WORKER CONCERNS AND ASPIRATIONS

Microfinance Opportunities

June 2022
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

**SUMMARY** ............................................................................................................................................................................. 1

**INTRODUCTION** .................................................................................................................................................................. 2

**WORKER ASPIRATIONS** .......................................................................................................................................................... 2

- Educational Aspirations: Children of Garment Workers: ........................................................................................................ 2
  - How High Should the Children Go? ......................................................................................................................................... 3
  - The Value of a University Education ...................................................................................................................................... 3
  - The Barriers to Getting a University Education .................................................................................................................. 4
- Garment Workers’ Education ................................................................................................................................................... 4
  - Secondary School ........................................................................................................................................................................... 4
  - Higher Secondary School .............................................................................................................................................................. 5
  - University .......................................................................................................................................................................................... 6
- Savings Aspirations ........................................................................................................................................................................... 6

**WORKER CONCERNS** ............................................................................................................................................................... 7

- Introduction ........................................................................................................................................................................................ 7
- Methodology ........................................................................................................................................................................................ 8
  - Assignment of Key Topics and Scoring .................................................................................................................................. 8
  - Key Topic Categories .................................................................................................................................................................... 9
- Responses .......................................................................................................................................................................................... 11
  - Overview .......................................................................................................................................................................................... 11
  - Factory Income ............................................................................................................................................................................. 12
  - Work ................................................................................................................................................................................................. 12
  - Personal and Cultural ................................................................................................................................................................ 13
  - Infrastructure ............................................................................................................................................................................... 13
  - Benefits ............................................................................................................................................................................................ 13
  - Health ............................................................................................................................................................................................... 14
  - General ............................................................................................................................................................................................. 14
SUMMARY

This report focuses on workers’ aspirations and concerns. It is an effort to give workers voice in policy debates as to how to improve their lives. Some key messages that come out of this report are the following:

- Worker aspirations are constrained by the daily grind that we reported in the Economic Control report:
  - Despite working long hours and having little time off only a few workers report saving for long-term purposes, beyond unforeseen events or emergencies. Emergencies as the main savings purpose is to be expected, given how most workers do not own or have access to insurance and have very little social protections.
  - When asked if they find joy in their work, 71% of workers reported they do not.
  - 96% said they do not want their children to grow up to become garment workers. Instead, they want their children to get educated.

- Workers have clear educational aspirations for themselves and their children:
  - Cumulatively, about 90% of parents want both girls and boys to get an education all the way through to the Higher Secondary Certificate level
  - 65% of parents want their girls to attend university, while just under 90% want their boys to do so.
  - These data suggest a huge aspiration-reality gap, because only 17% of young women attend university in Bangladesh today and only 24% of young men do so, according to the World Economic Forum’s latest Global Gender Gap Report.

- Workers themselves also have educational aspirations:
  - 82% of garment workers had not completed their secondary education
  - Of those, 30% of them told us they would still like to do so (similar rates for women and men)
  - Among those respondents who already had completed higher secondary school, or who hadn’t yet but wanted to do so, or who hadn’t completed either secondary school or higher secondary school but still had aspirations of doing so (374 workers in total), 67% told us they would like to attend university (70% of women compared to 59% of men).

- Workers’ concerns for their present situation reflect so much of the data that the GWD initiative has uncovered over the years:
  - Their top two concerns relate to their incomes and their work, especially their work environment and work hours.
INTRODUCTION

Periodically, during the life of this project we asked workers about their aspirations and their concerns. In this report we draw on four sets of data collected from workers in 2021 and early 2022. In January 2021 we asked workers about their aspirations for the children’s education and also about their own educational aspirations. In October 2021 and again in January 2022 we asked workers about their savings aspirations. And in late January 2022 we asked workers about their concerns, and, specifically, what topics they would like the GWD initiative to cover in the future.

The data from these different surveys tell us a lot about the state of mind of the workers in the RMG sector in Bangladesh. It is clear from their responses that their aspirations are constrained by their efforts to make ends meet and to get as many hours at the factory as possible, to make as much money as possible. These constrained aspirations are also reflected in their concerns, which are focused on how little they earn and their work environment. The place where they show greater aspirations is when they are asked about education. They aspire to more education for their children and themselves. They see education as the ticket out of the RMG sector and into work that earns more and is more promising—at least for their children.

