

Worker's voice

An analysis of 1000 interviews with workers in Bangladesh

Report

Hong Kong, January 2010

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I. INTRODUCTION

Production practices in Bangladesh and therefore also European textile companies are constantly facing public criticism. Working conditions within the supply chain are criticised. Arguments range from underpayment, child labour and discrimination to poor living and working conditions.

Over the last couple of years, Bangladesh has developed as a major site of the world's textile production. Agriculture and the ever-growing textile industry have begun to form the core employment sectors. However, Bangladesh is still one of the poorest developing countries in the world. According to the United Nation's Human Development Report 2010, Bangladesh is ranked 129th out of 169 countries worldwide. Every year, thousands of rural residents move into the area of the mega-city of Dhaka. Dhaka is already home to around 13 million people and according to United Nations projections, the city will have almost 17 million inhabitants in 2015. The increasing formation of slums is only one consequence. Approximately 40 percent of the city's population lives in slums. But the prospect of work continues to attract rural workers.

But how do the workers view their own situation? And what problems and needs do they express? Many of the claims and arguments in the dispute between stakeholders, media, NGOs and business are based on western values and a western world view. What is really important to the people in Bangladesh? And how do they really live in Dhaka?

To obtain answers to those questions is not easy. Many adults, especially women, are illiterate. Official information can be obtained from few and not often credible sources. Trade unions and/or organizations do not have access to this type of information.

This report is the result of a six month survey of workers from the textile industry in Dhaka, Bangladesh. These results are unprecedented in their scope and their focus. Almost 1,000 workers were interviewed and a total of 30 questions answered about their person and their living and working conditions. The workers that were interviewed are not from one particular factory, but from various production sites. The focus of this survey is to gain deeper insights into the general living and working environment of the textile workers. It should be noted that this is a different approach taken in relation to other interviews often conducted by NGOs or as a part of audits, which collect information on a specific company. This is the first interview analysis published on the subject of garment workers' households, hobbies and desires. Moreover, it specifically inquires about the needs and circumstances of women in Bangladesh, who are still discriminated due to tradition and religion.

II. BASICS

1. Textile industry in Bangladesh

The textile industry is a major industry in Bangladesh with over 2.3 million workers and growing daily. Textile industry workers, of which 80% are female, add 15% to the gross domestic product. An estimated 4,500 mills employ an average of 500 workers, while most production facilities are located in the metropolitan area of Dhaka.

2. Bangladesh German Chamber of Commerce and Industry (BGCCI)

The BGCCI supported this project as a co-operation partner. As a representative institution of the German and Bangladesh Economy and Industry, BGCCI connects the scientific approach and research results with current actors in business and politics.

3. Awaj Foundation

The Awaj Foundation is a local, non-governmental organization in Bangladesh working with and for workers rights issues such as employment awareness raising and information distribution about workers rights and security issues. Awaj focuses on workers in the textile industry. Over 30,000 workers are members of Awaj. Awaj employees themselves also come from the textile industry and in most cases have 10 to 15 years of experience.

4. Method

The interviews were carried out as part of the Awaj safety and health training. The training sessions were held in the local language by staff of Awaj, who have long-standing experience in the textile industry. The training sessions and interviews were conducted on Awaj premises and participation was voluntary.

These trainings are offered by Awaj in two phases and are free of charge, each one covers more than 1,000 workers from various textile mills. Overall, nearly 2000 workers are interviewed. The first survey took place during the first training phase from February to August 2010. In this report the results from the first survey are presented. Initially, the distribution of the questions was provided in paper form only, so that the workers could independently answer the questions (in writing). This idea did not work well in practice, due to illiteracy among workers and simple 'yes' and 'no' answers. Thus direct interviews were carried out instead.

III. ANALYSIS OF THE INTERVIEWS

1. Personal data

Gender and age

A total of 934 workers were surveyed, of which 76% (708) are women and 24% (226) are men. The respondents are between 11 - 50 years old, but there was a significant accumulation in the 20 to 30 years, accounting for 84% of the respondents. Seven percent of the respondents are under 20 years and 9% over 30 years.

In detail:

Under 15 years	1	0,1%
15 - 18 years	28	3,0%
19 - 23 years	441	47,2%
24 - 28 years	366	39,2%
29 - 33 years	67	7,2%
34 years or above	28	3,0%

Table 1: Age structure

Living region and origins

The workers interviewed mostly live in Gazipur (44.1%), Mohakhali (28.1%) and Mirpur (20%). Only 4% live in Narsingdi and 3.2% in Savar.

Many workers are not born in Dhaka, but moved there in search of work. Initially, 63.7% come from the Greater Dhaka region. About 11% come from Barisal (11.8%), Rajshahi (10.8%) and Chittagong (10.1%).

About 8% are from Rangpur, followed closely by Khulna with 7.6 percent. Only 3.2% are from Sylhet. The last three regions are among the poorest regions of Bangladesh.



Figure 1: Regions in Bangladesh

Family and children

The rate of married couples versus singles: 57% to 42.3% is fairly equal in the survey. The average number of children is zero to a maximum of two children. Workers over 30 years of age have an average number of two children. Workers over 20 years of age tend to have one or two children.

