From Jobs to Careers:

Lifting Constraints to Women's Career Advancement in South Asia

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PRELIMINARY AND INCOMPLETE

Abstract: This study investigates the primary demand-side and supply-side barriers hindering women's progression from jobs to careers in garment factories across Bangladesh, India, and Pakistan, and evaluates whether targeted interventions can alleviate these constraints. Specifically, it examines how managerial decision-making (demand-side), women's access to career information and skills awareness (supply-side), and household support impact women's career advancement. Building on partnerships with the H&M Group, we are conducting comprehensive surveys in approximately 100 garment factories across the three countries. These surveys will identify and quantify the most pressing constraints on women's career progression. Following this, randomized interventions will be implemented in Bangladesh and India to assess their effectiveness in overcoming these barriers.

Introduction

Women's participation in the labor force has consistently been recognized as a key driver of economic growth and societal progress. The benefits of integrating women into the workforce extend beyond households to influence national economies and firm-level productivity. Despite these well-documented advantages, significant barriers persist worldwide, restricting women's ability to fully engage in and benefit from labor markets. These challenges are particularly acute in developing regions, where structural inequities and deeply entrenched societal norms create systemic obstacles. While much of the policy and research focus has been on enabling women's entry into the labor market through access to jobs, there has been comparatively little emphasis on facilitating their transition into careers—roles that provide opportunities for skill development, wage progression, and upward mobility. This gap in focus represents a critical missing piece in the effort to achieve gender equality and unlock the full potential of women in the workforce.

The distinction between jobs and careers is not merely semantic; it reflects fundamental differences in the nature of women's engagement with the labor market. Jobs are often characterized by a short-term perspective, motivated by immediate economic needs, and typically offer limited opportunities for advancement or professional growth. In contrast, careers involve long-term commitment, access to training, prospects for wage growth, and pathways to positions of greater responsibility. For women in developing countries, however, the journey from jobs to careers is fraught with challenges. High gender wage gaps, occupational segregation, and low female labor force participation (FLFP) rates highlight the barriers that exist at both demand and supply levels. Employers' biases, limited access to training, workplace safety concerns, and societal attitudes further compound these challenges, creating a landscape in which women's potential remains largely untapped.

South Asia presents a particularly stark example of these dynamics. With some of the lowest rates of FLFP globally, the region is characterized by significant gender disparities in both participation and advancement within the labor force. These disparities are particularly evident in the garment industry, one of the largest employers of women in South Asia. As a labor-intensive sector, the garment industry holds tremendous potential for economic empowerment, especially for women transitioning from informal employment or agriculture into formal labor markets. Yet, this potential remains unrealized for many. Data from nearly 900 apparel factories and over a million workers across countries such as Bangladesh, India, and Pakistan reveal that wage gaps are widest and opportunities for career advancement are most limited for women in these settings. Women are often concentrated in lower-

paying, entry-level roles, with few pathways to supervisory or managerial positions. This exclusion is not merely a reflection of individual choices but is deeply rooted in structural and cultural barriers that shape women's experiences in the workplace.

Understanding these barriers and identifying effective strategies to address them are critical for fostering gender equality and promoting economic development in the region. Existing research has largely focused on supply-side factors, such as education and training, as drivers of women's labor force participation. While these are undeniably important, they do not tell the whole story. On-the-job barriers, including gender biases in managerial decision-making, workplace discrimination, and unsafe working conditions, play an equally significant role in limiting women's career progression. Addressing these issues requires a holistic approach that considers both demand-side constraints—factors influencing employers' decisions—and supply-side constraints, such as women's access to resources, information, and support systems.

The garment industry provides an ideal context for such an investigation, given its economic importance and its unique position as a gateway for women entering the formal labor market. By focusing on this sector, this study aims to shed light on the specific challenges that women face in their efforts to build sustainable careers. It also seeks to evaluate the effectiveness of targeted interventions designed to address these challenges. These interventions include initiatives to reduce managerial biases, enhance women's access to information about career opportunities, and increase support within households to enable women to pursue career aspirations. By combining rigorous data collection with innovative experimental methods, the research will not only document the existing barriers but also test practical solutions to overcome them.

