Vietnam is the world's third-largest exporter, with approximately \$37.6 billion in annual exports.

Multiple factors are responsible for the garment industry's expansion in Bangladesh. These include competitive labor costs, a large and skilled workforce, and government policies aimed at enhancing manufacturing and export performance. Nevertheless, the sector faces substantial challenges. Infrastructure deficits and wage demands are reducing competitiveness relative to other garment-producing countries, and recent political instability has led to disruptions affecting reliability. Increased automation, 3D printing and knitting, Artificial Intelligence (AI) robotics and intelligent manufacturing are also disrupting current processes and slowing employment growth.

In response, industry stakeholders are working to enhance resilience and sustainability. Efforts include investments in green manufacturing practices, with Bangladesh boasting the highest number of globally certified garment factories certified by the Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design (LEED).¹ Furthermore, initiatives aimed at improving labor conditions, ensuring worker safety, and fostering compliance with international standards are underway to maintain the sector's international standing and appeal to buyers.

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The COVID-19 pandemic

January 2020 to May 2023 COVID-19 pandemic hit the RMG sector hard. Demand in major markets fell, many factories closed, and workers struggled to travel to work and collect wages. By July 2020, over one million garment workers had been fired or furloughed, and over 10 million returned to rural areas. Early in the pandemic, the government provided stimulus packages and mandated digital wage disbursement, which helped boost payment digitalization. However, after official support was withdrawn in August 2020, the use of digital payments declined by more than 50 percent, indicating gaps in the financial ecosystem and the lack of sustainable digital business models. The pandemic also exposed the absence of an up-to-date national social protection database and highlighted the need to strengthen social protection mechanisms.

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Female empowerment through employment

The RMG sector has been – and continues to be – instrumental in shaping gender dynamics in Bangladesh. With approximately 2.6 million women workers constituting around 60 percent of the workforce, the sector serves as a primary source of formal employment for women. This work provides women with increased economic independence and enhanced decision-making capacities. For many, especially those from rural areas, garment work offers a vital income source, enabling them to help support their families and improve access to education and healthcare.

Despite these gains, gender inequalities persist. Most women workers come from rural low-income families and women mainly occupy lower-wage positions, such as sewing operators, while men often hold higher-paid roles. A significant gender pay gap exists, with women earning less than their men for similar work. Long working hours, repetitive tasks, and unsafe factory environments unreasonably affect women, who also often bear the burden of domestic responsibilities. In addition, women workers may face limited access to grievance mechanisms, maternity leave and childcare facilities at work.

Efforts are being made to address gender inequities in the sector. Non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and advocacy groups are working to promote gender-sensitive policies, and international initiatives such as the Gender Equality and Returns (GEAR) program focus on improving workplace conditions, reducing harassment, and empowering women.² Moreover, an increasing number of manufacturers are implementing policies to close gender pay gaps, provide maternity benefits, and establish anti-harassment processes. These interventions are critical to align the sector with international labor standards and enhance Bangladesh's reputation in global markets.

¹ LEED is a voluntary green building certification program used worldwide. See: <https://www.usgbc.org/>

² GEAR is partnership between the World Bank Group's International Finance Corporation (IFC) and the United Nations International Labour Organization (ILO). See: <https://betterwork.org/collaborations/>

Digital services and inclusion

Driven by expanding network infrastructure, a competitive telecommunications market and increased smartphone adoption, Bangladesh's digital mobile communication services continue to expand. In August 2024, with a national population of around 173 million, the total number of mobile phone subscribers reached 192.43 million, and in the second quarter of 2024, the smartphone market in Bangladesh grew 20 percent year-on-year, with shipments reaching 3.1 million units. The 126.97 million mobile internet subscribers registered at the end of August 2024 significantly exceeds the 13.53 million fixed-line internet subscribers, and the rising preference for smartphones is contributing to an overall increase in mobile internet usage.

DFS in Bangladesh are also experiencing significant growth, driven and enabled by increased smartphone penetration, supportive regulatory frameworks, and a dynamic fintech ecosystem. A key aspect of the government's digital inclusion policy is to encourage the uptake of mobile money and other digital payment platforms. In December 2022, the number of mobile banking subscribers passed 191 million, a 12.57 percent increase from the previous year, with mobile money transfers being the most popular service. Internet banking has also seen substantial growth, with the number of internet banking customers increasing to a record 6.57 million in February 2023, up from 4.7 million in February 2022 and 3.4 million in February 2021. Increased use of MFS, internet banking and digital payment platforms are regarded as crucial to advancing financial inclusion.

Doubtlessly, the digital payment landscape in Bangladesh is expanding, with the National Digital Payments Roadmap (2022-2025) outlining strategies to improve digital payment systems and increase the adoption of digital transactions across multiple sectors. Likewise, Bangladesh Bank (BB) – the central bank and apex regulatory body – is promoting DFS through regulatory support, new guidelines for MFS operations, and policy initiatives aimed at creating a secure and efficient digital financial ecosystem. Bridging the gap between formal institutions and the unbanked population, particularly in remote areas, is a primary objective.

Nevertheless, the uptake of digital solutions in general, and digital payments in particular, is limited by the high cost of smartphones, the cost of network access, lack of digital literacy, insufficient financial knowledge, and inadequate digital payments infrastructure. DFS are still not regarded as being entirely reliable and trustworthy, and challenges on both supply and demand sides raise concerns about the long-term sustainability of business models aimed at increasing uptake.

Despite the overall growth in DFS, a significant gender gap remains in uptake and usage. BB data for September 2024 indicate that nationally 96.7 million women held MFS accounts (42 percent of the total) compared with 135.6 million men (58 percent of the total).³ Furthermore, this gap appears to be widening. Central bank data suggest that women's MFS account ownership fell by 6.45 percentage points between December 2019 and December 2023, while the number of accounts owned by men increased by 6.36 percentage points.⁴ A 2021 UNCDF study found that the biggest barriers for women RMG workers were a lack of digital literacy and insufficient financial capability.⁵ The study also found significant gender gaps in smartphone ownership, internet access and awareness of DFS. The report recommends that more coordinated efforts are required to build digital and financial literacy, particularly on topics related to financial well-being, customer protection, and data privacy and security. While a few large factories have undertaken some initiatives to improve financial literacy, these have been irregular and have very largely not considered gender issues.

³ Source: LEED is a voluntary green building certification program used worldwide. See: <https://www.bb.org.bd/en/index.php/financialactivity/mfsdata>

⁴ Source: <https://www.thedailystar.net/business/economy/news/gender-gap-mfs-widens-3-16-five-years-3573356>

⁵ Ready-Made Garment Sector Digital Market Assessment: Bangladesh. Available at: <https://www.uncdf.org/article/7363/ready-made-garment-digital-market-assessment-bangladesh>

Building knowledge and understanding

In October 2023, UNCDF published a research report – ‘Digital financial services for garment workers in Bangladesh’ – which examined the gaps in the digital finance ecosystem and identified self-sustaining business models for improved use of digital financial products and social protection services by women working in RMG sector.⁶ Engaging with 10 mobile service providers, 20 garment manufacturers, and 500 workers through focus group discussions and surveys, the report presents detailed data and analysis on the position of garment workers regarding digital financial literacy, financial products and services, and social protection programs.

