

# The Workers' Voice

## - Report 2019 -



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The Workers' Voice Report 2019 is the result of a cooperation project between the Awaj Foundation and Consulting Service International Ltd. (CSI). Launched in 2011, it is the fourth edition that addresses labour conditions in Bangladesh's garment industry from a workers' perspective.

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## The Workers' Voice Project Partners

**Awaj Foundation** is a non-governmental organisation that was founded in Bangladesh in 2003. Awaj Foundation aims to improve the livelihood of workers through legal rights counselling, trainings on workers' rights, occupational safety and health, as well as hygiene and reproductive health. The main concern of the Awaj Foundation is to build a bridge between the workers and the factory management to secure legal rights and better address the workers' needs.

**Consulting Service International Ltd. (CSI)** was established as a CSR consulting firm in Hong Kong in 2005. A liaison office in Dhaka, Bangladesh was opened to meet sustainability needs of this key market for textiles and garments only one year later. Operating in all major Asian markets, CSI designs and implements projects that deal with corporate social responsibility issues in the garment and other manufacturing industries. CSI advises brands, retailers and manufacturers on implementing sustainable practices in their supply chain, providing comprehensive assessments and capacity building programmes. The firm works with governmental and private-sector organisations to organise sustainability events (e.g. workshops, conferences) and design sustainability strategies for manufacturing industries embedded in global value chains. CSI is strongly engaged with local NGOs like Awaj Foundation to sustainably develop Bangladesh's garment industry.

## Executive Summary

Bangladesh is the world's second largest garment exporter. The readymade garment (RMG) industry has been the main driver of economic growth for decades. Despite improvements in the past, safety, health and labour conditions still put the workers' lives at risk. This report intends to shed light on the working conditions from a gender perspective and analyse the socio-economic factors that sustain gender inequality.

Bangladesh's garment industry has attracted and retained women in employment, which is mostly narrated as a story of female empowerment. The results from this study, however, suggest that female garment workers are far away from gender equality.

Women make up 77% of the respondents, with the percentage dropping drastically when it comes to more qualified positions, such as quality control, quality inspection or ironing<sup>1</sup>. **Female interviewees held 68% of operator and assistant positions in their companies as opposed to 13% of the male respondents, a percentage that is far from parity.**

Female workers appear to be more burdened by the responsibilities they are facing at work and at home. Not only do more female interviewees have children, they also have more children than the male respondents. Working parents can rarely count on a supporting structure (e.g. childcare, crèche) in their factories, which is why **most of the respondents are wary of reconciling family life and work**. Especially men are reluctant to have more children under the current circumstances; their averseness allows for the inference that they feel their societal role as breadwinners is at risk.

The **gender-education gap is significant. Female respondents are consistently underrepresented in higher levels of school education and higher education**. Significantly more women than men either did not attend school, dropped out of primary school or completed primary school (62% vs. 42%), often following pressure from family members. Only 51% of the respondents made their own decision to leave school early. Male respondents were granted far more autonomy in deciding on their future than female respondents.

**Interest in resuming studies and further education is mainly curbed by financial limitations, but also subject to gender-specific choices.**

While male respondents would aim for higher education, which allows for better pay, female respondents would focus more on practical, like vocational education, which would keep them in lower positions.

Our data suggest that the **female workers interviewed are often stuck in low-skilled and thus low-paid operations**. Although female workers receive more overtime premium than male workers, their bonus per hour is less. This inequality bears witness to the structural discrimination of women in pay. Regardless of the quality of the work or the position women have been promoted to, female respondents have been promoted comparatively more than male respondents over the last two years (41% vs. 29%). However, the employment opportunities of women are very limited. **Women may well be promoted more often than men, but it is men who are usually promoted to higher designations**. The argument that education is key to female empowerment has limitations. According to this study's data, the **years of schooling have no significant influence on wages**. Higher education does not guarantee a better salary in garments.

The minimum wage this study is based on and that was effective until December 2018 was unsuited to fight poverty among the working class. The **household income per capita is dramatically low**. With **most of the respondents living in multi-person households** (i.e. families), the number of economically active household members is crucial. Families with only one person at work are extremely vulnerable to poverty as their income per capita is the lowest. Workers living in multi-person households with four and five people to sustain are less prone to poverty than other household sizes. It requires a **living wage to support families** in ridding themselves of the strings of poverty.

Almost half of the workers interviewed joined their current company less than two years ago. The key **reasons for high fluctuation among the respondents are low wages (30%) and delayed payment (16%)**. Unfair treatment and harassment were also found to play a decisive role for the employees to join another company (10%).

The imbalance in power between men and women, between management and workers, puts workers in a defensive position and in enduring a discriminatory work environment. While the **feeling of unfair**

<sup>1</sup> Workers in supervisory or management positions were hardly or not among the interviewees.

**treatment is equally distributed among male and female workers** (39% vs. 41%), results from this study suggest **differences in the areas men and women face discrimination**. Male respondents feel more often unfairly treated because of their origin. They also seem to feel slightly more discomfort in following their religious beliefs and practices than female respondents. Although the work environment is insecure for both men and women, **misogynist practices prevail**. Female workers are constantly exposed to patronizing or sexist remarks. **One third of all workers interviewed can testify to insulting remarks about women and female workers**, which are made at least once a week or more often. Female respondents tend to be more often victims of physical violence, bullying and sexual harassment. Uneven power relations between management and workers are assumed to be the key reason for this type of violence. A **culture of bad behaviour and systemic abuse of power affects all workers** regardless of their gender. Further research is necessary to understand which form of violence is gender-specific.

Many factories have grievance mechanisms in place that can be used to file complaints. Unfortunately, **most of the workers remain passive against discrimination**. More than two thirds of the respondents avoided acting on the unethical behaviour suffered. Women are more inclined to confront others with the discriminatory behaviour they have been exposed to than men. **Neither female nor male workers consider anonymous complaints and participation committees as helpful conflict resolution mechanisms**.

**Anonymous complaints are not accepted by the workers**. Despite their availability, it is uncommon for workers to use this grievance mechanism. Only 16% of the workers interviewed have filed an anonymous complaint, men slightly more than women. The grievances of two thirds of the workers were left unattended, leaving the workers with a feeling of indifference about their concerns.

Most of those workers **who did not report discriminatory behaviour to their superiors were afraid of losing their employment**, women to a greater extent than men. Those who did inform the management, felt their **issues were not properly addressed and solved** through, for instance, appropriate sanctions for the perpetrator. The factory management is known for inaction, disbelief and stalling tactics. It is deeply unsettling that 18% of the workers (17% female, 22% male) were not even believed by their superiors.

**Neither unions nor participation committees seem trustable for almost three-fourths of the workers** interviewed. While unions are hardly common in Bangladesh's RMG factories, participation committees are mandatory to be set up in establishments of more than 50 workers. Despite legal provisions, only two-in-three respondents (67%) work in factories where participation committees are available. **Less than one third of the workers interviewed sees their interests adequately represented**, while almost half (47%) disagrees mostly because they take the committee for corrupt, are negative about the support they give or simply are not convinced that they can help.

64% of the workers interviewed remain within the ten daily working hours. About **one third does overtime beyond the legal limit**. Slightly more female workers are represented in 8-10-hour workdays, while male respondents dominate the categories of 11 hours and more. More research is necessary to prove statistical significance and see if women work comparatively 'less' than male workers as they are normally entrusted with care and domestic work.

In the light of these findings, a **range of health issues can be ascribed to a growing workload** and poor working conditions:

- Physical health problems, like bodily aches and pain, are overwhelmingly related to the continuously increasing workload.
- Mental health problems (e.g. stress, depression) are also mostly linked to the workload workers have to cope with, although family issues play an important role, too.
- 16% of all respondents rated their health poor or very poor, which means they were having difficulties to carry on with their daily lives.
- More than 40% of the workers have already experienced accidents with injuries and were sent back to work after treatment.
- One-in-five factories does not provide medical leave, exposing their employees to great risk.
- The data showed that about four-fifth of both male and female respondents are exposed to a feeling of stress and pressure.

**Female workers struggle more with the production targets set by the management than male workers**. The discrepancy (35% vs. 19%) can be explained by the domestic responsibilities (e.g. childcare, household chores) that are basically covered by women.

Workers who are tired and exhausted by the workload tend to make more mistakes. The risk of workplace

accidents and injuries rises with the workload as workers ignore safety precautions to keep up with the production target. However, **the majority of the workers interviewed have not been involved in an accident with injuries in the factory they are currently employed at (88%)**. Those who were mostly suffered punctures and needle stick injuries. Serious wounds (e.g. avulsion fractures, traumas, hand/leg burns, etc.) were inflicted on only few workers. More research is required to investigate whether and why male workers are exposed to a greater risk of occupational injuries (17% vs. 10%). These injuries usually require treatment and need to be brought to the attention of superiors. **21 % of all respondents work in factories that do not provide sick leave**, which is a serious violation of the law.

**Workers feel that fire incidents have become less frequent, they have not disappeared though.** Still 36% of all workers experience fire incidents once a year. In very rare cases, they are confronted with fire at the workplace at least once a month. Only 5% of all

respondents consider fire safety in their factories as poor or very poor. Companies seem to take precautions to ensure fire safety and frequently practise fire drills.

Commuting safety is an increasing issue for garment workers. **Almost all female respondents walk to their workplace, male workers do significantly less.** Almost one third of the workers interviewed feel very or somewhat unsafe on their way home from work. Harassment is a serious problem for women on their daily travel route, particularly on their way home.

Garment workers are trapped in standardized operations. **Almost two third of the workers (64%) would like to learn a different operation or move to a different designation, mostly to increase their earnings and to improve themselves.** Empowering workers also means to give them work opportunities. Gender-specific preferences have revealed that women are more interested in learning new operations, while men prefer to venture into new professions (e.g. driving) outside the factory.

## 1 Introduction

Bangladesh's garment industry has experienced stunning, uninterrupted growth in the past three decades. Continuously rising export earnings standing at a record high of more than \$30 billion in 2017-18 have led the country to reach lower middle-income status already in 2015.

Thanks to the "Everything But Arms" (EBA) arrangement, which grants least developed countries (LDC) duty- and quota-free access to the EU market, Bangladesh has grown to become the EU's key supplier of readymade garments (RMG). Once Bangladesh graduates from the LDC status, which is expected not to happen before 2024<sup>2</sup>, it will stop benefitting from preferential treatment. Talks are already under way about how the Generalised Scheme of Preferences (GSP) could support sustainable development of Bangladesh's garment industry. These preferences though can be removed if businesses fail to respect labour and human rights. To ensure both market access and safe working conditions, the Government has to enforce employment standards with rights and obligations for both employers and employees.

In the aftermath of the Rana Plaza collapse that killed more than 1,100 workers and left many others injured, safety measures were introduced to improve fire, electrical and structural safety. While structural integrity and occupational safety and health have improved thanks to broad interventions by the Accord on Fire and Building Safety in Bangladesh and the Alliance for Bangladesh Worker Safety, there is less progress in corporate responsibility and the respect for labour rights: wages remain low, workers continue to clock excessive working hours, and women are often

treated unfairly and worse than their male co-workers. Such substandard forms of employment contribute to health problems and, eventually, affect productivity, too.

While companies are often unaware of the importance of a healthy and safe work environment for their business performance, they will have to live up to international labour standards if Bangladesh's garment industry is to remain eligible for the EBA scheme or to qualify for either Standard GSP or GSP+ facilities.

The Workers' Voice Report 2019 will shed light on the shortcomings in Bangladesh's RMG sector and expand on gender dynamics that obstruct workplace equality among a predominantly female workforce.

After this introduction, section 2 explains how the information for this report was gathered and the statistical methods that were used to deal with this data.

Section 3 lays out the results of the survey, informing first about the socio-demographic and socio-economic characteristics of the respondents before it goes into detail about the working conditions. Fluctuation, working hours, discrimination, health problems, fire safety, freedom of association and access to remedy were at the centre of the analysis. Commuting safety goes beyond the work environment and discusses the workers' perception of personal safety on their way to and from work. The section closes with prospects and opportunities for the workers. Wherever possible, the data was edited by gender to identify gender dynamics.

Section 4 ends with concluding remarks and recommendations for corrective action.

<sup>2</sup> Bangladesh has joined the ranks of lower middle-income countries, a classification used by the World Bank, in 2015. Graduation from the LDC group by the United Nations is based on three criteria: Gross National Income (GNI) per capita, Human Assets Index (HAI), and Economic Vulnerability Index (EVI). Bangladesh was

found eligible for graduation for the first time in 2018 and must meet these criteria at two consecutive triennial reviews before it can be recommended for graduation, i.e. not until 2024. For more information, see Committee for Development Policy of the United Nations 2018.

## 2 Methodology

This report presents the results of a survey conducted with 447 workers of the RMG industry between September and December 2018. Consulting Service International Ltd. in collaboration with Awaj Foundation designed a structured questionnaire to gather information from garment workers on their working conditions.

### 2.1 Standardised questionnaires

The survey draws on a total of 447 standardised questionnaires. Face-to-face interviews were conducted with RMG workers in the centres operated by Awaj Foundation. Garment workers seek out Awaj Foundation for various reasons, e.g. for medical treatment, for seeking advice on labour right issues, for training sessions, or just for resting and a chat with Awaj staff and other workers. When auditors meet with workers, they normally only interview them shortly, often in front of co-workers and superiors. Hence, workers are afraid of suffering a disadvantage and feel uneasy to disclose discriminatory practices, which are often stigmatized. Given such dynamics, the Awaj Centres were selected to ensure conditions that are free from intimidation, judgment or inappropriate behaviour by superiors.

Questions were asked regarding the workplace environment, health conditions, discrimination at the workplace, the perception of safety in and outside the factory, and personal information. After verifying the validity of the questionnaires, data were entered in SPSS, a statistical data software, for processing and analysing.

Answers to open questions were categorised and coded for interpretation. Most of the questions provided open-response categories. To avoid this would lead to excessively long answers and coding, response categories were predefined but usually not read out to the respondents. This approach helped minimize refusals, i.e. 'don't know' answers, while respondents are not pressured to guess the right answers. Closed-ended questions with predefined answers give the respondents a choice. They select an answer that is the most appropriate to their purpose and do not have to think about how to articulate it. Closed-ended

questions with predefined response categories that are read out work best for issues that have been already narrowed down.

The survey generates new and updated knowledge and empirical evidence on working conditions. The workers' experiences and opinions were the key source to these findings. The database produced from the questionnaires was analysed for statistical trends, significance of specific variables as well as associations between two or more variables. Frequency tables, cross tabulation and tests of association have been used for exploring the variables and their possible relationships.

All test results and figures included in this report are expressed in percentages and compared between males and females to identify relationships between working conditions and gender. Percentages are calculated based on the information given by 344 female and 100 male workers participating in this study, for which the terms 'respondents', 'participants' and 'interviewees' have been used interchangeably<sup>3</sup>.

### 2.2 Limitations

We understand a questionnaire based on mainly closed questions is less encouraging for workers to get involved but keeping them rather passive. However, this methodology was assumed to work well for workers that are embedded in a hierarchical and patriarchal society and a daily routine of standardised work operations. These conditions tend to inhibit a reflective attitude and their ability to articulate the response.

Given the sample design, the survey is not a representative sample of the four million workers who are currently employed in about five thousand garment factories. To reach out to workers, to build trust and to conduct the interview in a safe environment is difficult. The Awaj Centres are a point of contact for garment workers seeking counsel, constituting a meeting place, which served as a safe space for interviewing workers on sensitive issues that cannot be discussed freely at their workplace or at home. Consequently, the findings from the survey cannot be generalized with confidence to the target population. Inferences can only be made about the workers participating in the study.

<sup>3</sup> Three workers did not indicate their gender. They were only considered for calculations concerning the total population, the size of which consequentially is 447.



Image 1: Workshop with female workers at one AWAJ Centre

### 3 Results of the survey 2018-2019

The Workers' Voice Report 2019 relies on survey data from interviews with 447 workers taken between September and December 2018. It takes stock of the latest developments in the garment industry since the last edition in 2016. Gender differences and the conditions of female employment in the garment industry are given particular attention since women's rights are historically disregarded in Bangladesh's society.

#### 3.1 Socio-demographic characteristics

Workers are the key resources of any labour-based manufacturing industry. The RMG sector generates employment on a large scale, bringing economic growth to Bangladesh. Given the abundance of labour force, the factories tend to ignore that the workers are their capital and investment in their well-being is central to a prospering business.

To understand and derive adequate conclusions from this study, it is helpful to introduce into the interviewees' socio-demographic characteristics, such as gender, age, marital status, and parenthood.

##### 3.1.1 Gender

In Bangladesh, ready-made garments are the only industry to offer large-scale formal employment to women regardless of their education. Mostly societal but partly also physical restrictions prevent unskilled women from signing on in other industries (e.g. tanneries, engineering industries). The less an industry is integrated in the global market or price competitiveness matters, the lower the employers' interest in diversifying their workforce.



Image 2: Female RMG workers in a Bangladesh factory

Women make up 77% of this survey's respondents, which is within the limits of official estimates<sup>4</sup>. The recently debated downward trend to a female workforce of less than two-third cannot be confirmed for this study.

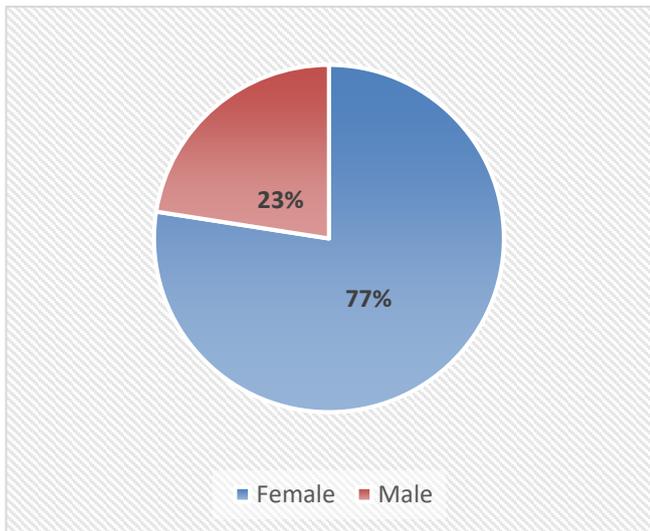


Figure 1: Distribution of respondents by gender

Ironically, Bangladesh's most powerful industry depends on women whose social rights have long been not fully respected. While buyers and manufacturing firms praise the high female to male ratio among the workforce as a success story of empowerment, the **work environment still exposes female workers to highly vulnerable conditions** as will be learned in 3.2 and 3.3. The global #metoo movement, for instance, started in Hollywood but has gradually led to discuss sexism and gender inequality in other industries, too. Section 3.3.2 will expand on harassment and discriminating behaviour by male-dominated management and line supervisors taking advantage of their position of power.

<sup>4</sup> Three interviewees provided no information on their gender.

Power asymmetries within the workforce, between management and workers, and within the families point to structural challenges that limit the female workers' opportunities, for instance, for promotion to more skilled and valued activities. **Financial independence and a more valued position for contributing to the household income are often only temporary gains from the employment in the RMG sector, which end with marriage.** Women may then be forced to reproductive and care work, re-creating their inferior position in society (see 3.1.4).

### 3.1.2 Age

Compared to the last Workers' Voice report in 2016, a slight increase in the median age of the respondents to 26.7 years indicates that hiring practices may have changed towards more experienced workers. The workers aged below 18 fell from 4% to 1%. The group of 18 to 24 years experienced the biggest drop from 47% in 2016 to 35% in 2019 (see Figure 2). As labour costs rise (see 3.2.2), companies seem to be poised to employ more unskilled workers as assistants (helpers), which has an impact on levels of productivity, quality and overall competitiveness. **Only 5% of the workers interviewed are aged between 40 to 54 years**, which can be understood as a sign that stress and hard work weigh on older employees. On the other hand, it is normally women that leave the garment industry for taking care of domestic priorities.

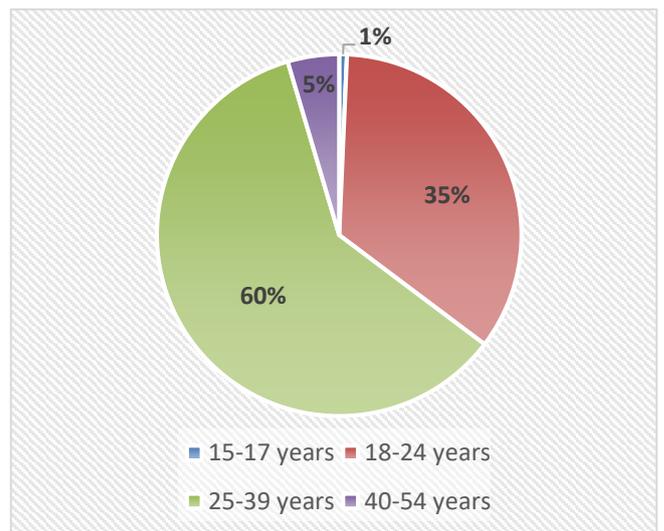


Figure 2: Distribution of the respondents by age

Figure 3 supports the view that women leave the garment industry earlier to engage in reproductive and care work, which leads to **men being more represented in older cohorts**. Male respondents were

found comparatively older than their female counterparts: 66% of them were aged between 25-39 years as opposed to only 58% of the females.

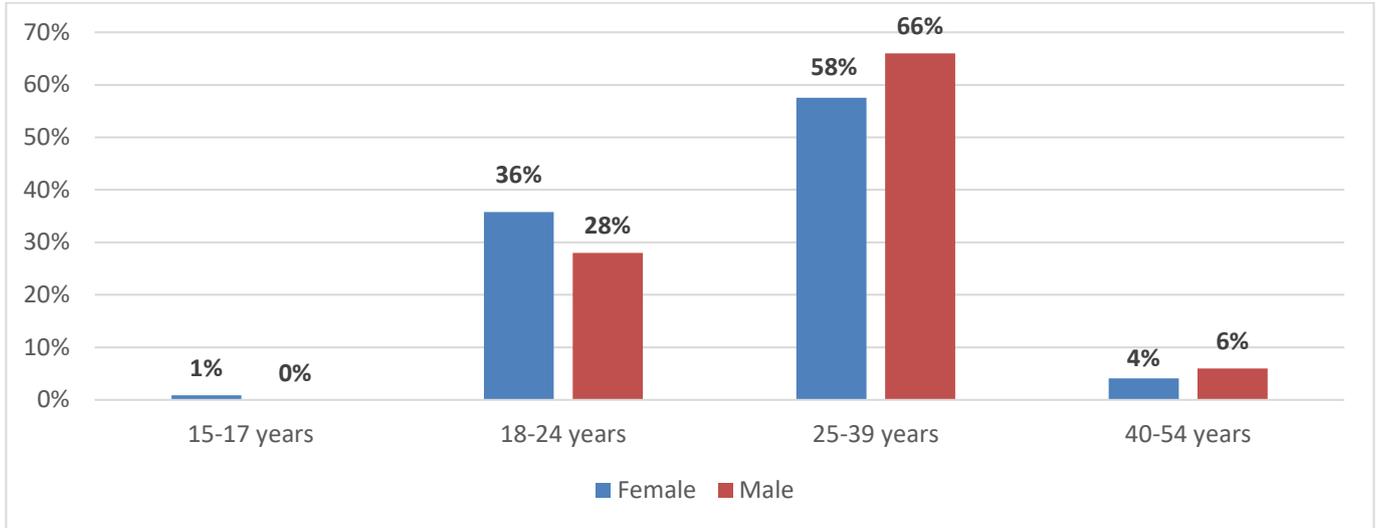


Figure 3: Distribution of respondents by age and gender

As a matter of fact, **factories prefer to hire young women who are less likely to take sick leave and maternity benefits.** Constant pressure to increase productivity can be compensated more easily by

younger workers who do not yet have to face multiple strains at home and at work. Section 3.3.2 will provide more information on discrimination at work, which can also be pregnancy-based.

### 3.1.3 Marital status

Marriage and childbirth are often turning points for the professional career of female workers in emerging economies. It is widely acknowledged that the garment industry has increased the labour force participation of women, whereas it has led to a decline of the fertility rate as women delay their decision to marry and have children. Figure 4 points to a similar distribution of married female and male workers (76% vs. 73%). It is striking though that **far fewer women were single than men (14% vs. 27%) and no male respondent was divorced, separated or widowed.** Female workers who, for any reason, lost their spouse rely on job opportunities in the RMG sector, even if they are poorly paid.

5% of the female respondents followed their spouse or some family member who found work close to the current residency, while only 1% of the male workers encountered themselves in a similar situation. These results indicate that the female workers interviewed tend to make their decisions more dependent on family matters than male workers.

