

Background: BREB has demonstrated a strong commitment to improving gender diversity within its organization

Empowering women, skills development, and favorable work environment are the three core BREB goals towards gender mainstreaming. In late 2021, the World Bank (WB) and BREB conducted an assessment to identify gender gaps, barriers, and possible steps for improvement at both policy and operational levels.¹ The assessment was intended to provide a basis for developing a Gender Action Plan to enhance institutional and regulatory capacity and to support the gender-responsive implementation of the WB's ongoing Electricity Distribution Modernization Program (EDMP). The interventions will also benefit the 80 rural electric cooperatives, locally known as Palli Bidyut Samitis (PBS) under BREB. The assessment was based on extensive consultations and surveys framed around four key areas of gender equity: i) gender sensitivity and women's empowerment; ii) job satisfaction and work-life balance; iii) office environment and facilities; and, iv) sexual-harassment at workplaces. This report provides a summary of the findings and recommendations.

Box 1: Bangladesh Rural Electrification Board (BREB) Quick Facts

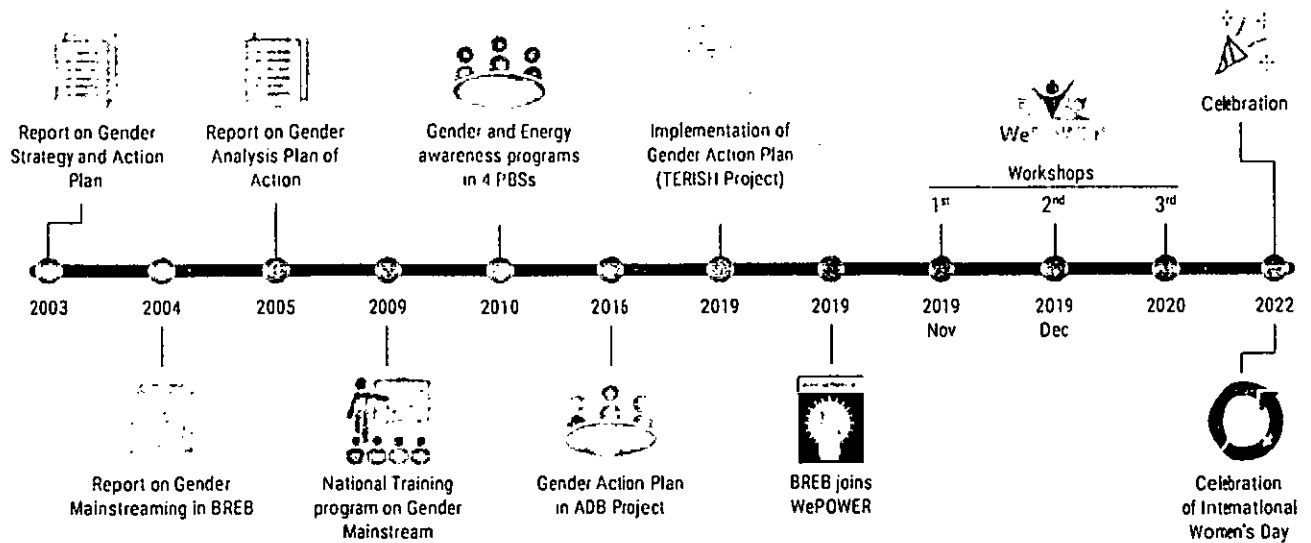


- BREB is the largest power distribution utility in Bangladesh
- It is responsible for rural electrification
- Established in 1977 and headquarters in Dhaka
- Comprises 80 rural electric cooperatives, locally known as Palli Bidyut Samitis or PBS
- PBS spans the country (462 Upazilla)
- A WePOWER (South Asia Women in Power Sector Professional Network) Partner since 2020
- BREB Total staff: 1,447 (8% female)
- PBS Total staff: 40,188 (14% female)
- Total Customers Served: 33.5 million