WORKER ASPIRATIONS

Educational Aspirations: Children of Garment Workers

Garment workers in Bangladesh do not want their children to grow up to become garment workers. Instead, they want their children to get educated. That is the overwhelming sentiment expressed in October 2020 when we asked workers if they wanted their children to follow in their footsteps (see our #Opendiaries post). As one worker told us:

“I didn’t want that because I want my children educated well and not to lead a life like me. They have to survive their life with much less pain or problems than I face. They need to lead a happy life like I want.” – 38 year-old male garment worker in the industry for eight years

Overall, 96% of garment workers surveyed said they did not want their children to become garment workers. In another survey a couple months later involving a very similar pool of respondents, we also learned that 71% of garment workers found no joy in their work.

Needless to say, this does not bode well for any long-term self-actualization possibilities the garment industry has to offer. However, none of this has deterred garment workers from wanting to give their children a better future, or from valuing education. And it hasn’t deterred many garment workers themselves from wanting to become better educated.

In this report, we present the results from a survey MFO and SANEM conducted asking respondents to share their attitudes towards secondary and higher education. In this section, we focus on workers’ educational aspirations for their children. In the next section, we will look at workers’ educational aspirations for themselves.
How High Should the Children Go?

Overall, 45% of the garment workers to whom we presented this education survey reported having a female child, and 44% reported having a male child. Those without a girl or a boy were excluded from the analysis below.

There was little difference among those respondents with female children and those respondents with male children regarding how far they would like their children’s education to advance. And there was an even smaller difference between women and men regarding how much schooling they’d like their children to receive, regardless of whether the child was a girl or a boy. The simple way to put it is garment workers want their children to go to school, for as long as they can, no matter the gender of the child or the parent.

The greatest disparity in support for furthering their child’s education came at the university stage, when a somewhat lower rate of parents with girls reported that they’d like their child to attend university, compared to parents with boys.

We presented the survey to respondents in the form of a decision tree: if a parent said that they did not want their child to complete secondary school, then they were not presented with the next question, which asked if they wanted their children to complete higher secondary school, and so on. Below is a chart representing the proportionate response rate of parents who would like their child to attain the indicated education level, based on how many parents made it to that stage in the decision tree process. The “cumulative” row shows the share of “Yes” at each stage for all parents of children, not just those who aspire for their children to reach that stage:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Would you like your child to get a Secondary School Certificate?</th>
<th>[Then] would you like your child to get a Higher Secondary Certificate?</th>
<th>[Then] would you like your child to attend University?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Girls</td>
<td>Boys</td>
<td>Girls</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>89%</td>
<td>92%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cumulative</td>
<td>89%</td>
<td>92%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In other words, cumulatively, about 90% of parents want both girls and boys to get an education all the way through to the Higher Secondary Certificate level, but 65% want their girls to attend university, while just under 90% want their boys to do so. These data suggest a huge aspiration-reality gap, because only 17% of young women attend university in Bangladesh today and only 24% of young men do so, according to the World Economic Forum’s latest Global Gender Gap Report.

The Value of a University Education

We also wanted to get a sense of the value workers put on education. The vast majority, 90%, of respondents answered “YES” to the question “Do you believe that attending university gives a person new opportunities for work and personal wellbeing?” (nearly identical rates for women and men). Digging into these responses a little further we found that the most frequently given reason in support...
of a university education was that it confers more job opportunities. That wasn’t the only value
parents recognized in attending university, however. Below is the full range of their answers sorted
by frequency of response (these are overall numbers, as women and men’s response rates were very
similar):

Table 2: Reasons for attending university

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Reason Attending University is Valuable</th>
<th>Response Rate</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>More job opportunities</td>
<td>20%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Earn respect and honor</td>
<td>16%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prosper financially</td>
<td>16%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Increase abilities and/or become more resourceful</td>
<td>15%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Widen knowledge</td>
<td>14%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Better life</td>
<td>12%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Personal development</td>
<td>7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The Barriers to Getting a University Education

Finally, we asked parents about the barriers they face in helping their children get a university
education. All the barriers that could impede their child’s progress were financial in nature (besides a
small percentage answering “Other”). Not one parent responded by telling us that a family problem,
an unsafe school environment, a male family member refusing consent, not having enough time, or
getting married could hinder their child’s educational progress. It seems the only thing standing in
their way is money.