Promoting gender-inclusive digital financial services

Recognizing these challenges, a range of initiatives are working to promote gender-inclusive DFS. These include government and regulatory bodies implementing policies to promote financial inclusion and counter disparities in the financial sector and banking organizations developing more inclusive financial products and innovative delivery mechanisms that take account of the socio-economic position of women, particularly those with limited access to formal financial services. Studies have also been conducted to better understand the barriers women face in accessing DFS and develop strategies to overcome them.⁷

The expansion of DFS presents a significant opportunity to reduce gender disparities and enhance women’s financial inclusion and economic empowerment in Bangladesh. However, continuing efforts are required from policymakers, financial institutions and development organizations to create an enabling environment and make progress.

⁶ Available at: <https://www.uncdf.org/article/8467/digital-finance-garment-workers-bangladesh-insights>

⁷ See for example: <https://www.womensworldbanking.org/insights/delivering-digital-promise-women-bangladesh>; <https://www.adb.org/publications/gender-equality-social-inclusion-finance-bangladesh>; https://innovation.brac.net/downloads/Digital-Financial-Services-Playbook_V10.pdf

Partnerships for progress

UNCDF regards partnerships as critical to their mission of unlocking public and private capital for sustainable development in the world's LDCs. Through its focus on inclusive and scalable partnerships, UNCDF seeks to create systemic change in economic development and financial inclusion, which reaches the world's most vulnerable people. UNCDF's approach to partnerships hinges on the following key principles:

Alignment with national priorities - UNCDF partnerships align with the priorities of LDCs, ensuring relevance and ownership by local stakeholders.

Strategic collaboration - UNCDF works closely with governments, private sector actors, development agencies and civil society organizations to design and implement programs that address local development challenges.

Leverage for impact - UNCDF partnerships mobilize additional resources and expertise, maximizing the impact of investments, particularly in under-served and financially excluded populations.

Innovative models - UNCDF encourages innovative financial solutions, such as blended finance, public-private partnerships and digital finance initiatives, to address development challenges sustainably.

Knowledge sharing and capacity building - UNCDF prioritizes knowledge sharing, co-creation and capacity building in partnerships, ensuring sustainable outcomes that empower local institutions and communities.

Recognizing the complex and interconnected challenges involved in achieving financial inclusion for women workers in the RMG sector, the Collective Impact on Future of Work in Bangladesh project illustrated these principles. At the institutional level, UNCDF worked as one of 15 partners in 'Oporajita'. This initiative, funded by H&M Foundation – the philanthropic arm of the global fashion and design company – works to support the development of a socially inclusive and environmentally responsible textile industry. Accepting that the sector has made significant contributions to women's financial empowerment in Bangladesh but has not yet made equivalent progress in improving working conditions and diversifying job roles, H&M Foundation identifies, funds and facilitates transformative innovations, initiatives and research. In an industry increasingly driven by automation and digitalization, Oporajita is active in multiple areas that affect the lives of women garment workers, including skills training, cultivating an enabling environment for women's empowerment, and fostering inclusive collaborations.

“UNCDF has played a crucial role in the Oporajita initiative by bringing together key stakeholders to enhance social protection for RMG workers. Accurate worker data and streamlined fund disbursement are critical challenges, and many factories struggle to update records while workers face banking barriers. Strengthening industry-wide collaboration and optimizing processes, with UNCDF’s support, is essential for building a more inclusive and effective social protection system.”

— Farzana Sharmin, Senior Joint Secretary, Bangladesh Knitwear Manufacturers and Exporters Association (BKMEA)

Oporajita: Collective Impact

Funded by H&M Foundation and the Government of Sweden and coordinated by The Asia Foundation with FSG Inc co-designing the collective infrastructure, Oporajita partners include CARE Bangladesh, Center for Communication Action Bangladesh (C-Cab), Circular Apparel Innovation Factory (CAIF), International Development Enterprises (iDE) Bangladesh, LightCastle Partners, Save the Children Bangladesh, Shimmy Technologies, Swisscontact Bangladesh, UNCDF, WaterAid Bangladesh, and Build Bangladesh.

To accelerate the transformations needed to restructure social systems, shift power relations and ensure sustainable equity in communities, Oporajita uses a Collective Impact approach to encourage and enable international, national and grassroots organizations, government agencies, and local experts to work collaboratively towards common goals and share learning.

The five characteristics of a Collective Impact approach are:

- A common agenda - Participants define problems and solutions collectively.
- Shared measurement - Participants measure progress in the same way.
- Mutual reinforcement - Participants’ efforts are integrated to maximize impact.
- Continuous communications - Participants communicate to build trust and strengthen relationships.
- Strong coordination - A dedicated team aligns and coordinates the work of the group.⁸

At the organizational level, through an open call for proposals, UNCDF developed partnerships with four commercial partners to develop and deliver digital solutions to increase women’s financial inclusion and empowerment. As discussed further in the next section, these were:

- AponTech Ltd - A technology and online marketplace company which provides low-income workers with access to credit and discounted household essentials through a mobile application and at physical stores in factories.
- Bank Asia PLC - A private commercial bank that designed a mobile application to enhance digital and financial literacy and promote access to digital financial tools.
- BRAC Bank PLC - A private commercial bank and a subsidiary of BRAC, a leading development organization, which developed a digital microlending solution and a financial literacy training program.
- Zaynax Health Ltd - A digital healthcare company that combined digital and in-person training to provide health learning resources and enhanced access to health insurance.

⁸ See: Collective impact Forum - <https://collectiveimpactforum.org/what-is-collective-impact/>

Separately, UNCDF also developed a partnership with BKMEA to develop and deliver a multilayered awareness campaign that promoted access to social protection and welfare services provided by public and private stakeholders.

These initiatives were supported by multiple operational partnerships developed by the implementing partners. Collaborations with manufacturing companies and factory owners enabled project personnel to gain access to workers and encourage participation. Partnerships with banks, financial institutions, microfinance entities and technology providers ensured stability, scalability, viability and operational efficiency. Mobile service providers were also engaged to co-create products and incentives tailored to the needs of workers, and other collaborations, such as with the Bangladesh Garment Manufacturers and Exporters Association (BGMEA) and other NGOs and public institutions, facilitated scale-up efforts. In addition, collaborative awareness campaigns with local women's organizations helped build participation and engagement.

UNCDF additionality

At institutional, organizational and operational levels, partnerships were central to project work. UNCDF provided financial and strategic support critically to reducing the risks associated with investments targeting low-income, marginalized populations, enabling the delivery of financial solutions and knowledge to an underserved population. A cost-sharing model alleviated financial constraints and encouraged implementing partners to allocate their own resources, skills and experience to engage a more significant number of vulnerable beneficiaries faster.

Collaboration among diverse stakeholders – including development organizations, financial institutions and commercial and community partners – combined diverse expertise, resources and networks, leveraging complementary strengths to foster innovation and create impactful, scalable and sustainable solutions. By combining specialized knowledge – ranging from financial technology to community outreach – comprehensive solutions were developed that responded to both systemic and individual challenges. Specifically, UNCDF expertise contributed to addressing gaps in implementing partners' knowledge regarding gender-sensitive financial inclusion. This supported the development of business models adapted to the financial needs of women workers and aligned with the SDGs.

Furthermore, UNCDF's global reputation, convening power, and established networks of NGOs, government agencies, and financial institutions added credibility and authority to partners' activities, helping overcome potential barriers and expanding and strengthening the implementation ecosystem. Grant conditions set by UNCDF, which emphasized inclusivity, gender sensitivity and financial accessibility, also encouraged partners to integrate these principles into their broader operations, fostering responsible business practices.