Furthermore, a recent noteworthy project of BREB entitled 'Translating Electricity Supply into Improvement of Rural Households' was implemented in 5 PBSs², developing an energy-based

1. The assessment involved collection of data from a) an anonymous survey of 1,447 male and female employees of BREB and 20 selected PBSs; b) BREB official data on employees; c) central HR database of 40,000 employees from 80 PBSs; and d) Key Informant Interviews (KII) and Focus Group Discussions (FGD) with BREB/PBS officials and staff from all levels.
 2. Bangladesh Power System Improvement and Efficiency Improvement Phase 1 (<https://www.adb.org/projects/6292100600/0243100600/01>)

Figure 1: Timeline of key gender initiatives undertaken at BREB/PBS



Box 2: Electricity Distribution Modernization Program (EDMP) by the World Bank

EDMP is a gender-tagged project with result indicators, interventions, monitoring requirements, and funding support for the inclusion of gender. Under Disbursement Linked Indicator (DLI) 7, the Project will annually monitor:

- % of female employees in technical roles (baseline: 2.8%, target: 10%)
- % of female staff at BREB and PBS
- % of female staff in management/officer positions
- % of female staff in project technical trainings
- EDMP aims for 10% women staff in technical roles in BREB by the end of the project

livelihood program with a focus on low-income women consumers of the PBSs. The project also provided training for microenterprise development using electricity and safety aspects in the use of electricity, along with specific technical training to members of BREB/PBS on the digitalisation of maintenance of assets/infrastructure of the network.

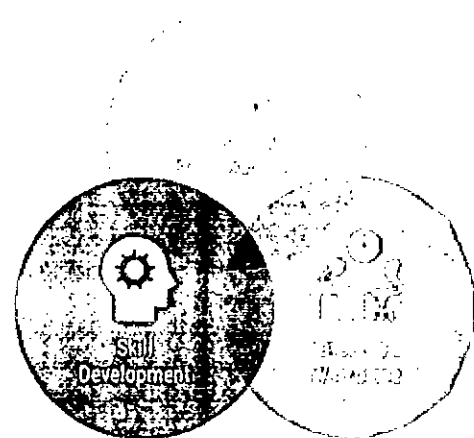
Employee profile finds a low number of women employees in both BREB and the 80 PBSs

In 2021, women accounted for just 8.2% (119/1,447) of total employees at BREB (see Chart 1). The situation is similar in 80 PBSs where women make up 13.9% (5,594/40,188) of total employees (see Chart 1), including regular, contractual, and other temporary categories. Most women hold non-technical administrative positions in both BREB and PBSs.

Box 3: BREB Initiatives as a WePOWER Partner

When BREB became a partner of the South Asia Women in the Power Sector Professional Network, also known as the WePOWER Network, it committed itself to implementing gender activities toward improving women's participation in the energy sector.¹ Towards this, BREB declared three goals for gender mainstreaming:

1. Empower women in the workforce by adopting good practices and policies from leading utilities in South Asia.
2. Provide training and learning opportunities to female staff for enhancement of technical and managerial skills.
3. Create a favorable work environment and introduce new initiatives for women in the BREB workforce.



¹ Visit www.wepowernetwork.org for more information.