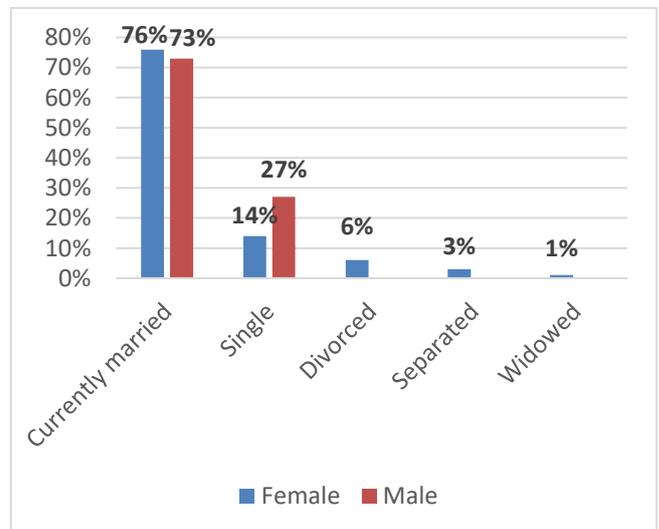


Figure 4: Distribution of respondents by marital status and gender

Marriage and family assume important functions in Bangladesh's society. **Particularly, for women it seems to be important to reconcile work and family life.** Most of the women interviewed moved to their current living place either to be closer to work (31% female vs. 36% male) or to live with their family (17% female vs. 7% male). This usually saves time and increases flexibility as family acts as a support structure.

### 3.1.4 Parenthood

It is a challenge for parents, and especially for women, to master the double burden of work and care. Apart from expectant mothers having a right to take maternal leave before and after birth, there are no social benefits for working parents. This study argues that female workers are more disadvantaged and burdened than men by the responsibilities they are facing at work and at home. 68% of the female workers interviewed had children as compared to only 57% of the male workers (see Figure 5).

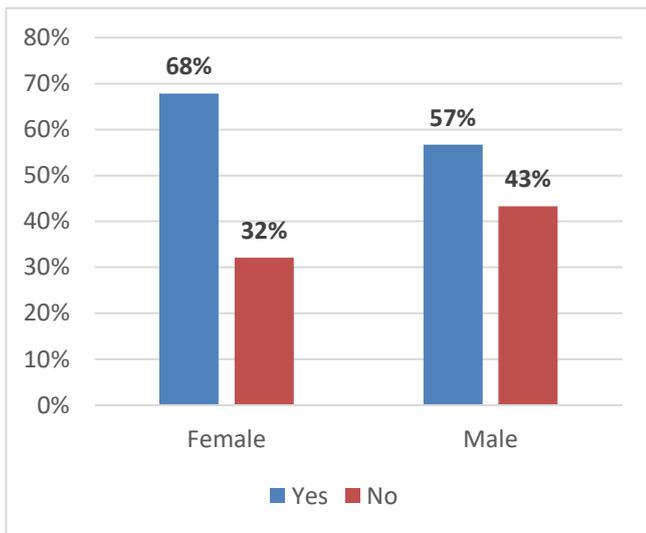


Figure 5: Distribution of respondents by parenthood and gender

In addition to **more female workers having children, female respondents also have more children than male respondents** (see Figure 6). Naturally, this implies an **additional burden for women who devote more time to housework and childcare than men**.

With 48% of the total respondents having one child, 38% two children and only 14% three or more children, only a low percentage of the respondents exceeds the national fertility rate which has dropped from 3.17 births per woman in 2000 to 2.10 in 2016. The current birth rate means the population of Bangladesh is neither growing nor shrinking, immigration excepted.

The Government of Bangladesh has been implementing a national action plan for family planning that addresses child marriage and pregnancies among youths and adolescents. These measures seek to level geographical and spatial disparities as women in rural areas tend to get earlier married and have earlier and more children than those living in urban agglomerations.

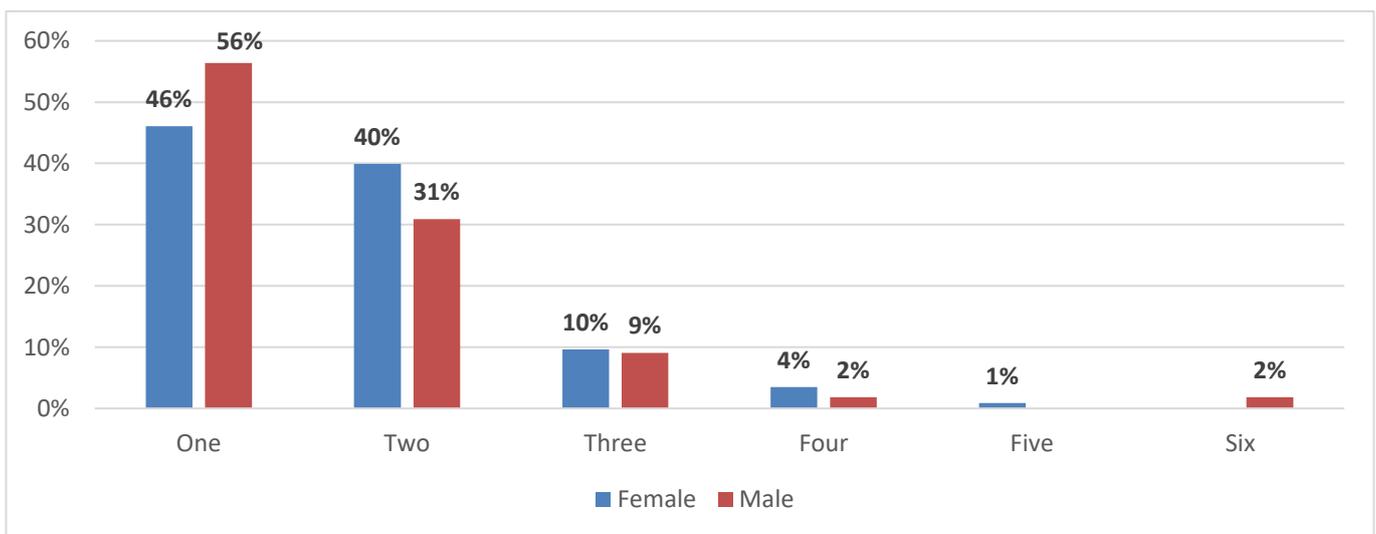


Figure 6: Distribution of respondents by number of children and gender

Among the interviewees for the Workers' Voice 2019, **low education levels prevail**: only 35% have completed the primary level; 15% dropped out of primary school and 8% did not attend school at all (see 3.2.1). Workers may well have become more aware of family planning issues over the past years; however, the adverse effects of high stress and workload seem to be factors that weigh on the women's decision to not have more children. Female workers seem to be understanding that parenthood is a costly choice. On the

one hand, they cannot exit work for better jobs as they could before, facing less flexibility due to child rearing. On the other hand, long working hours and low pay make it very difficult for women to combine parenthood and work. Consequently, **66% of all respondents cannot imagine having a child while employed at the current factory** (see Figure 7). Only one-in-five women could imagine having another child during employment; **male respondents are even more reluctant to have more children** (13%).

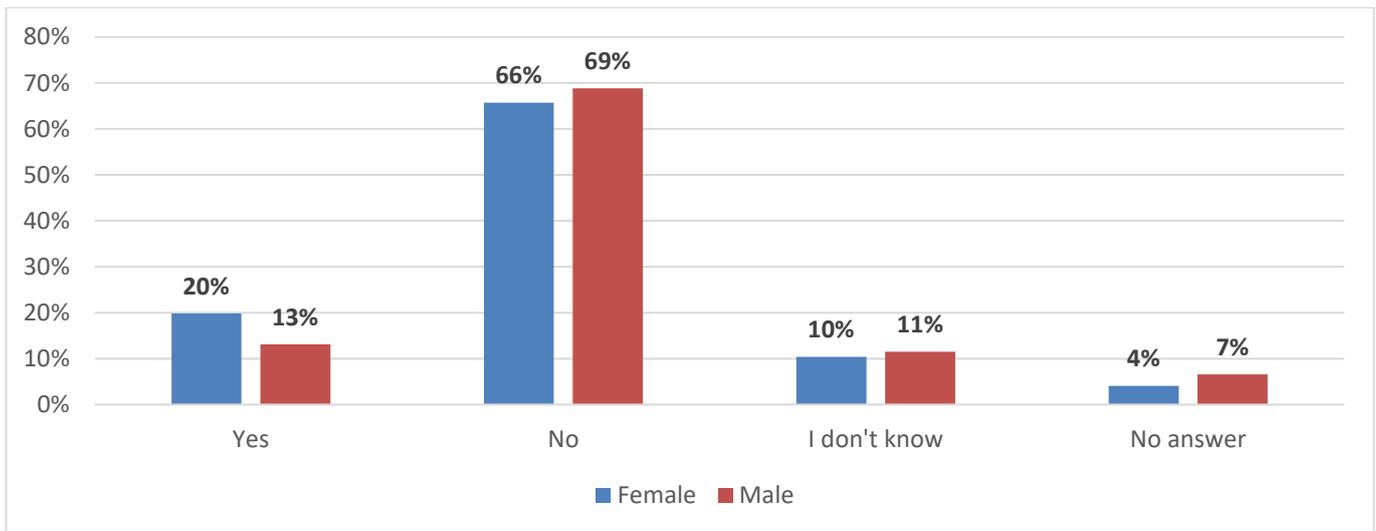


Figure 7: Distributions of respondents with desire to have more children while employed and gender

The main reasons for the low desire to have more children are manifold and not always related to the workers' economic situation (see Figure 8). 37% seem to have made a deliberate decision not to want a child. While for female respondents it seems to be more of a personal choice than for male workers (39% vs. 26%), **male respondents seem to feel the pressure of a patriarchal society that expects men to be the main provider for their family. The lack of satisfactory income is the prime reason for 64%** to decide against such life-changing commitment, whereas earnings seem to be an issue only for 11% of the female respondents. Being an unmarried single is the second most important constraint for men (38%).

Few workers (6% female, 7% male) recognize to have finished their family planning. The work environment

also is not as important in the decision to have more children as assumed. Only 10% female and 7% male workers pay attention to childcare facilities at the factories. This may also be interpreted as a sign that most of the respondents are unaware of the facilities export-oriented companies are to provide to their workforce.

Workers are often uninformed about the national legal requirements factories are supposed to meet and the international standards they have been certified with. If unions and organisations like Awaj Foundation can raise the workers' awareness and provide the relevant information, workers will be able to better communicate their needs to the management.

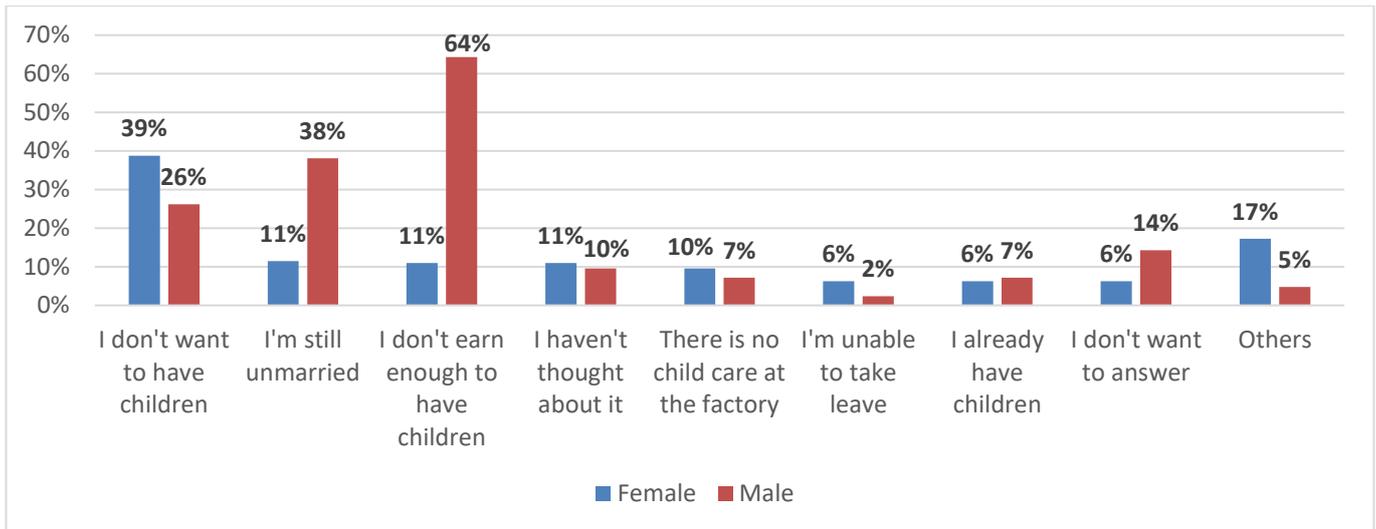


Figure 8: Distribution of respondents by reasons for not wanting a child while employed and gender

RMG companies in Bangladesh are often indifferent to the relationship of working conditions and high employee turnover. Most businesses are oblivious to the needs of a productive workforce that requires the provision of maternity leave, sick leave, childcare facilities, and other benefits. Only 6% of the female respondents went on maternity leave when with child. **Very few of the then pregnant workers did not know they were entitled to maternity leave (1%) or were forced by their management to keep working (2%). However, still 5% of the respondents mention financial reasons for immediately returning to work without taking any leave.** Considering that it takes time to recover from childbirth and new mothers suffer from exhaustion and sleep deprivation, employers have the responsibility to provide facilities that reduce

the mothers' vulnerability, such as childcare facilities (e.g. nursing room, crèche), flexible breaks for breastfeeding, or flexible production targets, among others.

The results on parenthood show that most of the respondents are wary of reconciling family life and work. Especially men are reluctant to have children under the current circumstances; they feel increasingly unable to follow their societal role as breadwinner. The supporting structure (e.g. childcare) for working parents is poor or continues to be ignored by the factory management. Although women certainly have benefited from global market integration through employment, there is a gap in the knowledge of their rights and entitlements (e.g. maternal benefits).

### 3.2 Socio-economic characteristics

#### 3.2.1 Education

Available studies indicate that the level of education varies with gender and social origin in Bangladesh. According to UNESCO, the adult literacy rate<sup>5</sup> in Bangladesh is 72.89%, with a considerable gap between men (75.7%) and women (70.1%). The gender-education gap among the garment workers interviewed is more nuanced on different levels:

- The percentage of workers who did not attend school (8%) corresponds with results from other

studies that illiteracy among garment workers is rather low<sup>6</sup>.

- Significantly more female than male workers responded to have not completed the primary level (17% vs. 9%).
- More women have achieved a Primary School Certificate (37% vs. 25%) than men, as male respondents are consistently stronger represented in school degrees of Junior School Certificate (i.e. eight years of schooling) and above.

Figure 9 supports the findings of national statistics and international studies as female respondents are systematically underrepresented in higher levels of

<sup>5</sup> The adult literacy rate applies to people aged 15 and above who can both read and write with understanding a short simple statement about their everyday life (Index Mundi 2019).

<sup>6</sup> According to Haque and Bari (2016), 12% of the garment workers are illiterate.

school education and higher education. Traditional customs of marriage and early childbearing often result in girls dropping out of school prematurely, while male workers face less restrictions to continue with

secondary and tertiary education. Statistical tests corroborate a strong statistical association between gender and educational status. Male workers tend to have a higher level of education than female workers.<sup>7</sup>

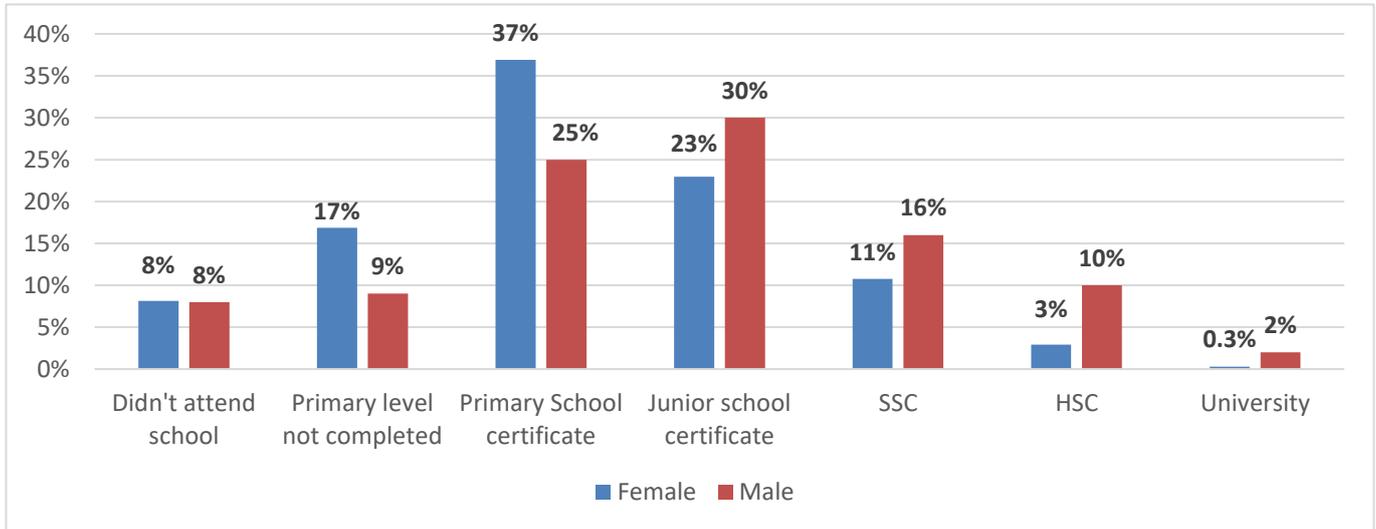


Figure 9: Distribution of respondents by level of education completed and gender

Figure 10 presents that **most of the workers (41%) who left school prematurely followed their parents' desire to contribute to the family income**<sup>8</sup>. Responsibility was expected more from male than from female interviewees (47% vs. 41%). 16% of the respondents did not complete their education to tend to financial problems in their families; again, men were more

obligated than women (22% vs. 14%). 13% of the workers disliked attending school and abandoned education. It is striking that **13% of the female workers dropped out of school to marry, while none of the male respondents has had to face such pressure**, which is a testament to Bangladesh's patriarchal society.

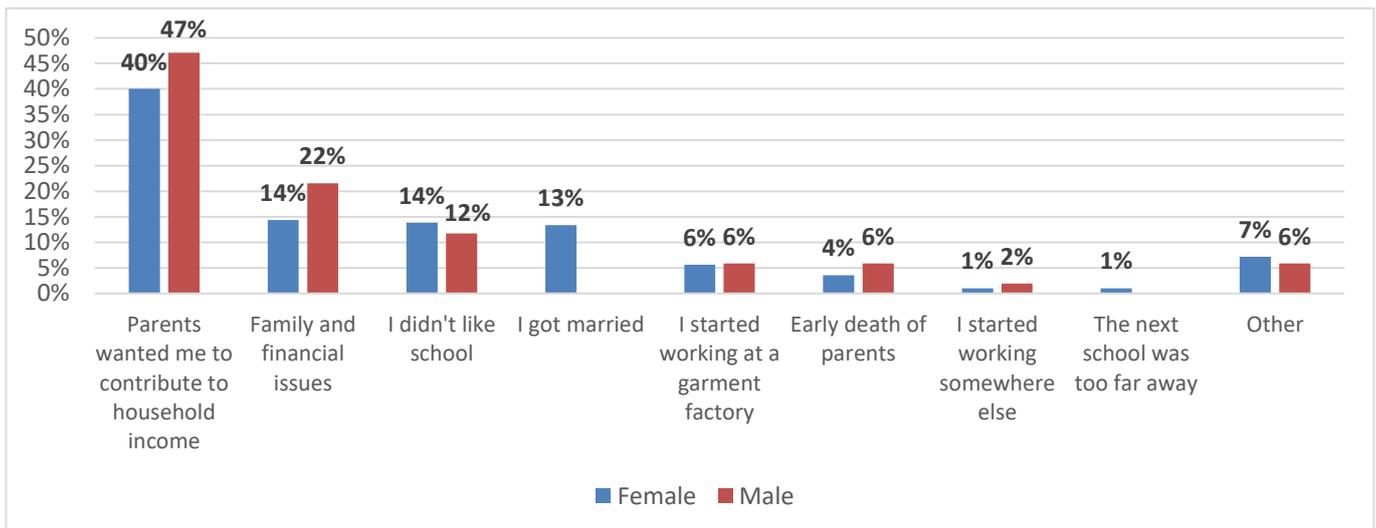


Figure 10: Distribution of respondents by reason behind incompleteness of study and gender

<sup>7</sup> P-value 0.003 (< 0.05/1.0)

<sup>8</sup> Values for pregnancy, raising children or siblings, sickness, or family problems, among others, were categorised in 'other'.

In Bangladesh, the RMG industry has been pivotal in providing economic opportunities to primarily poor and vulnerable women from rural and deprived urban areas. Productive employment not just allows them to postpone marriage and childbearing, but also empowers them to gain control over finances and influence decisions that go beyond matters of household and childcare. However, **only 51% of the respondents made their own decision to leave school early**. Not surprisingly, **male respondents were granted far more autonomy than female respondents (62% vs. 48%)**. For 42% of the respondents, parents intervened in their decision to abandon studies; other than assumed, family members like husbands or brothers were less involved (6%). Again, female workers were exposed to considerably greater pressure from their parents than their male counterparts (see Figure 11).

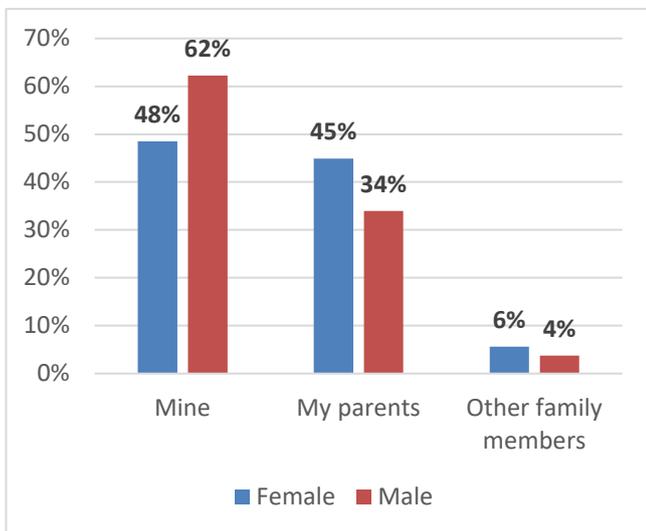


Figure 11: Distribution of respondents by whose decision it was to leave school and gender

Despite 83% of the workers having an educational level of eight years or less of schooling (see Figure 9), **only 40% of the workers are interested in resuming their studies or pursuing a higher level of education**. The overwhelming **reason for the respondents to oppose to further education is of financial nature** (see Figure 12). Workers lack the finances to sustain a prolonged period of studying without full salary. As about two-in-three workers already have children, their main concern is to provide opportunities for their offspring.

**Family and financial responsibilities would not allow 76% of the workers to study again**. Low pay and high expenses are the key constraints to putting aside money for further education (see 3.2.2). High workloads at work and, particularly for women, at home seem to be too absorbing for workers to think about own development opportunities. This also translates in a feeling of lacking curiosity and interest in learning new things that might result in better pay and working conditions. It is noteworthy that family and spouses exert more control over female (6%) than over male respondents (2%). **Men in patriarchal societies enjoy more freedom to take their destiny into their own hands**.

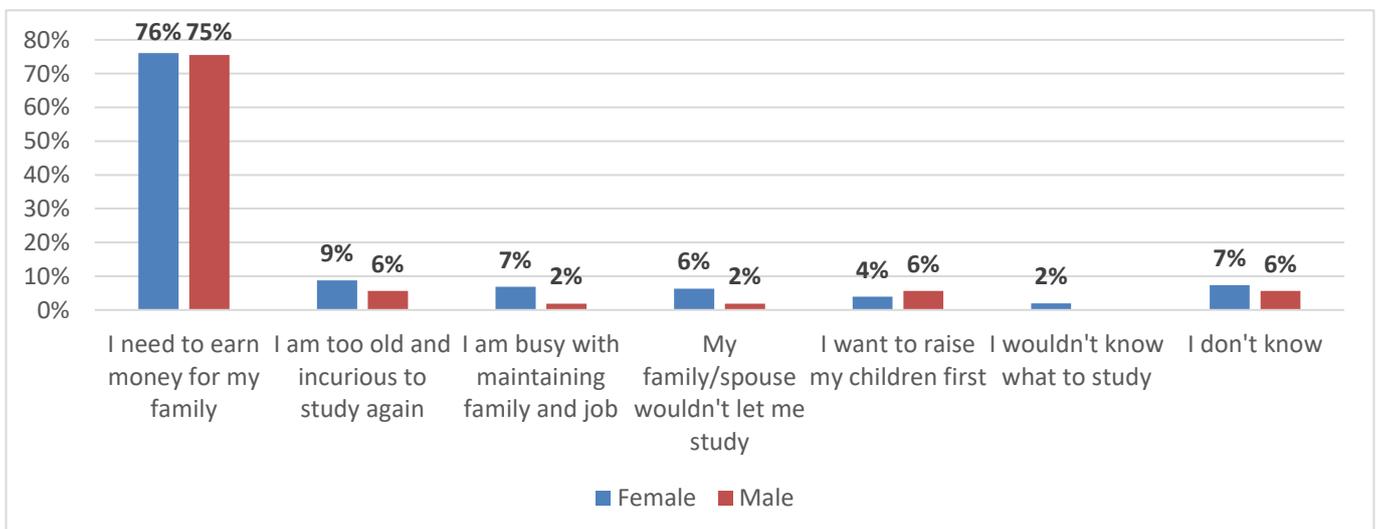


Figure 12: Distribution of respondents by reasons for lack of interest in further education and gender

Those who want to hit the books again are primarily interested in completing the Higher Secondary School Certificate (HSC), which qualifies them for taking on more responsibilities, such as operator or production in charge. Not surprisingly, the HSC level is the primary choice of male respondents (22% vs. 13%) as society has taught them to be in charge, while the female workers interviewed appear to be more insecure about their possibilities. The difference points to **men's pursuit for positions that require higher education and specific soft skills (e.g. management or leadership skills)**. As women workers tend to be less promoted (see 3.2.2) and have fewer role models in successfully moving up internal ranks, completing secondary level (8%) and vocational and technical education (7%) is comparatively more important to them than for men (3%; 6% respectively). **Women seem to be inclined to pursue a more practical education** that may help them change employment and

find more suitable job opportunities. The fact that male respondents aim for higher education corresponds with the results presented in 3.2.2. The **male workers interviewed have higher designation levels compared to their female counterparts**, which translates in better working conditions and better pay.