The rigorous reporting, progress tracking and monitoring frameworks UNCDF required ensured accountability and allowed timely operational adjustments to optimize outcomes. Lessons learned will be disseminated globally by UNCDF to guide future efforts to reach similar underserved communities and expand innovation in pro-poor digital financial services. Demonstrating the feasibility and practical details of financial literacy and digital financial inclusion, the project's successes will inspire and encourage other organizations to invest in similar solutions, delivering systemic change in financial inclusion efforts worldwide.

By working together, UNCDF and its commercial implementing partners, along with other participants in the Oporajita initiative, were able to deliver inclusive, context-specific and catalytic interventions that both addressed immediate needs and provided robust foundations for systemic change, embedding gender-sensitive financial services and social protection within a dynamic socio-economic framework.

“As part of the Oporajita initiative, UNCDF has worked to bridge gaps in digital financial inclusion and social protection for women garment workers. By collaborating with key stakeholders, we are fostering sustainable solutions that enhance financial resilience and economic empowerment. This project has been a pivotal effort for UNCDF in advancing inclusive digital economies and ensuring that no one is left behind in Bangladesh’s transition to a digital future.”

– Sakshi Chadha, Digital Expert, UN Capital Development Fund (UNCDF) Bangladesh

“As a key partner in the Oporajita initiative, UNCDF has been instrumental in uniting government representatives and associations like BKMEA and BGMEA to improve social protection for women garment workers in Bangladesh. Alongside 12 other dedicated partners, we are driving collective impact to equip women garment workers for a future defined by automation and digitalization[WF1] and contribute to a just transition in Bangladesh.”

– Fernanda Drumond, Head of Collective Action, Disaster Management & Special Projects at the H&M Foundation

Delivering digital solutions for women's inclusion and empowerment

UNCDF's 'Collective Impact on Future of Work in Bangladesh' project was designed to identify gaps in the digital finance ecosystem and develop self-sustaining business models to expand uptake and use of digital financial products and social protection services by women RMG workers. Based on identified needs, one major component of the project engaged four commercial partners to develop and deliver digital solutions to increase women worker's financial inclusion and empowerment. The partners and their initiatives were:

- AponTech Ltd - EmpowerHER provided financial services and discounted household essentials through both a mobile application and physical stores in factories. Financial services included interest-free grocery credit, instant purpose-specific short-term loans, gender-focused savings options, and instalment-based purchasing for household essentials.
- Bank Asia PLC - The Amar Hishab Kitab mobile app aimed to improve digital and financial literacy and provide access to innovative digital financial tools. Key outcomes included increased adoption of small-ticket women-friendly savings products and enhanced awareness of the benefits of digital financial literacy.
- BRAC Bank PLC - Jibika combined a digital micro-lending solution that provided real-time, collateral-free loans with minimal documentation requirements and financial literacy training that improved the capacity to access digital financial services and manage personal finances.
- Zaynax Health Ltd - Zaynax Health provided training on digital savings, e-payments, digital health insurance products and household budgeting using both an e-learning platform and in-person training facilitated by community opinion leaders in physical information booths.

Supporting the Sustainable Development Goals

The 'Collective Impact on Future of Work in Bangladesh' project supported the SDGs:

 <p>1 NO POVERTY</p>	<p>SDG 1 (No Poverty) - By offering affordable and accessible credit, the project helped reduce financial vulnerability among low-income workers.</p>
 <p>5 GENDER EQUALITY</p>	<p>SDG 5 (Gender Equality) - The project addressed gender disparities in financial access and empowered women through financial independence.</p>
 <p>8 DECENT WORK AND ECONOMIC GROWTH</p>	<p>SDG 8 (Decent Work and Economic Growth) - By providing financial support and promoting entrepreneurship, the project contributed to economic growth and job creation.</p>
 <p>10 REDUCED INEQUALITIES</p>	<p>SDG 10 (Reduced Inequalities) - Creating affordable, tailored digital financial products helped ensure inclusion and reduce the economic marginalization of women.</p>

EmpowerHER - Financial inclusion and empowerment

EmpowerHER addressed financial challenges faced by women workers in the RMG sector by providing specifically tailored financial products and services. Implemented in four factories, it built on Apon Bazaar's existing business infrastructure and expertise to create a financial ecosystem accessible through both physical stores in factories and a digital application.

Key financial products and services included:

- Interest-free grocery credit - Provided through physical stores and a digital app, this product allowed workers to access discounted groceries on credit without interest. Efforts focused on transitioning cash-paying customers to digital transactions through training and advocacy. Female workers were able to consult family members before making purchases and were supported by women agents to adopt digital tools.
- Instant loans for specific purposes - Piloted in collaboration with financial institutions, this app-exclusive product provided small pay-day loans for emergency needs, including healthcare, education and utility payments. Loans were capped at 30 percent of gross salaries and repaid through payroll deductions. Female users received a 1 percent discount on interest rates, with the information provided by dedicated women agents.
- Short-term loans - Designed for slightly larger amounts and repayment terms of 6–12 months, these loans were offered through digital application processes. Female borrowers were prioritized and received additional discounts. The service aimed to improve access to affordable credit compared with traditional market options.
- Gender-sensitive savings products - These digital savings products were tailored to meet the needs of women workers, allowing small deposits starting from BDT500. Savings accounts remained accessible even after employment ended, with women customers receiving higher interest. The product emphasized flexibility in deposit amounts and frequency.⁹
- Installment facility for household appliances - In response to the demand for household appliances, this app-exclusive service provided access to discounted items with installment payment options. Payments were deducted from salaries and partnerships with appliance companies facilitated product availability.

EmpowerHER built on Apon Bazaar, Apon's existing digital platform, integrating financial services into a user-centered app that allowed women workers to manage family finances conveniently and securely. Workers without smartphone access received support from women agents at digital kiosks in physical stores. In addition, an in-app call center staffed by women provided customer support. Partnerships with financial institutions, microfinance entities and technology providers were critical to ensure scalability and operational efficiency.

Challenges to implementation include limited adoption of digital solutions, national political and economic instability, regulatory shifts and market competition. Mitigation strategies included diversifying financial offerings to address varied needs, strengthening partnerships to maintain operational stability, and adapting to regulatory changes and market conditions through continuous assessment.

EmpowerHER contributed to gender equality by prioritizing inclusivity and addressing specific barriers faced by women workers. Specifically, tailored financial products, such as reduced interest rates and additional benefits for women, were central. Outreach efforts specifically targeted women workers, offering financial literacy workshops, inclusive customer support, and collaborations with women community leaders to foster agency and confidence.

⁹ Approximately US\$4.10 at December 2024.

A gender lens was systematically integrated into project design and implementation. Sex-disaggregated data provided insights into the distinct needs and experiences of women workers, while gender-sensitive market analysis identified specific constraints and risks, including gaps in financial knowledge and capability among women workers, and guided the development of strategy. The language and approach of the initiative were also deliberately gender-inclusive, promoting equality and inclusivity across all activities. Privacy measures were implemented to address gender-specific concerns, and the project team included a steering committee which incorporated gender expertise.

EmpowerHER marked a significant expansion of Apon's traditional business model into financial services. It was designed for long-term impact, transitioning into a sustainable vertical business within the company's operations. By integrating interest-free credit, purpose-driven loans, savings products and installment facilities, Apon established itself as a financial services provider. The project's emphasis on digital platforms, gender sensitivity, and holistic support showcased an innovative approach to empowering women RMG workers and improving their financial resilience.

At the conclusion of project activities on 31 December 2024:

- 9,188 RMG workers (55 percent women) demonstrated improved decision-making abilities regarding financial solutions.
- 4,378 RMG workers (46 percent women) demonstrated improved health and nutrition habits.