Chart 1. Total staff in BREB

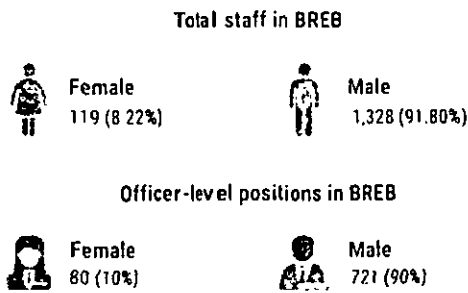


Chart 2. Total staff in PBSs

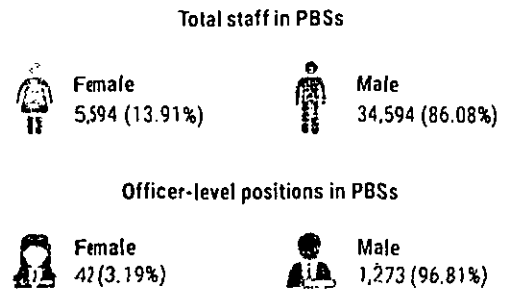
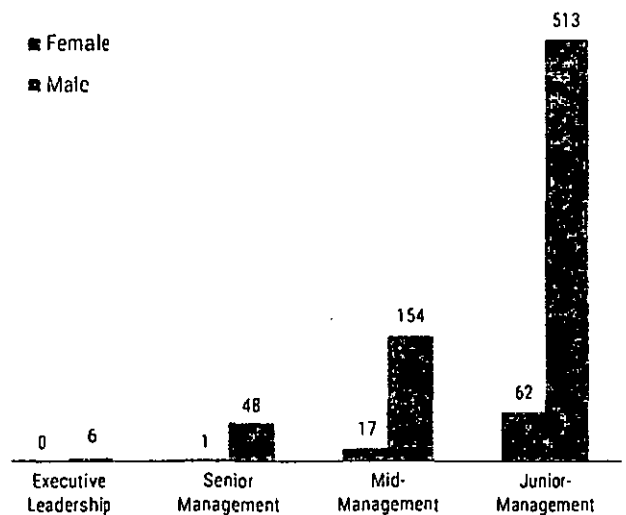


Table 1: BREB HR Information (level of employment) as of Aug 2021

Level of Employment	Total Staff			Female Staff		
	Technical	Non-Technical	Total	Technical	Non-Technical	Total
Executive Leadership	3	3	6	0	0	0
Senior Management	29	20	49	0	1	1
Mid-Management	107	64	171	1	16	17
Junior-Management	320	255	575	15	47	62
All other employees	755	350	646	2	37	39
Grand Total	755	692	1447	18	101	119

(1- Chairman and Members; 2- Ex. Director, Chief Engr., Addl. Chief Engr., Director and equivalent; 3- Dy. Director/Executive Engr. and equivalent; 4- Asst. Engr., Sub-Asst. Engr. and equivalent (Class-1 and Class-2 Officers); 5- All Class III and Per employees.)

Chart 3. Distribution of male and female BREB staff across management-level positions



- At BREB, women account for only 2.8% (17/609) of total staff in technical/engineering roles. Only 2.46% of Deputy General Manager (DGM) positions (nine, of which five are technical roles) are held by women. Only 10% (80/801) officer-level positions are held by women (see Chart 2). Just one of 55 executive and senior management-level positions is held by a female staff (see Chart 3).
- Employment of women varied within the 80 PBSs, with an average of 13.9%. Kushtia in the central-west location has the highest proportion of women employees (18.1%) whereas Cumilla-4 in the East has the lowest (9.7%).
- In PBSs, the posts of Billing Assistants, Data Entry Operators, and Assistant Cashiers are reserved for women. Only 3.2% (42/1,315) are officer-level positions (see Chart 2).
- Approximately half of PBS employees hold contract/temporary positions (non-regular). Among these, a sizable number of women (599) account for 25.57% of the 2,343 "no work no pay" (NWNP) temporary positions.

Policies, practices, and perceptions around gender at BREB and PBS

BREB is working to improve gender awareness within the organization. There is growing understanding among men and women, of the need and benefits of greater gender equality. Staff at all levels understand that achievement of BREB's goals depends on equal representation and full participation of both male and female staff. BREB/PBSs provide/s compulsory training to all new recruits. On-the-job/in-service training for female and male staff is one of the pillars of the organization structure. All employees have regular mandatory operational and management training, including a one-hour session on gender awareness. However, the subject of sexual harassment/anti-discrimination is not covered in any training course. Indeed, BREB is yet to develop a policy against gender-based discrimination at work and specific policies to encourage women's participation in management/officer-level positions.