In detail:

No children	315	33,7%
1 - 2 children	312	33,4%
3 - 4 children	60	6,4%
5 - 6 children	3	0,3%
Missing values	244	26,1%

Table 2: Number of children

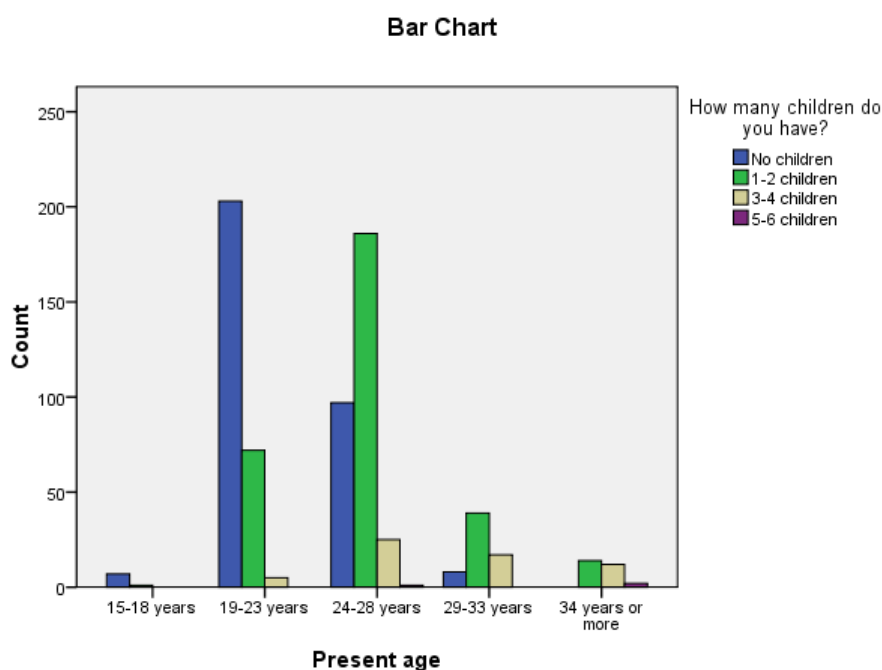


Figure 2: Age structure and children

Education

In looking at the average number of completed school years on the basis of gender, demonstrates that women complete four to six years of school, while men complete seven to nine years. Only forty-eight percent of women remain in school for four to six years, compared to 51.8% of men who on average have seven to nine years education. The proportion of people with higher education is clearly influenced male. The final Secondary School Certificate Examination (SCC) - attainable after ten years of schooling - is obtained by 11.2% of the men interviewed and only 2.4% of their female counterparts. The Higher Secondary School Examination (HSC) - attainable after twelve years of schooling - is only reached by 0.6% of the women and 2.4% of the men

interviewed. A bachelor's degree was attained by only one woman and one man of the workers interviewed.

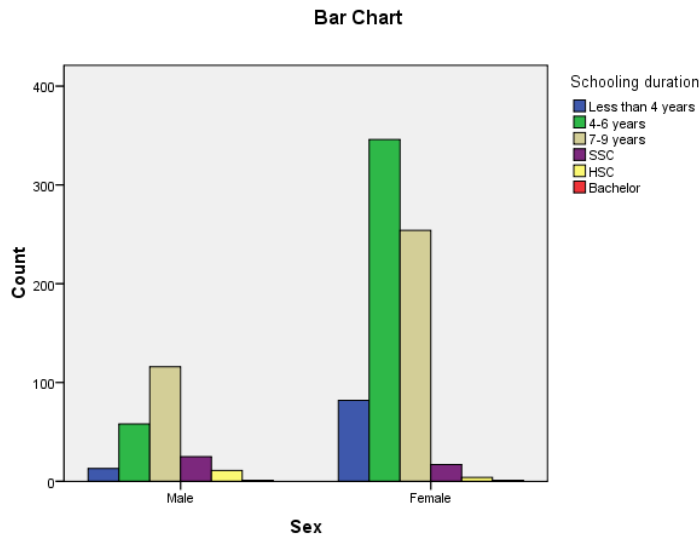


Figure 3: Completed number of school years and gender

Under 4 years	95	10,2%
4 - 6 years	404	43,3%
7 - 9 years	370	39,6%
SSC	42	4,5%
HSC	15	1,6%
Bachelor's degree	2	0,2%
Missing values	6	0,6%

Table 3: Completed number of school years

Why was your education interrupted?

Financial problems	707	75,7%
Marriage	58	6,2%
No interest	29	3,1%
Start of career	5	0,5%
Others	99	10,6%
Missing values	36	3,9%

Table 4: Reasons for interruption

The predominant reason for dropping out of school is financial problems. Marriage, no interest in starting work and 'other' reasons only account for a fraction.

Half of the respondents (46.4%) expressed interest in continuing education if it was an option. About 52% of the interviewees have no interest in returning to resuming their education.

2. Work

Working age

The average age of the surveyed workers started working at 17 to 18. Accordingly, this age is not reflected in young workers. A total of 43 participants started working prior to the age of 14.