UNCDF investment not only facilitated the successful implementation of EmpowerHER but also supported the development of a scalable, gender-focused financial model that addressed the specific needs of women RMG workers while promoting inclusive and responsible business practices.

Overview: AponTech

Founded in 2017, AponTech Ltd operates Apon Bazaar to address the financial inclusion challenges faced by Bangladesh's low-income industrial workforce. The company's business model integrates financial empowerment with essential service delivery via a multichannel marketplace. It aims to reduce reliance on informal credit systems and promote savings and financial independence. Supported by a dedicated app, women agents, and partnerships with suppliers and financial institutions, Apon Bazaar has, to date, disbursed \$10.01 million in interest-free credit and supported 177,680 customers through 43 stores. It demonstrates scalable, results-driven innovation with a sustainable revenue model that leverages factory-provided resources to minimize operational costs.

Interview: Cool in a crisis

“ Sapna Akter Zobda is the proud mother of two boys, aged 10 years and two years. She lives with her husband and hopes for a better future for her family. “In more than 10 years of working, I have faced countless financial struggles,” she says. “Yet, through these challenges, Apon has been a support, helping me navigate tough times with dignity.”

Since starting to shop with Apon in 2019, Sapna reports that its discounts, credit facilities and financial services have made a real difference in her life. The savings from discounts have been important, and being able to shop on credit has helped when money was tight. “Apon has become a part of my daily life,” she says, “not just for groceries, but for little treats, like buying biscuits and snacks for my children. Seeing their happiness makes every effort worth it.”

Recently, Sapna achieved something she once thought was out of reach – she bought a fridge using her savings. For Sapna, the purchase represents more than just ownership of an essential domestic appliance. “It felt like a milestone in my life,” she says, “a real moment of success to celebrate.” Apon has also helped her in other more critical life moments. “When my brother-in-law was diagnosed with a brain tumor and needed surgery, I could step in and contribute financially knowing that I had Apon to turn to,” she reports.

For Sapna, Apon is more than a shop. “Whether it’s saving for the future, ensuring my children’s happiness, or being prepared for emergencies, Apon has always been there for us, and I sincerely hope it always will be,” she concludes.



Amar Hisab-Kitab - Digital financial literacy

Bank Asia’s Amar Hisab-Kitab mobile application aimed to enhance financial and digital literacy among RMG workers, with a specific focus on women. By offering a comprehensive financial literacy curriculum and personal financial management tools, the app reduced financial disparities, promoted inclusivity, and equipped workers with the skills needed to navigate formal banking systems. Implemented in nine factories, key features included:

- Financial literacy module - Addressed topics such as financial concepts, digital banking, budgeting, and ethical finance.
- Personal financial management - Allowed users to record income and expenses, build transaction histories, and assess eligibility for financial products.
- Banking product information - Provided details on banking products and services, helping users make informed choices.
- Location-based services - Offered information about bank branches and agents for in-person assistance.
- Multilingual and interactive content - Material was presented in Bengali, supplemented by animated videos.

Amar Hisab-Kitab addressed the limited financial knowledge and accessibility to banking services experienced by women factory workers. Primary objectives included increasing understanding of financial and digital tools, improving financial management and savings behavior, fostering inclusivity, and reducing financial disparities. Broader aims included enhancing economic stability in the RMG sector through better personal financial decision-making.

Implemented in collaboration with the Sarathi project, the initiative included targeted promotional campaigns in RMG factories and surrounding communities, using print media, television and social media.¹⁰ RMG workers were also engaged directly through training workshops in factories. A dedicated Bank Asia team with expertise in DFS, stakeholder engagement and training delivery supported the project. Experienced understanding of local market dynamics and financial inclusion strategies ensured effective implementation and capacity-building.

Amar Hisab-Kitab was designed to address a range of risks to ensure effectiveness and sustainability. Cybersecurity measures were implemented to protect against unauthorized access and data breaches. Operational risks were mitigated through strategies to ensure uninterrupted service delivery and minimize platform disruptions, and to ensure compliance and operational viability, the initiative prioritized adherence to relevant financial regulations. In addition, the initiative incorporated user-centered design features and provided targeted support to improve accessibility for workers unfamiliar with smartphone technology. Gender-sensitive strategies were embedded into the product design, data collection and analysis, marketing communications and community engagement. To ensure sustainability, the initiative included mechanisms for regular content updates and integration with Bank Asia's other digital platforms. Plans for a national rollout and integration with other banking services positioned the initiative for scalability, with the potential to expand beyond the RMG sector and target other low- to mid-income groups.

At the conclusion of project activities on 31 December 2024:

- 61,807 RMG workers (71 percent women) had been reached through promotional activities.
- 5,053 RMG workers (78 percent women) had been onboarded/registered.
- 4,548 RMG workers (80 percent women) had completed the training.
- 4,207 RMG workers (77 percent women) had completed the training with passing test scores.

Through its targeted support, UNCDF not only enhanced the impact of Amar Hisab-Kitab but also positioned it as a scalable and replicable initiative to promote financial empowerment and inclusivity in the RMG sector and beyond.

Overview: Bank Asia PLC

Bank Asia PLC, established in Bangladesh in 1999, is a third-generation public limited commercial bank. It is one of the leading banks in the country, focusing on customer-centric services, technological innovation and financial inclusion. Envisioning a poverty-free Bangladesh, emphasizing human dignity, human rights and poverty reduction, the bank aims to deliver high-quality services, contribute to national economic growth, uphold integrity, and provide innovative technology-driven solutions. Priorities include customer satisfaction, transparency, compliance with regulations, stakeholder value, environmental protection, and societal contributions. It also works to foster a supportive working environment for employees.

¹⁰ For more information on Sarathi see: <https://www.swisscontact.org/en/projects/sarathi-progress-through-improved-financial-health>

Interview: Digital distractions

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For 26-year-old Ayesha Siddiqua, who works on garment linings, the most useful feature of Bank Asia's Amar Hisab-Kitab App is the ability to keep a daily record of income and expenses. "This means that I do not need a pen and paper and a filing place to keep track of my financial life," she says. "My mobile phone is always to hand, and I can both make inputs on it and access up-to-the-minute information."

Ayesha had the app installed on her phone when a Bank Asia team visited her factory as a part of a promotional campaign. "The app opened up a practical and exciting route for me to learn about banking services," she says,

explaining that she was so enthusiastic she ended up helping around 500 colleagues to download the app. "In fact," she continues, "for two days, I could not work in peace because my colleagues kept asking me to help with the download. Then, when the app was downloaded, the simple tutorial built into it meant I could get some relief. This was fortunate because, at one point, my supervisor advised me not to help when I was on duty because it was interrupting my work."

Ayesha reports that her family members are almost as enthusiastic as she is, as they too, see how the app can help them save money and make practical plans for the future.

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Jibika - Digital lending for financial inclusion

BRAC Bank's Jibika provided a digital financial product that addressed the specific challenges faced by low-income individuals, particularly women RMG workers. Designed to provide an accessible, efficient and inclusive financial services solution, the initiative offered real-time, minimal documentation, and collateral-free loans ranging from BDT500 to BDT50,000 as an alternative to high-cost informal lending. Female RMG workers were selected as target beneficiaries because of their vulnerability to financial insecurity, limited financial literacy, and exclusion from formal financial systems. By leveraging digital technology, Jibika sought to integrate marginalized women workers into the formal financial sector, offering them a safer and more sustainable way to manage their financial needs.