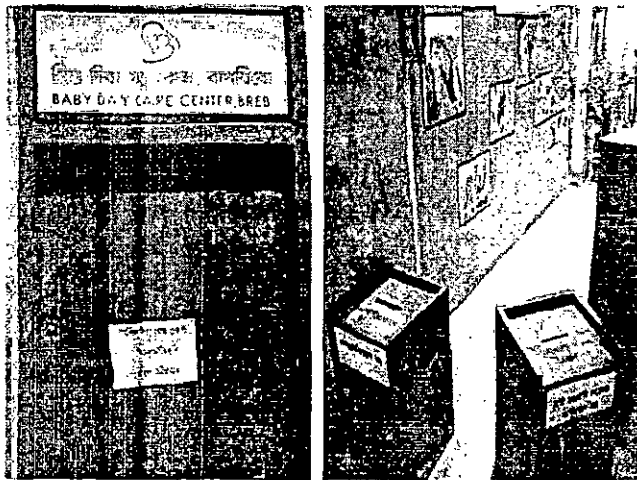


Photo: Baby daycare center (left) and boxes for complaints of sexual harassment at BREB HQ

BREB is also supporting outreach and capacity building to students and women professionals. The small number of women in BREB and PBS, especially in technical and senior positions, is reflective of the prevalent societal gender norms and traditionally low participation of girls and women in STEM education and jobs. To overcome such challenges, BREB works with key engineering universities to build the capacity of female engineering students through exposure visits, internship programs, and interaction with senior female engineers (role models). BREB also supports a mentorship program through which new female recruits are paired with senior engineers (both male and female) to help with personal and professional development. Each year, BREB conducts two leadership trainings and sends its employees to local capacity-building workshop events. Nevertheless, women's participation in technical and leadership roles (policymaking and regulatory positions) remains low. The percentage of women receiving any particular training is also low, with less than 10% of women trainees in STEM-related areas. Furthermore, none of the current 11 interns at BREB are female.

HR policies need to be further strengthened to amplify the impact of BREB's gender activities. Transfers and postings are done as per government rules. PBS has no policy that gives preference for women to be in the same geographical area as their homes, or for spouses to have postings in the same or adjacent PBS offices due to organizational regulations. Women are posted to their spouse place only on condition of vacancy. However, women can be placed in different PBSs in the same district. On the other hand, employees of BREB are allowed to be posted in their home districts.

Employees do not have the option of flexible work arrangements such as part-time employment, teleworking/telecommuting, flexible core hours, or compressed work schedules. At present, there is no official policy for paternity leave, or paid family and medical leave. Female employees are entitled to paid maternity leave of six months for up to two times in their service life. In

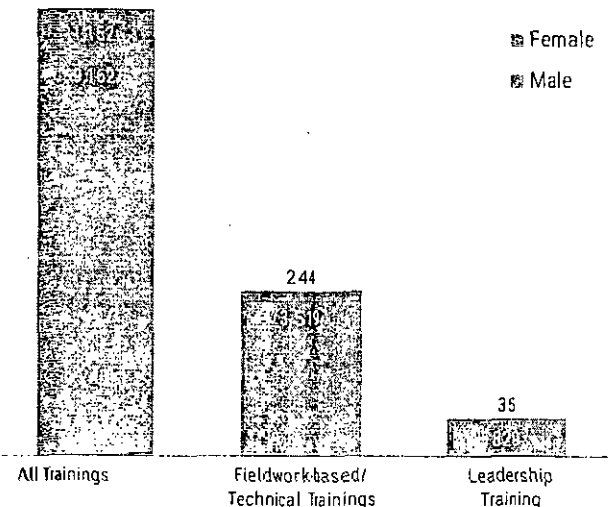
Box 4: Addressing PBS staff workload

Data from 80 PBSs show that on average, the service length of women PBS employees is significantly longer than men (14.5 vs 9.6 years). Women also worked twice as long as men (15 vs 7.6 years) before getting their first promotion. This indicates that there are fewer promotion opportunities (vacancies) in positions where women employees are concentrated. For example, there is only one position of Billing Supervisor per eight Billing Assistants, which can be filled by promotion when the incumbent retires.