Garment Workers’ Education

In this section we focus on workers’ own educational aspirations, and the barriers they face in fulfilling
those aspirations. What we learned from the workers, is that they aspire to getting more education
for themselves, all the way up to the university level, highlighting the educational aspiration-reality
gap that we identified in the previous section when looking at their kids’ educational aspirations.

Secondary School

The majority of garment workers we surveyed, 82%, have not attained their secondary school
certificate. In the United States, that is the equivalent of not having completed school through the 10th
grade. The gender disparity is somewhat wide: 13% of female garment workers have their secondary
school certificate, whereas 33% of male garment workers have theirs. This is despite the fact that
more adolescent girls than boys are enrolled in secondary education in Bangladesh on the whole, at a
rate of 69% to 59%, respectively (according to the World Economic Forum’s Global Gender Gap
For those 18% of respondents who did complete their secondary education, the self-reported barriers to completion were somewhat similar for women and men, but with some important differences. Below is a list of the greatest barriers respondents faced, sorted by frequency of response rate for women and men.

Table 3: Greatest barriers to education

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Greatest Barrier</th>
<th>Women</th>
<th>Greatest Barrier</th>
<th>Men</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Cost of school</td>
<td>23%</td>
<td>Need for additional income</td>
<td>32%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Family problems</td>
<td>21%</td>
<td>Family problems</td>
<td>19%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Need for additional income</td>
<td>17%</td>
<td>Cost of school</td>
<td>18%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Got married</td>
<td>13%</td>
<td>Not enough time</td>
<td>8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not enough time</td>
<td>9%</td>
<td>Other</td>
<td>8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No consent from male family members</td>
<td>5%</td>
<td>Other financial problems</td>
<td>6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>5%</td>
<td>Got married</td>
<td>5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not a safe environment</td>
<td>3%</td>
<td>Not a safe environment</td>
<td>4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other financial problems</td>
<td>3%</td>
<td>No consent from male family members</td>
<td>1%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Among the 82% of garment workers who had not completed their secondary education, 30% of them told us they would still like to do so (similar rates for women and men). The perceived barriers to completing their secondary education for this group of respondents were proportionately comparable to the answers from those respondents who had already completed secondary education (represented in the chart above). Perhaps unsurprisingly, those aspiring to complete their secondary education reported not having enough time and getting married as barriers at slightly higher rates (likely because they are older and already have jobs, families and/or other adult concerns), and they reported the cost of school as a barrier at a slightly lower rate, perhaps because they have already saved up money. However, the need for additional income was still perceived as the greatest barrier to completing their secondary education, just as it was overall for those who had already completed their secondary education.

Higher Secondary School

Among the 18% of garment workers who already had completed secondary education, 53% of them had also attained a higher secondary school certificate. In the United States this would be the equivalent of completing the 12th grade. The gap here was narrower between women and men, 55% to 50%, respectively.

Of those 47% of respondents who had completed their secondary education, but had not yet completed higher secondary school there was a bit of an aspirational drop-off: only 41% of those respondents (similar rates for women and men) told us they would like to continue their education and complete higher secondary school.
And among that 30% of aspiring respondents who had not yet completed the first phase of secondary school but would like to someday, 67% of them told us they would also like to complete higher secondary school (69% of women told us they would like to compared to 55% of men).

University

None of the garment workers we surveyed told us they had acquired a university degree, but a number of them would like to. Among those respondents who already had completed higher secondary school, or who hadn’t yet but wanted to do so, or who hadn’t completed either secondary school or higher secondary school but still had aspirations of doing so (374 workers in total), 67% told us they would like to attend university (70% of women compared to 59% of men), reflecting the high value that workers put on a university education and the large educational aspiration-reality gap in Bangladesh that we’ve already identified.

Among both types of respondents (already educated or highly aspirational), the perceived barriers to completing university were similar to the real or perceived barriers during other educational stages of life, in that the need for additional income and the cost of school were still the two biggest concerns, for both women and men.

Overall, 20% of the garment workers to whom we presented this survey said they would like to attend university. And for the majority, saving up enough money by working in the garment industry is likely the only chance they’ll have to one day afford a higher education.