This study also has significant implications for policy and practice. Policymakers, industry leaders, and international organizations all have a stake in promoting gender equality within the labor force, particularly in regions like South Asia, where the potential for transformative change is immense. Governments can use the insights from this research to design policies that promote equitable pay, enhance workplace safety, and create supportive environments for women's career advancement. Similarly, private-sector actors, including garment manufacturers and international brands, can benefit from understanding how inclusive practices can improve productivity, reduce turnover, and enhance their reputation in global value chains. For Intergovernmental Organizations (IGOs) and advocacy groups, the findings provide a basis for designing programs that address the root causes of gender inequality in labor markets.

Beyond its immediate focus on the garment industry, this research contributes to broader conversations about the role of women in economic development. The transition from jobs to careers represents more than an economic shift; it is a social transformation that empowers women to contribute meaningfully to their households, communities, and societies. It challenges traditional gender roles, promotes greater agency and autonomy for women, and sets the stage for intergenerational progress. By identifying and addressing the barriers to this transition, this study aims to advance not only gender equality but also the broader goals of sustainable and inclusive economic growth.

In summary, the garment industry in South Asia offers a microcosm through which to explore the intersection of gender, labor, and economic development. By investigating the barriers to women's career advancement and testing interventions to address them, this research seeks to provide actionable insights that can drive meaningful change. In doing so, it contributes to a growing body of literature that recognizes the importance of moving beyond jobs to careers as a framework for understanding and addressing gender disparities in labor markets. The findings of this study have the potential to inform policies and practices that benefit not only the women directly involved but also the broader economies and societies of South Asia

Methodology/research design

Our proposed project has two primary goals. First, we aim to identify and contrast the primary constraints to female labor participation and career advancement in the garment industry in three South Asian countries that are characterized by especially low levels of female labor force participation: Bangladesh, India and Pakistan. Second, we aim to evaluate the impact of targeted interventions on female workers' job-to-career transition, i.e., women's work retention, compensation, and promotion patterns. In order to achieve our goals, we plan to implement three distinct phases of the proposed project. In Phase 1, we conduct a survey of supervisors and factory workers in Bangladesh, India and Pakistan. In Phase 2, we will implement a comprehensive set of factory-level interventions targeting either factory managers, female workers or female workers and their families, through clustered randomized controlled trials. The interventions will be conducted in Bangladesh and India. Phase 3 of the project will consist in the evaluation of the interventions, through the collection and analysis of administrative and survey data the year following the interventions. In what follows, we provide background information about our study

sample (H&M factories in Bangladesh, India and Pakistan), describe each phase of the project, and provide details on our sampling and randomization strategies.

Background Information: The H&M Factories

There are currently 256 H&M garment factories in Bangladesh, 29 in Pakistan and 177 in India. These are large factories, with an average of 1000 employees in India, and an average of 2000 employees in both Bangladesh and Pakistan.[1] The gender composition of the workforce, averaging all ranks, is balanced in India and Bangladesh, where around 50 percent of the workers are women; in contrast, only 14% of garment workers in the H&M Pakistani factories are women. Averaging across all positions within the factories, in the three countries, male employees earn about 10 percent more than female employees. This applies to low rank positions and managerial positions alike. Women are typically employed in entry-level positions, as line workers, and share of women falls as they move up the production-worker wage scale Even fewer work as supervisors. In our study sample, only 8 percent, 15 percent and 7 percent of supervisors (the next position up the career ladder) are women in Bangladesh, India and Pakistan, respectively. When looking at the percentage of female employees who hold a supervisory role, they are 6 percent in Bangladesh, 3 percent in India and 6 percent in Pakistan. These numbers confirm that women's career advancement is severely limited in all three countries.