Less than 14 years	43	4,6%
14 - 18 years	547	58,6%
19 - 23 years	292	31,3%
24 - 28 years	31	3,3%
29 - 33 years	2	0,2%
34 years or more	2	0,2%

Table 5: Working age

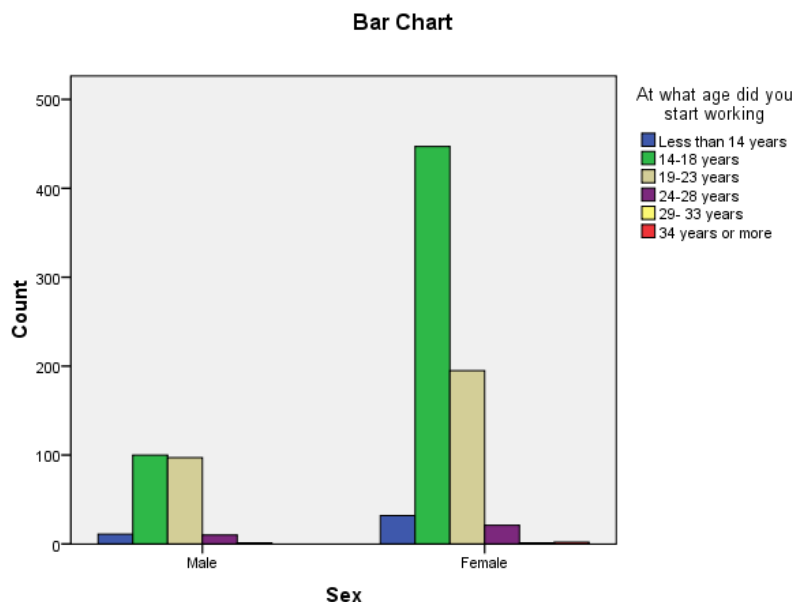


Figure 4: Working age and gender

Wages and working hours

The average income among the interviewees is 2,940 Bangladesh Taka (BDT), corresponding to € 31.47. Adding paid overtime a average monthly wage of 3,702 BDT is earned. The difference in monthly wages between gender is 17.74% as men earn an average of € 35.51 and women an average of € 30.16. Due to the fact that women work more overtime, in the end they earn nearly the same as their male counterparts: a monthly salary of € 43.50 for the women compared to the men's € 38.39. This accounts for a 13.33% difference. Every week, the interviewed workers work an average of 10 hours a day, 6 days per week.

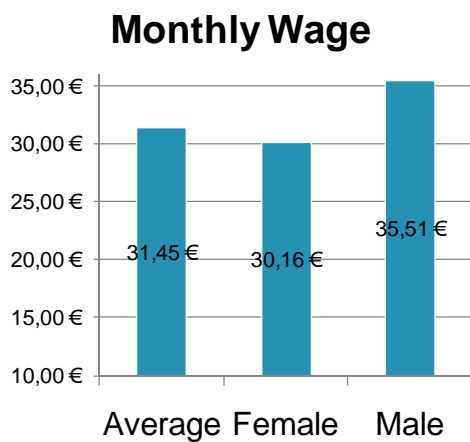


Figure 5: Monthly wage in EUR and gender

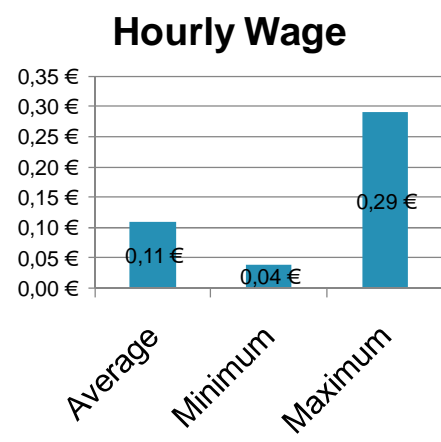


Figure 6: Hourly wage in EUR

BDT 1662 - 2000	2,4%
BDT 2001 - 3000	19,0%
BDT 3001 - 4000	44,3%
BDT 4001 - 5000	26,9%
BDT 5001 - 6000	2,7%
BDT 6001 or more	1,0%

Table 6: Monthly wage in Bangladesh Taka (BDT)

In order to calculate a worker's hourly wage, we set the expected gross wage in relation to the specified number of hours per day for a total of 28 working days per month. The majority of the workers work 10 hours a day.

8 hours	110	11,8%
10 hours	668	71,5%
12 hours	154	16,5%

Table 7: Daily working hours

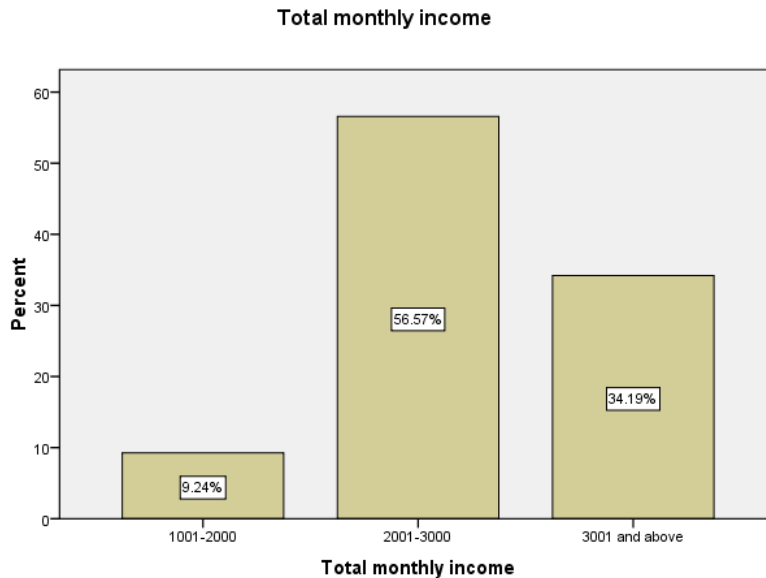


Figure 7: Total monthly income

The majority of women (49.5%) earn € 30 to € 40 permonth. In comparison, the majority of men (41.5%) take home € 40 to € 50 permonth. Furthermore, the proportion of € 30 to € 40 male earners is quite high at 36.4% For the € 30 to € 40 female earners, this is value is 23.6% which is almost equal to the proportion of € 20 to € 30 female earners (21.7%). The highest monthly income of € 50 to € 60 is earned by 5.5% of men and 1.9% of women. Seventy-seven percent of the respondents indicated they get paid overtime. Everyone is paid on a monthly basis.