In sum, the **gender-education gap is significant**. Female respondents are consistently underrepresented in higher levels of school education and higher education. Interest in resuming studies and further education is mainly curbed by financial limitations. Opportunities for further studies would result in gender-specific choices. Male respondents would aim for higher education, which allows for better pay, while female respondents would focus more on practical, like vocational education, which would keep them in lower positions.

### 3.2.2 Wages

With China gradually moving away from labour-intensive garment manufacturing, sourcing from Bangladesh is expected to increase. As the second largest garment exporter in the world, Bangladesh's competitiveness rests on low-cost labour.

At the time of data collection, the **monthly minimum wage was BDT 5,300 for the lowest pay grade (assistants/helpers)**, which was also the lowest wage among the top five garment-exporting nations<sup>9</sup>.

After the Rana Plaza tragedy, **safety issues addressed by the Accord on Fire and Building Safety and the Alliance for Bangladesh Worker Safety were prioritized**

**over other violations of ILO conventions**. Wages stagnated for more than five years until they were adjusted only in December 2018. Hence, the reference for this study will be the old pay of BDT 5,300 (see Table 1).

The basic wage of grade 7, the lowest wage level, amounts to 57% of the total wage and gradually increases up to 65% for grade 1 workers. Only the house rent allowance varies with the pay grade and is comparatively higher for grade 1 and 2 workers. The medical, transport and food allowances the workers are entitled to are fixed amounts.

Table 1: Minimum wage and pay grades 2013-2018

Grade	Basic wages	House rent allowance	Medical allowance	Transport allowance	Food allowance	Total wages
Grade 1	8,500	3,400	250	200	650	13,000
Grade 2	7,000	2,800	250	200	650	10,900
Grade 3	4,075	1,630	250	200	650	6,805
Grade 4	3,800	1,520	250	200	650	6,420
Grade 5	3,530	1,412	250	200	650	6,042
Grade 6	3,270	1,308	250	200	650	5,678
Grade 7	3,000	1,200	250	200	650	5,300

Source: Ministry of Labour and Employment, SRO No. 369-Law/2013

<sup>9</sup> China, Bangladesh, Vietnam, India, Turkey

Effective from 1 December 2018, the minimum wage for grade 7 has increased to BDT 8,000. Only after workers went on strike over adequate pay demanding a proportionate increase of all wage levels, the Government conceded to adjust the wages for grade 1 to 6 workers. It is noteworthy that the basic wages were proportionally reduced to 51% of the total wage for grade 7 and 60% for grade 1 workers, respectively.

Due to land scarcity and rising housing expenses, the house rent allowance was increased to 26% for grade 5-7 workers. Grade 1 and 2 workers have 30% and 29% respectively at their disposal. Table 2 illustrates in absolute numbers that **lower-grade workers are systematically disadvantaged compared to more skilled and experienced workers.**

Table 2: Minimum wage and pay grades from December 2018

Grade	Basic wages	House rent allowance	Medical allowance	Transport allowance	Food allowance	Total wages
Grade 1	10,440	5,220	600	350	900	17,510
Grade 2	8,520	4,260	600	350	900	14,630
Grade 3	5,160	2,580	600	350	900	9,590
Grade 4	4,930	2,465	600	350	900	9,245
Grade 5	4,670	2,335	600	350	900	8,855
Grade 6	4,370	2,185	600	350	900	8,405
Grade 7	4,100	2,050	600	350	900	8,000

Source: Ministry of Labour and Employment, SRO No. 345-Law/2018

The availability of low-cost labour is believed to drive Bangladesh's competitiveness. However, inadequate wages create a work environment that is dysfunctional to quality, productivity and the workers' well-being.

Despite the garment industry being primarily fuelled by female workforce, the statistics point to a structural discrimination of women. In the light of our findings, we would like to discuss five propositions:

*Proposition I: Female workers earn less than their male co-workers*

Low wages are rampant in the garment industry. Most of the workers interviewed, about one-in-five, were drawing a grade 4 salary at the time of the data collection, that is approximately BDT 6,400. Given the numerous strikes and demonstrations in which trade

unions called for fairer wages, which were eventually granted in December 2018, it is **remarkable that 43% of this study's participants did not know their salary grade** (see Figure 13). This ignorance appears to have an impact on the results that suggest that, at first glance, women seem not to be discriminated as they are not significantly underrepresented in the higher pay grades.

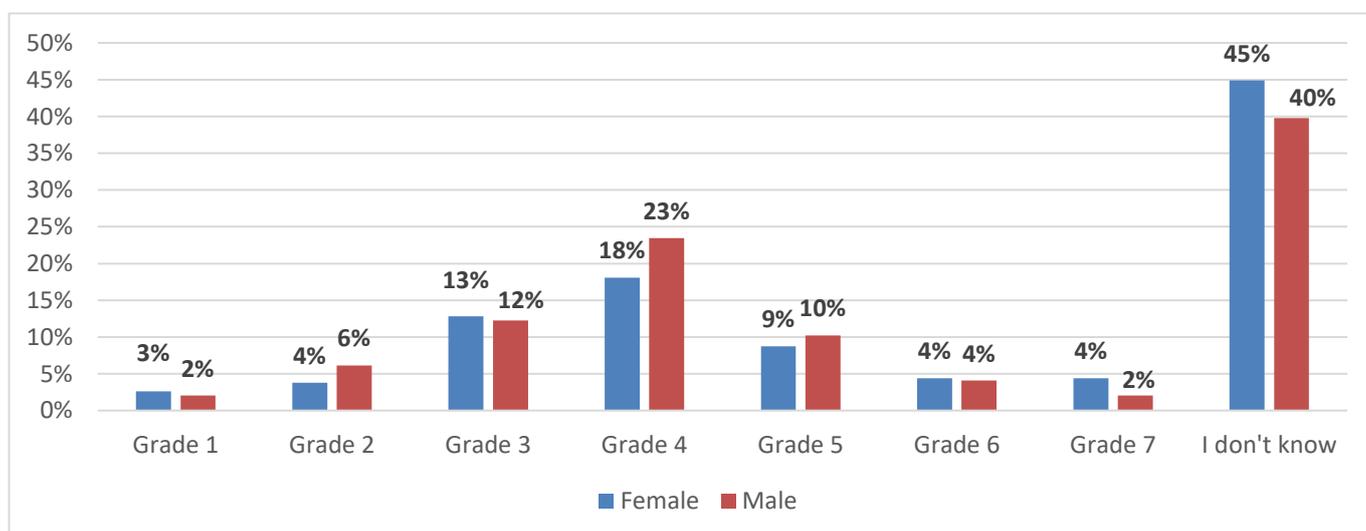


Figure 13: Distribution of respondents by wage grade and gender

However, this situation changes when looking at the actual income data provided by the respondents. First, contrasting these with the pay grades and the total wages, it is conspicuous that 63% of the workers gave a wage range of BDT 7,000 and BDT 9,000, which is beyond the grade 3 level (BDT 6,805). As 43% were unable to tell the grade number, it is possible that more workers fall in a different category, i.e. a higher pay grade than stated in Figure 13<sup>10</sup>.

Second, the **gender pay gap is visible for all wage classes but seems to be more pronounced for higher wage employment.** Figure 14 shows that still 33% of

the workers earned between BDT 5,000 and BDT 7,000 excluding overtime<sup>11</sup>. Women are stronger represented in this category than men (36% vs. 25%) who proportionally dominate higher wage classes. 3% of the male interviewees obtained wages between BDT 9,000 to 12,000 per month, compared to only 0.3% of the female interviewees (see Figure 14). 6% of the male respondents earned more than BDT 12,000 as opposed to only 0.6% of the women. The strong association between gender and wages also corroborates the assumption that the female workers interviewed for this study earn less than their male counterparts.<sup>12</sup>

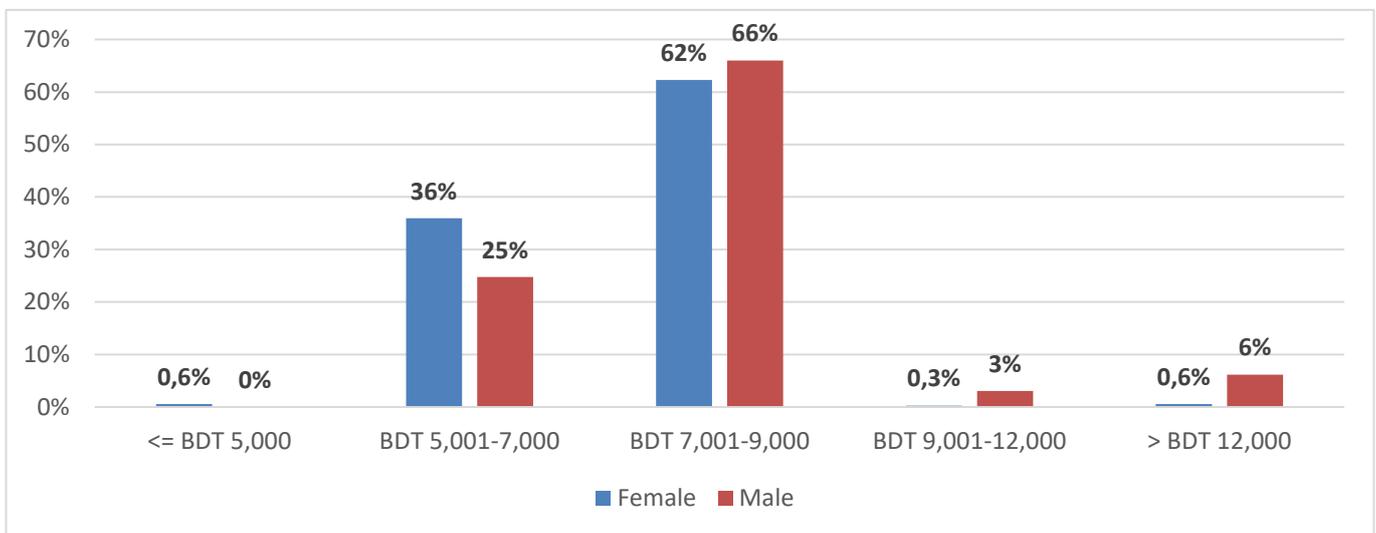


Figure 14: Distribution of respondents by monthly wage without overtime and gender

**Despite most of the workers drawing a salary beyond the legal minimum, 77% of them are not satisfied with it** (see Figure 15).

Men are even less conformant with their income, which is another argument for a growing discomfort with their decreasing ability to be the main breadwinner of the family.

It is also a strong signal that the minimum wage cannot cover the basic living costs anymore. Access to affordable housing is increasingly constrained as is the workers' inability to meet the rising costs for food and utilities.

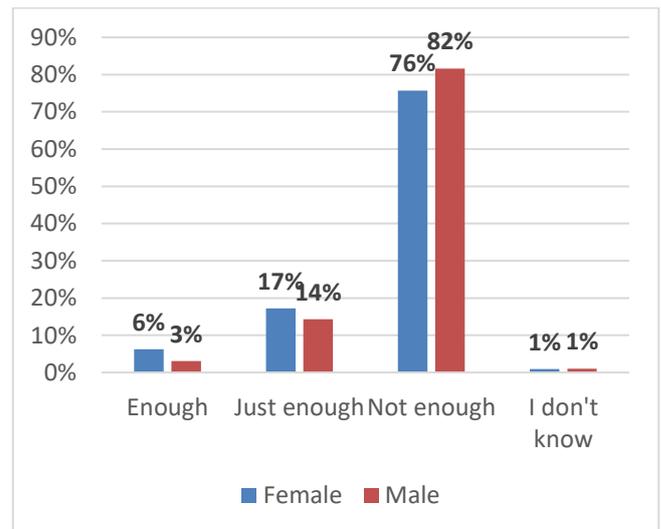


Figure 15: Distribution of respondents by wage sufficiency and gender

<sup>10</sup> It also cannot be ruled out that despite explanations overtime was included in the indications on basic wages.

<sup>11</sup> Workers were requested to point to wage classes if they did not want to or could not disclose their actual wage.

<sup>12</sup> P-value: 0.000 (< 0.05)

For all hours worked over 48 per week, the law requires an hourly payment equal to two times the employee's regular hourly wage. Employers who wilfully violate the minimum wage and overtime provisions are sanctioned. The data collected for the Workers' Voice 2019 suggests that **female workers receive more overtime premium than male workers**

**(96% vs. 86%)<sup>13</sup>**. This means that women do overtime more often than men because their **overtime premium per hour is below that of male respondents<sup>14</sup>**, which bears witness to the structural discrimination of women in pay. Figure 16 illustrates that **women dominate the lower premiums, while men according to their higher designations obtain higher rates.**

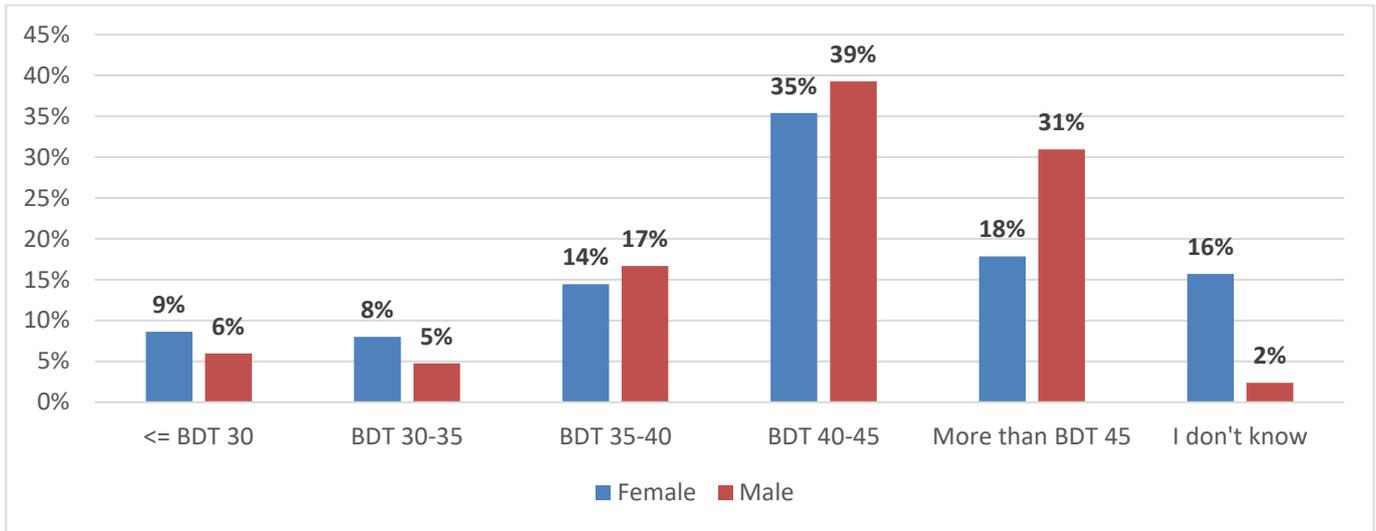


Figure 16: Distribution of respondents by overtime premium per hour and gender

*Proposition II: Men normally occupy more skilled positions.*

Wage discrimination for similar work between male and female workers is difficult to be verified. This study shows that female workers end up earning less than their male co-workers (Figure 17). Almost **three-fourth of the female respondents (73%) are employed as operators, compared to only less than half of the male workers (47%).**

Assistant operating posts are mainly held by women, while more skilled positions, like quality control, quality inspection or supervisory, are given to men for the most part. Men are often ascribed certain skills and biological factors (e.g. strength) that seem to qualify them for alleged male domains (e.g. ironing), whereas women are often forced to carry out simple but low-paid operations.



Image 3: Pattern making carried out by male workers only



Image 4: Ironing section with male workers only

<sup>13</sup> P-value: 0.000

<sup>14</sup> P-value: 0.005

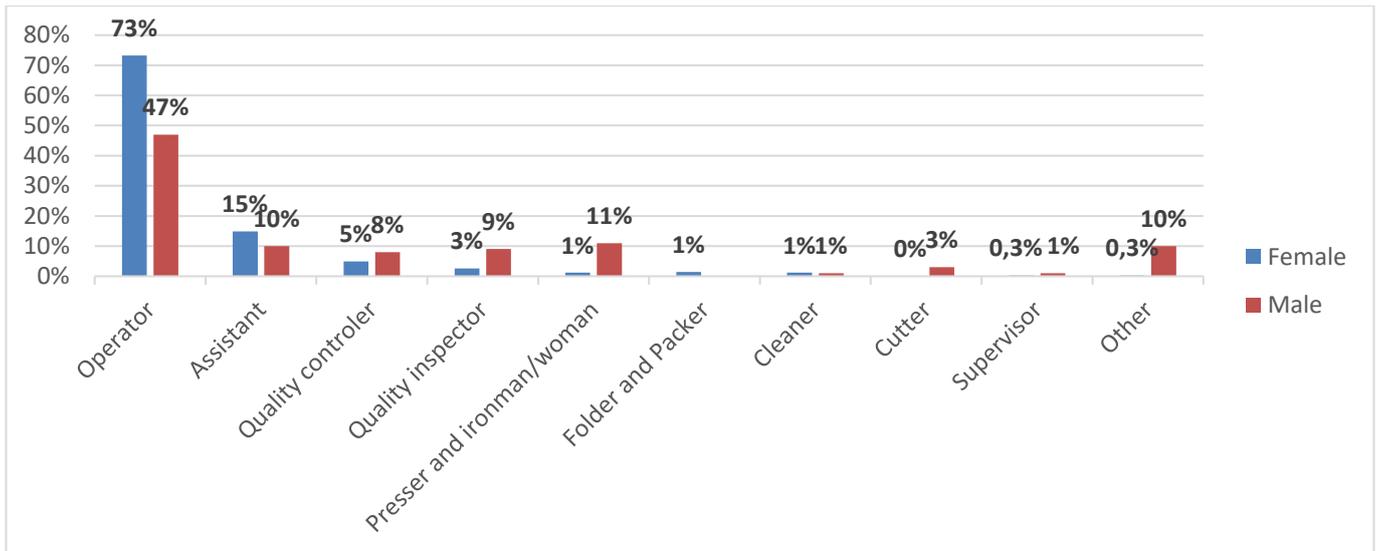


Figure 17: Distribution of respondents by designation and gender

*Proposition III: Women are not used to negotiate their salary – but seem to be doing better at it*

With the burgeoning garment industry and many companies exporting to top international clients, female workers are in a good position to negotiate for a raise. However, gender role attitudes ascribe women to be more reserved than men when it comes to demand a suitable salary for their skills in a labour market as open and large as the one in Bangladesh. Unlike previous reports, our results suggest that women workers seem to do better at negotiating salaries. **Almost half**

**of the female respondents (49%) got a raise in 2018**, which reveals that women did not avoid negotiations, foregoing higher payment (Figure 18). In fact, over the last two years there has been little difference in wage raises among male and female workers (74% vs. 74%). It is not typical for low-skilled workers to negotiate, even less so when they joined the factory only recently, like in the last two years, which about 46% of the workers did. This means **wage increases in this period could have been also a result of a typical promotion process** from assistant to junior and general operator positions.

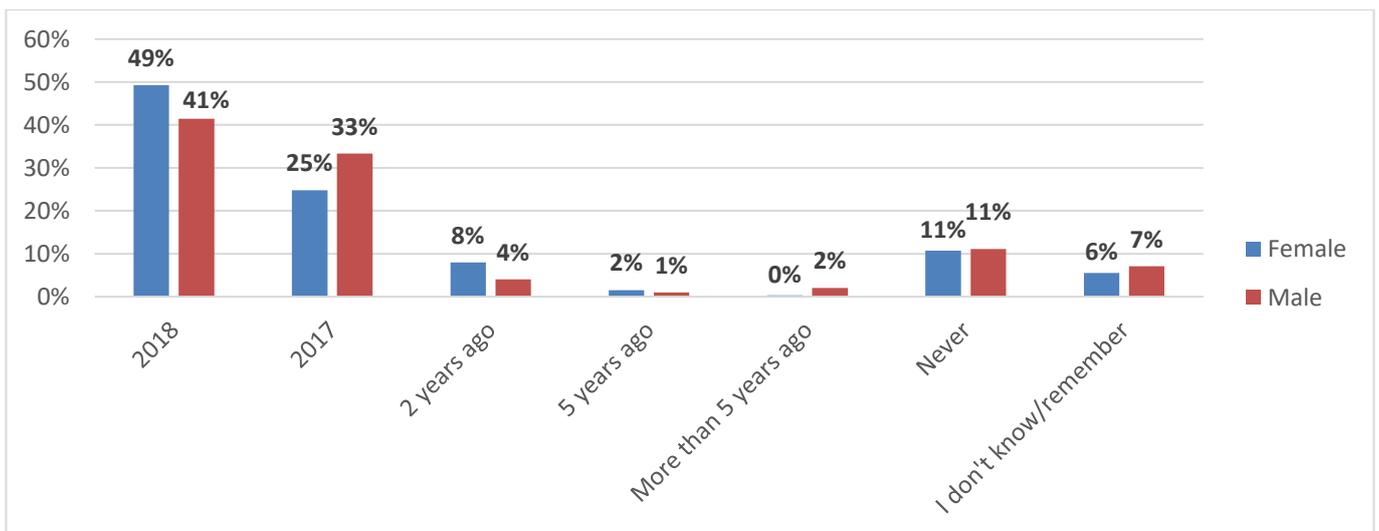


Figure 18: Distribution of respondents by last wage increase and gender

On the other hand, increases in salary are not always equalled by improvements in position. Promotions can

be based on seniority or on the quality of work and may be followed by the worker moving to another skill

category, which usually comes with an improvement in the pay grade. The wages of most of the female respondents originated from a low level and maintain a significant pay gap to their male co-workers, as laid out above. **Female respondents have been promoted comparatively more than male respondents over the last two years (41% vs. 29%), which does not tell anything about the quality of the work or the position**

**they have been promoted to** (see Figure 19). It is more likely the result of a rather high employee turnover. Skilled or ambitious workers with no promotion in sight are more inclined to leave the factory for better job opportunities or start their own business. Employers are also often adamant in granting training to workers as this may enable them to negotiate better payment or leave for competing factories.

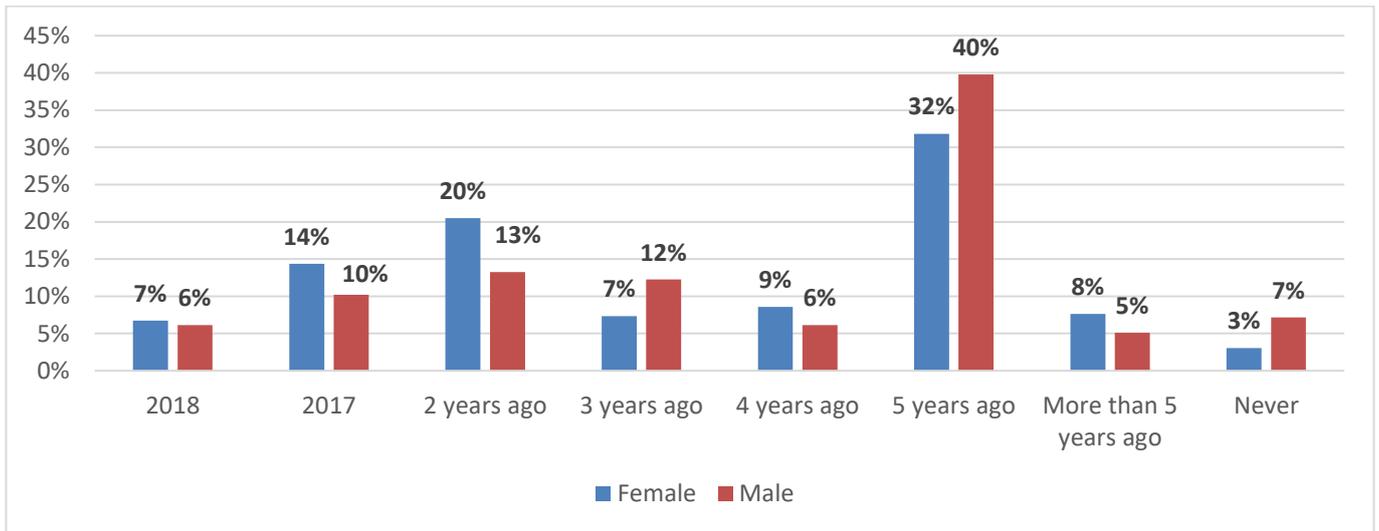


Figure 19: Distribution of respondents by last promotion and gender

Promotions as such are not sufficient to tell about gender-based discrimination. Employers have more subtle ways to discriminate their female workforce. However, looking at the positions female respondents have been promoted to, it is significant to realise that operator positions prevail among women (58%) as

opposed to only 38% of the male workers. **Far more male than female respondents have been promoted to higher valued positions that require better education and are better paid.** Figure 20 impressively demonstrates that male respondents were promoted to higher designations than females<sup>15</sup>.