A shortage of staff and lack of equipment (e.g., computers) were cited by some as factors for overworked PBS employees. According to female respondents, BREB guidelines stipulate the provision to engage an additional computer operator for every 35,000-subscribers per zonal office. But sometimes, only one computer operator is assigned to a zonal office that has more than 70,000 subscribers, resulting in a significant increase in the workload.

Filling these positions as per the guidelines would help immensely. Others suggest that PBS workload depends on time management and overall management practice by the head of PBSs. The experience seems to vary widely between the PBSs, with a select few PBSs being the most egregious in terms of poor time management.

Chart 4: Training at BREB and PBS



addition to maternity leave, a woman worker can avail of her earned leave, half-pay leave, and leave without pay. The introduction of a phased return schedule may further facilitate and encourage young mothers to return to work.

Job satisfaction among BREB and PBS employees is good, but, work culture and work-life balance concerns need to be addressed. Mixed findings from a survey of 1,142 employees show the following:



Job satisfaction: Both men and women expressed general satisfaction with their jobs at BREB and PBSs. More women than men (79% vs 63%) felt they have fair and equal opportunities for promotion/career growth. Both women (78%) and men (74%) reported receiving adequate training opportunities. About 95% of women and 87% of men said they were satisfied with the support they received from superiors/managers.



Discrimination at work and work culture: At the time of the survey, a majority of respondents (especially women) felt they had the respect and support of superiors/managers and colleagues. Women staff also felt that the promotion system is transparent. However, a sizable number of respondents (approximately 20% of men and 11% of women) reported some experience of bias or discrimination at work when considering factors such as salary, promotions, and access to training opportunities. More senior women compared to early and mid-career women, especially those in technical positions where their number numbers are low, reported that they have experienced discrimination at work.

A recurring sentiment among women was that "women should be respected as colleagues, not just as females" by their male colleagues



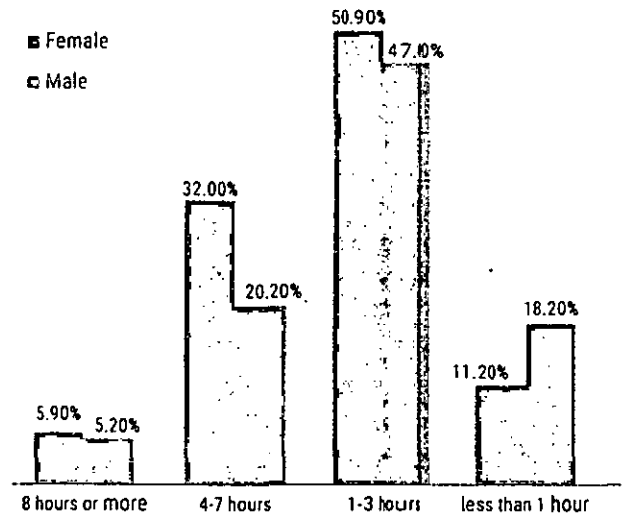
Work-life balance: The survey also found that almost all employees (97.9%) were typically spending more than 8 hours a day at work. At the time of the survey, 25.6% of the respondents were working more than 8 hours of unpaid overtime in a week. Indeed, more male staff (49.9%), as compared to female staff (31.32%), felt that they were not able to spend enough time with their family after work. This could be attributed to the practice of employees not leaving the office until the senior staff members leave for the day. Extended hours at work impact both women and men, but can be particularly inconvenient for women as they are also expected to care for children and the elderly at home as well.

There is a disparity in office environment and facilities available for women working at BREB vs PBSs. Notably, women in technical positions have a significantly worse perception of facilities, reflecting the lack of adequate facilities for women in field-based work.