Savings Aspirations

As documented in the Women’s Economic Control report, workers work long-hours to earn as much as possible. Yet, when asked if they have been putting aside money for a particular purpose (be it an emergency, special occasion, education, or long-term plan), only a third of (both male and female) workers reported doing so. Among those that were able to set aside money for a specific purpose, the median savings amount was Tk. 24,000 (or $279) when asked in October 2021 and Tk. 30,000 (or $350) when asked in January 2022. This is the amount of money they had been able to save by that point as opposed to how much they were able to save during that month. When asked about the purpose of those savings, by far the most common answers was “for emergencies” (the top choice for everyone, though more likely to be reported by male workers) followed by “children’s education” (more women than men said this), or to build a house or buy some land (here too more women than men reported these). The fifth most common purpose was general “savings”, the second most common purpose among just men.

These data were further confirmed in responses to a set of questions we asked monthly in October, November, and December 2021 regarding whether workers had money left over at the end of each of these months. When asked what their plan was to use the money, the workers overwhelmingly named either an emergency, food, daily expenses, or household items.
These responses are indicative of common and well-known themes, despite working long hours and having little time off only a few workers report saving for long-term purposes, beyond unforeseen events or emergencies. Emergencies as the main savings purpose is to be expected, given how most workers do not own or have access to insurance and have very little social protections.

WORKER CONCERNS

Introduction

In late January of 2022 garment workers in the current study were asked two questions intended to allow respondents to share with their enumerators which topics (if any) they’d like to see added (or see more of) in the weekly GWD surveys. To introduce the two questions enumerators first said, “We want to hear from you and how you feel about the project,” and then they asked the first question: “Are there any topics or questions that you would want us to ask you about?” This question was closed, in that respondents could only answer “yes” or “no”. A total of 169 respondents answered “yes” and only those respondents were asked the second question: “Which ones?”. Below is a graph showing the total number of respondents who answered either “yes” or “no” to the first question as well as each answer’s percentage share:
Methodology

Assignment of Key Topics and Scoring

Workers posed the second question were allowed to answer any way they chose, meaning every answer could be unique. Some answers were considered sufficiently alike by our Bangla translators at SANEM that we did receive back 16 duplicate response-types (representing 51 respondents’ answers) once the answers were translated into English. This means that we received 134 unique answers from respondents telling us which topics they would like to see covered in the weekly surveys.

As the answers were open-ended and qualitative, but not too numerous, a manual key topic count system was utilized to determine which topics respondents reported with the most and least frequency. Key topics were generated organically as we sifted the responses. In total, we identified 25 key topics that were sufficiently distinct as to warrant their own category.

If a key topic appeared in a respondent’s answer, that key topic was given a score of “1”. Some answers (93 to be exact) only received a total score of one, if for example the answer was simply “About our work environment” or “About my family members”. Other answers received a higher total score and one answer was scored a high of nine, as the respondent answering this question mentioned many key topics in their response. In the end, we gave the 169 answers a total score of 317, meaning that was how many individual mentions our 25 key topics received, collectively.

Due to the nature of open-ended responses and the difficulty of translating one language into another, we tried to be generous with both the assignment of key topics and points. If, for example, a worker’s response was, “My sufferings. As it is hard for me to maintain my family with this low payment,” then we gave this response a score of 2, one for mentioning their personal sufferings (key topic: “Personal Life, Future”) and one for mentioning their low payment (key topic: “Salary”).
Key Topic Categories

After we had assigned key topics and points, we then grouped the key topics together into one of seven big tent categories: Factory Income, Work, General, Personal and Cultural, Infrastructure, Benefits, and Health. Below is a chart showing the results of this analysis:

Table 4: Key topic categories

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Key Topic</th>
<th>Number of Mentions</th>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Category Totals</th>
<th>Share</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Salary</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>Factory Income</td>
<td>83</td>
<td>26%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Overtime</td>
<td>15</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Allowances</td>
<td>12</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bonus</td>
<td>9</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Work Environment</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>Work</td>
<td>75</td>
<td>24%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Work Hours</td>
<td>13</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Job Security</td>
<td>11</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Factory Safety</td>
<td>6</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Promotion</td>
<td>4</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Discrimination</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Key Topic</td>
<td>Number of Mentions</td>
<td>Category</td>
<td>Category Totals</td>
<td>Share</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-----------------------------------</td>
<td>--------------------</td>
<td>-------------------------</td>
<td>-----------------</td>
<td>-------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>GWD General, Project Praise</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>General</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>14%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Children, Education</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>Personal and Cultural</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>11%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Household, Family</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>Personal Life, Future</td>
<td>7</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gender Issues</td>
<td>5</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Price Increase</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>Infrastructure</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>10%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Transportation</td>
<td>6</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Housing</td>
<td>4</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Benefits (Pension, Insurance)</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>Benefits</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other Leave</td>
<td>11</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maternity Leave and Benefits</td>
<td>6</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>COVID-19</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>Health</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Health</td>
<td>7</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vaccines</td>
<td>2</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Food</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>317</strong></td>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>317</strong></td>
<td><strong>100%</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

