



International
Labour
Organization

► Evaluation Office



i-eval Discovery



Mid-term Independent Evaluation of Promoting Gender Responsive Enterprise Development and TVET Systems (ProGRESS)

QUICK FACTS

Countries: Bangladesh

Evaluation date: 01 October 2025

Evaluation type: Project

Evaluation timing: Mid-term

Administrative Office: ILO-Dhaka

Technical Office(s): SKILLS, ENTERPRISES, DWT/CO-New Delhi

Evaluation manager: Ahmad Sina Sabawoon

Evaluation consultant(s): Name of consultant(s): Angélica Arbulú (Team Leader), Dewan Abu Ehsan (National Consultant), Salvador Bustamante (Quality Control)

DC Symbol: BGD/18/02/CAN

Donor(s) & budget: Canada, Global Affairs Canada, CAD 20 million - equivalent to US\$15.5 million

BACKGROUND & CONTEXT	
Summary of the project purpose, logic and structure	This draft mid-term Independent Evaluation, commissioned by the ILO and conducted by Artival Research & Evaluation, assesses the ProGRESS project (“Promoting Gender Responsive Enterprise Development and TVET Systems”) implemented by the International Labour Organization (ILO). The evaluation is forward-looking, focusing on how the project promotes gender equality and women’s economic empowerment (GEEW) and how it can be strengthened. Context: Bangladesh has seen rapid economic growth, driven by the ready-made garment (RMG) sector and remittances. Still, it faces challenges of informality (85% of workers), weak labor rights enforcement, youth unemployment, and gender inequality in employment. Women’s labor force participation has grown—mainly in RMG—yet remains lower than men’s, with work concentrated in low-wage, insecure sectors. Cultural norms, mobility restrictions, and care responsibilities continue to constrain women, despite their key role in reducing poverty and shifting gender roles. Project Description: • Duration & Budget: 5 years (Oct 2022–Oct 2027), CAD 20 million. • Purpose: Strengthen access to skills training and employment for women and disadvantaged groups by supporting Bangladesh’s TVET system, building on over a decade of ILO engagement. • Approach: Gender equality and women’s empowerment as central drivers of policy reform, enterprise development, and skills provision. • Intermediate Outcomes: 1. Support national policy adoption/implementation promoting gender equality in TVET, digital access, enterprise development, and green jobs. 2. Expand women’s wage and self-employment opportunities, particularly in green growth sectors. 3. Increase inclusive, sustainable, and accessible skills training for women, youth, persons with disabilities, and disadvantaged groups. • Lead & Partners: Led by ILO and Bangladesh’s Technical and Madrasah Education Division, with multiple government agencies (e.g., NSDA, DTE, Department of Women Affairs, SME Foundation, BMET) and private sector actors. Target Areas: Women and vulnerable populations in selected districts (Chattogram, Sylhet, Hill Tracts, Mymensingh, Dinajpur, Rajshahi, and coastal Khulna/Barishal).
Present situation of the project	The project is nearing the four-year mark (in October 2025). Implementation was significantly affected by the changing situation in Bangladesh, especially during 2024,