Implemented in three factories, the core features of Jibika included:

- Real-time loan disbursement - Digital loans were processed and disbursed in real-time, ensuring that workers could access funds when they needed them.
- Minimal documentation - The initiative eliminated the need for formal paperwork, reducing a substantial barrier for RMG workers, many of whom lack formal identification documents or financial histories.
- No collateral requirements - Collateral-free loans made the service accessible to workers with limited or no assets.
- Small loan sizes - The initiative catered specifically to the needs of low-income individuals, offering loan amounts suitable for day-to-day expenses or small-scale income-generating activities.

In addition to addressing immediate financial needs, Jibika empowered RMG workers specially women by promoting financial independence, encouraging savings, and supporting entrepreneurial ventures such as small-scale handicrafts or livestock breeding. The capacity development element of the project was critical in ensuring that beneficiaries could use the digital lending platform effectively and make informed financial decisions. Awareness campaigns and training sessions were conducted to familiarize workers with financial concepts such as savings, budgeting and using digital payment systems as well as the platform.

One challenge Jibika faced was the lack of official documentation among many RMG workers, which typically excludes them from accessing loans through formal financial systems. This was addressed by securing regulatory waivers that permitted digital-only applications. In addition, Jibika responded to the slow processing times of conventional loan systems, which are often unable to meet urgent financial needs, by implementing real-time digital loan disbursement. The high administrative costs typically associated with microloans presented an additional obstacle, as these costs make such loans less accessible to borrowers and less sustainable for lenders. Jibika responded by utilizing digital platforms to streamline processing and reduce costs.

Key offerings of financial products specifically designed to meet the needs of women RMG workers included:

- Prottasha: A low-cost current account requiring only BDT10 to open, with no maintenance fees or minimum balance requirements.

By addressing financial and technological gaps, Jibika promoted the inclusion of women RMG workers in formal financial systems. It contributed to reducing their reliance on informal loans and savings processes, enhancing their ability to save, invest, and manage financial risks. Aligned with broader gender equality goals, the initiative increased women's participation in economic activities and helped improve their socio-economic standing.

Jibika adopted a multifaceted approach to risk management and mitigation. To bridge the gap between customer needs and available financial products, the initiative relied on market research, feedback sessions, and data analysis to adapt its products to the specific requirements of women workers. To address organizational expertise and coverage gaps, it recruited experienced personnel and provided targeted training. In addition, to navigate potential regulatory changes, the initiative maintained a flexible operational model to ensure compliance and continuity.

Jibika served as a valuable pilot that explored the potential of digital financial solutions to address the needs of marginalized communities. Highlighting the importance of specifically adapted financial products and services in promoting inclusion and empowerment, it provided valuable insights into the challenges and opportunities of digital lending, offering a model for future efforts to expand financial access and support sustainable economic growth in Bangladesh.

At the conclusion of project activities on 31 December 2024, 4,300 RMG workers (30 percent women) demonstrated improved financial literacy.

UNCDF's involvement played a pivotal role. The intervention not only supported the immediate goals of the initiative but also contributed to systemic advancements in the digital financial landscape, paving the way for more inclusive and accessible financial services across Bangladesh.

Overview: BRAC Bank

BRAC Bank PLC, established in 2001, is a private commercial bank and a subsidiary of BRAC, a leading development organization. The bank is distinguished by its commitment to SMEs, which constitute over 50 percent of its portfolio. Recognizing the SME sector's potential to drive economic growth and employment, BRAC Bank pioneered SME financing in Bangladesh, offering access to institutional banking for previously unbanked entrepreneurs. With a network of 189 branches, and over 500 SME unit offices and 1,000 agent outlets nationwide, offerings include working capital and trade, equipment and project financing, with streamlined online applications and mobile banking platforms designed for SMEs.

Interview: Banking on savings

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Twenty-four-year-old Sojib Rana has been working in the industry for more than five years. He started on the minimum wage and now earns about BDT 20,000 a month with overtime, but this requires him to work 12-18 hours a day. "It's not an easy life," he says, "but everyone in my family depends on my sole income as my father passed away many years ago."

Sojib's mother lives in Rangpur, where Sojib used a loan of BDT 70,000 from a local NGO to buy a small plot of land and construct a family home. "Paying off this debt and the interest, along with price increases in daily necessities, makes it very difficult for me to make ends meet every month," he says. "I've always been wondering if I could get a loan at a lower interest rate."

Sojib was familiar with BRAC Bank's bKash app, which he uses to receive his monthly salary.¹¹ He has a smartphone and an MFS account, which he uses regularly. However, he had never had a formal bank account of his own. "When BRAC Bank reached out, I took the opportunity to open a bank account digitally," he explains. "A big attraction for me was the way I could do this without presenting many official documents."

The main purpose of Sojib's account is to save money in small amounts for the future. "If I never take a first step towards saving money, I will never start," he says. "When you need help, no one is there for you and at the end of the day, you are on your own." Sojib also plans to use the account to apply for a loan if he is faced with a family emergency. "I never thought before that I could get a loan from a bank," he concludes. "I am very happy that BRAC Bank reached out and is prepared to help."

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¹¹ bKash is a joint venture of BRAC Bank, Money in Motion LLC, IFC, Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, Ant Group and SoftBank Vision Fund. See: <https://www.bkash.com/en/about>

Zaynax Health - Online and in-person training for digital financial literacy

Zaynax Health's Promoting Digital Financial Literacy initiative empowered women RMG workers by increasing their knowledge of digital financial products such as savings, e-payments, digital insurance and bill payment services. Implemented in 14 factories, it helped build financial independence and develop the market for digital financial and healthcare products.

The initiative employed a multi-faceted approach to reach beneficiaries, integrating online and in-person training. Key elements included:

- Accessible and user-friendly video content was developed in Bengali, enabling RMG workers to learn at their own pace.
- A dedicated call center provided regular reminders and updates to keep beneficiaries engaged and informed.
- Factory PA systems were used to broadcast key financial literacy messages, ensuring widespread dissemination of information.
- Trained local ambassadors acted as champions within RMG clusters, providing one-on-one guidance and supporting workers directly.
- Strategically placed booths in RMG clusters served as accessible hubs for learning and inquiries. These booths helped install and demonstrate the mobile application.
- An extension of the mobile app hosted educational content, allowing workers to view, save and revisit material on their smartphones.
- For workers without smartphones, digital toolkits were provided at factory premises, offering flexible and inclusive access to learning materials.

Online training modules, hosted on the Zaynax Health app, were concise, lasting 5-8 minutes each, and were delivered in Bengali to ensure accessibility. They included video tutorials followed by quizzes to assess comprehension. To maximize engagement, participants received reminder calls via a dedicated women-staffed call center, and public announcements were made in factories. In-person outreach was also important, with dedicated trainers providing individual and group demonstrations at information booths, and workers without smartphones were supported through digital learning toolkits provided at factory premises. These toolkits included tablets pre-loaded with the Zaynax Health app, enabling workers to access training materials and complete the program. Progress, dropout rates and completion statuses were tracked to allow continuous adaptation and improvement.

To encourage enrolment and foster engagement, incentives for completing the training included digital bonuses, cashback rewards and discount vouchers for health insurance products. In addition, women RMG workers were identified and trained as community ambassadors and provided with training, ongoing support and rewards such as discounted health insurance and digital bonuses to act as peer educators, providing information and guidance. Feedback mechanisms were also established to allow participants to share experiences and suggestions. Through these integrated strategies, the initiative not only addressed barriers to financial and healthcare access but also empowered women workers to make independent financial decisions.