Work facilities: Facilities for female staff usually include adequate lighting, hand-washing facilities, and disposal bins in the BREB HQ and PBS offices. A child-care facility is available in the BREB HQ but not in the

Chart 5: Additional time spent by respondents on office work per average day at home during weekdays/weekends (by percentage of respondents)



Box 5: Congestion and air quality

Some concerns about office space congestion were also raised during the interviews with women staff. For example, the work environment (air quality) of the billing section could be improved if the file storage areas are separated from the desk space. There is also no air conditioning.

field offices located at PBSs or project sites/plants. PBS offices lack on-site daycare centers or even lactation rooms. A female employee can get time off for a certain period to feed her newborn baby in the office, or at her home if it is nearby. The survey interviews also indicate this disparity in the office environment and facilities available for women working at BREB vs PBSs. Notably, women in technical positions have a worse perception of facilities. However, BREB is striving to improve the facilities and a breastfeeding corner has recently been arranged in all PBS HQs (although not in the zonal offices). BREB is also working to establish daycare facilities in all PBSs. There is no system for monetary assistance to avail of external childcare facilities.



Safety and transportation: Women are more concerned about after-hours workplace safety and transportation. Office transportation for pick-up and drop-off is available for all BREB staff and employees. The facility is unavailable for PBS employees. Both women and men find it difficult to access official or public transport after office hours. Securing safe and reliable pick-up/drop-off transportation services can greatly improve employee satisfaction.

Box 6: Improving training on anti-sexual harassment

According to the study survey, 68% of the respondents have not received any training on preventing sexual harassment, although most know how to report harassment. Four (0.4%) of the respondents (two male, two female) have personally experienced sexual harassment. Fifty-seven (5.1%) respondents were aware of colleagues who have faced harassment issues. During the interviews and FGDs, different forms of sexual harassment and unresolved harassment cases from the past were also discussed.

BREB did not receive any verbal or written complaints in the prior year. In Bangladesh, sexual harassment at workplaces typically goes unreported because victims lack confidence that their complaint will lead to any punitive action against the perpetrator in such cases. Furthermore, people often do not report such cases to avoid social and personal embarrassment.

“Women staff should be given the opportunity to leave the office at the specified time. Asking them to come to the office on weekends or at odd times is also not acceptable” - A male BREB/PBS survey respondent

Workplace training against sexual harassment and awareness, especially at PBSs, can be strengthened. PBSs currently do not have any institutional body or structure to address gender concerns and grievances, whereas BREB HQs have Gender Committees in place. BREB has an official policy on sexual harassment and a formal grievance procedure. The organization has established an internal anti-sexual harassment committee of five members, of which three are women. The Chair of the Gender Committee and gender focal points are female staff of the BREB. In addition, harassment complaints are received in a separate complaint box. Security cameras are placed in appropriate locations to increase staff safety. Overall, the training and awareness on anti-sexual harassment can be improved.

Recommendations (areas for interventions)

BREB can strengthen its existing activities to improve women's interest and job applications, especially for technical and management roles. More targeted policies and rules (such as more structured student engagement and internship programs, increasing women's quota in postings, creating platforms where women can share issues and ideas, leadership training, and mentoring support) are recommended to encourage women's participation

Table 2: Employment post requirement of BREB as of 30 June 2021

Designation	Approved post	Currently employed	Women Employee	Percent of women employees
Deputy Director (Finance)	25	20	1	5.0
Assistant Director (Admin)	85	64	12	18.8
Assistant Engineer	215	173	10	5.8
Sub Assistant Engineer	163	125	5	4.0

in technical and decision-making roles within the power sector. High-level placement of women as role models is known to have the biggest impact on advancing gender goals and should be pursued aggressively. Survey respondents also see great value in a more formal arrangement with engineering institutes and the presence of senior women engineers in internships and career opportunity sessions/job placement networks at local universities as motivators for female engineering students to apply.