	and is expected to be further impacted by the political processes linked to the upcoming national elections in 2026.
Purpose, scope and clients of the evaluation	The evaluation serves two main purposes: accountability (assessing project performance for donors and ILO constituents) and learning (informing adjustments to strategies and interventions). Its objectives are to provide credible information for decision-making, promote learning, and improve effectiveness by assessing the project's design, implementation, and results against OECD DAC criteria. Clients of the evaluation include primary users, mainly the ILO Country Office in Bangladesh, the Governments of Canada and Bangladesh (particularly TMED and partner ministries), and the ILO Regional Office for Asia and the Pacific; and secondary users, mainly beneficiaries, researchers, and other implementing partners. In terms of scope, the evaluation covers the period between October 2022 and August 2025 and all ten districts.
Methodology of evaluation	The mid-term evaluation, guided by ILO and OECD-DAC standards, assessed the ProGRESS project with a dual focus on accountability and learning. Using a theory-based, gender-responsive approach, it combined desk reviews, monitoring data, surveys, interviews, focus groups, and field visits across 13 districts¹. Additional interviews were added to strengthen the validation process further and helped confirm the reliability of the findings. Stakeholder participation, triangulation, and a validation workshop ensured the credibility and utility of findings. While progress and lessons were identified, challenges such as the project's broad scope, gaps in monitoring data, and limited access to key stakeholders, such as the NSDA, constrained the depth of analysis and our ability to assess external coherence. Despite these limitations, the evaluation provides evidence-based recommendations to strengthen project strategies and enhance adaptability to emerging opportunities.
MAIN FINDINGS & CONCLUSIONS	In terms of relevance and strategic fit, the project design proposes effective strategies to address existing needs. The main innovative element in the project design is the focus on inclusion of vulnerable population, specifically on gender. Alignment with donor, ILO and national priorities is confirmed through revisions at designated strategic points. The midterm evaluation is one of these key strategic points for revision. The initial design suffered significant geographic expansion from three to ten districts, in reality reaching further as some of the projects expand beyond the geographic areas

¹ as some activities bleed outside the identified 10 districts

identified in the TAPP (as reflected in the fact that this evaluation included visits to thirteen districts). Without additional resources, this expansion has led to dilution of resources, especially in regard to the Chittagong area, as a key area selected, in addition to other considerations, due to its potential for coherence with other existing projects, but also leaving fewer resources available to focus on the innovative element of inclusion.

A strength of the project is that it has the participation of a broad mix of private, government, civil society and social partners to reach the different target groups. Going forward, this provides ILO with the opportunity to understand how effective/efficient different types of partners can be in different scenarios for different population groups. Still, monitoring systems do not incorporate indicators to measure this (aka the effectiveness of each type of partner and for which type of beneficiary). Similarly, the project does not currently measure how different sectors and regions compare in terms of job quality or sustainability; however, tools are being launched at this stage (e.g., GTMS and a tracer survey) that should help address this gap.

As described in detail in the report, several aspects of the projects are specifically focused on enhancing overall **coherence**. In terms of internal coherence, the project is aligned with the office's overall approach and ILO's global goals. Some synergies have been identified; however, the project continues to operate mostly in silos and would benefit from a more systematic approach to ensure coordination with other ongoing ILO projects and between project components. Similarly, while there are efforts to strengthen external coherence, and some innovative alliances have been created, including the Interministerial Taskforce for Gender Integration and bringing UN Women into the sector, there is significant room and benefit to be obtained, especially towards strengthening sustainability, from increasing efforts to bring project partners together especially at the field level and by bringing national partners into the district level.

In terms of **effectiveness**, the project shows progress in all three key areas of focus: increased capacity to promote gender policy, expanded wage and self-employment opportunities, and improved access to training. There are, however, some limitations on how progress is measured that limit managers' (and the evaluators') ability to assess the progress of each area independently. In terms of strengthening capacity to advance gender policy, it has focused on capacity building and awareness raising, promoting exchange and dialogue, and providing technical guidance, knowledge products, and tools. The interministerial skills task force has the potential to bring continuity to these efforts.

The project has improved the availability of training and targeted some accessibility issues, reaching 3,280 beneficiaries of whom 62% are female, and secured employment for roughly 67% of whom 28% were self-employed, with an additional 879 apprenticeships reported, the majority (98%) in the formal sector, and 61% being female, indicating a clear focus on promoting gender equality. A key ILO's comparative advantage is its ability to link skills training directly. It should be noted that 28% of the

beneficiaries who secured work did so in a sector outside the four identified as showing promise by the project. Analysis of the monitoring data highlights the importance of securing a dedicated position for job placement as a key factor in increasing the employment success rate. While women's enrollment is high, employment rates continue to lag. There is important progress towards the inclusion of ethnic communities (9.3%), with some innovative community-based approaches identified as having great potential for reaching ethnic communities and specifically women.

Key challenges identified include Limited knowledge of services available, especially for entrepreneurship and challenges accessing training centers, especially by those most vulnerable. Inclusion of persons with disabilities remains very weak (2%). A key challenge observed was some partners' inability or unwillingness to include persons with disabilities. There was also limited progress reported in the green sector. There is a need to improve identification and selection of beneficiaries and to identify mechanism to address their specific barriers.