Phase 1: Data Collection in Garment Factories in Bangladesh, India and Pakistan

Phase 1 is currently taking place in collaboration with our partner organization: The H&M Group. The collection of survey data within garment factories is complete in India and Pakistan, and is ongoing in Bangladesh. Our baseline survey took place in 49 H&M garment factories in India and 8 H&M factories in Pakistan; it is currently taking place in 50 H&M factories in Bangladesh. In all factories, we are focusing on machine operators, and we conducted or are conducting a supervior survey and a worker survey.

a) *Supervisor survey*: The survey involves 2 line supervisors (lower-level managers), one man and one woman, per factory. The survey has the primary objective of identifying demand-side factors that contribute to the observed gender gaps in salary and promotion rates, e.g., supervisors' incomplete

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[1] These statistics are generated through the analysis of proprietary data that the H&M Group shared with the PI.

or incorrect information about the productivities of male and female line workers, and systemic and/or implicit biases in the existing evaluation processes and promotion practices;

b) *Worker survey*: The survey will involve randomly selected 30 male and 30 female workers in 50 H&M garment factories in Bangladesh, 49 H&M factories operating in India and 8 H&M factories in Pakistan. This leads to a total of 3,000 workers in Bangladesh, 3.000 in India, and about 500 in Pakistn. The random selection of survey respondents mirrors the randomization strategy that we will use for the implementation of targeted interventions in Phase 2 of the project. The survey records individual demographics and family background, and elicits workers' *career aspirations*, if any, and their expectations about future promotions, salary raises, and the possibility of transitioning to a different position within or outside the factory. It also records the intention of leaving the labor market altogether in the short- or the long-term. Moreover, the survey collects information on men's and women's job search practices (e.g., how they obtained their current job), awareness of (male and female) co-workers' salaries – including those of supervisors and managers –, information regarding the possibility of career advancement within the factory, and measures of satisfaction with different aspects of their jobs, including mid-level and top-level management, and co-workers' verbal, physical or sexual harassment. Finally, the survey measures preferences and personality traits (e.g., self-efficacy and competitiveness), gender attitudes, and beliefs about the prevailing social norms regarding the employment of married versus unmarried women in garment factories.

c) *"Work from home" study in Pakistan*: In Pakistan, nearly all of the women working in the garment industry (94 percent) do so from home (ILO 2017). Given the vast prevalence of the "work from home" model, the study of characteristics and dynamics of women's labor force participation and career advancement in the garment industry in Pakistan requires a different methodological approach. To this end, we plan to track the contractors working for the Better Work firms (about 50 in the Sindh and Punjab regions) and, through them, identify and quantify the number of female home workers per factory. We will then implement a *pilot household survey* (due to budgetary constraints), involving 300 randomly selected female home workers and their husbands. Our overarching objective will be to quantify the working conditions – i.e., compensation, hours and type of work – of these women, who tend to engage in the lowest earning tasks, and who are dependent upon, and hence easily exploited by, independent contractors and middlemen.

Initial Results (India)

The garment industry in South Asia presents a critical opportunity for examining gender disparities in the workforce. This study draws on data collected from H&M factories in Bangladesh, India, and Pakistan to identify the constraints women face in career advancement and propose interventions to address them. Our initial results cover Factory and Workforce Distribution, Gender Income Disparities, Career Aspiration and Training Opportunities, Promotion Prospects, and Regional Insights. They are generated by the data collected in Indian garment factories. The data collection in India took place between September and December 2024. About 60 randomly selected workers, all employed as machine operators, were suveyed, in each of 49 factories. We aimed for about half of the surveyed workers to be women. We report some very preliminary findings below. The data cleaning and data analysis are curretly ongoing.

Factory and Workforce Distribution

Table 1.1 illustrates the distribution of surveyed factories across North and South India, with the majority (32 out of 49) located in southern states such as Karnataka, Tamil Nadu, and Andhra Pradesh. Table 1.2 highlights the gender composition of the surveyed workers, with 58% female workers overall, showing a higher concentration of women in the South (1,192 women versus 466 in the North). These distributions underscore the regional variations in female workforce participation.