The EDMP project will give new opportunities for the recruitment of women. Diversifying the type of reserved positions for women, including those requiring skills in engineering and ICT (Information and Communication Technologies), will help widen the job pool and improve gender diversity in technical positions. Increasing awareness about job opportunities and benefits for women, especially through job advertisements and student outreach, will also help to attract more women applicants. Both digital and non-digital communication platforms must be used to disseminate information about i) training opportunities on grid modernization, (ii) job placement for technical positions, and (iii) incentives for female entrepreneurs. Table 1 shows the positions with the greatest workforce requirement at BREB - which are mostly managerial and technical roles. There is a clear opportunity to fill these positions with women. Other practical guidance from the consultations with BREB and PBS employees include:

- Under the present policy, there is a 100% quota for women for the position of Data Entry Operator at PBSs. This could absorb some women currently working in the billing section, where the positions of Billing Assistants will gradually cease to exist because of the introduction of pre-paid meters.
- The positions of meter testers are held mostly by men. With effective training, women could be fully qualified for the job.
- The position of Assistant Junior Engineer (IT) now has a PBS internal quota of 15% for women. This could be increased to 50% by recruiting more female engineers.
- The position of Wiring Inspector could have a 15% quota for women.
- The quota of Assistant Accountant/Assistant Plant Accountant could also be increased to 100% from the existing 15%.

- Some arrangements can be made with banks to install their booths at all the HQs or zonal offices of PBSs for the collection of bills. This will reduce the work of bill collectors and facilitate the resolution of bill-related problems.

Instituting and advertising facilities for women will help with recruitment and retention. Employment at BREB and PBSs can look attractive if there are visible opportunities for career growth and for moving up the job ladder for women. Flexible work arrangements such as part-time employment and teleworking can also improve the retention rate of female employees. During transfer or posting of women staff, BREB should consider recruitment in the PBSs within their home district or close to their partners' workplace. This will make for an easier transition and minimize any disruption to family life. Furthermore, BREB and PBS should continue improving gender-friendly workplaces and add facilities such as transportation and daycare. It is important to inform all employees of these facilities as well as advertise the same for job applicants.

Identifying and capacity-building/reskilling of qualified women employees can help to meet the future workforce needs of BREB. Participation of female staff in technical training is low, which may be attributed to a lower number of female employees in technical positions. It is important to note that the overall lack of career mobility within BREB provides limited opportunities for female employees to advance to other technical and more robust employment categories. Importantly, BREB and PBSs are currently facing a large workforce gap in technical positions. Women candidates should be trained and considered for such positions. Furthermore, training and other relevant departments should be sensitized and made aware of the gender goal and target, so that they factor in gender considerations in their workplan and reflect gender-responsiveness in their work.

- In addition to trainings and activities to enhance the capacity of women members of the staff, unconscious bias/anti-sexual harassment training for managers and all staff members, establishing a formal grievance mechanism/process, establishing standard safety/security facilities, and rotating field and office tasks between women and men in the teams is also important.

BREB is working to build daycare facilities in all PBSs.

Gender-friendly policies and facilities need to be extended to PBSs. BREB has established an on-site daycare center and plans to build three more model daycare facilities in compliance with the Child Daycare Centre Act of 2021. BREB also has a woman doctor to deal with medical issues at the office. However, these facilities are



not available at the PBS offices. Both BREB and PBS offices should have satisfactory toilets for men and women, and a common room for women where they can relax, pray and nurse in privacy. At present, many gender considerations are applied in an ad-hoc manner depending on the supervisor. In order to make the work environment and facilities more gender-friendly and effective, the following recommendations can be instituted at the organizational level by HR:

- Adequacy/availability of clean washrooms, break rooms, lunch facilities, and field facilities that are easily accessible.
- Flexible work hours or stricter adherence to regular work hours so that women can return home on time.
- Lunch/ prayer hours at the PBSs should be planned in a manner that gives members of the staff adequate time while preventing a long waiting time for clients.
- Safe after-office hour pick-up and drop-off services should be provided.
- Give preference to women for postings in the same or nearby PBS as their spouses.
- Follow guidelines on the ratio of equipment/supplies (computers) to staff and the ratio of customers to staff, to ensure a reasonable workload for each staff member.
- Allow returning mothers to use their earned leave (if any is accrued) for up to four months as additional day-offs.
- Provide reorientation support and a moratorium on transfer postings.
- Men should be entitled to paternity leave when they need to support their spouses.³