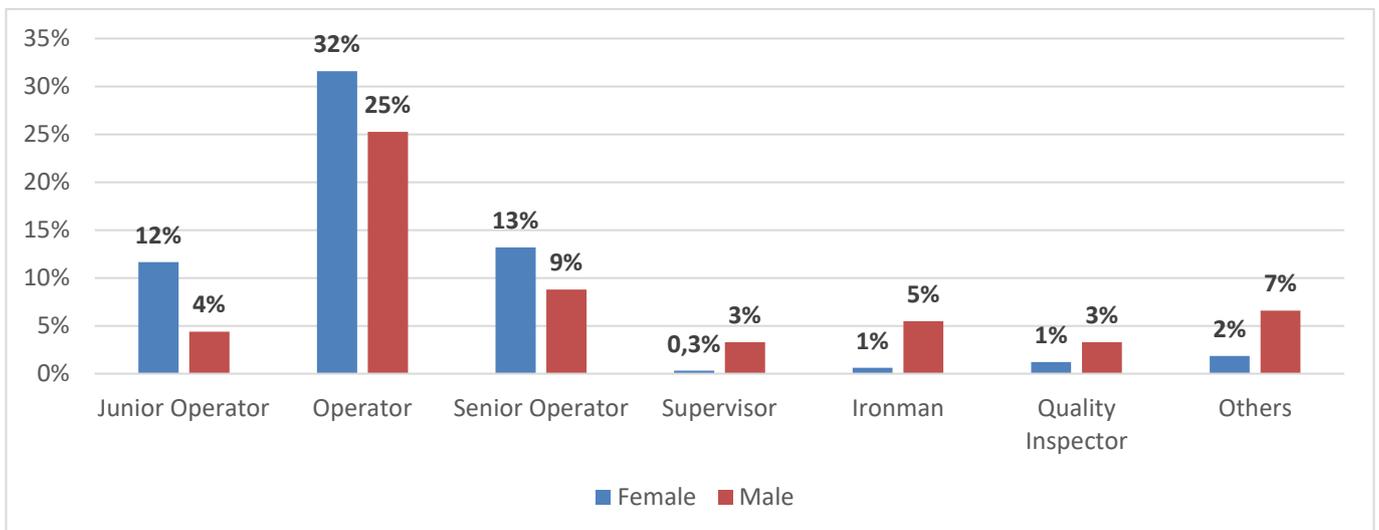


Figure 20: Distribution of respondents by position workers have been last promoted to and gender

<sup>15</sup> P-value: 0.00

Figure 20 is also useful to reassess the findings from Figure 18: women may well be promoted more often than men. However high their position, their

employment opportunities are far more limited than those of their male counterparts.

*Proposition IV: Due to a lower level of education, women are often stuck in low-skilled operations that tend to yield lower wages.*

Women who dropped out after primary education forego employment opportunities in more skilled positions or even middle management.

Women dominate lower levels of education. **62% of the female respondents compared to only 42% of their male counterparts dropped out of primary school** and often entered employment right away (see Figure 9). A primary level of education is mandatory in Bangladesh but often cannot be pursued for reasons such as transportation cost, the need to work and earn money, or to assume care tasks at home.



Image 5: Women in low-skilled operations

Secondary education prepares students for a career path, imparting detailed knowledge in sciences, maths and languages. It is usually followed by higher education, vocational education or employment.

*Proposition V: Education is instrumental in achieving better job positions, but does not guarantee higher wages*

**significant influence on wages**<sup>16</sup>. Higher income groups can be found among those who only completed primary and/or junior school; a Higher Secondary School Certificate (HSC) does not necessarily guarantee better wages. It can be stated though that primary school and junior school graduates have ended up in higher pay grades and earn between BDT 7,000 and BDT 9,000.

Education is often brought forward as key to female empowerment. Results presented in Figure 21, however, show that the **mean salary does not continuously increase with higher education, which is an indication that the years of schooling have no**

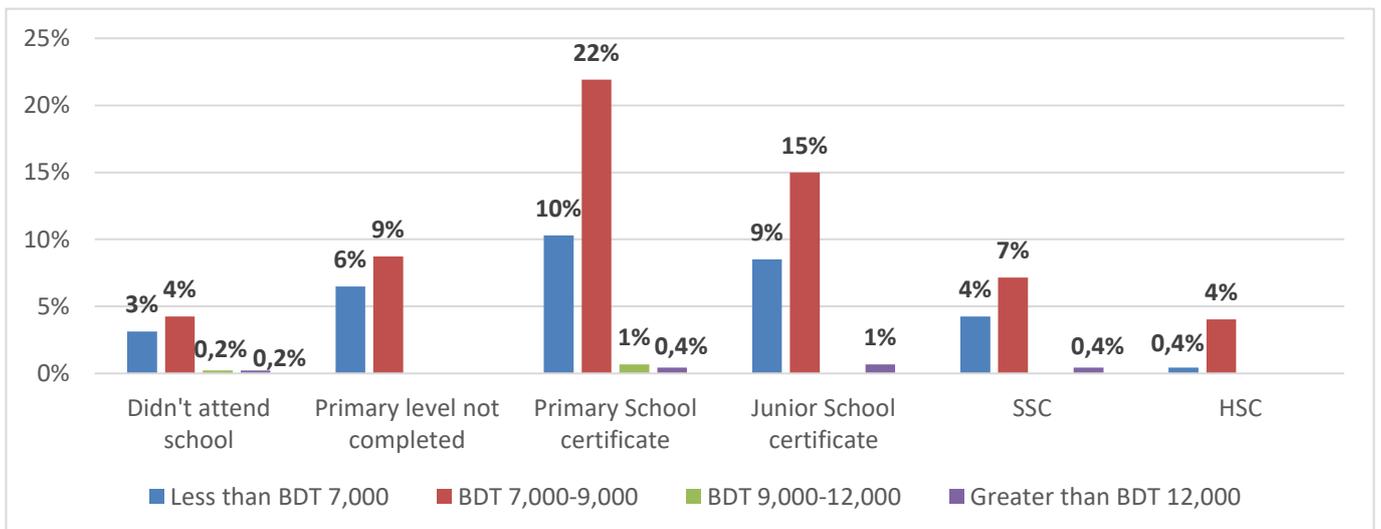


Figure 21: Distribution of respondents by level of education completed and monthly wage

<sup>16</sup> P-value: 0.945 (>0.05)

In the light of the results discussed above, the following can be concluded:

- The gender gap in the payment of garment workers is still noticeable.
- More than 40% of the workers are unaware of their pay grade.

- Men normally occupy more skilled positions.
- Men are promoted to higher designations than women.
- Higher education does not guarantee a better salary.

### 3.2.3 Household income

Low minimum wages are often insufficient to explain poverty or income inequality. The earnings of all household members can give a better idea of the risk of poverty minimum wage workers are exposed to. Minimum wage earners often live in low-income households. Most of the workers interviewed for this study live with their spouse or family, i.e. parents, siblings, and/or children (83%); only few reside alone (9%) or share a place with co-workers (6%). Many of the respondents have (economically not active)

children or parents to provide for. Figure 22 implies that the minimum wage is often not sufficient to increase the overall household income and help all members to get by. **Approximately 22% of the respondents are single earners, most of them sustaining families of three and four people** with an income as low as between BDT 6,001 and BDT 12,000. 40% of the respondents live in households (of mostly four and five people) with an income between BDT 18,001 and BDT 25,000, of which 32% are sustained by two earners.

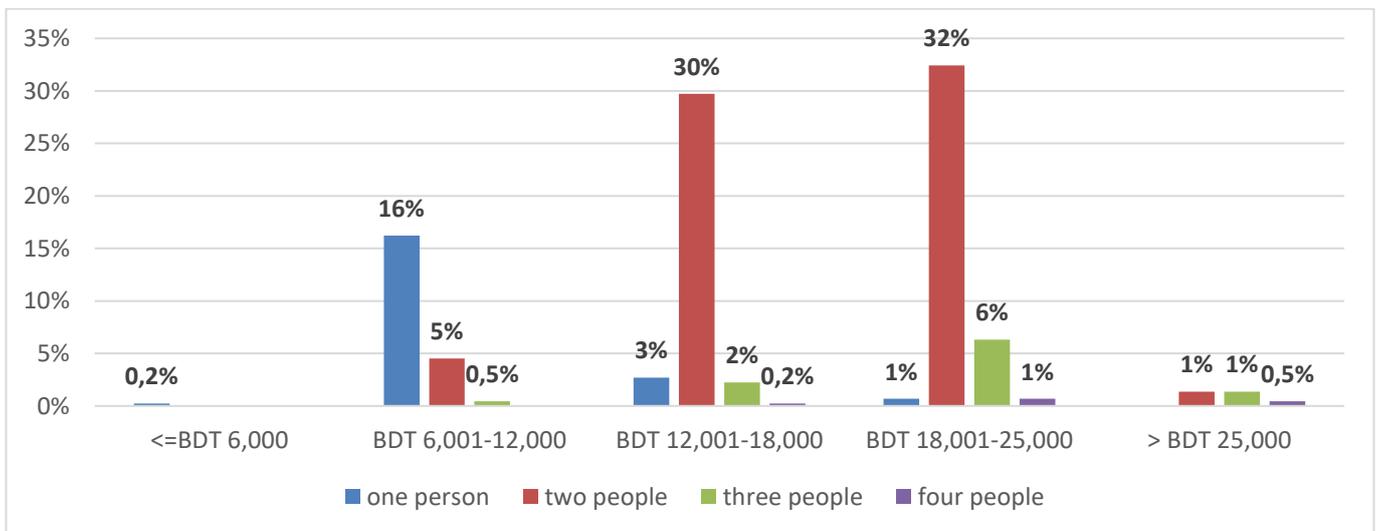


Figure 22: Distribution of respondents by household income and members contributing

Breaking down the household income to the disposable income per person reveals the extent that **minimum wage earners are exposed to poverty**. As the questionnaire provided the workers with the option to tick income categories if they do not want to disclose the exact amount, Figure 23 can indicate only average income categories. The result is striking nonetheless: 85% of all respondents have an average income per capita below 6,000 BDT. **More than half of the workers (52%) live in households with less than 4,000 BDT per person**. Almost one fourth of the

respondents (24%) have less than 3,000 BDT per person at their disposal. The disposable income per capita for 5% of the workers interviewed is even less than 2,000 BDT, which shows that the plight of these workers is dramatic. It is noteworthy that **women apparently live in households with higher income per capita available than men**. This may be explained by the fact that the male respondents more often are single earners (see also Figure 24), while working women tend to live in double-earning households where they get support from husbands or brothers and fathers.

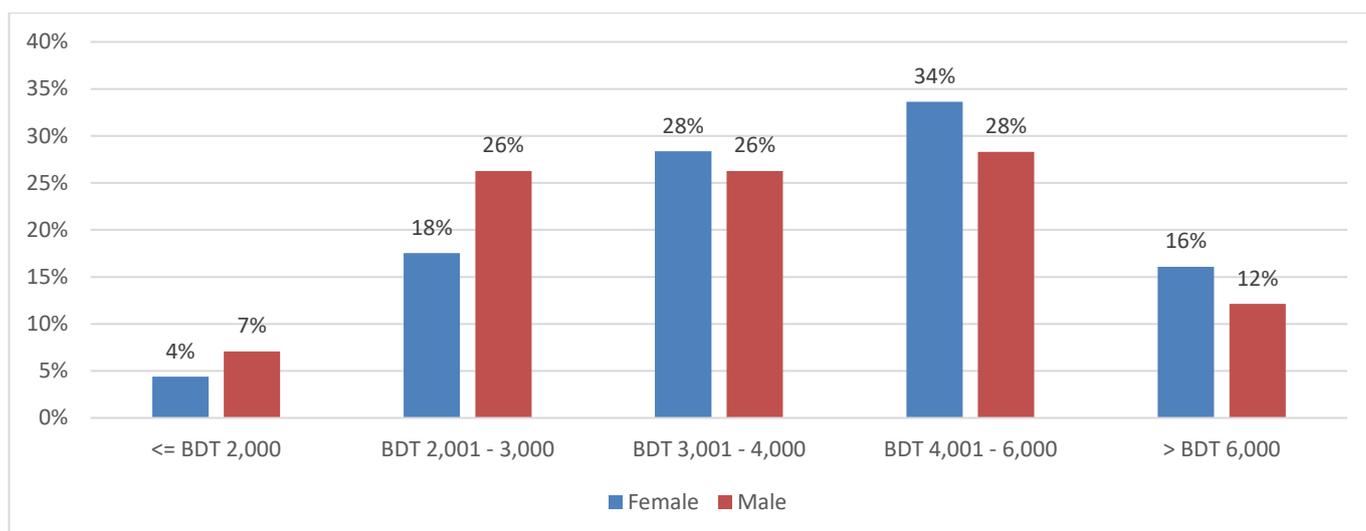


Figure 23: Distribution of respondents by average household income per capita and gender

These numbers demonstrate that the minimum wage is not enough to cover the basic needs of a family. The adjustment in December 2018 was overdue but falls short of providing living wages that help workers and their families lift out of poverty.

According to the ILO, minimum wages have to be designed to cover the needs of the workers and their families. In countries of the global south, like Bangladesh, where population density and housing expenditures are high, regular wage adjustments are important to ensure a decent living standard of working-class families. As the social security system fails to adequately provide for aged people and children, the working age population has no choice but to engage in low-paid employment. **Most of the respondents live in households with two earners (69%), still one-in-five are sole earners** (see Figure 24).

Multi-person households of four and more persons are particularly dependent on wages that are able to sustain the basic living costs. **The more family/household members are economically inactive, the greater the risk to fall below the poverty line.** Families with only one person at work are extremely vulnerable to poverty as their income per capita is the lowest.

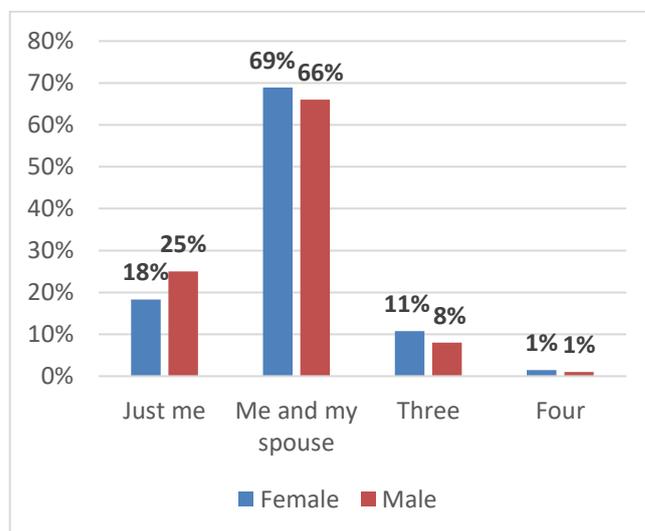


Figure 24: Distribution of respondents by contributors to household income and gender

Most of the respondents live in multi-person households. Assuming that the income is pooled, 75% of the respondents add their salary to households of four or more members. 29% of the workers contribute to the household income of families of five.

**The household income not just increases with the number of contributing members, but also with the number of people living on it<sup>17</sup>** (see Figure 25). Multi-person households tend to be found in higher income categories.

<sup>17</sup> P-value: 0.000

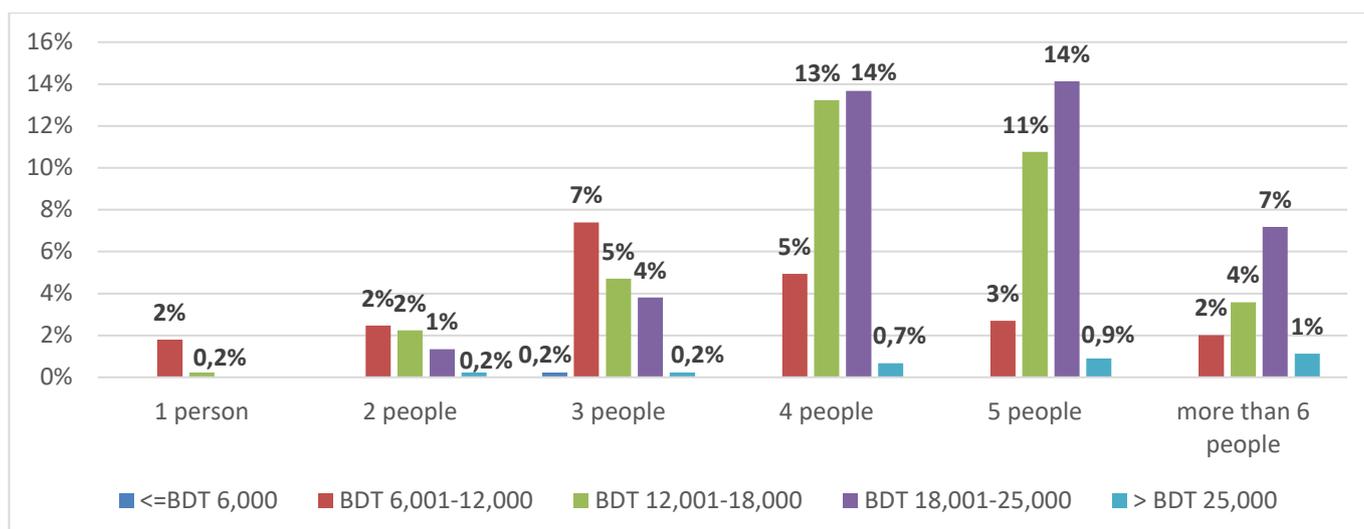


Figure 25: Distribution of respondents by household income and people living on it

The results presented confirm the poverty level garment workers are exposed to. The household income per capita is dramatically low. With most of the respondents living in multi-person households (i.e. families), it is quite understandable that the minimum

wage was considered as not sufficient to cover the basic living costs (see Figure 15). However, respondents living in multi-person households with four and five people to sustain are less prone to poverty than other household sizes.

### 3.3 Working conditions

Minimum wages are widely regarded as insufficient to cover the basic needs of the workers. Even the rise to BDT 8,000 for pay grade 7 in December 2018 was broadly criticised as inadequate for a decent living standard. Although the workers are entitled to “just and favourable remuneration” as claimed by various ILO conventions<sup>18</sup>, employers often justify low wage policies with tight margins and strong competition.

This report holds that low wages create a vicious circle of health problems, absenteeism and a high employee turnover, among other negative effects. Many employers have not understood yet that poor working conditions often result in poor business performance.

#### 3.3.1 Fluctuation

High employee turnover has detrimental effects for both workers and businesses. While factories suffer productivity losses, workers need to start over from

the bottom of internal hierarchies, and often learn new operations and procedures. **Nearly half of the workers interviewed have not worked for more than two years in their current factory.** 19% of the participants of this study joined their current factory less than one year ago; 29% within the last two years. The reasons for such high fluctuation mainly boil down to payment as presented in Figure 26.

It adds to the evidence on gender-specific differences in treating Bangladesh’s RMG workforce that **male respondents are comparatively less willing to accept inadequate pay or a lack of promotion opportunities. Women face more harassment at the workplace than men**, which will be elaborated on in more detail in section 3.3.2; male respondents complain more about unfounded dismissals. The lack of childcare at the factory was only an issue for a few female workers (2%). Most of the workers organize their childcare from within the family, instead of referring to private-sector funded structures.

<sup>18</sup> ILO conventions No. 95, No. 131, No. 173, and No. 180.

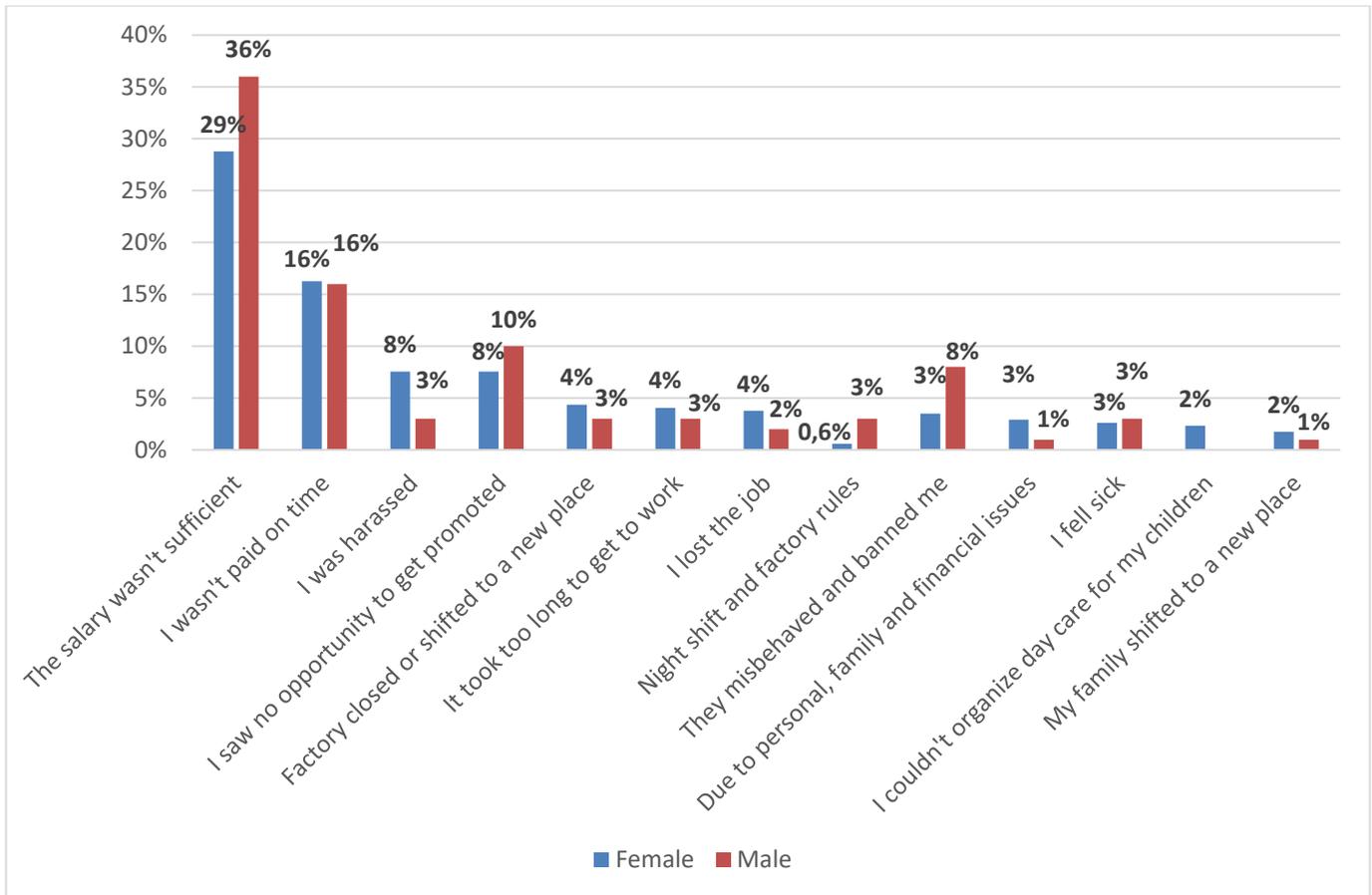


Figure 26: Distribution of respondents by reasons for leaving previous factory and gender

These reasons for leaving the job bring both workers and employers in awkward positions. Workers lack wages that are sufficient to cover their basic needs, which is why they move to another factory where they may well start out on better terms but still have to work their way up internal hierarchies. Often new jobs do not turn out to be better employment opportunities, which is why new entrants tend to leave the factory after a short period of time. Workers with more than five year of tenure usually have been promoted and reached a position that reduces their willingness to leave. Employers fall prey to losing skilled personnel to competing factories and need to

recruit suitable replacements, which is time consuming and has an impact on production, even though workforce abounds.

There may be also organizational factors that drive employee turnover. How is production planned, how does the work environment look like, how is the communication between management and workforce? As workers may not be aware of shortcomings in these areas or are not used to talk about it, it is worth having a closer look at the reasons that are not related to pay, such as harassment and bad behaviour.

### 3.3.2 Discrimination in the workplace

Workers in garment factories often endure low pay, harassment, and unethical behaviour. The Constitution of Bangladesh prohibits any discrimination whatsoever in employment:

*No citizen shall, on grounds only of religion, race, caste, sex or place of birth, be ineligible for, or discriminated against, in respect of any employment or office in service of the Republic. (COB: 29-2)*

ILO convention No. 111 on Discrimination with respect to employment and occupation has been ratified by Bangladesh and is in force<sup>19</sup>. Despite legal provisions, discrimination at work is an unfortunate reality for many of the workers interviewed for this study.

**41% of all workers interviewed complain about discrimination or unfair treatment at the workplace.** The expectation that there would be significant gender difference was not met (see Figure 27). Several studies suggest that unfair treatment often results in maladaptive behaviours (e.g. self-harm, substance misuse, disordered eating, avoidance coping, depression) in order to manage and cope with stress. Despite constitutional rights, legal provisions and adverse financial effects on their business, employers rarely take these allegations seriously. A grievance committee that is constituted by members of the management and the workers could be a suitable mechanism for workers to see their allegations dealt with.