Gender Disparities in Income

Tables 2, 3 and 4 provide a breakdown of monthly incomes by gender. Across all regions, men earn significantly more than women, with gender income differences most pronounced in the higher wage brackets. For instance, 12.77% of men earned between Rs 15,001 and Rs 20,000 compared to only 5.58% of women. The gaps widen further at the Rs 20,001–Rs 30,000 range, where 3.83% of men and just 0.13% of women fell. These disparities are consistent across regions, as shown in Tables 3 and 4, though the income gaps are slightly narrower in the South.

Career Aspirations, Training Opportunities and Promotion Prospects

Table 5 reveals notable gender differences in career aspirations. While 61.2% of women anticipated remaining in their current position at a higher grade, only 14.31% aimed for supervisory roles, compared to 35.98% of men. These aspirations align with the opportunities available, as shown in Table 6: only 6.17% of women reported consistently taking up training opportunities, compared to 20.91% of men.

These disparities highlight large gender disparities in career aspirations and the existence of the systemic barriers thatwomen face in accessing the resources needed for career advancement.

Tables 7 and 8 explore men's and women's attitudes toward promotions. Only 42.76% of women expressed an intention to apply for a promotion, compared to 56.2% of men. Additionally, 39.38% of women stated they would "never" apply for a supervisory role, as opposed to 20.59% of men. Despite this, women's self-assessed confidence in their supervisory skills, displayed in Figure 1, suggests that they perceive themselves as equally capable if they assumed the role of supervisor. Further analysis, displayed in Figures 2 and 3, suggests that while women think of themselves as higly productive (62% of women and 68% of men think of themseleves as the ``best" when compared to co-workers) women are significantly less likely to believe that their supervisor would rank them as their best. In addition, our preliminary analysis of family-driven barriers indicates that the women employed in these garment factories (who have threfore self-selected into these jobs) do not lack family support (Figure 4), and display progressive attitudes towards gender equality (not shown in this draft's tables/figures).

In summary, our prelimnary analysis suggests that the observed gender gap in career aspirations is unlikely to be driven by constraints related to gender norms, or by a confidence gender gap. Instead, it seems to be driven by a lack institutional support and by (factual or perceived) bias in management assessments.

Regional Insights
The data underscore significant regional differences in income, training, and promotion opportunities. In the South, where women constitute a larger share of the workforce, gender income gaps are narrower, and more women report access to training. This contrasts with the North, suggesting that cultural and institutional factors vary considerably within the country.

Implications and Phase 2 of the project

Phase 2 of the proposed project will consist in the implementation of firm-level interventions aimed at lifting some of these constraints, which, based on the literature our previous work, we believe are especially binding in the garment industry in Bangladesh and India. Phase 2 will involve the surveyed factories in India and Bangladesh.

The survey findings highlight the urgent need for targeted interventions to support women's career advancement in the garment industry. We will use such insights to design and implement interventions within garment factories. While we have not finalized the design of the interventions, these may include:

1. Expanding Training Programs:** Increase access to and participation in upskilling initiatives for women.
2. Addressing Wage Gaps:** Implement policies that promote wage transparency and equitable pay practices.
3. Fostering Confidence and Support:** Create mentorship programs and provide role models to encourage women to pursue leadership roles.
4. Regional Tailoring:** Customize interventions to address the unique challenges faced in different regions, such as the North's lower female workforce participation.

These measures, combined with collaborative efforts among industry stakeholders, have the potential to transform the garment industry into a more inclusive and equitable space for women.

Phase 3: Endline Data Collection and Outcome Variables

Phase 3 of the project will consist in data collection activities, one year after the interventions (year 3 of the grant). We will re-visit the surveyed factories an implement an endline survey of workers ad supervisors. Our primary outcome variables are (administrative-level) measures of: 1) female worker pay and the corresponding gender gap; 2) female promotion rate and the corresponding gender gap; 3) female retention rate and the corresponding gender gap. Our secondary outcome variables are measures of: 1) (long-term) career goals and aspirations; 2) perceptions of social norms associated with employment in garment factories for married and unmarried women; 3) satisfaction with the work environment, including managerial decision-making and male co-workers' attitudes and behaviors; 4) psychological well-being and life satisfaction; and 5) intra-household decision-making. At endline, we will also collect information about workers' social networks within and outside the factory. This will make it possible, in longer-term follow-up work, to assess possible spillover effects of our interventions. Finally, in order to facilitate the tracking of survey respondents between baseline and endline survey (and in future follow-up work) and reduce attrition between the different waves of data collection, both the baseline and endline surveys will include detailed contact details of responders and their family members (e.g., parents, spouse, close friends and neighbors).