The initiative applied a gender-sensitive approach. Collaborative awareness campaigns, organized with local women's organizations, informed women workers about the initiative's benefits and opportunities and encouraged active participation. Training materials were developed to reflect the experiences of women workers, including managing household budgets and healthcare requirements, and products were adapted to address varying levels of financial literacy and technology access. Female RMG workers were also actively engaged in planning and design phases, with their insights shaping product features. This participatory approach aligned the initiative with the priorities of its target audience and encouraged a sense of ownership.

The project was implemented by a Zaynax team with extensive experience in behavior change and digital literacy training. Partnerships with RMG factories provided access to workers in a controlled environment, while collaboration with BGMEA positioned the initiative for expansion and sustainable long-term operations. The initiative also demonstrated potential for long-term sustainability through its revenue model, which included fees from digital financial service providers. The adaptability of training content and the digital platform also facilitated scalability, potentially enabling the model to extend within Bangladesh and in similar low-income contexts globally.

At the conclusion of project activities on 31 December 2024:

- 50,996 RMG workers (79 percent women) had been onboarded/registered.
- 38,516 RMG workers (80 percent women) had completed the training.
- 15,390 RMG workers (82 percent women) had completed the training with passing test scores.
- 1,649 RMG workers (98 percent women) had been converted to customers.

UNCDF's involvement was integral to the success of the initiative, providing not only financial resources but also strategic direction and advocacy, which contributed to the project's effective execution and long-term sustainability.

Overview: Zaynax Health

Zaynax Health Ltd is a Bangladesh-based digital healthcare company offering an online platform that integrates multiple services in a single mobile app. Collaborating with NGOs and public institutions to promote health and financial well-being, core company services include 24/7 doctor consultations via audio and video, hospital cashback micro-insurance bundles, partnerships with hospitals, and home-based diagnostic tests. Operating nationwide with offices in Dhaka, Chittagong and Barisal, the company has a base of more than 72,000 subscribers, reaching new customers through digital sales, direct sales, and commercial partnerships.

Interview: Balancing work and motherhood

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For Juthi Akter, a 30-year-old garment worker in Gazipur, every day required a balance between hard work and the responsibilities of motherhood. Both she and her husband work long hours, leaving little time for family life. On one particularly challenging day, when her young son Ariyan developed a high fever, the thought of rushing to a clinic after a full day at work felt overwhelming.

That's when Juthi remembered the Zaynax Health app an acquaintance had mentioned. With a mixture of hope and urgency, she downloaded the app and was quickly connected with a child specialist. To her relief, the doctor prescribed home care and the necessary medication. "The ease of using the app transformed a daunting situation into something manageable," she recalled. "I felt relieved knowing I could get help without having to leave home."

But Juthi's challenges don't stop with family health, and she often feels the financial strain of unexpected expenses. "I worry about how to stretch our limited budget while ensuring Ariyan has everything he needs," she says.

Her attitude changed when she joined a project financial literacy program. "It opened my eyes to the intricacies of managing her money in the digital age," she says with a smile. "I never realized how to make my salary work better for me. Now, I can do everyday transactions without worrying about extra charges."

As she puts Ariyan to bed each night, Juthi feels a sense of peace she once struggled to find. The challenges of working life remain, but with her newfound skills and resources, she feels she is on a path to a more secure future.

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Enhancing access to social protection

A UNCDF report – Digital Financial Services for Garment Workers in Bangladesh – published as part of project activities in October 2023, identified over 140 Social Safety Net Programmes (SSNPs) in Bangladesh. However, only a few of these are directly applicable to RMG workers.¹² Administered by 23 government ministries and regional divisions, these programs supplement health and life insurance services provided by private sector organizations and are often the only recourse for poor people in situations such as injury, illness, maternity, and job loss due to factory closures. They include, for example:

- **Central Fund Scheme** – Managed by the Ministry of Labour and Employment and funded through a mandatory contribution from export-oriented factories, the scheme provides financial assistance for medical emergencies, education support, maternity benefits, and compensation for work-related injuries or deaths.
- **Employment Injury Scheme (EIS) Pilot** – A social insurance initiative aimed at compensating workers in case of workplace injuries, disabilities, or fatalities. The scheme provides monthly pensions and medical care to affected workers.
- **Mother and Child Benefit Programme (MCBP)** – Administered by the Ministry of Women and Children Affairs, this program provides monthly cash benefits (BDT800) for pregnant RMG workers and mothers with children aged up to four years.
- **EU-German Fund for Unemployed Workers** – A temporary support measure providing BDT3,000 per month for three months to RMG workers who lost jobs due to factory closures or economic downturns.
- **Universal Pension Scheme (Progoti Scheme)** – While not specifically targeted at RMG workers, this government-backed pension program allows private sector employees, including RMG workers, to contribute towards retirement savings.
- **Workers’ Children Education Assistance** – Provided under the Central Fund, offering up to BDT20,000 in education scholarships for the children of RMG workers.
- **Daycare Facilities for RMG Workers** – Under the Child Day Care Program of the Ministry of Women and Children Affairs, daycare centers provide childcare services for RMG workers, though coverage remains limited.
- **Mental Health Initiatives** – Led by industry associations (BGMEA, BKMEA) and supported by development organizations, these initiatives aim to provide mental health support and counseling services for workers through peer learning and well-being centers.

Other schemes are being developed in what the government considers a priority area, critical to the development agenda from a human rights perspective as well as an important tool for poverty reduction. In June 2022, for example, the Employment Injury Scheme (EIS) was introduced, a three-year pilot initiative to provide income protection for RMG workers. The scheme aligns with international standards, supplementing existing lump-sum compensation with lifetime monthly payments of up to 60 percent of a worker’s wage in cases of workplace death or injury. It aims to enhance worker financial security, improve industry productivity, and support ethical labor practices to meet global buyer standards.

¹² Available at: <https://www.uncdf.org/article/8467/digital-finance-garment-workers-bangladesh-insights>

Administered by the Ministry of Labour and Employment through the Central Fund, EIS is supervised by representatives from government bodies, employers' associations (the Bangladesh Employers' Federation, BGMEA and BKMEA), and workers' organizations (The National Coordination Committee for Workers' Education (NCCWE), IndustriALL Bangladesh Council (IBC), United Federation of Garments Workers (UFGW)). With financial backing provided by seven international fashion brands, including H&M, Primark and Tchibo, the pilot aims to validate long-term implementation and statutory adoption plans.

Despite the existence and expansion of these schemes, poor and marginalized groups continue to face challenges in accessing them. According to the Ministry of Finance, approximately 3.8 million people benefited from SSNPs in 2022, providing cover to only around one-quarter of households. Furthermore, the 2023 UNCDF report found that only 16 percent of RMG workers are aware of SSNPs relevant to them and their families and that those workers who are aware know little about eligibility criteria, benefits and claims processes, leading to low claim rates. Furthermore, the vast majority (93 percent) of workers who are aware of the schemes believe that it is tough to access benefits. The complexity of the system, the documentation requirements, and the lack of services in rural areas are identified as barriers. Manual procedures and poor data integration are also accepted challenges, contributing to delays in disbursement, which average three to four months.

In response, UNCDF engaged BKMEA – one of Bangladesh's primary organizations working to expand the industry and assist government and labor organizations to develop policy guidelines – to prepare and deliver a multilayered awareness program aimed at RMG workers, especially women, to increase knowledge about social protection and welfare services provided by public and private stakeholders, and workers' entitlements.