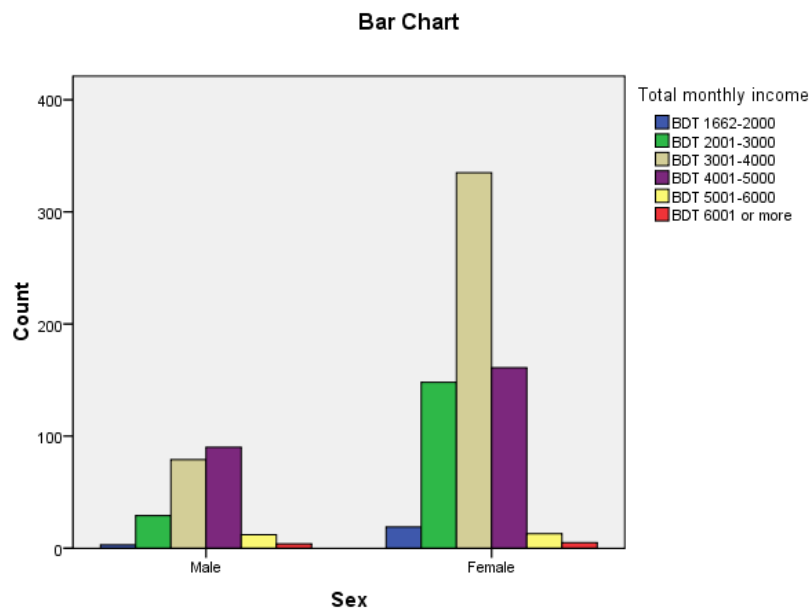


Figure 8: Monthly income and gender

Position in the company and working years

The majority of respondents are employed as workers (women: 81.4%, men 80.2%). Also the number of cleaning and support staff is even (women: 16.4%, men: 14.7%) as well as the supervisors (women: 2.2%, men: 5.1%).

Worker	733	78,5%
Supervisor	26	2,8%
Cleaning staff	145	15,5%

Table 8: Position in the company

Most respondents, aged 20 to 30, work between two to five years with their current employer. We can therefore assume that this is their first or second employer. Given the generally high turnover rates in Bangladesh, this fluctuation seems rather low.

Under 2 years	135	14,5%
2 - 5 years	497	53,2%
5 - 10 years	229	24,5%
More than 10 years	65	7,0%
Missing values	8	0,9%

Table 9: Number of years at current employer

Illness and accidents

In case of falling ill during working hours, the primary form of behaviour is to go home (42.4%). However, 23.9% said leaving is denied by the factory as they do not receive approval and must continue to work. About 17% take a short break and only 11% will directly consult a doctor.

Go home	396	42,4%
Work	223	23,9%
Short rest in factory	155	16,6%
Consult a doctor	104	11,1%
Others	11	1,2%

Table 10: Behaviour in case of illness

In case of an accident at the workplace, the most frequent response referred to self-protection (31.2%). However it should be noted that this question may have been interpreted as an accident caused by the worker him/herself (consult a doctor: 11.8%, leave factory: 9.2%) or by the factory or a fellow worker (offer assistance: 8.8%). Only 4.6% would notify the supervisor or management. These percentages are the result of the different understanding of the issue and therefore not directly comparable. One can however notice that the contact with management and supervisors tends to be avoided as they are not a first point of contact in an emergency.

Inform management	43	4,6%
Leave factory	86	9,2%
Consult a doctor	110	11,8%
Offer assistance	82	8,8%
Self-protection	291	31,2%
Others	227	24,3%
Missing values	95	10,2%

Table 11: Behaviour in case of accident at work

Furthermore, whether workers receive support from the factory in case of illness or accident at work was also asked.



Figure 9: Factory support in case of accident
Please note that "99" means 'missing values'. There is no response from 2.1% of the respondents regarding this issue.

No/nothing	535	57,3%
Medical or clinical support	327	35,0%
Transportation	4	0,4%
Compensation	2	0,2%
Others	46	4,9%

Table 12: Factory support case of accident

Fifty-seven percent of the respondents claim they do not receive any support from the factory in case of a workplace or industrial accident. Only 35% say they receive medical help. Transport (0.4%) or compensation (0.2%) is offered only in the rarest cases.

Assessment of workplace

How do those workers like their work and their workplace? The female respondents appreciate above all a good working environment (25.9%). Experiences with previous interviews and surveys have shown that "good working environment" mainly refers to the cleanliness and safety of and within factory. Almost as important is the timely payment of wages (25.0%). Other important aspects include the way of working as well as whether they enjoy their work (18.5%) and good behaviour in general (13.8%).