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Preliminary Tables and Figures

Table 1. 1 : Factories sample summary

Region	State	Total Factories covered
North	Uttar Pradesh	14
	Haryana	3
	Total	**17**
South	Karnataka	24
	Tamil Nadu	6
	Andhra Pradesh	2
	Total	**32**
Total		**49**

Table 1. 2 : Workers sample summary

	North	South	Total
Male	479	711	1,190
Female	466	1,192	1,658
Total	945	1,903	2,848

Table 1. 3: Workers sample summary (by state)

	Uttar Pradesh	*Haryana*	*Karnataka*	*Tamil Nadu*	*Andhra Pradesh*	*Total*
Male	405	74	524	148	39	1,190
Female	406	60	915	196	81	1,658
Total	811 (28%)	134 (5%)	1439 (51%)	344 (12%)	120 (4%)	2,848

Table 2: Total monthly income earned from factory work (Overall)[2]

Earned income range	Percent			
	All	*Female*	*Male*	*Gender Differences (Male – Female)*
Rs 5001 – 10000	15.61	17.62	12.68	-4.94***
Rs 10001 – 15000	74.25	76.68	70.71	-5.97***
Rs 15001 – 20000	8.51	5.58	12.77	7.19***
Rs 20001 – 30000	1.64	0.13	3.83	3.71***

Table 3: Total monthly income earned from factory work (North)

Earned income range	Percent			
	All	*Female*	*Male*	*Gender Differences (Male – Female)*
Rs 5001 – 10000	15.78	17.82	13.76	-4.06
Rs 10001 – 15000	75.23	79.86	70.64	-9.22**
Rs 15001 – 20000	5.30	2.08	8.49	6.40***
Rs 20001 – 30000	3.69	0.23	7.11	6.88***

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[2] All observations (157) with income less than or equal to Rs 5000 was dropped. These are either zero (91) or less than Rs 5000 because either they didn't work in last month or was on leave for many days.

Table 4: Total monthly income earned from factory work (South)

resp_income	Percent			
	All	Female	Male	Gender Differences (Male – Female)
Rs 5001 – 10000	15.52	17.54	11.97	-5.57**
Rs 10001 – 15000	73.78	75.49	70.76	-4.74*
Rs 15001 – 20000	10.04	6.88	15.61	8.73***
Rs 20001 – 30000	0.66	0.09	1.67	1.58***

Table 5: Where do you see yourself in this occupation in a year's time? (Overall)

Where they see themselves in 1 year	Percent			
	All	*Female*	*Male*	*Gender Differences (Male – Female)*
Same position and grade	22.50	23.50	21.08	-2.42
Same position and higher grade	53.09	61.20	41.64	-19.56***
Higher/better position (supervisor)	23.29	14.31	35.98	21.66***
Worse position or grade	0.25	0.31	0.17	-0.13
Leave	0.87	0.68	1.13	0.45

Table 6. Since you joined this factory, have you had opportunities to train to upskill? (Overall)

| Had the opportunity to train or upskill	Percent			
	All	*Female*	*Male*	*Gender Differences (Male – Female)*
No	54.23	59.34	46.89	-12.45***
Yes, but I never took it up	11.29	12.70	9.27	-3.42**
Yes, and I took it up sometimes	22.26	21.79	22.92	1.13
Yes, and I always took it up	12.23	6.17	20.91	14.74***

Table 7: Do you plan to APPLY FOR a PROMOTION or to ask the supervisor or a manager for a promotion

(for instance to a higher grade/wage or higher position) in the future? (Overall)

Plans to apply for a promotion in the future	Percent			
	All	Female	Male	Gender Differences (Male – Female)
Yes	48.32	42.76	56.20	13.43***
No	51.68	57.24	43.80	-13.43***