And below is a graph displaying the results using only the key topic category:

*Figure 4: Worker concerns by category*
Responses

Overview

From the results it is clear that what matters most to half of the responding workers is that they be asked and invited to discuss the basic aspects of their jobs: salaries, work hours and the work environment at their factories. If we include the Benefits category, then almost 60% of respondents want to discuss workplace-based topics.

One bias factor we cannot be certain of (and it would take a very well-designed survey to measure it) is how much the study itself has influenced respondents and to what extent they formulated their responses based on what they believe the nature of the GWD study to be. As the data show, nearly as many respondents as would like to discuss their salaries simply answered the question by referencing the project itself (representing the 45 respondents who mentioned the key topic “GWD General, Project Praise”). As one respondent put it: “What is the profit for this project for asking us this much variety of questions?”. Another respondent said: “What good will it do to take information from us?”. And yet another: “What will happen with the information you take from us?”. One worker even asked, “Do we have any opportunity to get better job at a good institution through this project?”. Many other respondents who mentioned a General category key topic simply answered by saying they value the project and what they have learned from it. But even with these respondents, the implication is that they are actively thinking about their role in the project, and what the goals of the project are. If the finance and work-related nature of the core of our weekly questions is influencing respondents, it could be leading them to answer (perhaps out of deference to us) that they would like to discuss income and workplace topics more so than, say, family dynamics or housing.

Another takeaway is that COVID-19 and health in general are not high on the list of worker concerns. Regarding the ongoing pandemic, it could be viewed by workers as just another obstacle to contend with as they try to earn enough money to buy food and pay rent.

In support of this view, while the “Infrastructure” category only comprised a 10% share of the responses, the “Price Increase” key topic was mentioned by 23 respondents, representing 7% of all mentions, putting it 4th on the individual mention list. As consumers even in wealthy nations have been experiencing recently, prices are increasing. It would appear garment workers want to discuss just how they are supposed to maneuver through an ever-more expensive world with the low incomes they earn. In one interview, a respondent from Gazipur discusses the recent price hikes:

“How am I handling this? Well, my salary is 9,400 taka right now. With overtime, I can get 12,000 taka maximum. I can manage my livelihood somehow with this amount. I have to struggle to live like this. But I hid this from my family. I have to compromise living like this.”

It might also be worth mentioning that no garment workers told us they wanted more interview questions to be about financial services and digital finance. These types of questions constitute a major part of our core weekly survey. The workers might simply view those types of questions as formalities, or they might believe that there is nothing more to be asked or said about those subjects. But we also cannot ignore the number of respondents who had praise for the project in general and told us how much they had learned about managing their personal finances. We hope this respondent meant it when they said: “I got so much benefit from here. We want this survey to continue for many days more.”
To conclude, we’ll go through each of the seven categories and to see how the GWD study over the past two years might already have allowed garment workers to discuss their topic of choice. We’ll note areas where we might be able to expand or refine our set of core questions to include more topics of the greatest concern. We will also include some selected quotes from the answers respondents gave to the worker concern survey throughout each category section.

**Factory Income**

More than any other subject, garment workers want to talk about their pay. And, we can assume, how low that pay is relative to their daily, weekly and monthly expenses. One worker said: “Our workload is not aligned with our salary. If only our salary gets raised.” Another emphasizes the special difficulty of living and working through COVID-19: “It would be better to keep questions like how are we managing our finance in this trying times of the pandemic.”

Clearly this topic is extremely important to them, because we already ask them many questions about their pay every week. They want even more of a focus than there is now, most likely because they are struggling to get by on what they earn.