Involving mass communications campaigns aimed at individual workers, in-depth knowledge transfer with trade unions, and engagement with institutional stakeholders such as factory social welfare teams, the campaign employs an integrated approach for maximum impact. Through interactive activities and community engagement initiatives, specific objectives included:

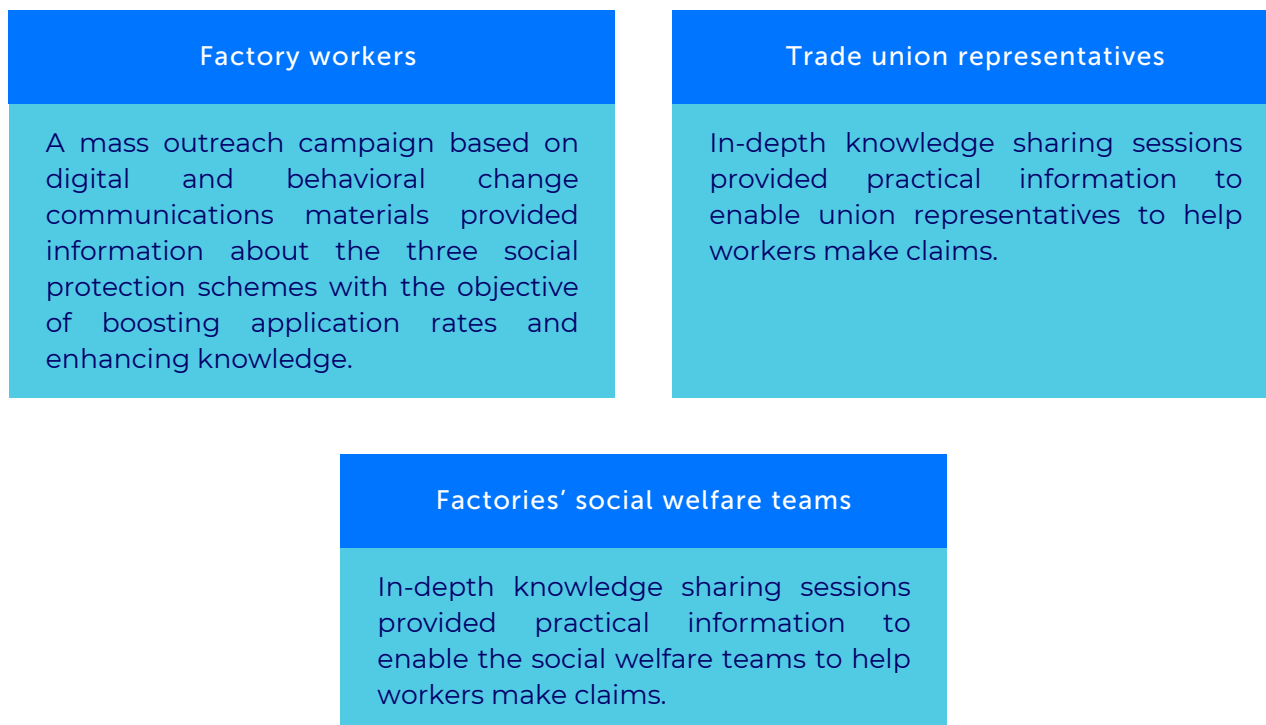
Increasing awareness of specific social protection and welfare services among RMG workers.

Changing attitudes towards accessing services.

Encouraging active uptake.

Building capacity of union leaders and factories' social welfare teams to support access and uptake.

Subsequently, 30 factories were identified across Dhaka, Narayanganj and Gazipur divisions with a combined workforce of approximately 20,000 individuals, and an extensive campaign was developed that focused on awareness of three of the most relevant social protection and welfare services: the Central Fund Scheme, the Employment Injury Scheme, and the Mother and Child Benefits Programme. The campaign was targeted at three groups:



Project activities involved coordination with garment factories, recruiting and training campaign personnel and community volunteers, developing and distributing campaign promotional and learning materials, installing knowledge sharing booths in factories, promoting dialogue with union leaders, and organizing community events, along with promoting the campaign and its objectives through social media.

Digital and behavioral change communications materials developed included a citizen's charter and a handbook covering the three primary social protection schemes, banners for display at factory premises, and a video success story. With 200-300 workers involved in each two-hour session, the factory-based events introduced SSNPs and provided a step-by-step guide to workers' rights and application processes, role-playing exercises, and Q&A sessions. As a result, many workers who had previously been unaware of their entitlements began applying for benefits, demonstrating increased confidence in navigating the system and accessing the support available to them.

Responding to manifold challenges

Since the start of the project in January 2023, Bangladesh has experienced persistent political unrest and widespread protests over governance, unemployment and inflation. The protests and subsequent government crackdowns, which included nationwide curfews, led to increased security risks and restricted access to factory sites for project personnel. Even if a participating factory was operational and project personnel could reach it, in some cases, factory owners were unwilling to allow access to anyone but workers.

In November 2023, this issue was compounded by wage-related strikes and labor unrest. Operational responses required day-to-day adjustments, including canceling and scaling back activities and continuing negotiations with factory operators and government authorities. Other responses included initiatives to enhance partnerships with women's associations and cooperative societies to reach women workers outside of the workplace.

Government reactions to the unrest included internet shutdowns to curb the organization of protests and the spread of information. As well as disrupting communications and business operations across the country, this isolated citizens – including project personnel – and hindered access to online services. This presented further operational challenges and threatened the reliability and reputation of the digital financial services being promoted, especially in crisis situations.

The political unrest and robust official responses had wider repercussions for the RMG sector, which was already grappling with a global economic slowdown and lower consumer demand in key markets. Tight production schedules and international shipments were disrupted, and failures in the national energy generating sector further constrained the energy-intensive industries in the RMG sector. With some international fashion brands potentially diverting orders to alternative manufacturing hubs, many factories' management teams simply had higher priorities than engaging with project activities.

In addition, with national governance issues, falling consumer demand and energy shortages creating an unpredictable business environment, large numbers of workers felt they could not rely on their salaries, and many feared losing their jobs. This created a challenging environment for a project aimed at promoting financial literacy, expanding the uptake of digital financial services, and formalizing financial practices.

Limited ownership of the smartphones needed to access digital services among women factory workers was a core challenge. In fact, many RMG workers simply cannot afford to buy the more sophisticated devices needed for personal access to the services the project promoted.¹³

Workers face further costs for network access and as factories rarely provide Wi-Fi internet access, primarily due to concerns over productivity and infrastructure costs, project activities had to be conducted outside of working hours, and hot-spot internet access had to be provided for project activities. In some cases, and additionally, to take end-of-shift fatigue into account, project personnel responded by moving interactions out of factories and into homes. However, even in this environment, many working women struggled to find the time and energy to participate.

¹³ In December 2023, the Bangladesh Minimum Wage Board established the minimum monthly wage for the garment sector at BDT12,500. Before that, the minimum wage had been set at BDT8,000 since 2018. Considering that mid-range smartphones typically cost between BDT20,000 and BDT40,000, and that even pre-owned devices cost at least BDT5,000, the cost of device ownership presents a barrier to the project's ambitions.

Beyond limited digital literacy, the generally low educational levels of many workers also presented a challenge, often exacerbated by factors such as heavy workloads and harsh working environments. Starting with limited experience with smartphones and sophisticated mobile applications, many workers struggled to comprehend and retain the training. Responses included repeating and refreshing the training modules, developing more video-based training material and interactive hands-on activities, and facilitating mentors to deliver one-to-one training.