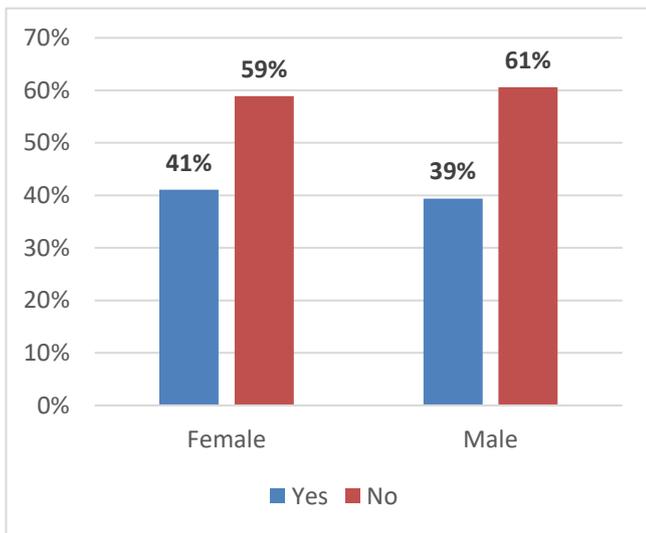


Figure 27: Distribution of respondents by being treated unfairly and gender

While the feeling of unfair treatment is equally distributed among male and female workers, results from this study suggest **differences in the areas men and women face discrimination.**

Figure 28 implies that **male respondents feel more often unfairly treated by their ethnicity or origin.** 14% of all male workers experience at least once a month unfair treatment, which means they are treated differently because of the place they were born in or the culture they were brought up in. As 100% of the respondents indicated to be Bengali, there are no grounds for ethnic discrimination. Discrimination

against rural-to-urban migrants seems to be a more likely reason given that Bangladesh's garment factories are strongly concentrated in and around Dhaka, a city which has grown massively through migration. As a rapidly expanding megacity, the capital of Bangladesh is known for spaces dominated by social inequality, exclusion and stigmatization.

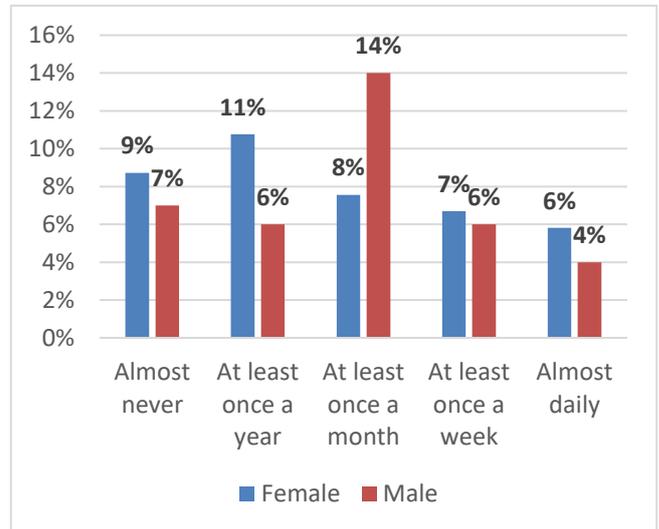


Figure 28: Distribution of respondents by discrimination because of origin and gender

Moreover, the Constitution of Bangladesh sees ethnicity and the freedom of practicing one's religion closely related. Religions other than Muslim be practiced in peace and harmony as it is believed to have positive implications for ethnic relations among the population. With Islam as the state religion, approximately 90% of Bangladesh's population are Muslim. More than 8% of the population are Hindu, forming the biggest minority in Bangladesh. Other religions, like Buddhist or Christian, constitute less than 1%. **The male workers interviewed feel more inequity in following their religious beliefs and practices than female respondents.** Only on a daily level, women seem to be more affected by discriminating remarks and behaviour regarding their religion than men (see Figure 29).

<sup>19</sup> Convention No. 100 on Equal Remuneration has already been addressed in section 3.2.2.

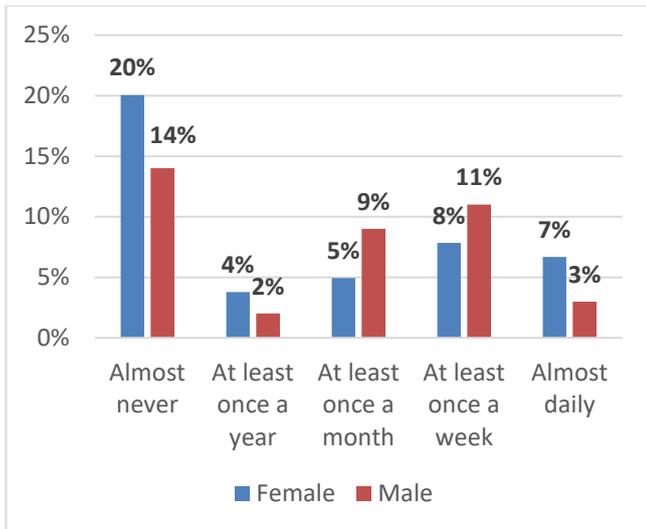


Figure 29: Distribution of respondents by discrimination because of religion and gender

It is important that workplace and recruitment policies do not interfere with religious practices. Workers are entitled to express their beliefs and observe religious practices as long as these do not interfere with their work.

**Discrimination on the grounds of gender can take many forms in a patriarchal society** like Bangladesh, where women in many areas still are disadvantaged:

- Female workers may be hired for certain, financially less lucrative positions only.
- Female workers may be fired more easily than men.
- Female workers may be put to occupations that are less prestigious.
- Female and male workers perform work of similar skills and responsibility, which does not justify pay differences as presented in Section 3.2.2. Results from the workers participating in this study suggest that women are treated less favourably than men just because of being women (see Figure 30). Female workers are almost twice as likely to say they have been treated as if they were not competent because of their gender at least once a week (13% vs. 7%).

It is noteworthy that also male workers feel they are discriminated at their workplace on the grounds of gender. One-in-ten male workers experience gender-based discrimination almost daily, which is not unheard of in a work environment where women account for more than 75% of the workforce. Further research is necessary to determine on what grounds male workers have been granted less rights or have been denied rights compared to women.

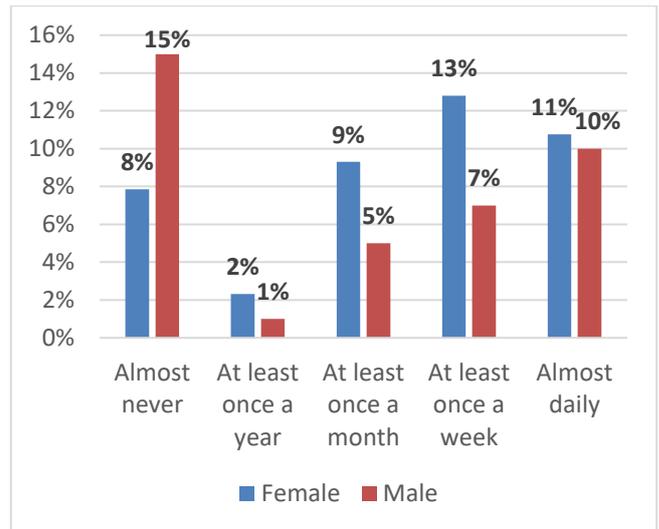


Figure 30: Distribution of respondents by discrimination because of gender and gender

Another form of discrimination can be the use of rude comments about women, which is often meant to humiliate them. Figure 31 shows that female and male respondents hear such remarks nearly to the same extent. **One third of all workers interviewed can testify to insulting remarks about women and female workers more often than once week.** 22% of the respondents even witness such remarks daily. These results indicate that the female workers interviewed are facing a misogynist workplace culture, where they are constantly exposed to patronizing or sexist remarks.

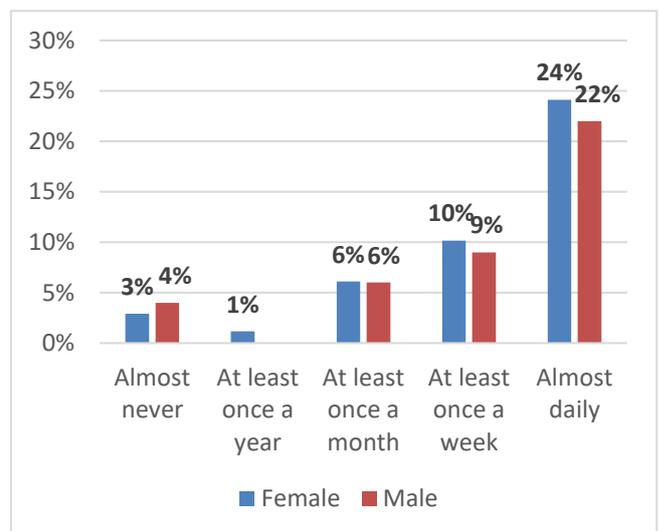


Figure 31: Distribution of respondents by hearing rude remarks about women and gender

It is assumed that mostly superiors and, in some cases, male co-workers target women with disrespectful remarks. Women hardly rise in position and cannot use seniority or power to degrade and humiliate other (female) workers. More research is necessary to

understand in which situations and by whom such remarks have been made and whether power has been misused.

In the context of this study, bad behaviour is understood as verbal abuse, unwanted sexual attention, threats or humiliating behaviours. Even being in its essence a verbal aggression, it can be damaging to the workplace environment. It may exert an adverse impact on

- the team's ability to deliver the final product, i.e. the productivity;
- the cohesion of the team;
- the well-being of individual workers.

Figure 32 highlights that 40% of the workers interviewed were exposed to bad behaviour. Women were slightly more affected than men (42% vs. 36%), which corroborates their vulnerability. **A culture of bad behaviour and abuse of power seems to affect all workers, regardless of their gender.**

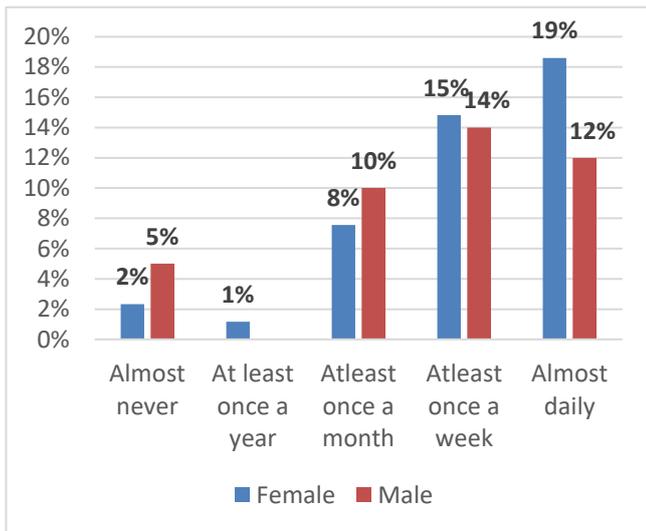


Figure 32: Distribution of respondents by exposure to bad behaviour and gender

Verbal abuse and physical violence at work are often inextricably linked. **Physical violence, bullying and sexual harassment** induce fear, undermine work morale and negatively impact on productivity. Figure 33 demonstrates that **female and male workers are almost equally affected**. Only in less frequent intervals,

such as at least once a month (10% vs. 4%) or once a year (6% vs. 2%), female respondents are more than twice as often concerned as male respondents.

**Uneven power relations between management and workers are assumed to be the key reason for violence against workers.** Further research is necessary to understand which form of violence is gender-specific.

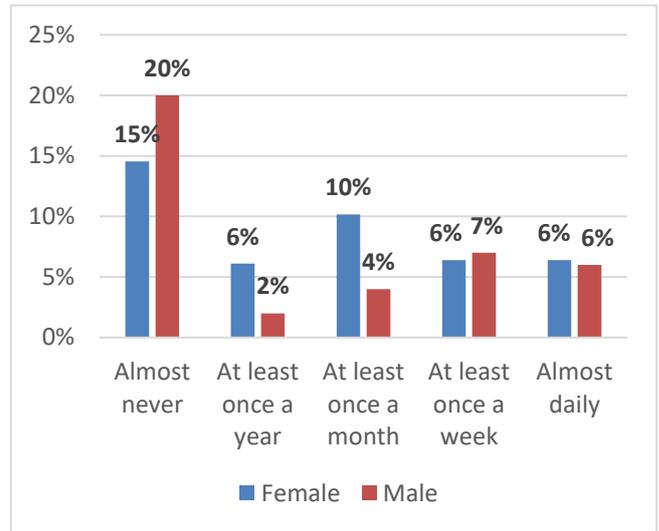


Figure 33: Distribution of respondents by exposure to physical violence, bullying and sexual harassment and gender

Dealing with discrimination is stressful and often embarrassing for the workers. To induce change, workers have to do their part to improve the situation, but often are not encouraged by their employers to do so.

Many factories have grievance mechanisms in place that can be used to file complaints. Unfortunately, **more than two thirds of the workers remain passive against discrimination** (see Figure 34). Out of those who were treated unfairly, 38% mentioned to have reported to the management, very few (3%) had engaged the participation committee.

It is interesting that female respondents are more inclined to confront others with the discriminatory behaviour suffered. They are more willing to notify the management of the discrimination and even seek help from co-workers, something which male respondents never did. Derived from the data, it is fair to say that passivity prevails among male workers.

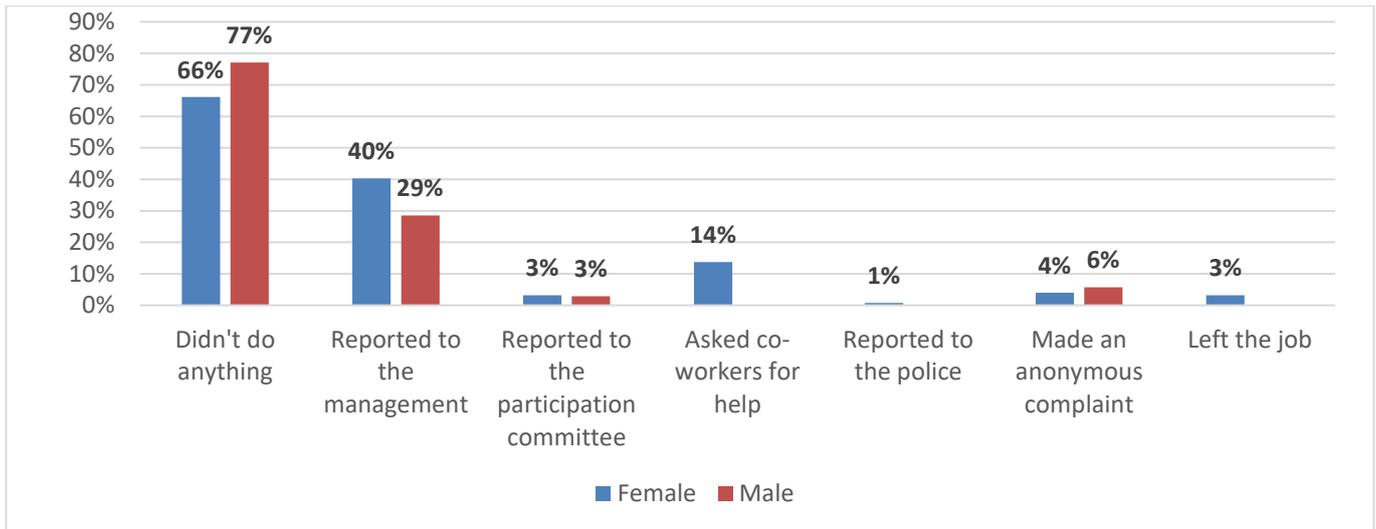


Figure 34: Distribution of respondents by reaction after experiencing unfair treatment and gender

When it comes to bad behaviour, workers again seem to be reluctant to involve others and report what happened. Offenders usually are in a position of power and know how to impart feelings of guilt and shame to their victims. A factory work environment may create social control or be remiss about denouncing misbehaviour. **Nearly half of the respondents (46%) avoided acting on the unethical behaviour suffered**

(see Figure 35). About 23% already reported incidents to the management, men even slightly more than women. Women are roughly three times as likely as men to ask other workers for help (10% vs. 3%). Anonymous complaints and participation committees are rarely considered as helpful conflict resolution mechanisms, which is something that calls attention.

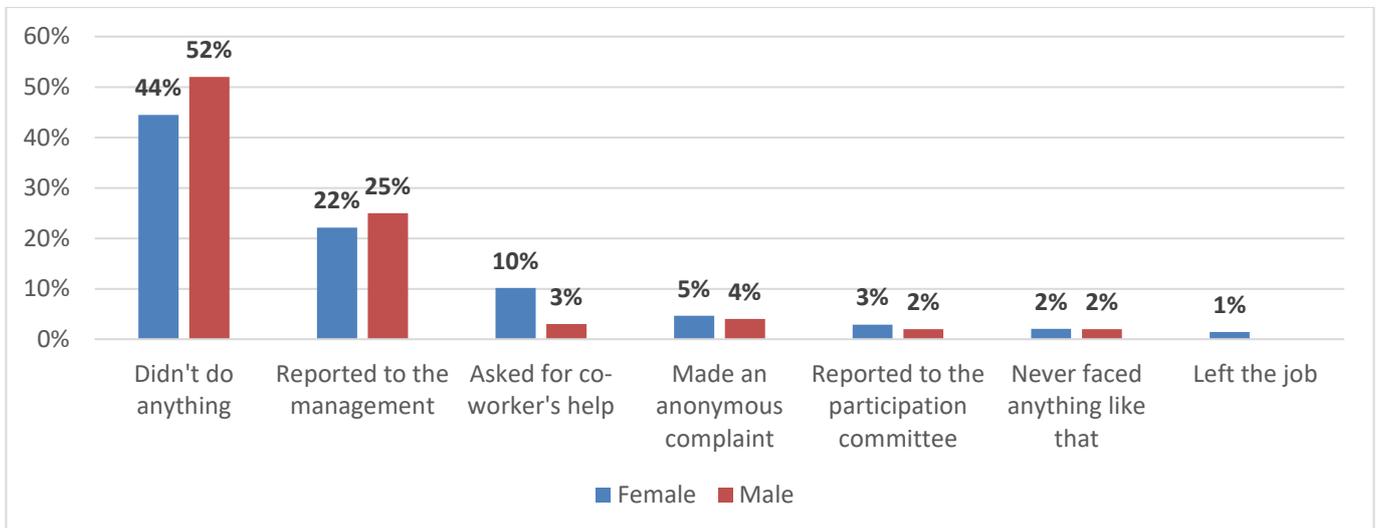


Figure 35: Distribution of respondents by reaction after experiencing bad behaviour and gender

The vast majority of those **workers who did not report such behaviour to their superiors were afraid of losing their employment**, female respondents even to a greater extent than male respondents (see Figure 36). This reflects the power asymmetry between management and workers. Labour rights organizations always encourage workers to make their employers aware of any form of discriminatory or unethical practice, so

change is initiated. 13% of the respondents, however, acknowledge that their superiors usually do not care about such things. Male workers (17%) even seem to be more frustrated than female workers (12%). 10% of the women interviewed refrained from filing a complaint with their superiors as it was someone of the management who harassed them. They did not expect a fair hearing and appropriate sanctions. This calls for

setting up a **grievance committee** that is equally composed by members of the management and the workers. If grievances can be filed with an impartial

committee following a predefined procedure, workers are encouraged to be more forthcoming in denouncing violations of labour rights.

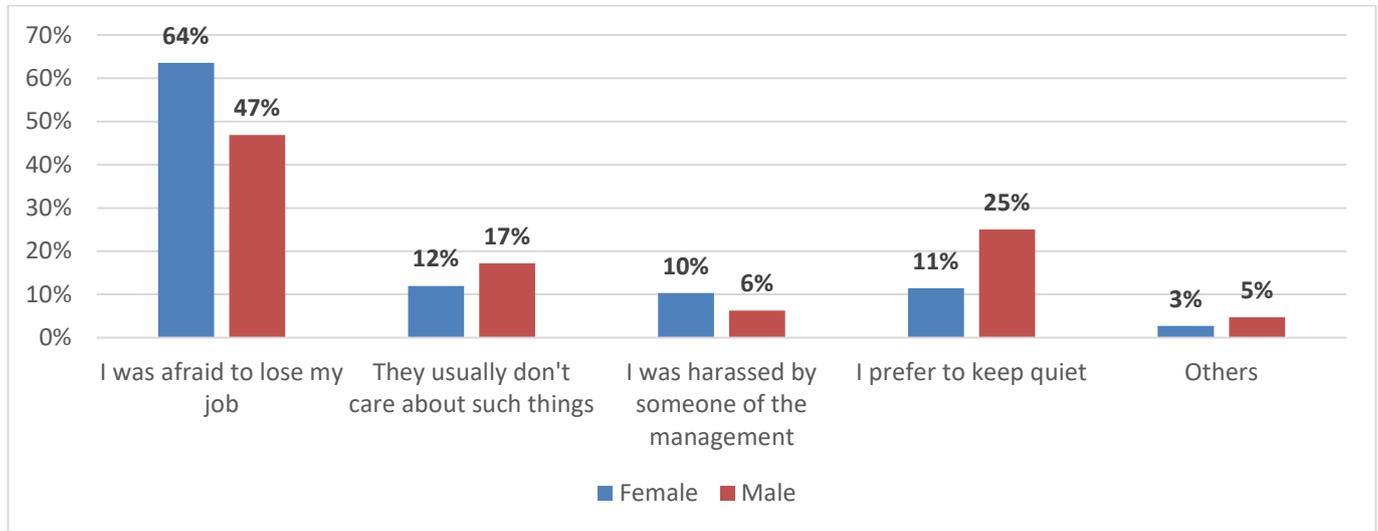


Figure 36: Distribution of respondents by reasons for not reporting bad behaviour to superiors and gender

These results undoubtedly point to a **work environment that is insecure for both men and women, although misogynist practices prevail**. Employment is often used by the factory management to force workers into accepting abusive conditions. The imbalance in power between men and women, between management and workers, puts workers in a defensive position and in enduring a discriminatory work environment. Vague objections rarely put off offenders nor induce change.

The structural and gender-specific imbalances between management and workers are alarming in the sense that the **management ignores the needs of their workforce**.

Requests for help are not adequately reciprocated. Figure 37 shows that the management responds to complaints about discriminatory and unethical behaviour through inaction in the form of disbelief or stalling. 43% of the male respondents and 36% of the female workers were told that it would be acted upon their complaint, which was then never addressed. Only 15% of those workers who experienced bad behaviour (18% female vs. 7% male) had the feeling that their issues were properly addressed and solved by the management, followed by appropriate sanctions for the perpetrator. It is deeply unsettling that 18% of the workers (17% vs. 22%) were not even believed by their superiors.

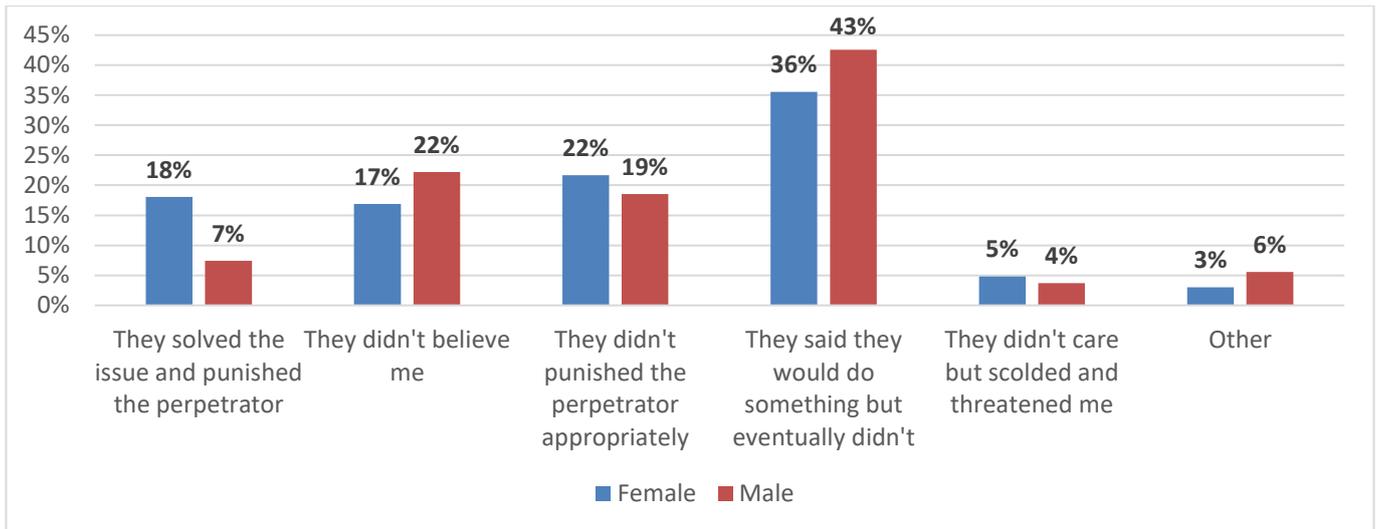


Figure 37: Distribution of respondents by reaction of superiors in response to complaint about bad behaviour/harassment

These results paint a **bleak picture of how workers are treated by their superiors**. It is therefore necessary to point to grievance mechanisms, communication

channels and workers' representations to understand why discrimination and unethical behaviour often remain unopposed.