In terms of **efficiency**, while technical implementation has progressed well, the project has been severely impacted by the political changes in 2024, and further delays can be expected as part of the normal election process in 2026. Due to the expansion into new geographic areas described above, it is necessary for the project to reassess whether its targets and objectives are still feasible, and to strengthen management to ensure the project benefits from all potential synergies between its components. This revision should also consider the most effective way to ensure partners on the ground can make informed decisions and assess if targets with longer-term partners also need to be adjusted to focus on the most successful experiences and identify effective management mechanisms if the ones set out in the PRODOC are not realistic.

Important and innovative tools have been developed for the project's oversight, including BLIMS; however, project goals and monitoring systems are still not fully aligned to inform management decision-making effectively.

The project has demonstrated a positive direct **impact** on the lives of beneficiaries, including capacity building, for both partners, government counterparts and beneficiaries; through the creation of strategic alliances and facilitation of new partnerships/structures, as well as secured direct employment for some of its beneficiaries. Direct capacity building, coupled with strengthening partners and systems, promotes a more gender aware system. By working at national and district levels to addressing structural barriers, the project has furthered its aim to achieve systemic change and sustained behavioral change in partners; these long-term goals will require ongoing investment. Ultimately, these changes aim to create new partnerships and strengthen accountability, including introducing innovative tools such as the already mentioned Graduate Tracking and Management System, intended to be led by the government going forward.

The project interventions build on over a decade of support to Bangladesh's TVET system. They align with the ILO's overall global goals and national priorities, helping secure **sustainability**. The overall exit strategy builds on the identification and capacity

building of strategic partners to ensure the inclusion and gender lens going forward within their own programming/financing; the introduction of changes to the system that incorporate an inclusive, green and gender lens to the system, and the provision of tools and evidence that will inform decision making and support advocacy. Strengthening the exit strategy should be a key focus of the second half of the project.

RECOMMENDATIONS, LESSONS LEARNED AND GOOD PRACTICES

Main findings & Conclusions

Recommendation 1: Strengthen project impact by revisiting geographic and thematic scope through strategic prioritization, paying particular attention to identifying and promoting innovative solutions that build on ILO's comparative advantages and demonstrably work for women and other vulnerable populations.

Recommendation 2: The project should consider adopting a more strategically focused approach to sectoral engagement, building on evidence and lessons learned, to ensure greater alignment with labor market demand and national development priorities.

Recommendation 3: The project should shift focus from aiming to reach the target number of beneficiaries towards identification of innovative "proof of concept" models for replication and scale-up.

Recommendation 4: Ensure that success stories, lessons learned, and findings from knowledge products collected during the first half of the project feed into and inform the three project components going forward.

Recommendation 5: Strengthen project coherence. The evaluation underscores the urgent need for a centralized communication and knowledge management system, supported by structured technical exchange platforms.

Recommendation 6: Strengthen the results framework by ensuring greater conceptual clarity on how the projects' interventions generate transformative and measurable change (the theory of change) and support this with the identification and regular collection of indicators that measure key outputs/outcomes of each of these steps.

Recommendation 7: Strengthen beneficiary targeting to bolster access to employment results. This will require identifying and addressing specific barriers for each subgroup, including looking at cultural norms, financial constraints and access amongst other barriers.

Main lessons learned and good practices

A key **good practice** identified is the development of BLIMS as a comprehensive and tailored system that provides real-time disaggregated data, by location, sex and sectors for the different project components and supports management in evidenced-based decision making. A key limitation is its lack of qualitative information. Another good practice identified is the identification of community-based tourism initiatives with the Tourism Board to empower communities, support traditions and increase income. Key **lessons learned** identified include the need for a designated person specifically assigned to link training and job placement to ensure Higher employment rates, and the need to assess the adequacy of facilities for training aimed at persons with disabilities. The report identifies other lessons learned and good



practices that do not meet the criteria to be considered as such, but have been included nevertheless for consideration and further investigation by the project team.