BREB, with the full support of the senior management, is mobilizing resources to develop the gender strategy and action plan under EDMP. There must be clear policies in place at BREB to provide the umbrella framework for gender equality in BREB and PBS offices. These documents should set achievable targets/goals and further institutionalize and strengthen WePOWER activities that the BREB is already implementing.⁴ Capacity-building and

³ Agreement proposal for 15 days paternity leave is awaiting approval at the Home Minister's office.

⁴ Please see here: <https://blogs.worldbank.org/endpovertynsouthasia/wepower-helps-bangladeshs-largest-power-distribution-company-boost-its-female>



technology-readiness of female employees of BREB/PBSs are critical metrics for the evaluation of the EDMP project impact. Hence gender-related key milestones are recommended through training topics and activities with a proposed Gender Action Plan.

- Management at each level needs to be given a clear mandate and specific action plans to implement such policies, rules and regulations. Furthermore, many respondents agree that performance-based rewards and penalties must be clearly stated and fairly applied across all levels without gender bias. The gender and anti-sexual harassment policies should be designed to recognize the third-gender and same-sex harassment issues. To that end, BREB should take steps to appoint a gender-focal person who can take the lead to support the management and has the authority to design programs as required. Under EDMP, gender focal points has been nominated in 25 PBSs so far.
- Gender-Informed Human Resource Monitoring System should also be in place to keep track of progress. Gender-disaggregated data on promotions and recruitments should be collected, monitored, and analyzed periodically to check for and mitigate risks of gender biases, to understand the progress over time, and to take corrective measures where required. Even for management/PBS head positions, the annual performance criteria /promotion criteria should emphasize leadership, their human-resource management capacity, and their contribution to improving the work environment for every gender. Newly recruited staff should also be introduced to WePOWER and made aware of their roles, rights, and responsibilities in moving the gender agenda forward and helping themselves and others.

To that end, BREB can explore incorporating aspects of a gender-informed HR Performance Management System (PMS) and institute unconscious bias training for its employees.

Closing thoughts

The gender assessment for BREB and PBSs points to some key challenges and advantages for the institutions under review. A considerable gap is evident between male and female employment, where female staff overwhelmingly occupy non-technical positions and participate in non-technical training.

As a result of current gender-focused, non-STEM employment, women fall in a career bracket that is more vulnerable to digitalization- and modernization-related changes, and, at the same time, have limited opportunities for promotion or transition to other technical and more robust employment categories.

Incorporating gender considerations as part of BREB's modernization efforts and transition to grid modernization and digital metering systems is the perfect opportunity. Additional efforts are needed to retrain and recruit female staff to the new required roles. It could also be achieved by introducing specific institutional changes in the recruitment process and incentivizing female candidates to apply for technical positions.

Research shows that having the buy-in from all levels of staff is essential to maximizing the benefits of diversity for the company. At BREB and PBSs, there is a growing awareness among men and women, at management and staff levels, about the need and benefits of greater gender equality across the institution. Staff at all levels seem to appreciate that the achievement of BREB's goals depends on equal representation and full participation of both male and female staff. And in that respect, BREB is already starting from an advantageous place to benefit from gender diversity.

Methodology: The findings are based on a robust methodology and extensive consultations concluding in 2021

	BREB	PBS	TOTAL (persons)
HR Survey/Data (employee info, training and policies/facilities *as of April/August 2021)	1	1	41,635
Employee survey (Online/Paper)	78	1,036	1,114
Focus Group Discussion (FGD)	16	45	61
Key Informant Interviews (KII) (mixed and women only)	9	3	12
Roundtable at the BREB	50		50
TOTAL			42,872

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