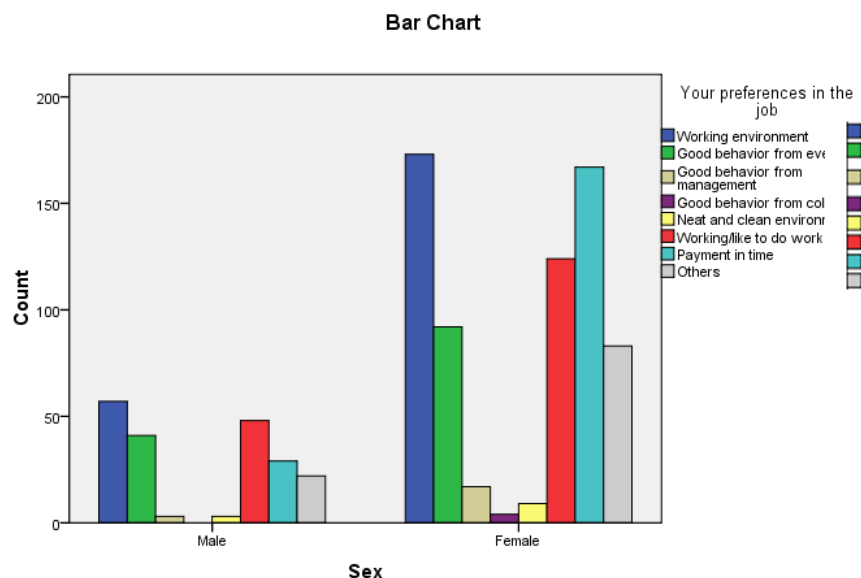


Figure 10: Positive work aspects

For men, results are similar with priority of the working environment (28.1%). The joy of work (23.6%) comes in second, while general good behaviour (20.2%) comes in third. The timely payment of wages is only mentioned by 14.3% as very good. The specific reference to a clean working environment is made only by a few respondents (women: 1.3%, men: 1.5%), but is often already included in the overall satisfaction with the work environment. Notably, good behavior by management is not often mentioned (women: 2.5%, men: 1.5%). Nor is the good behaviour of colleagues (women: 0.6%, men: 0%) explicitly mentioned, although this statement is probably also included in the general good behaviour claim.

Working environment	230	24,6%
Good behaviour in general	133	14,2%
Good behaviour of management	20	2,1%
Good behaviour of colleagues	4	0,4%
Clean environment	12	1,3%
Like to/my work	172	18,4%
Timely payment	196	21,0%
Others	105	11,2%

Table 13: Positive work aspects

What do the respondents not like about their workplace? When asked about their workplace complaints, bad behaviour and abuse in particular are mentioned. Other responses mentioned were too much work pressure, pressure to work overtime, temporary closure of the factory, factory rules and the level of noise.

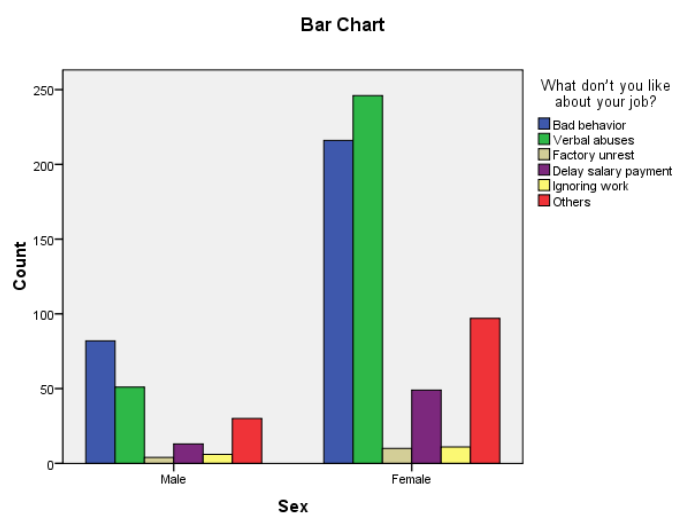


Figure 11: Negative work aspects

It is noticeable that women in particular complain about verbal abuse (39.1%). This can be interpreted as insults by the supervisors who are in direct contact with the workers. Furthermore, one third of the women (34.3%) complains about the general bad behaviour. Other, apparently less significant complaints, relate to late payment of wages (7.8%), no payment for overtime (1.7%), unrest in the factory or strikes (1.6%) and other responses (15.4%).

Bad behaviour	298	31,9%
Verbal abuse	297	31,8%
Unrest	14	1,5%
Delayed wage payments	62	6,6%
No payment of overtime	17	1,8%
Others	127	13,6%
Missing values	119	12,7%

Table 14: Negative work aspects

For the men, this picture is similar, except that complaints about general bad behaviour (44.1%) are higher than verbal abuse complaints (27.3%). Other complaints (16.1%), delayed payment of wages (7.0%), no payment of overtime (1.7%) and unrest in the factory (1.6%) are other grievances.

Travel to work

How long do the workers need to commute to work?

Less than 15 minutes	108	11,6%
15 - 30 minutes	438	46,9%
30 - 45 minutes	223	23,9%
45 minutes or more	140	15,0%
Missing values	25	2,7%

Table 15: Commute time to work

The majority of respondents (58.5%) require under a half an hour to commute to work. Taking into consideration the slow, often congested traffic in Dhaka, these respondents live in relative proximity to their workplace. About 24% take up to 45 minutes and another 15% need over 45 minutes to travel to their workplace.