### 3.3.3 Access to remedy

The UN Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights as well as international labour standards urge businesses to provide access to effective remedy to those whose human rights have been violated. Grievance mechanisms, such as complaint boxes or participation committees, are processes that enable workers to seek remedy for human rights abuses suffered in the workplace.

85% of all workers interviewed can count on at least one process or mechanism where they can seek help. **In most of the factories, complaint boxes are available.** It is astonishing that only 1% of the respondents lean on participation committees, even less on trade unions. **Despite the large availability of at least one grievance mechanism, it is uncommon for workers to use it.** Only 16% of the workers interviewed have filed an anonymous complaint, men slightly more than women (see Figure 38).

The low use of this grievance mechanism seems to testify to a work environment that does not encourage criticism. It is even more troublesome if the workers feel unheard or unwelcome to point to undesirable developments in the workplace.

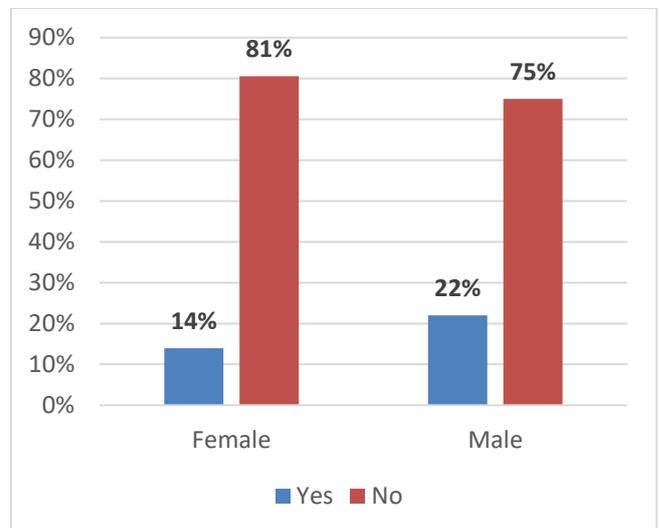


Figure 38: Distribution of respondents by using complaint box and gender

Figure 39 provides an informative picture of the way the factory managements deals with complaints. One-in-three respondents found their problem solved, which in turn means the **grievances of two third of the workers were left unattended**, leaving them with a feeling of absolute indifference about their concerns. Male respondents felt even more discomfort than females with the way the management handled their grievance (35% female; 27% male). As useful as

**anonymous complaints** may be for workers who are afraid to point out concerns and objections to superiors, the **mechanism itself is not accepted** but merely a blunt sword. While the workers may not be used to decry grievances and abuses, pointing to superiors, it could be helpful for the management to enable an environment of trust and understanding that fosters cooperation between the management and the workers.

The **Dialogue for Compliance** has proved effective in remediating non-compliant labour conditions through a participatory approach, in which management and workers own the problem and jointly look for sustainable solutions.

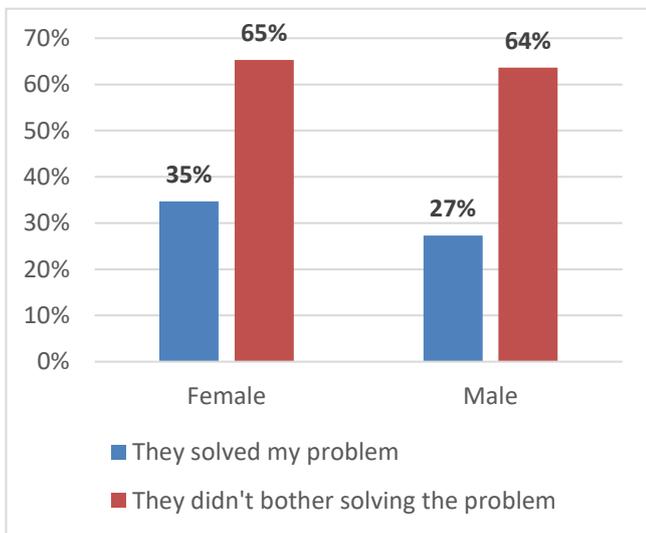


Figure 39: Distribution of respondents by response on the grievance and gender

In sum: grievance mechanisms are widely available, but not accepted by the respondents as effective means to resolve workplace issues.



Image 6: Dialogue for compliance workshop in Dhaka, 2018

### 3.3.4 Freedom of association

Despite Bangladesh having ratified the international conventions on the right to organize and freedom of association (No 87, No 98), garment workers face enormous challenges to unionization. For a trade union to be registered, the Bangladesh Labour (Amendment) Act, 2018 requires a minimum membership of 20% of the workforce (30% until November 2018). The Government has the power to deny such request on grounds that are not very transparent.

According to Human Rights Watch (2016), only 10% of Bangladesh's garment factories have registered trade unions. **Only 8% of the workers interviewed for the Workers' Voice Report 2019 are members of a trade union.** The degree of unionization, however, is critical for a responsible workforce that questions decisions with non-compliant bearings or criticizes discriminatory practices.

Figure 40 portrays that more than half of those workers who did not join a trade union registered with their factory seem not to know why they should have in the first place (55%). The **benefit of unionization**, the fact that someone is representing their interests to their employer is **not clear to them**. The Government's ties to businesspeople are well known and often perceived as an impenetrable amalgamation of mutual interests that conflict with the needs of the working class. **For 20% of the workers, the hostile environment created by their employers prevented them from joining unions.** The low effectiveness of unions to their cause was a minor issue for few female respondents (4%). The expectation that there would be marked gender differences was not met.

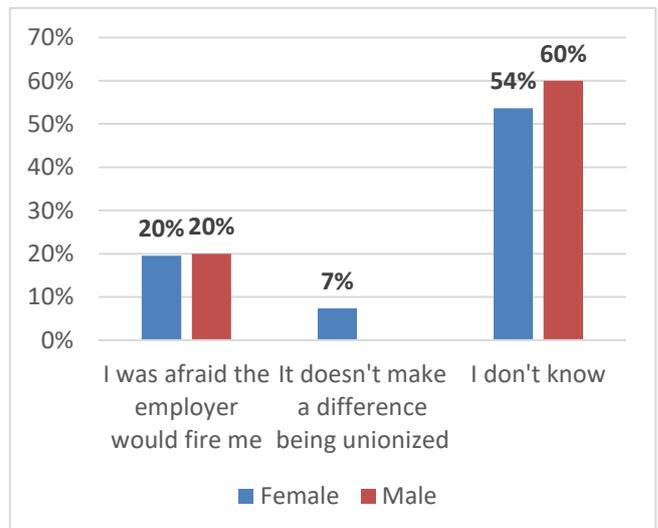


Figure 40: Distribution of respondents by reasons for not being unionized and gender

Participation committees are another mechanism to raise problems and deal with employee concerns. Constituted by representatives of employers and employees, participation committees work to establish trust, understanding and cooperation between executives and workers. They provide representation for employees at the workplace and support workers on resolving work-related issues. Factories with more than 50 workers are legally obligated to set up a participation committee. And yet full coverage is widely missed; **only two-in-three respondents (67%) work in factories where participation committees are available.** Only 27% of the workers interviewed see their

interests adequately represented, while 47% disagree mostly because they take the committee for corrupt, are negative about the support they give or simply are not convinced that they can help, as presented in Figure 41. These figures reveal the **extent of ignorance and discomfort with unions and participation committees.** 39% of those interviewed do not even know what support participation committees and unions provide. 21% of all respondents criticize their corruption and inactivity and the inadequate support they provide. Contrary to expectations, the gender of the interviewees did not make any significant difference.

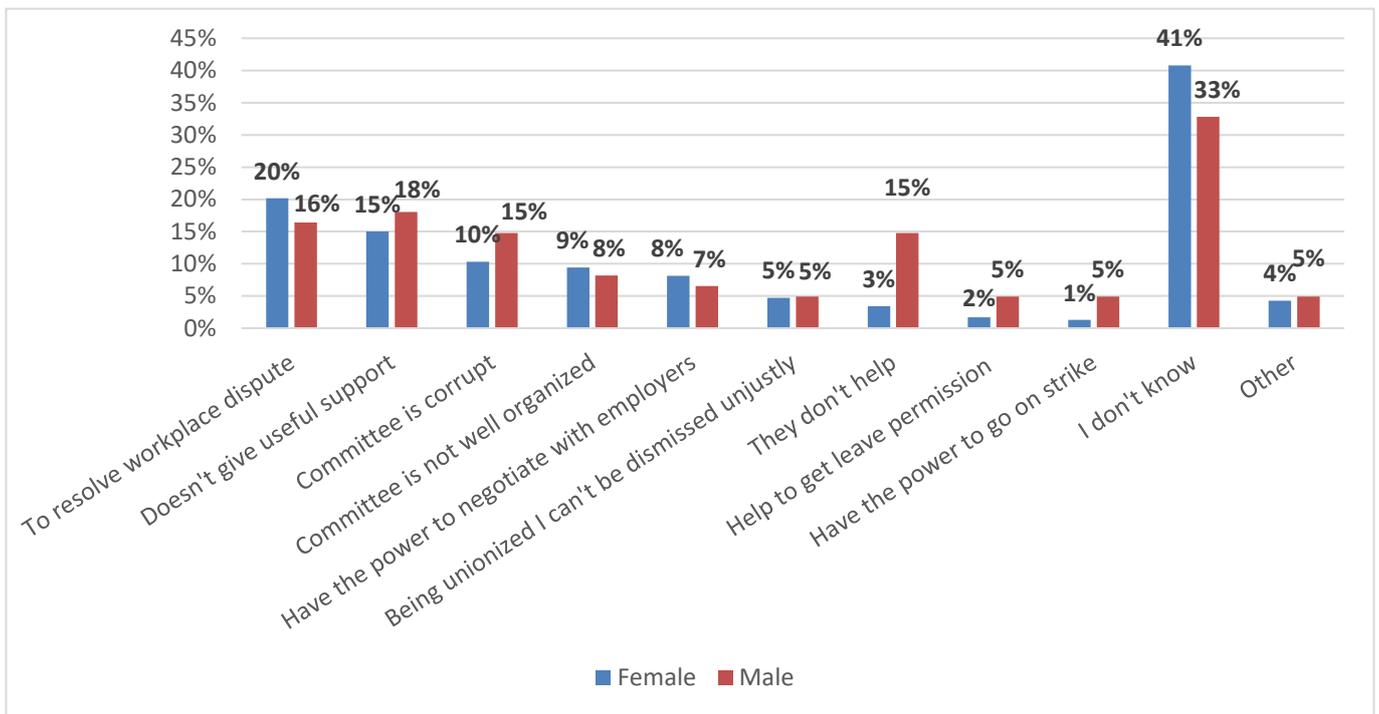


Figure 41: Distribution of respondents by support of union and participation committee and gender

As a result of the low degree of unionization in Bangladesh, only few workers (7%) turn to unions for guidance in achieving better working conditions. It is **more common for workers to seek the support of participation committees (18%).** They ask for advice on how to apply for leave or complain about harassment, long working hours and lacking work safety.

Other than unions, participation committees are not independent with respect to the employers, which seems to be flawing their effectiveness (Figure 41). Regardless of how workers are represented before their employers, a striking **74% of the workers have not turned to either union or participation committee for advice, which reflects the lack of trust in these institutions** (Figure 42).

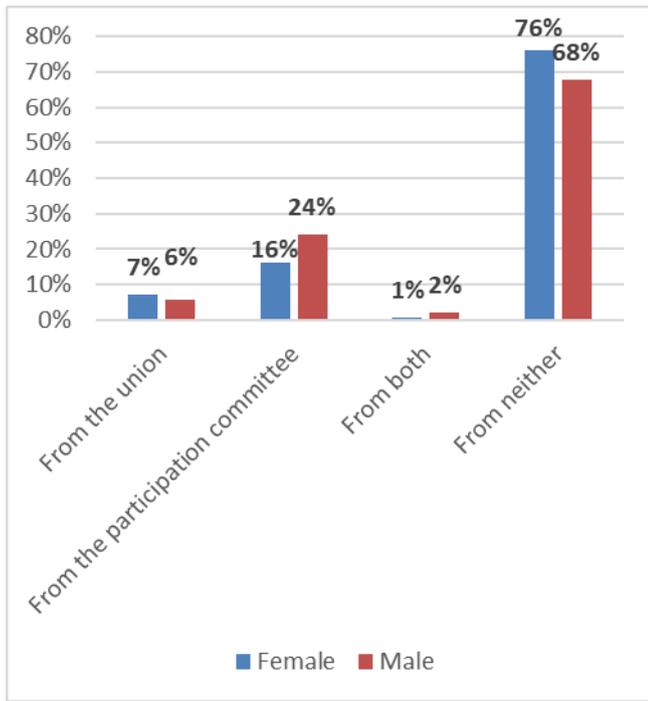


Figure 42: Distribution of respondents by request for support from union and/or participation committee and gender

To make sure the participation committee is effectively defending the interests of the workers, **members are expected to meet at least once in every two months**. For a safe and healthy work environment and a trusted relationship between management and workers, it is **essential to properly document the issues and outcomes** discussed.

The low degree of unionization is mostly owed to governmental pressure. It must be asked though why the workers distrust representation, which can be helpful to fulfil their goals. Most of the interviewees see their interests not adequately represented; they trust neither participation committees nor trade unions.

### 3.3.5 Working time

Depending on the collective agreement, working hours must not exceed 48 hours per seven-day period. During that period a worker is entitled to at least one day off from work. Overtime pay is due if the daily work exceeds eight hours. The daily maximum is two overtime hours.

94% of the respondents work six days a week, at least **6% work without rest** (see Figure 43). **89% of these blame the management for sacrificing their weekly day off**, although employers are mandated to ensure one day off per seven-day work period.

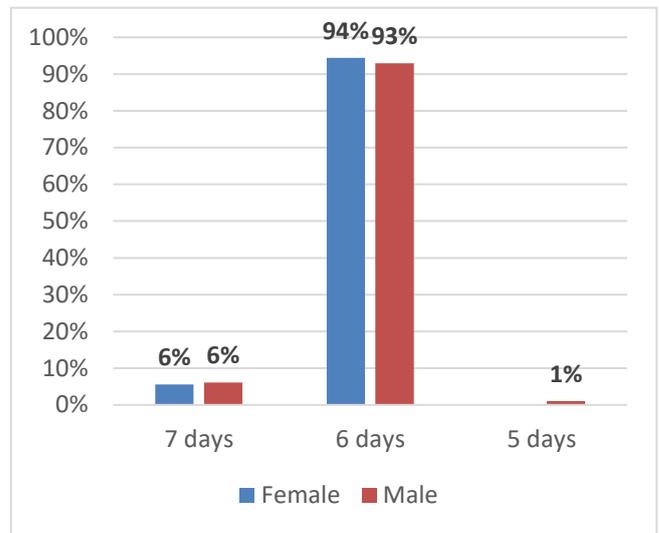


Figure 43: Distribution of respondents by workdays per week and gender

This picture does not change when analysing working hours. Although there is no statistical association between working hours and gender, it is informative that **slightly more female workers are represented in 8-10-hour work days, while male respondents dominate the categories of 11 hours and more** (see Figure 44).

It is assumed that women work comparatively 'less' than male workers as they are normally entrusted with care and domestic work. Night shifts may also be not appropriate for women if employers cannot ensure safety on their way home.

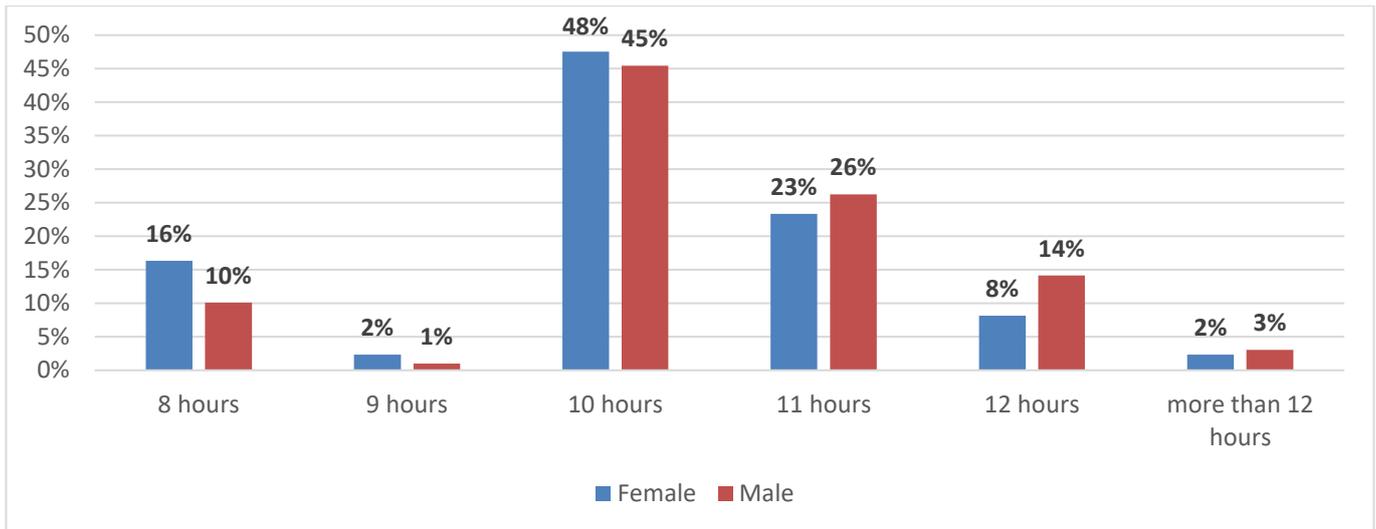


Figure 44: Distribution of respondents by working hours and gender

Many studies have found that as the number of hours worked increases, employees become less productive. Workers certainly may get better and more efficient at their task with more practice. As fatigue sets in with increasing working hours, the returns for businesses

and employees are decreasing. Workers see themselves often confronted with a **range of health issues, ascribing them to a growing workload and poor working condition.**

### 3.3.6 Health

Garment workers are increasingly affected by physical and mental health problems. The workers interviewed face health restrictions that are attributed to sub-standard working conditions as will be demonstrated below.

**43% of all workers did not have any reason to complain and rated their health good or very good** at the time of the interview (see Figure 45). 42% saw themselves in moderate health. **16% of all respondents considered their health as poor or very poor**, which means they were having difficulties to carry on with their daily lives. Other than expected, significant gender-specific differences were not identified.

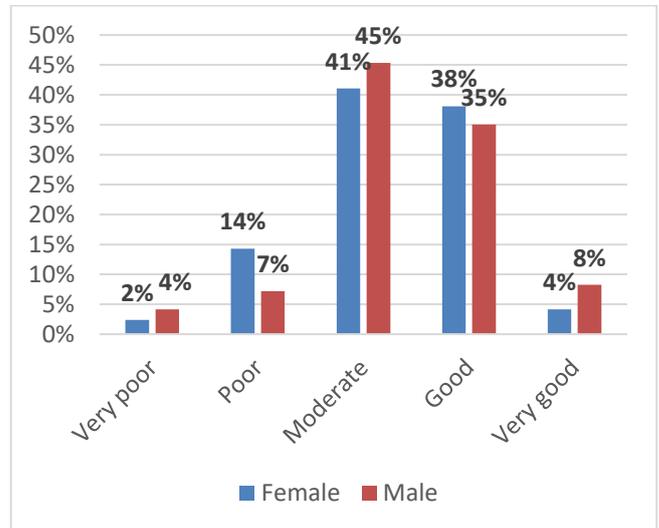


Figure 45: Distribution of respondents by health rating and gender

These difficulties are reflected in Figure 46. 67% of this study's respondents feel that their health conditions made it to a certain degree difficult for them to keep up at work or meet their obligations at home. 13% of the respondents were facing severe or extreme difficulties to meet their responsibilities at work or at home. Women feel more challenged than men.

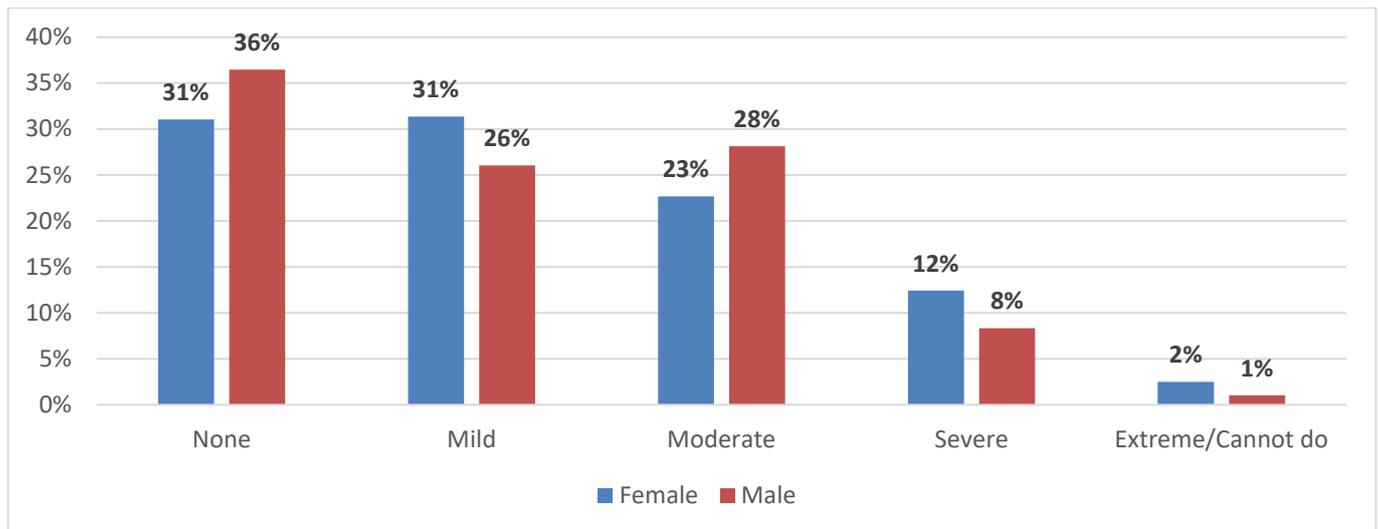


Figure 46: Distribution of respondents by health-related difficulties with work and/or household activities and gender

More than two-third of the respondents (69%) blamed the huge workload for their health condition, followed by family problems (21%), financial issues (15%) and physical sickness (10%). This means that the work conditions are associated with health problems that weigh on the workers.

14% of the respondents were severely suffering from bodily aches and pain in the last 30 days before the interview; 2% were extremely distressed (see Figure 47).

Only 29% of all workers, i.e. less than one-third, did not face any physical health problems, 23% were suffering from mild symptoms. Body aches and the symptoms that come with it can vary in intensity and are mostly a result of working persistently in malposition. Pain, weakness or fatigue require treatment. It seems necessary though, to understand the cause for this medical condition to restrain adverse impacts on the worker's health and the factory's performance (e.g. absenteeism, productivity).

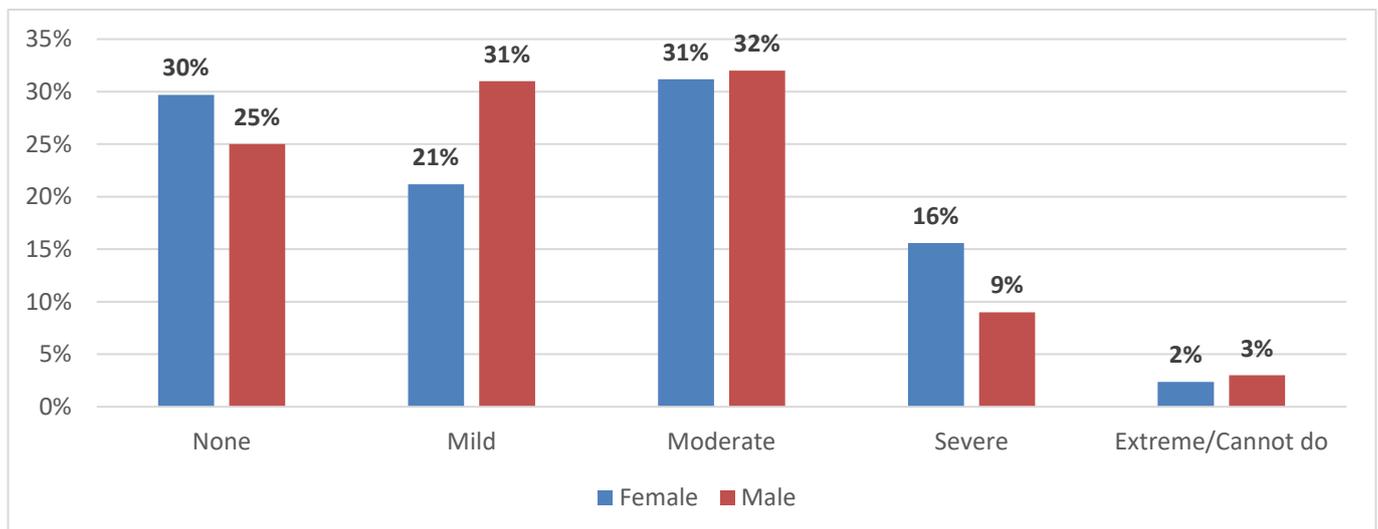


Figure 47: Distribution of respondents by problems due to bodily aches/pain and gender

The major psychological problems this study investigated are work stress, depression and worry or anxiety. 64% of all workers interviewed were affected in some way by sadness or depression in the last 30

days before the interview (see Figure 48). 16% of the respondents severely struggled with these problems; 3% of the workers were exposed to such extreme conditions that made it impossible for them to deal with.