Table 8: Suppose the management decides to collect applications to become a supervisor or a higher

position TODAY, would you apply? (Overall)

Would apply for promotion to supervisor now	Percent			
	All	Female	Male	Gender Differences (Male – Female)
Yes, now	26.40	18.76	37.06	18.30***
Yes, next year	24.02	23.46	24.79	1.33
Yes, in a few years	18.05	18.4	17.56	-0.83
No, never	31.53	39.38	20.59	-18.80***

**Figure 1: Expected performance in a supervisor role**
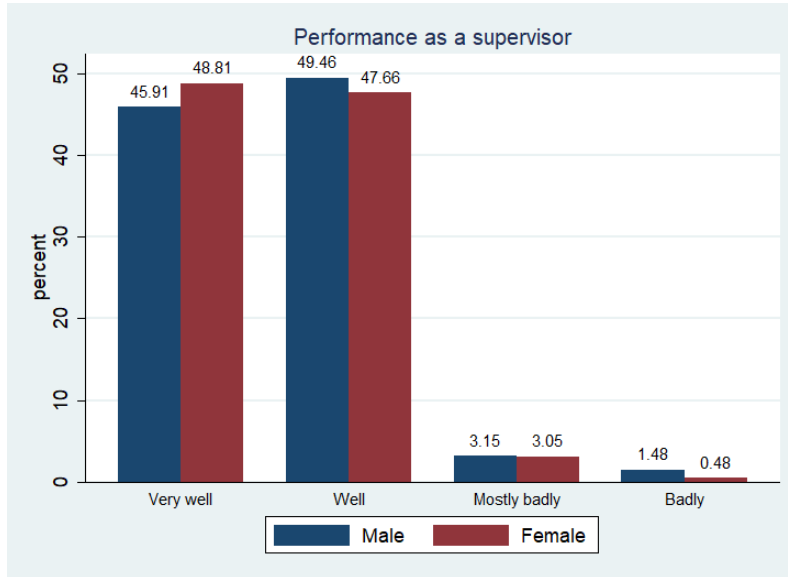
Note: The figure reports workers' answer to the question: *Imagine that you were promoted to the role of supervisor. How do you think you would perform in that position?*

**Figure 2: Worker's productivity self-ranking**

Self ranking of productivity (using Ladder)
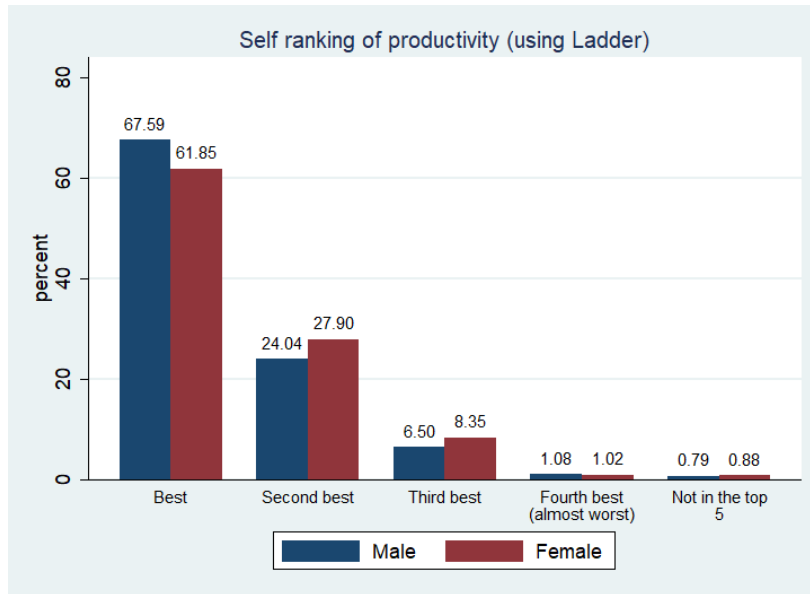
Note: The figure reports workers' answers to the question: *If you had to compare your productivty to that of your co-workers in your producton line, where do you think you will be on this ladder?*