Nothing	274	29,3%
Less than 20 BDT	0	0,0%
20 – 40 BDT	225	24,1%
40 BDT or more	137	14,7%

Table 16: Travelling costs to work in Bangladesh Taka (BDT)

One third of the respondents (29.3%) are able to commute to work with no travelling costs, which can be interpreted that many appear to live in close proximity to their workplace. Twenty-four percent of workers have to pay € 0.20 - €0.40 BDT, while 14.7% pay over € 0.40.

3. Life

Living place

Only 3.3% of the respondents live in a house or a condo. The vast majority (96.5%) lives in rented accommodation. On average, the flat is shared with a total of four to five people.

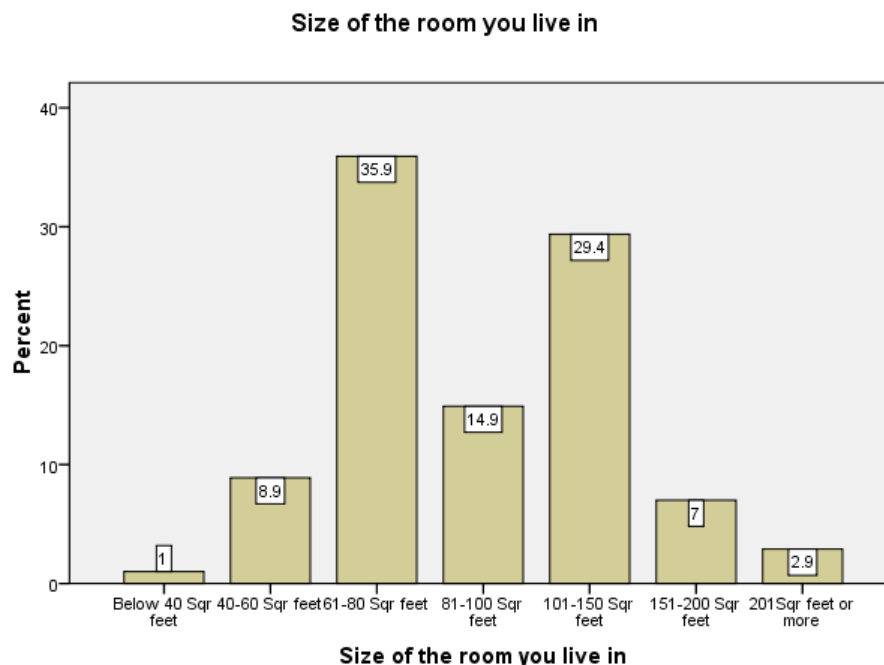


Figure 12: Flat size

under 3,7m ²	9
3,8 to 5,5m ²	80
5,6 to 7,4m ²	323
7,5 to 9,3m ²	134
9,4 to 13,9m ²	264
14,0 to 18,6m ²	63
18,7m ² or more	26

Table 17: Flat size

1000 or less BDT	9,6%
1001 - 2000 BDT	67,7%
2001 - 3000 BDT	12,8%
3001 or more BDT	1,3%
Missing values	8,5%

Table 18: Rent in Bangladesh Taka

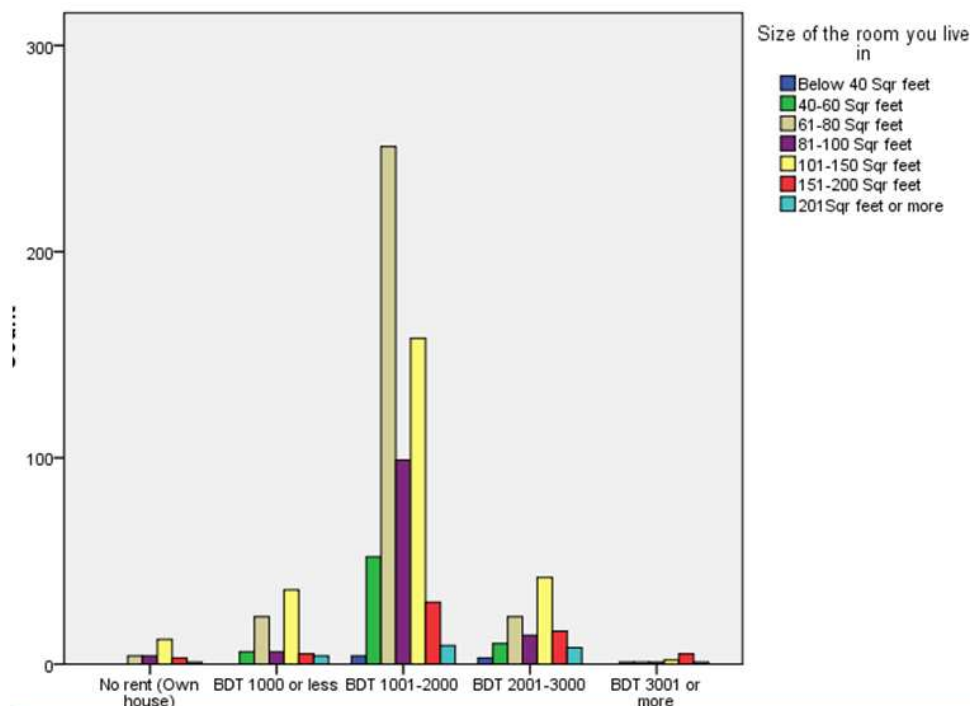


Figure 13: Flat size and rent

The chart shows the workers' monthly rent based of the average size of their apartments. The majority of respondents have a monthly rent of € 10 to € 20 for 5.7 m² to 13.9 m².