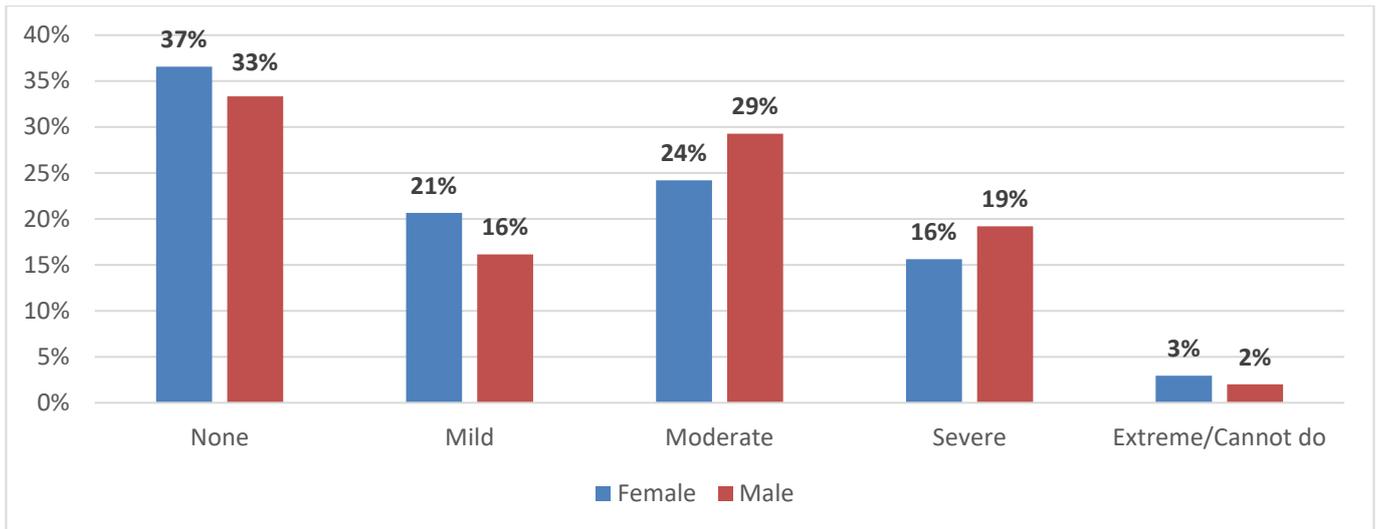


Figure 48: Distribution of respondents by problems due to sadness/depression and gender

It is alarming how the work environment affects the well-being of the workers, even though other reasons were causing distress, too. Figure 49 shows that **42% of all workers attribute their feelings of depression to the huge workload**. Slightly less (41%) were dealing with mental health problems because of family issues. Especially male workers worry more about family

(52%) and financial (32%) problems than females (39%; 25%). By contrast, **women tend to feel more depressed because of a harassing (16% vs. 9%) and discriminating (6% vs. 2%) work environment**. The feeling of being left alone by their spouse with all responsibilities only weighs on women who often need to reconcile work, childcare and household chores.

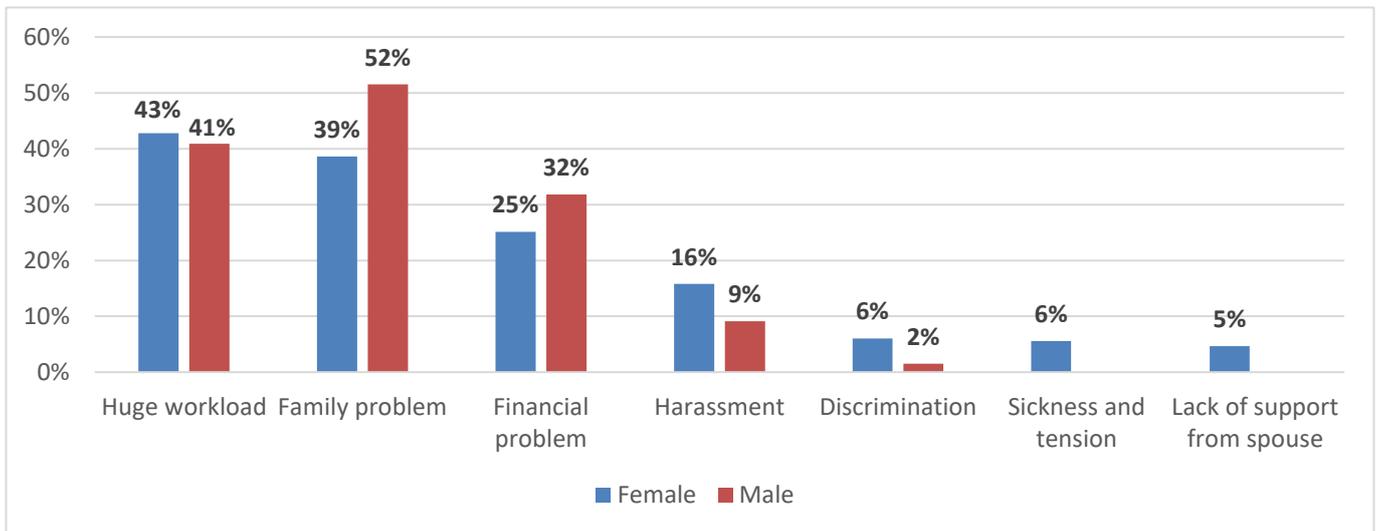


Figure 49: Distribution of respondents by reasons for feeling sad and depressed and gender

Work stress experienced in day-to-day work can have a significant impact on mental health. **Almost four-fifth of the workers interviewed are exposed to a feeling of stress and pressure**. It was expected that

the gender of the interviewees would induce different responses in terms of vulnerability to work stress. According to Figure 50, the stress suffered at and from work seems to affect female and male workers alike.

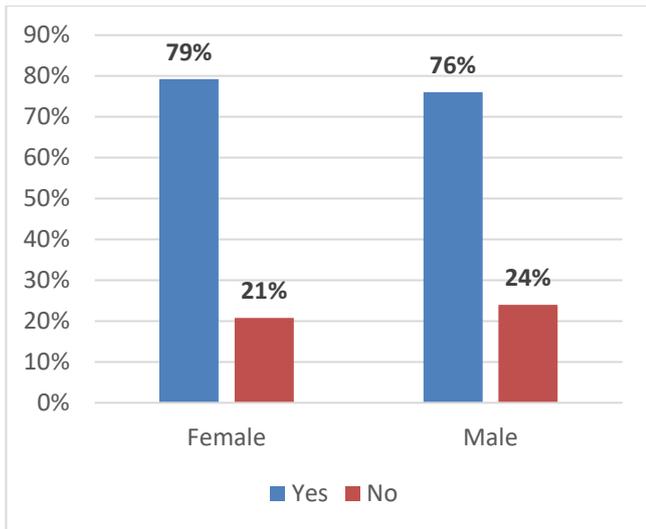


Figure 50: Distribution of respondents by suffering stress because of work and gender

The **key reason that causes stress is the heavy workload**, about which 89% of the workers interviewed for this study complained (see Figure 51). This is in accordance with the **workers feeling that their daily production target has increased compared to last year (84%)**.

An erroneous assumption often made by plant managers is that increased levels of performance lead to increased levels of productivity. On the contrary, more work may increase the pressure and the feeling of stress, which can translate in adverse health effects. The reasons why workers cannot perform at their highest can be various, such as unrealistic deadlines or employees that are not properly motivated to achieve better results.

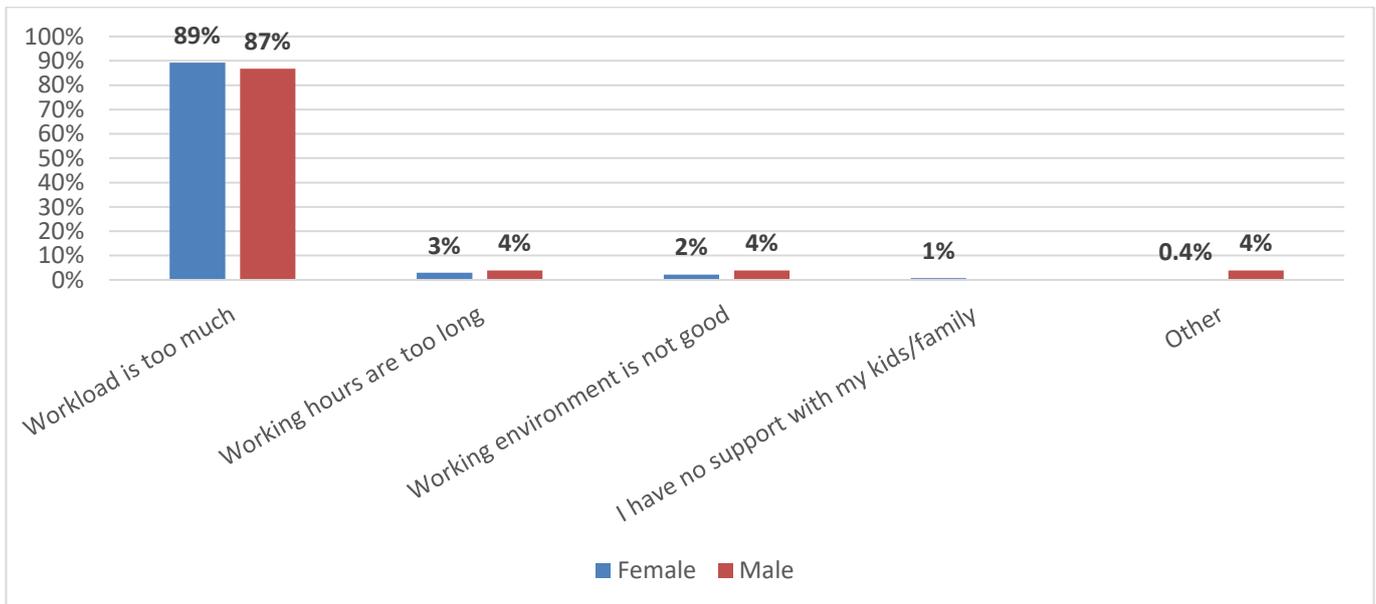


Figure 51: Distribution of respondents by main reason for feeling stressed and gender

**Most of the workers rather feel powerless and hopeless about their exposure to a continuously rising workload.** 67% of the workers are convinced that there is nothing that can be done (see Figure 52).

A considerable number (20%), unsurprisingly more women than men, blame the situation and their responsibilities at home for the stress they are facing, and the health problems associated with it. It is

noteworthy that only 14% of the workers would tell their superiors.

Female respondents are more wary of confronting their supervisors (8% vs 18%) than their male counterparts. Being normally male and in a position of power, supervisors often hire workers and establish a dependent relationship to them.

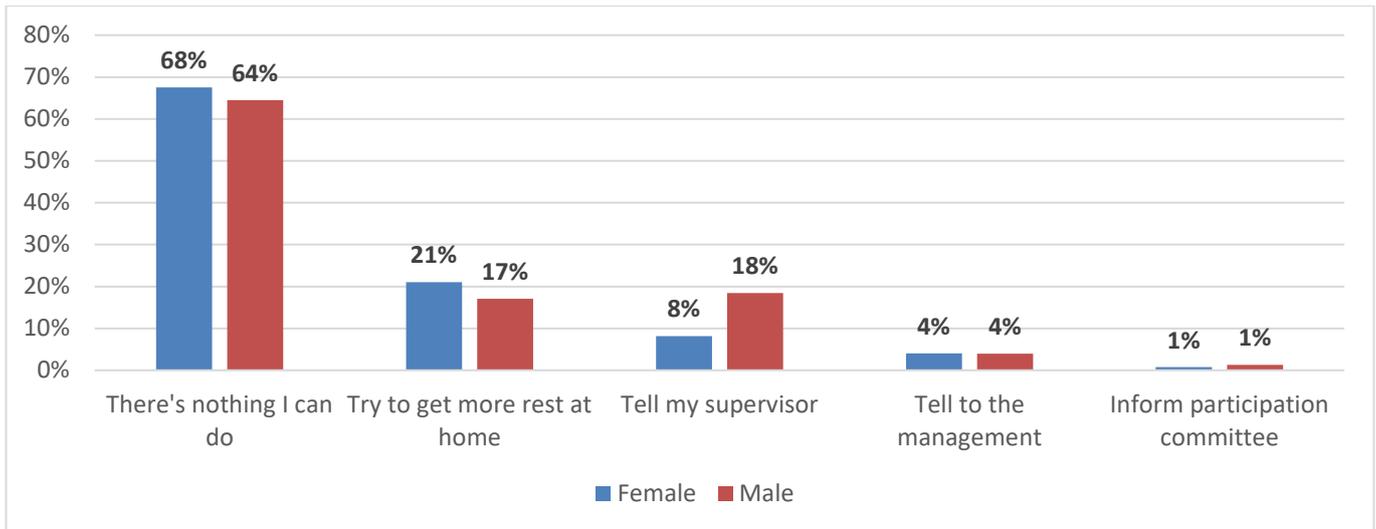


Figure 52: Distribution of respondents by how to deal with work-related stress and gender

The inability to deal with stress and other health problems is aggravated by production targets that are felt immoderate. **Workers feel they cannot keep up with the target quantities** plant managers impose on them. **Only for 30% of all respondents the daily targets are manageable.** 34% complain they are too much; for 32% the target quantities are disproportionate and unreasonable. There is a statistically significant

association that female workers struggle more with the production targets set by the management than male workers<sup>20</sup>. 35% believe the target quantities are by far too high, as opposed to only 19% of the male workers saying so. Such discrepancy can be explained by the domestic responsibilities (e.g. childcare, household chores) that are basically covered by women and by which women feel increasingly drained.

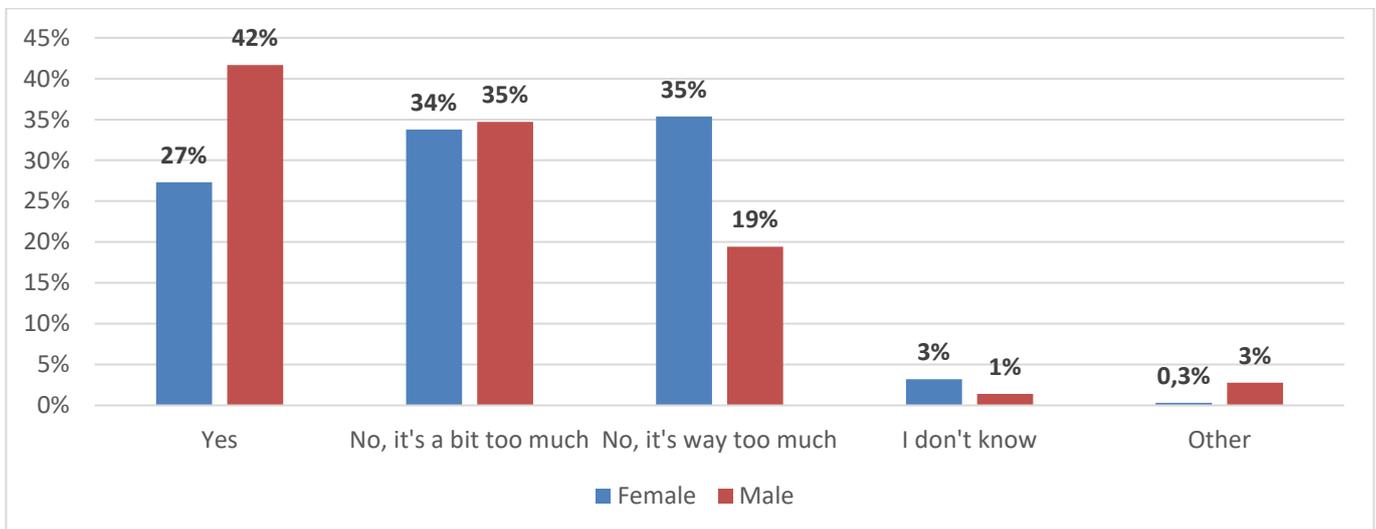


Figure 53: Distribution of respondents by whether target quantity is manageable and gender

Workers who are tired and exhausted by the workload tend to make more mistakes. The risk of workplace accidents and injuries rises with the workload as workers ignore safety precautions to keep up with the production target. **Male workers suffer comparatively more workplace injuries than female workers.** 49% of the male respondents have had accidents and injuries in

the workplace, as opposed to only 38% of the female workers (see Figure 54). Two third of the injuries suffered were punctures and needle stick injuries, which are mostly related to broken machine needles and missing safeguards. Lacerations (23%) and bruises (10%) are also common injuries among the workers interviewed. Avulsion fractures, trauma, and hand burns

<sup>20</sup> P-value: 0.008

and leg injuries were each suffered by 3% of the respondents. That means serious wounds were inflicted on only few workers, but they do occur.

After injury, most of the workers received first-aid treatment at the factory and returned to work right after (51%). 44% of the respondents went to see a doctor and only 9% had to ask for medical leave.

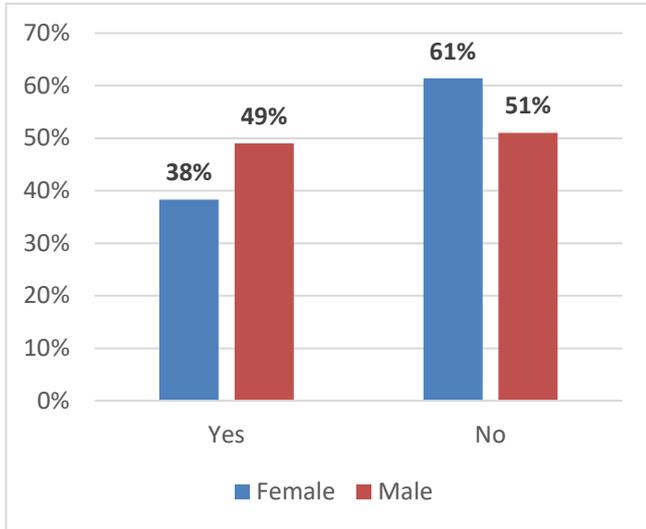


Figure 54: Distribution of respondents by workplace injuries suffered and gender

The majority of the workers interviewed have not been involved in an accident with injuries in the factory they are currently employed at (88%). Figure 55 shows that the gender difference calls for attention as only 10% of the female workers have experienced accidents, whereas 17% of the male respondents were somehow involved in workplace injuries. More research is required to investigate whether and why male workers are exposed to a greater risk of occupational injuries.

Those who were involved in an accident at the factory they are currently employed at mostly had to deal with punctures and needle stick injuries (42%), followed by hand (15%) and leg injuries (13%). The latter may

result from repetitive motions and body movement injuries as most of the workers do the same movement time and again or are constantly bending or twisting. These injuries usually require treatment and need to be brought to the attention of the superiors.

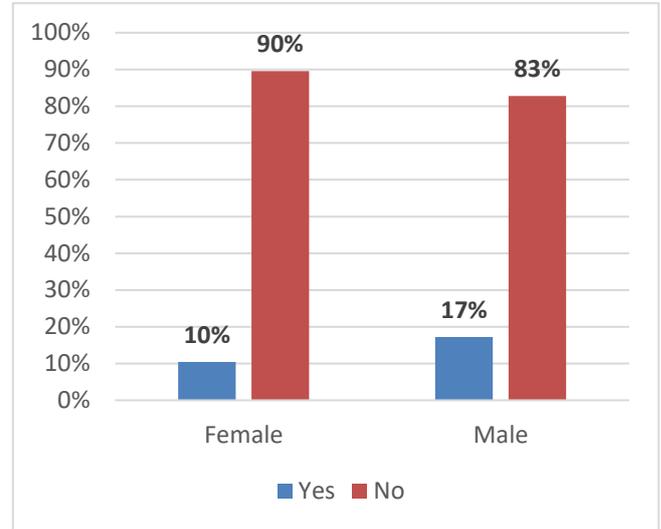


Figure 55: Distribution of respondents by accidents experienced in the current factory and gender

Figure 56 suggests that supervisors and management respond in ways that do not imply a significantly different treatment for male and female workers. Both female and male respondents were predominantly sent back to their workplace after receiving first aid treatment. Only few female workers could see a doctor.

**Although requested for, no sick days were granted to 13% of the workers** that had been involved in an accident with injuries at their current factory. The seriousness of the injury cannot be verified at this point, but it is disturbing that still so many workers were denied taking any days off. It provides **additional evidence of how little the factory management cares about health and safety for their workers.**

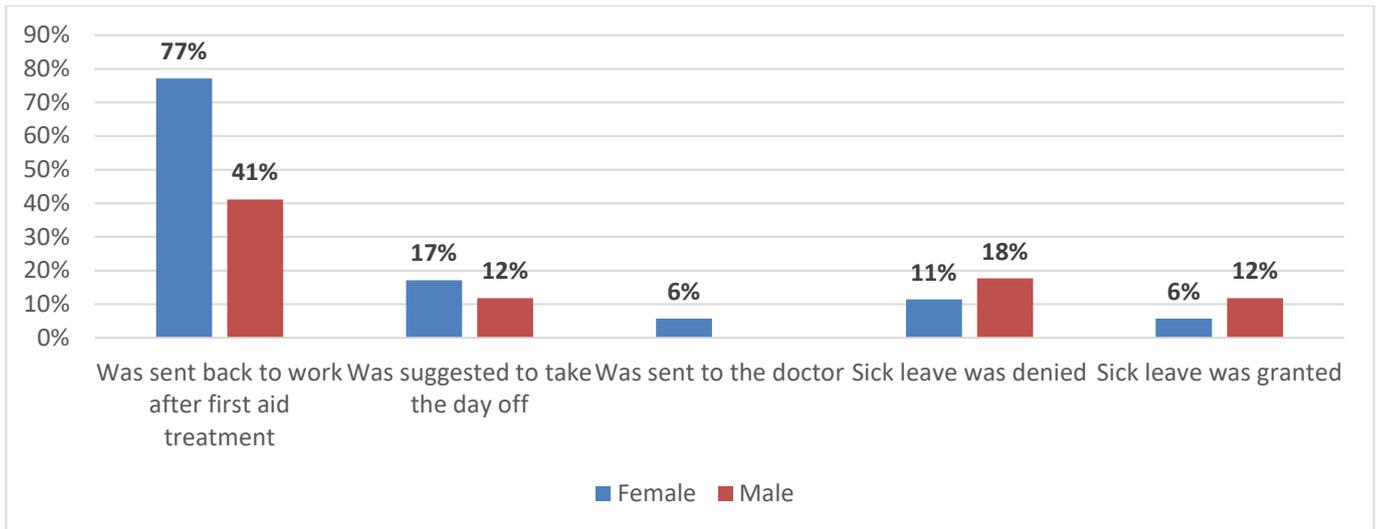


Figure 56: Distribution of respondents by reaction of superiors to injury and gender

In Bangladesh, employers are legally obliged to grant 14 days of paid sick leave per year. Employees need to present a medical certificate by a practising physician. Despite workers, who are required to take time off from work for medical reasons, being protected by the law, **21% of all respondents work in factories that do not provide sick leave** (see Figure 57). This is a serious violation of the law that is to guarantee that every employee is entitled to medical leave.

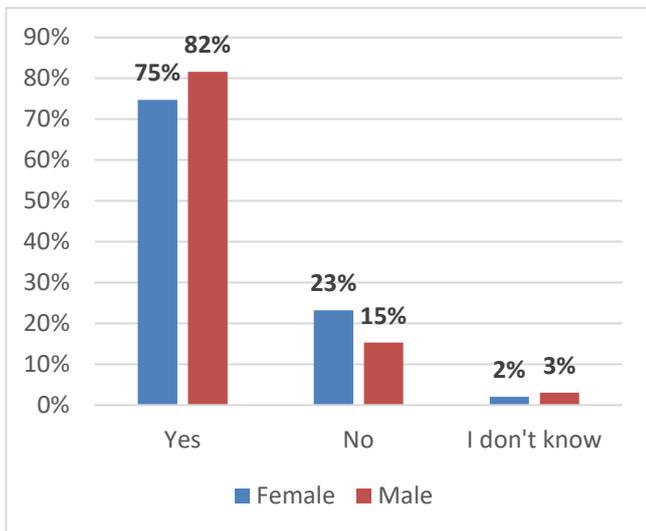


Figure 57: Distribution of respondents by provision of sick leave and gender

It is also worrisome that more than one-in-three employees lack knowledge about how many days (14) they are allowed to take off while ill or injured, without losing pay. Paid sick leave is part of the benefits workers are entitled to but very often do not know about. If employers are aware of and respect their employees' entitlements, more serious illnesses and long-term absences could be prevented; overall health would improve.

Our findings suggest that there are human health risks associated with factories:

- Garment workers face physical and mental health problems.
- Physical health problems, like bodily aches and pain, are overwhelmingly related to the continuously increasing workload.
- Mental health problems (e.g. stress, depression) are also mostly linked to the workload workers have to cope with, although family issues play an important role, too.
- More than 40% of the workers have already experienced accidents with injuries and usually are sent back to work after treatment.
- One-in-five factories does not provide medical leave, exposing their employees to great risk.