Figure 3: Worker's expected ranking by supervisor

What would be the productivity ranking by supervisor (using Ladder)
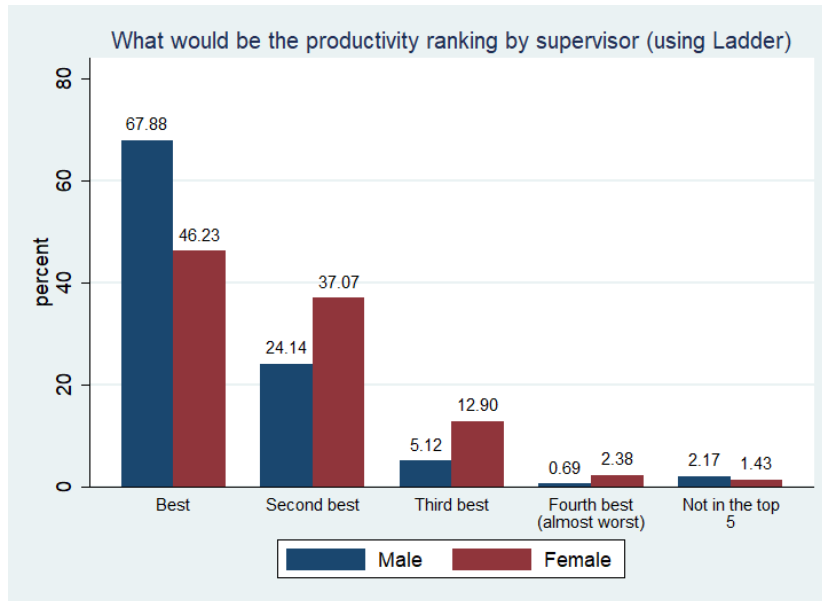
Note: The figure reports workers' answers to the question: *If your supervisor had to compare your productivty to that of your co-workers in your producton line, where do you think your supervisor will place you on this ladder?*

Figure 4: Family Support
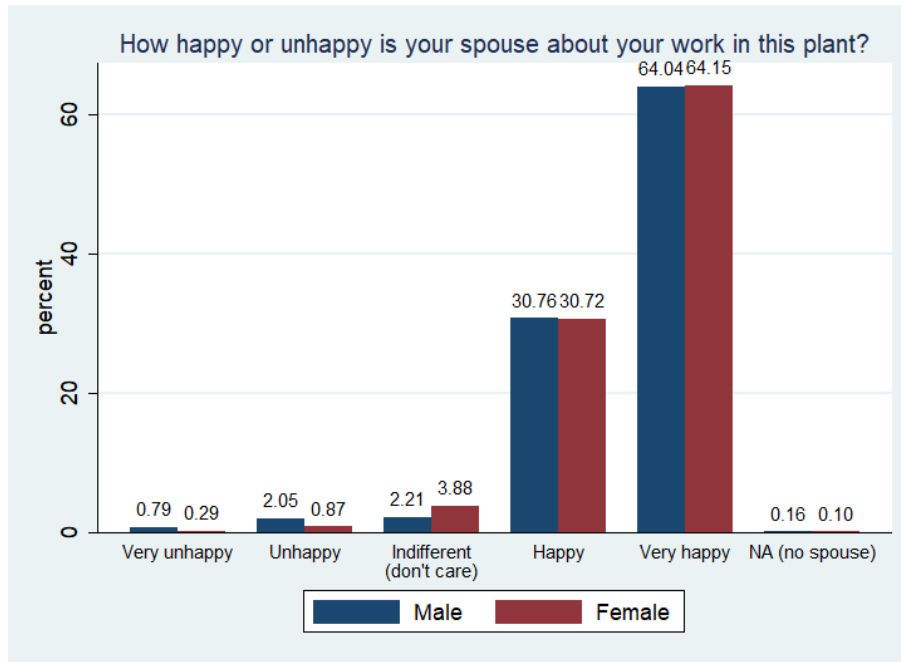
Note: The figure reports workers' answers to the question: *How happy or unhappy is your spouse about your work in this plant?*