A majority of the respondents neither live with the family or friends, but with other people. These 'other people' are likely to be flatmates from the factory.

Alone	104	11,1%
Family	73	7,8%
Friends	15	1,6%
Others	564	60,4%
Missing values	178	19,1%

Table 19: Flatmates

Most respondents have to pay the rent by the 15th of every month and many already before the 10th. In Bangladesh it is common that the salary is paid late the following month. Because of this, payment issues can arise if the rent has to be paid before the salary is paid.

No rent (own house)	31	3,3%
During the first 5 days of the month	62	6,6%
During the first 6 - 10 days of the month	750	80,3%
During the first 15 days of the month	70	7,5%
During the first 16 days of the month or later	4	0,4%
Missing values	17	1,8%

Table 20: Rent payment due date

Past time

When asked about their past time preferences, more than one third of the women surveyed (35.2%) like to spend their time on hobbies, which includes cooking, singing, reading or going to the cinema. In addition to these varying and individual statements, "housework" is enjoyed by 20.5%. Walking (14.6%) is another popular pastime. Spending time with the family and children accounts for only 8.6%.

The proportion of men who enjoy 'other' past time activities is even higher at 37.9% in comparison to the female respondents (21.1%). Hobbies (25%) and walking (26%) are both relatively popular. Only 5.7% reported that they like to spend this time with family and their children. Spare time spent on housework is enjoyed by a mere 5.2% of the male workers.

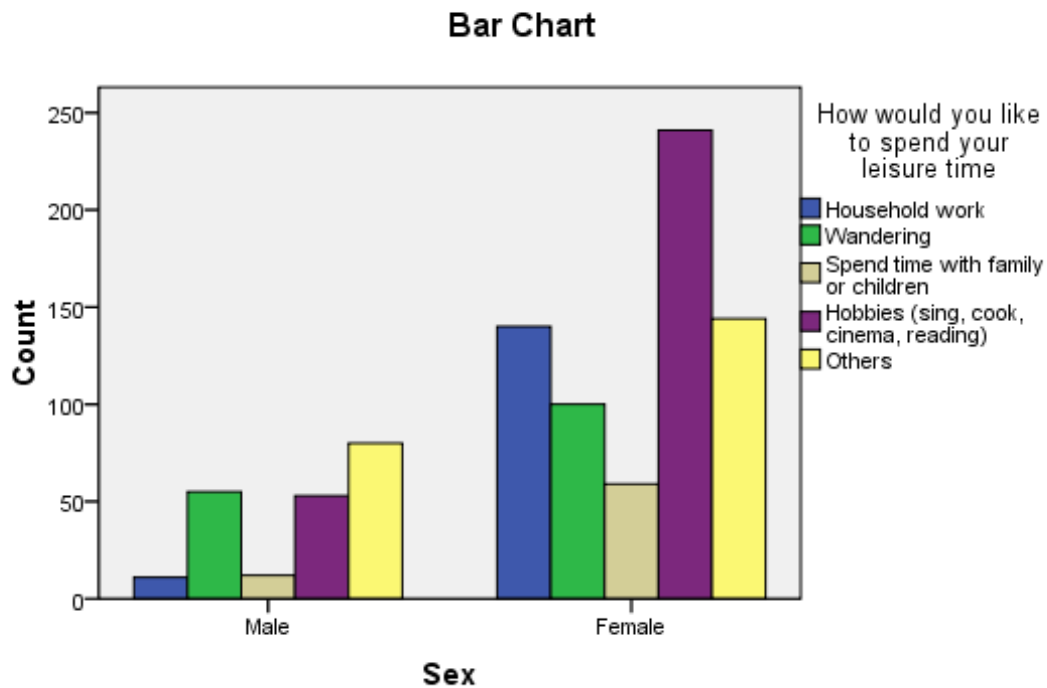


Figure 14: Spare time

In detail:

Housework	151	16,2%
Walk ("going here and there")	155	16,6%
Spend time with family and children	71	7,6%
Hobbies (singing, cooking, reading, cinema)	294	31,5%
Others	224	24,0%
Missing values	39	4,2%