Fundamental issues also emerged regarding understanding banking principles and trusting them. In some cases, even smaller and shorter-term loans were required than anticipated, and many workers reported feeling more comfortable with informal but familiar borrowing processes.

Regulatory requirements posed challenges for project initiatives offering banking services, particularly microloans and other credit services. In Bangladesh, digital microlending services are subject to the central bank and other regulations, and fintech companies must obtain appropriate licenses. Strict adherence to anti-money laundering and other regulations is mandatory, which includes conducting customer due diligence, maintaining detailed transaction records, and reporting suspicious activities.

Similarly, consumer protection regulations, including data protection laws and guidelines, must be adhered to and formal dispute resolution mechanisms established. This involved specialist project personnel in protracted discussions with regulatory bodies which delayed roll-out in some cases and limited some initiatives to pilots. Careful planning, substantial investment in compliance systems, and expert-led negotiations were required to comply with basic banking regulations, such as the need for proof of identity and a confirmed residential address.

Gendered social norms continued to significantly constrain the uptake of digital financial services by women workers. Traditional roles and expectations limit women's decision-making autonomy and restrict their access to and use of financial services. Low digital and financial literacy resulting from gendered access to education and information technology further exacerbates these barriers. Furthermore, societal norms often place women in informal financial roles within households, discouraging any interactions – digital or otherwise – with formal financial systems.

"Women have long been the backbone of Bangladesh's RMG sector, yet their access to leadership opportunities, financial security, and social protection remains limited. Oporajita is not just a project; it is a movement to challenge these disparities and empower women as leaders, negotiators, and decision-makers in their workplaces and beyond. UNCDF has played a critical role in bridging financial inclusion gaps by partnering with key stakeholders to develop digital and financial tools tailored for garment workers. By integrating financial literacy, policy advocacy, and innovative digital solutions, UNCDF is ensuring that social protection becomes a fundamental right, not just an option, for women in the RMG sector."

– Ainee Islam, Program Director, The Asia Foundation

Moving forwards

In 2025, the RMG sector in Bangladesh, a cornerstone of the national economy, faces significant challenges. As production costs rise due to higher energy prices, inflation and supply chain disruptions, global demand is falling. In 2023, export earnings grew by only 4.1 percent compared with 13.4 percent in 2022. Labor rights and workplace safety also remain troubling issues, with international consumers increasingly concerned about the social and environmental impacts of low-cost garment production. In addition, the sector is proving slow to integrate advanced technologies, limiting its competitiveness in higher-value market segments.

In this context, increasing the well-being, skills and resilience of women workers, who constitute 60 percent of the RMG workforce, is critical to both the economic sustainability of the sector and the political stability of the country. Women RMG workers, however, face multiple adversities. The minimum wage, revised in 2023 to BDT12,500 per month, remains insufficient, and women are particularly vulnerable to job cuts during economic downturns. Gender-based harassment in the workplace continues, and women, who must cope with the dual burden of work and unpaid domestic labor, face substantial barriers to professional advancement.

More widely, at a societal level, women in Bangladesh are also severely disadvantaged. According to a Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics survey, more than 50 percent of married women reported experiencing domestic violence in 2022. Likewise, despite legal measures, over 50 percent of women aged 20-24 years married before the age of 18 – one of the highest rates of child marriage in the world – limiting access to education, employment opportunities and economic participation. Consequently, aside from the garment industry, women's participation in the formal workforce is low, and many are engaged in informal or unpaid work with limited access to land ownership, credit or other economic resources. Deeply ingrained patriarchal values and cultural norms are the root causes.

Addressing these challenges requires a multi-dimensional approach, including strengthening legal frameworks, promoting education and skills development, enhancing access to healthcare and financial services, and fostering cultural shifts to promote gender equality.

UNCDF's Collective Impact on Future of Work in Bangladesh project has contributed to these endeavors by boosting women workers' digital and financial literacy and improving their access to formal financial services and social protection programs. Enhanced ability to manage personal finances, save and invest increases women's independence, economic resilience and long-term financial stability. It also helps ensure equitable growth and supports the garment sector's global competitiveness. In addition, increased familiarity with digital platforms connects women better to social welfare schemes, healthcare services and entrepreneurial opportunities, contributing to their financial independence and overall empowerment.

Aside from economic empowerment, further ambitious and determined initiatives are required in a multi-dimensional, multi-stakeholder approach to improve the well-being of women workers. Advocacy with government and industry stakeholders, combined with work to continue to increase awareness among women RMG workers about their rights and entitlements, is one critical element. This should include educating women workers about employment rights, including fair wages, workplace safety and access to social protection, and empower them to advocate for improved conditions themselves.

Encouraging participation in trade unions and workers' organizations, for example, will support collective bargaining and amplify women's voices in negotiations with employers and policymakers. Concurrent advocacy efforts with government and policymakers should focus on enacting and enforcing employment laws and regulations that prioritize gender-responsive policies such as maternity benefits, childcare facilities and mechanisms to prevent workplace harassment. These measures will not only enhance the socio-economic resilience of women workers but also ensure compliance with global labor standards, improving the industry's reputation and competitiveness in international markets and contribute to a more equitable and sustainable global garment industry.

Likewise, improving the workplace environment has benefits for the entire industry as well as individual workers and their families. Establishing safe and healthy working conditions, including proper sanitation, adequate ventilation and regular safety inspections, reduces occupational health risks and boosts worker productivity. Enforcing robust policies against sexual harassment and discrimination fosters a secure and equitable workplace, encouraging greater women participation and retention in the workforce.

Access to maternity benefits, childcare facilities and flexible work arrangements that respond to women's dual burden of professional and domestic responsibilities, is another key aspect of empowering and enabling women workers. Aligning Bangladesh better with international labor standards will support the development of a more resilient and empowered workforce that enhances Bangladesh's global competitiveness and contributes to the sector's sustainable growth and development.

Skills development and training are also vital to enhance the well-being of women workers and ensure the long-term economic viability and sustainability of Bangladesh's garment industry. Providing technical training to equip workers with advanced skills improves productivity, efficiency and the capacity to adapt to evolving technologies and market demands.

Leadership and management training is also required to prepare women for the supervisory and decision-making roles that foster inclusive workplace dynamics. Supporting education and literacy through accessible programs will empower workers to better understand their rights, manage personal finances, and access broader opportunities for career growth. Enhanced job satisfaction, reduced staff turnover, and a more skilled and empowered workforce will strengthen the sector's global competitiveness and contribute to more sustainable and profitable commercial operations.

Finally, technology development and innovation are vital. Introducing advanced technology, such as digital design tools and automated machinery, will enhance working conditions by reducing physical strain, streamlining repetitive tasks, and improving workplace safety. Encouraging innovation and entrepreneurship among women workers through targeted training and support will also generate a culture of creativity and empowerment, enabling women to add value within the industry and explore alternative income-generating opportunities.

Doubtlessly, the sustained growth and stability of the garment industry in Bangladesh – and indeed the nation itself – requires strategic investments, policy reforms and informed alignment with global best practices. Likewise, closing the digital divide, whether it derives from financial circumstances or gender norms, requires targeted interventions to bridge knowledge gaps, promote inclusion, and empower disadvantaged women. These efforts will not only improve individual livelihoods but also position the RMG sector as a forward-looking and competitive player in the global market, promoting its sustainable growth.

Through collaborative efforts among government, industry stakeholders, development organizations and civil society, the RMG sector can serve as a model for gender-inclusive industrial development that extends beyond Bangladesh.

Oporajita Partners