### 3.3.8 Fire safety

Under the National Tripartite Plan of Action and the Bangladesh Accord on Fire and Building Safety, the Government of Bangladesh and businesses have substantially invested in reducing fire-related accidents.

Figure 58 confirms that **most of the workers give the fire safety in their factory a good or very good rating (59%)**. Very few workers are of the view that the conditions are poor or even very poor in their factory.

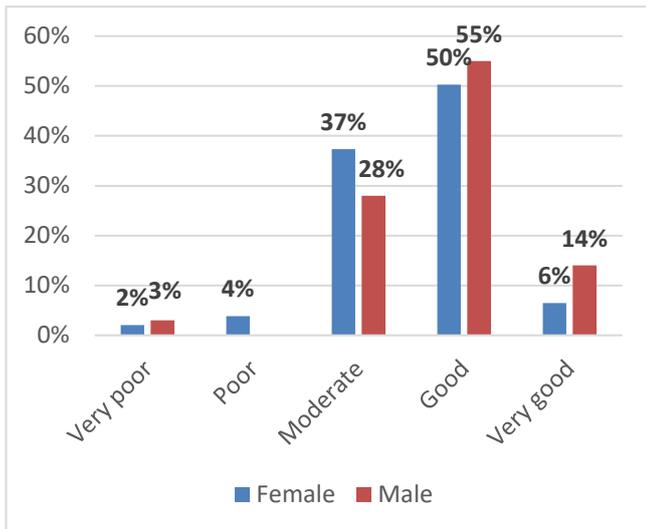


Figure 58: Distribution of respondents by rating of fire safety and gender

After the horrific tragedy in Rana Plaza, buyers were increasingly concerned about fire and building safety. Although industrial accidents of a similar magnitude have not happened again, a series of often deadly mishaps points to a systematic neglect in workplace safety. According to the perception of the workers interviewed, fire incidents have become less frequent. However, they have not disappeared. **36% of all workers experience fire incidents once a year** (see Figure 59). In very rare cases, they are confronted with fire at the workplace at least once a month.



Image 7: Firefighting equipment

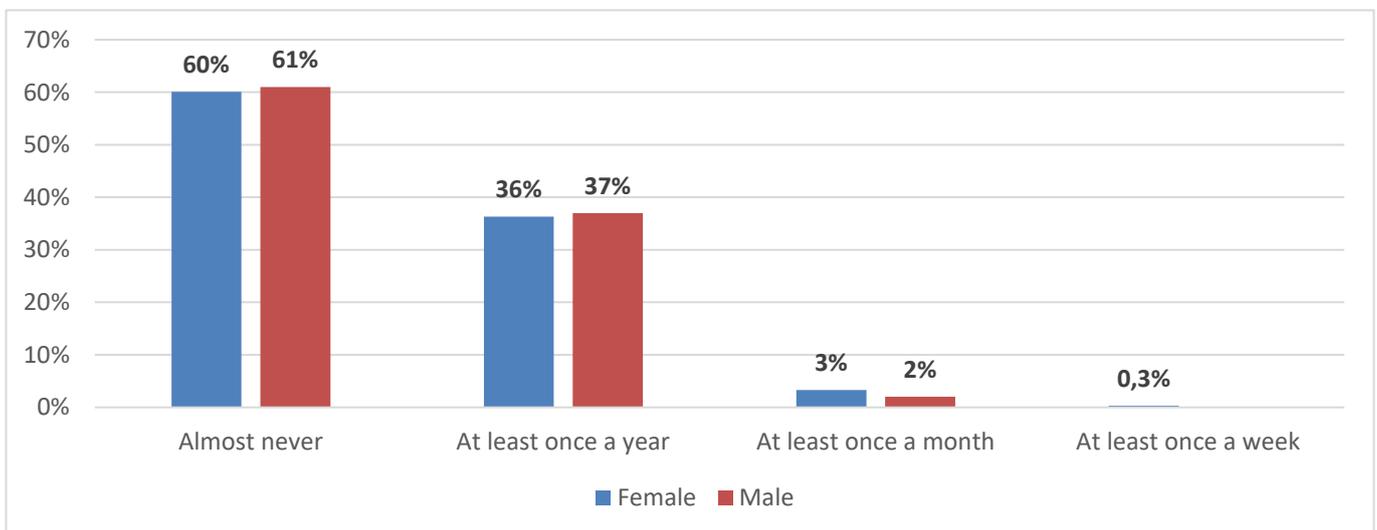


Figure 59: Distribution of respondents by frequency of fire incidents and gender

National inspection bodies often fail to perform inspections, monitoring and remediation. It is important that a fire risk assessment has been carried out and that companies act upon the findings identified in the assessment. If certain improvements have not been made, parts of the factory premises or the entire

factory must be restricted to use. Adequate fire alarm systems, fire-fighting equipment, emergency exits, and escape routes are indispensable measures for reducing the risk of fire. Regular fire safety trainings include explaining emergency procedures, clarifying

duties and responsibilities of staff and workers, and regular fire evacuation drills.

Figure 60 shows that **fire safety training is high on the agenda of garment factories. More than half of the workers of this study (52%) carry out fire drills every month** to practice and identify weaknesses in the

evacuation strategy. By law, it is mandatory to conduct fire and evacuation drills only every six months. Hence, it is a positive result for employers to proactively prepare their workforce and improve fire safety. Unfortunately, there are **still about one-in-five workers who fall below the legal requirements.**

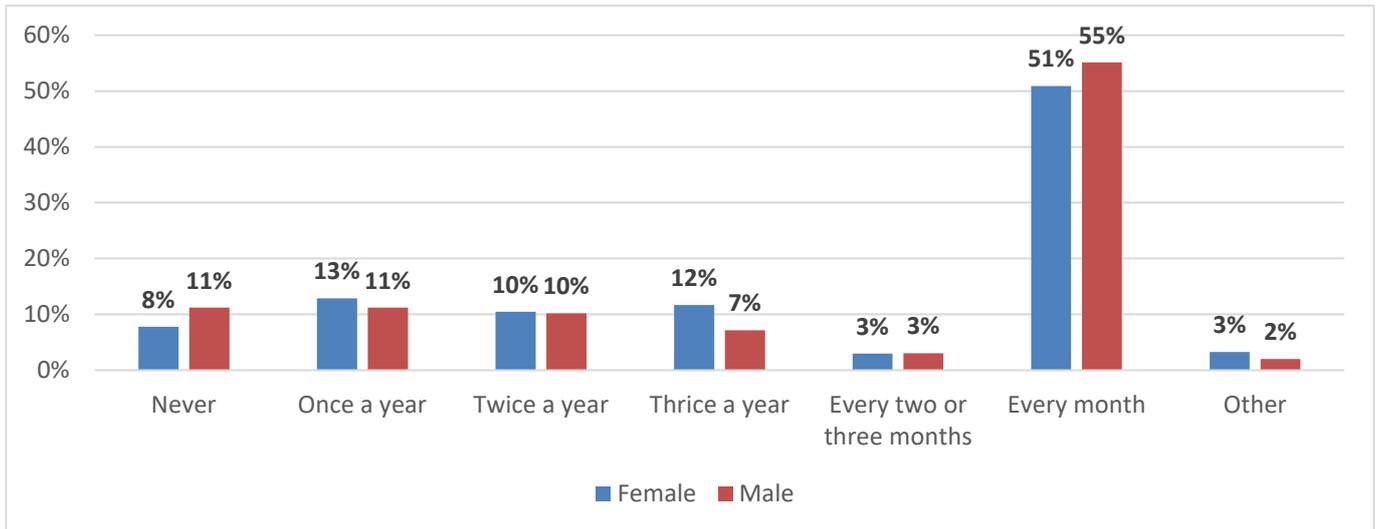


Figure 60: Distribution of respondents by frequency of fire drills and gender

To sum up the findings on fire safety:

- Only 5% of all respondents consider fire safety in their factories as poor or very poor.
- Fire incidents are rare, but still occur at least once a year for almost 40% of the workers interviewed.
- Companies seem to take precautions to ensure fire safety and frequently practise fire drills.



Image 8: Blocked escape routes

### 3.4 Commuting safety

The overwhelming majority of the workers interviewed lives nearby the factories and reaches their workplace on foot (see Figure 61). **Female workers are significantly more inclined to walk to work than their**

**male counterparts**<sup>21</sup>. As they are usually employed in lower-paid occupations, they avoid spending on bus or rickshaw. Factory-sponsored transport to work is rare among the respondents as it is normally reserved to employees in supervisory, middle management and other higher positions.

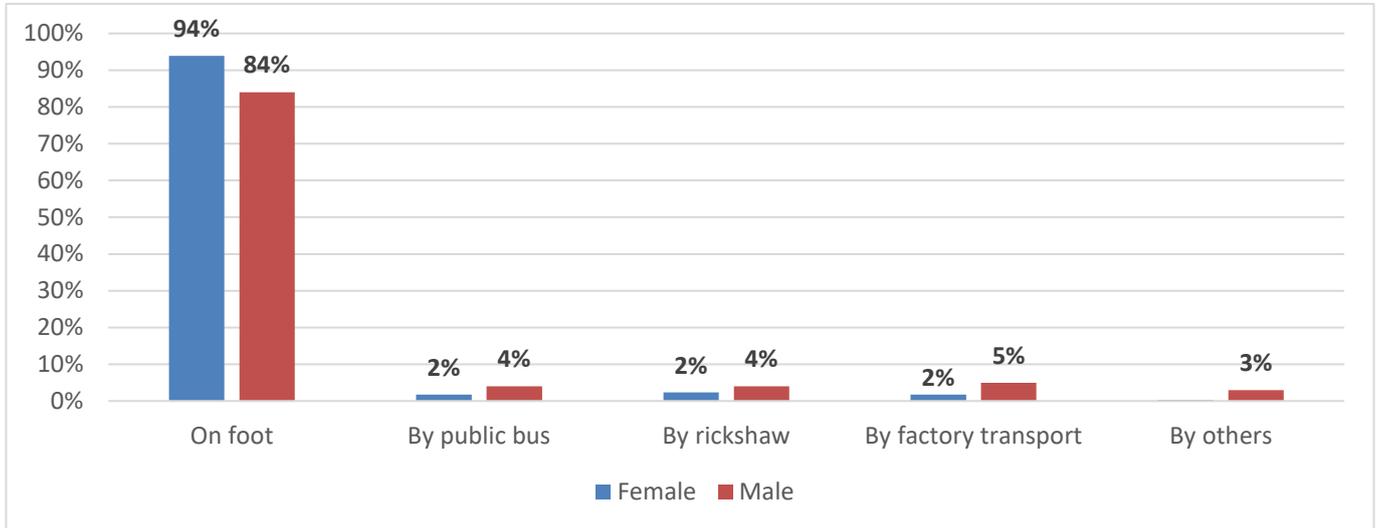


Figure 61: Distribution of respondents by use of transportation means to and from work and gender

Generally, garment factories are located on the outskirts of Dhaka and Chittagong, often along arterial roads. Workers tend to reside in proximity to keep the daily commute to a minimum and avoid travel expenses for transportation means, like bus or rickshaw. Most of the workers (72%) live within 15 minutes walking distance; one-fourth (24%) needs between 15 to 30 minutes to reach the factory by foot. Even though distances are small, commuter safety is a concern for the workers in Bangladesh's rapidly urbanizing population. **31% of all respondents feel very (8%) or a little unsafe (23%) on their way home from the factory** (see Figure 62). There is a tendency towards women feeling less safe than men.

Working late because of overtime or night shifts compels women to walk home after dark, which may contribute to an increased feeling of insecurity.

Long working hours, high pedestrian traffic and the absence of street lighting increase the commuting risk. Narrow and often poorly maintained roads (34%) along with insufficiently lit roads create the conditions that make it difficult for workers to get past often aggressively navigating vehicles traffic, leading to

accidents (see Figure 63), which men even more than women are afraid of (50% vs. 30%). By contrast, **only women perceive travel routes as unsafe because of harassment**, which appears to be a tremendous security risk. **30% of the female respondents already have felt harassed on their way home from work.**

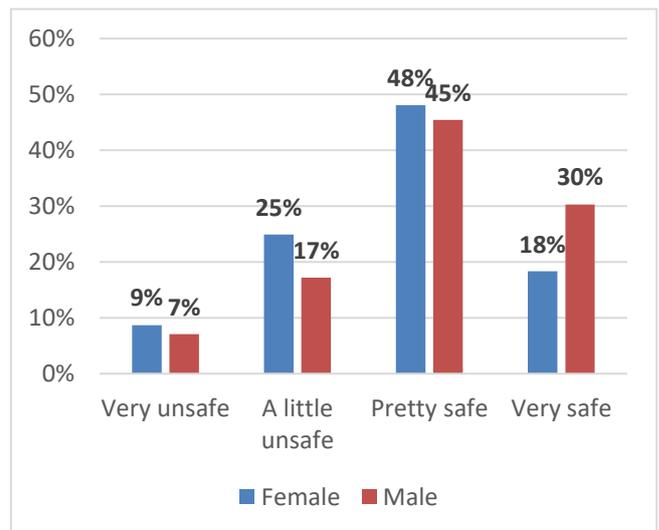


Figure 62: Distribution of respondents by safety feeling on their way home from the factory and gender

<sup>21</sup> P-value: 0.012

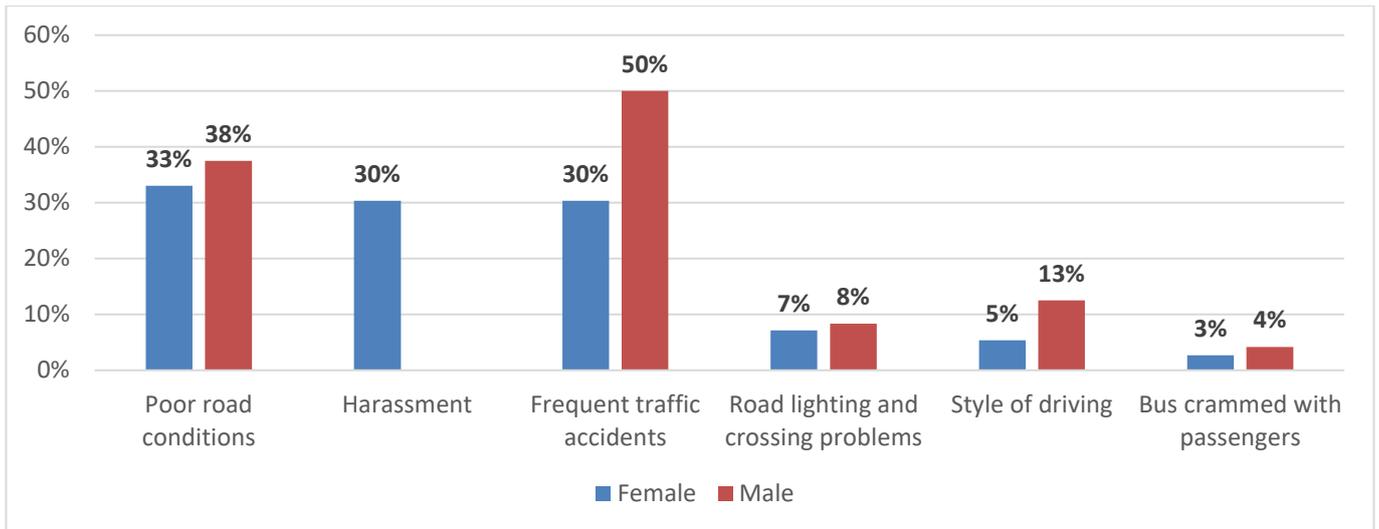


Figure 63: Distribution of respondents by reasons for feeling unsafe on way home from work and gender

From analysing data and information on commuting safety, the following insights can be generated:

- Almost all the female respondents walk to their workplace, male workers do significantly less.

- Almost one third of the workers interviewed feel very or somewhat unsafe on their way home from work.
- Harassment is a serious problem for women on their daily travel route, particularly in the evenings.

### 3.5 Prospects

Bangladesh’s garment industry has been growing ever since business started in the mid-1980s. For most of the workers, however, there are only limited opportunities with their current employer to move up professionally and assume more responsibilities. **Almost two-third of all workers interviewed (64%) would like to learn a different operation** (see Figure 64). **Men are significantly more interested in change<sup>22</sup>**, which again seems to attest to their increasing inability to provide for their family as single earners.

Employers often ignore the needs and capabilities of their workforce. It is widely acknowledged that there would be positive effects on motivation and productivity levels if workers were encouraged to acquire new skills.

Money is an important factor for workers to change and learn different operations, however, not the only one (see Figure 65). **52% of all workers indicated they are as driven by greater earnings as they are by the idea to improve themselves when they acquire new skills.** This tells of a **considerable degree of motivation that remains untapped.** While their set of skills is

rather static, workers embrace learning in the workplace, which is not valued by their management.

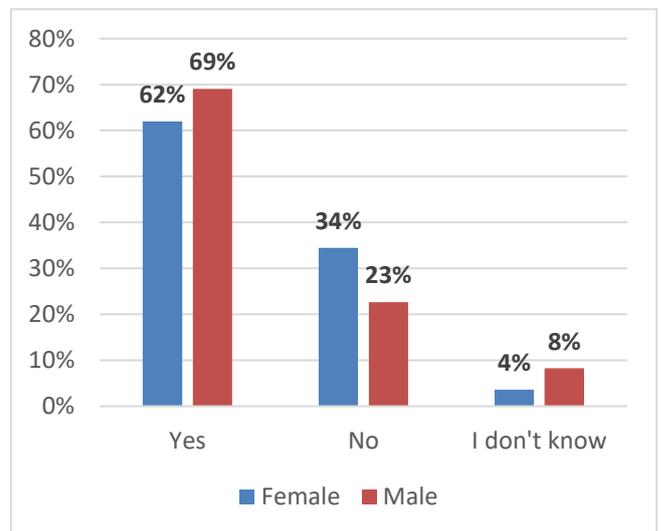


Figure 64: Distribution of respondents by willingness to learn new operation/designation and gender

Interestingly, although it has been mentioned as one of the key reasons for health issues (see 3.3.6), **only very few workers consider the workload as a reason for changing the designation or the job.**

<sup>22</sup> P-value: 0.025

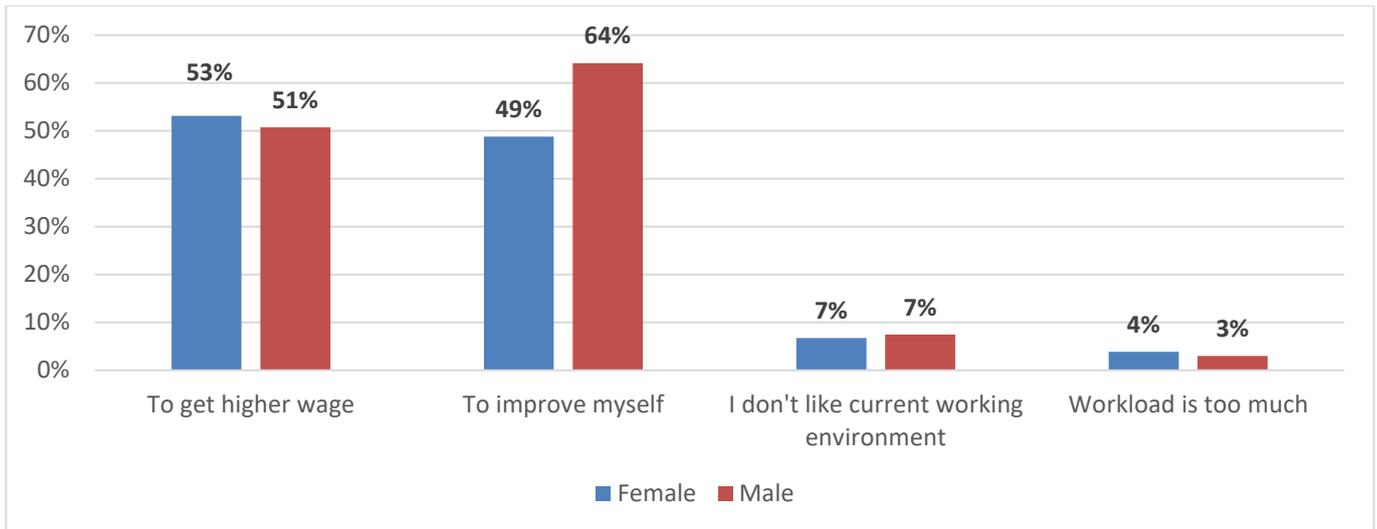


Figure 65: Distribution of respondents by reasons for learning new operation/designation and gender

The choices workers make if they were given the opportunity to learn new operations or venture into new professions are clearly gender-specific. Women would rather work in tailoring and handcrafting, which are typically home-based activities that allow them to flexibly combine work with care matters. By contrast,

male workers are keen to start a business and become an entrepreneur (26%) or change to a polytechnic profession (20%) or to driving (16%). These occupations have traditionally been reserved for men and are carried out outside, which means care work remains with the women.

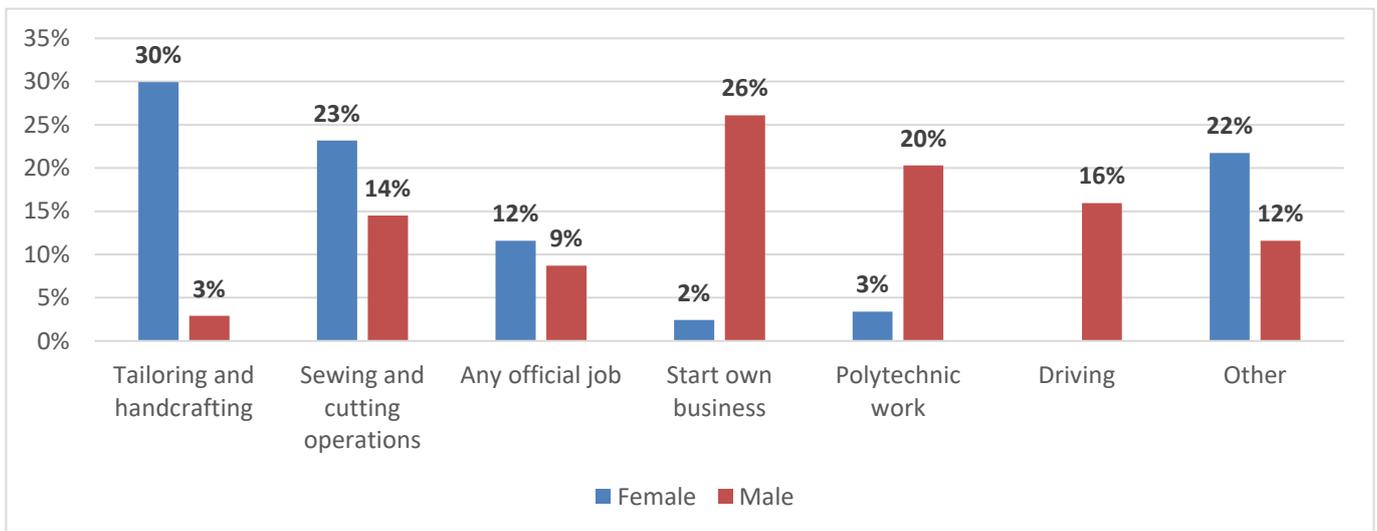


Figure 66: Distribution of respondents by learning new operation/designation and gender

In short, women are more interested in learning new operations, while men are more confident in seeking opportunities outside the factory. They dare venture

into new professions and, other than women, feel not bound by any domestic responsibilities.

## 4 Concluding remarks

The Workers' Voice Report 2019 has tried to shed light on the working conditions in Bangladesh's ready-made garment factories. Although the garment industry has the potential to lift men and women out of poverty, it is concerning to see that female workers are exposed to comparatively more challenging conditions in the workplace than male workers. Women are double burdened by the responsibilities they face in the workplace and at home in the form of care work and household chores. Factories with day care facilities for babies and young children could help mitigate the impact on working families and, specifically, women.

One of the key responsibilities will be to close the gender gap in education. Better access to secondary and higher education is necessary but not sufficient for providing girls with the same opportunities than boys. Compensation programmes to support families from poor areas in letting their girls study could be worth considering. Education is necessary to reduce inequalities in pay.

However, it requires more opportunities for women in designations that are better paid and traditionally reserved for men (e.g. ironing, quality control, quality inspection, supervisor). Recruitment policies need to be adjusted and awareness among the management be raised to stop discrimination at the entry.

The gender pay gap is the result of pay discrimination and job segregation. Companies are well advised to

pay workers the same amount of money for equal work. Only women who earn as much as men do are able to produce as much output as it is expected from men.

In the light of the global *#metoo* movement, it is alarming that female garment workers are exposed to a misogynist workplace culture with sexist remarks and bad behaviour. While the work environment is, if not encouraging, at least not preventing wrongful practices, it is even more worrisome that grievances are rarely adequately addressed by the management. Many workers feel powerless and turn away from supporting structures like participation committees.

The factory management needs to establish a culture of communication and respect within the workforce and between management and workers. Effective grievance committees and guidelines that give guidance to workers who experience harassment and other forms of unfair treatment need to be established and disseminated among the workers.

Although women certainly have benefitted from global market integration through employment, a gap in the knowledge of their rights and entitlements is making them vulnerable.

For awareness campaigns and trainings on gender and other issues to be effective, both employees and management should be addressed. Companies need to adjust their policies with gender-specific topics and encourage behavioural change at all levels, that is top management, middle management, supervisors, and workers.

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