Table 21: Spare time

Wishes

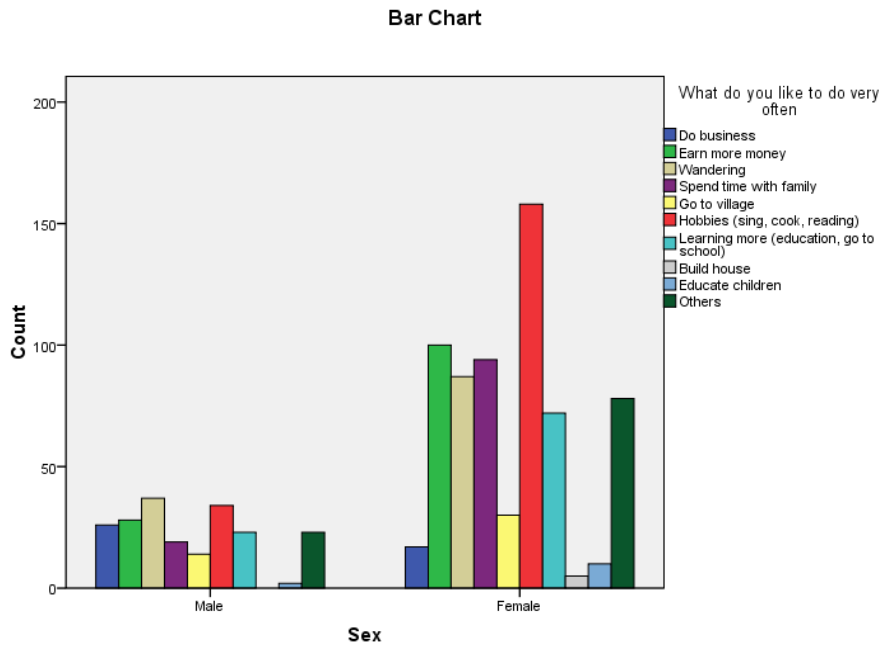


Figure 15: Wishes and gender

In addition to wishing for more time to spend on hobbies (women: 24.3%, male: 16.5%), walking (women: 13.4%, male: 18.0%), with family (women: 14.4%, men: 9.2%), many respondents would like to earn more money (women: 15.4% male: 13.6%).

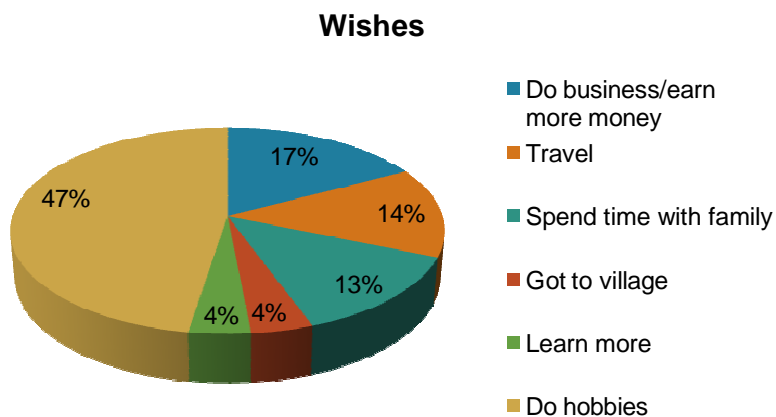


Figure 16: Wishes

In the wishes pie chart, 'travel' must be understood as exploring the city and walking around.

Do business/work more	43	4,6%
Earn more money	128	13,7%
Travel (go here and there)	124	13,3%
Spend time with family	113	12,1%
Visit village	44	4,7%
Hobbies (singing, cooking, reading, cinema)	192	20,6%
Learn more	95	10,2%
Build a house	5	0,5%
Educate children	12	1,3%
Others	101	10,8%
Missing values	77	8,2%

Table 22: Wishes

Noteworthy is the number of men (around 13%) who responded that they would like to open their own business. Only 11% of both the men and female gender groups expressed the desire to more education, or in principle to further develop. Furthermore, the desire to visit their home village was expressed (women: 6.8%, men: 4.6%). Remarkably only a few would like to use more time to educate their children (women: 1.5%, men: 1%).

IV. INTERPRETATION AND SUMMARY

This data provides a valuable basis for the evaluation of measures to improve working and living conditions of the Bengali population and should be specifically used for such purposes.

It is evident that improvements in production practices should take place in close communication with the workers to take into account their wishes and needs. Many aspects are not obvious to the western developers of codes of conduct or actions to meet social demands due to their western-oriented understanding.

It is interesting, for example, that many workers consider the factory as a pleasant environment to be, as they find the factory's conditions better than at home. These include simple objects such as toilets, but also the possibility of meeting colleagues or the fact that in the factory a woman is better protected. However, major causes for complaints are verbal abuse, insults and bad behaviour from supervisors and department managers mostly.

With regard to the interviewed workers' wages, it must be taken into account that this survey was conducted before November 1st - which is when the new minimum wage of 3,000 BDT (equivalent to € 30) was implemented - and therefore not yet included in these workers' monthly wages.

In Bangladesh, much time is spent outside the home due to small houses being shared with many people. A popular past time is therefore walking and being out and about on the street where one can easily meet up with friends. Overall these workers' needs are relatively modest by western standards. The majority of respondents would simply like to have more time for their hobbies, others request more family time, more time to go walking and make more money. The desire for independence among men is striking. This indicates how many Bengali men would like to open their own business and become economically independent while taking on the responsibility.

This report sees many results which can be used as a positive source, the willingness to self-employment being one example. At the same time it also highlights ongoing problems in Bangladesh that remain unsolved, for example the lower education of women and financial difficulties as a main reason for quitting school.

In the long run, businesses in Bangladesh can only be successful if all of these aspects are borne in mind. Holistic approaches, which may include, for example, family impact, social traditions and their different values, provide for durable.

applied

CSR

Corporate Social
Responsibility

Hong Kong

CSI Ltd. – HQ
Karl Borgschulze
33D Culture Homes
At Grand Blossom
123 Bulkeley Street
Hung Hom
Hong Kong

info@consultingservice.hk
T. +852 2593 1520
F. +852 2593 1222

Dhaka

CSI Ltd.
Alec Barnard
Gulshan Avenue
House 2- Rose Dale- App. B5
1212 Dhaka, Gulshan 2
Bangladesh

info@consultingservice.hk

Berlin

CSI Ltd. – Representation
Max Gilgenmann
Büro//Ladenfront
Braunschweiger Straße 80
12055 Berlin
Germany

info@consultingservice.hk