One other thought as to why factory income key topics and salary in particular were mentioned so many times: garment workers might have an outsized notion of just what it is their participation in the project alone can achieve. We’ll touch on this again in the General category. Unfortunately, the GWD projects are only able to go so far on their own in an effort to increase workers’ pay. It is up to other stakeholders to use the data we have gathered to make informed decisions designed to improve workers’ lives.

“*Our general duty is always 8 hours long. It is never enough for us to earn. It would be better if we talked about raising our overtime.*”

**Work**

Many workers combined factory income concerns and workplace concerns in their answers, as this respondent did: “I want to talk about the little off time we get during work hours. Sometimes they make us work during those off times even. But we do not get any compensation for that in our salary.”

While work hours and employment status questions are core components of our weekly surveys, we do not on a weekly basis ask garment workers about how they spend their break time. Nor for that matter do we routinely ask about factory safety, harassment from supervisors or each other, career ladders or redundancy. According to the workers who responded to this survey, we ought to be asking them more about these issues, on a more routine basis. We plan to do that, hopefully by giving workers who told us things like this more of a voice: “I want to talk about the misbehaviors of the owner of the garments and the officers.”

Over the past two years, when space in the weekly surveys permitted, we have asked workers these types of questions from time to time. In addition to questions regarding respondents’ knowledge of their work contracts (about half of workers receive a written contract), their top concerns regarding dismissal, and whether the 2018 wage gazette has impacted their work (80% of respondents said their workload has increased), we have done three deep dives into the COVID-19 precautions factories have taken. But clearly workers want us to ask more about their work environment.

“The factory authorities are discriminating and giving more opportunities to some and giving less to others. I want you to ask us about this.”
“How can a worker change the work environment of the factory and how can a worker get promotion.”

Personal and Cultural

Through the #OpenDiaries campaign we launched in November of 2020 we have been able to broaden the GWD communication channel to include non-traditional survey questions, many of them focusing on garment workers’ personal feelings and opinions. We have asked workers about their favorite meals, whether they feel a sense of community with other garment workers (93% of them do), and which countries they’d like to visit.

In addition to workers’ quotes and survey data, #OpenDiaries posts are also almost exclusively comprised of photos taken by the workers themselves, which we have asked them to submit to us (and which we also use in our blog posts). However, as one respondent’s quote suggests, we might need to do more to make all workers aware of the digital forums to which their pictures are being posted: “What are you doing with our information and our pictures?”

Regarding gender and household/family issues, two of the other key topics in this category, respondents had things to say. One respondent who wanted to talk more about gender answered: “We should talk about the physical problems of the female workers and how we can be aware of the remedies and precautions.” And another one said: “To continue job, a female has to tackle many family problem. I want to talk about these issues.” Another respondent wanted to share more about her personal and family life, and their financial struggles: “My sufferings. As it is hard for me to maintain my family with this low payment.” So it is clear that we could be asking more direct questions on these topics than we have so far.

The key topic that scored the highest in this category was “Children, Education” (tied for 5th-most mentions overall), the importance of which we can summarize by quoting one respondent: “Our children are lagging behind in case of education, you can ask about the present condition of our children education.” We have asked questions about education, especially their children’s education, and clearly the workers see this as an important topic.

Infrastructure

As one respondent simply put it, they want to talk more “about the environment where we live.” In the context of all responses we received, we took that to include price increases, transportation, and housing.

While we have not published data on price increases, we are aware that garment workers want to discuss this issue. Six workers mentioned transportation as a subject they’d like to discuss more. Here is one of the best representative quotes: “The struggle of a worker gets reduced so much if there is transportation service for everyone. So I want to talk about transportation service.” And here is one more: “It has become an ordeal for me to be present at time in the office coming from my home in the morning. I wish to know if it is possible for the factory to manage transportation system for everyone.”

Benefits

The types of benefits garment workers mentioned in their answers included pensions, insurance, holiday leave, maternity benefits (both allowances and leave), or just benefits in general; as one respondent put it: “Worker friendly services”. Although this category ranks near the bottom in number
of mentions, we have tried to pay attention this important aspect of workers’ lives through our weekly surveys.

In a survey about the Bangladeshi national budget, 26% of workers said that healthcare should have received more priority in the budget. At least a few workers in our study definitely would like to discuss health insurance more. “How are we covering the medical expenses of the sick people in family,” as one respondent told us for this survey. More details about the national budget can be found in our blog here.

And in the first two blogs in our Workplace Contracts series, we asked workers which terms of their contracts they pay the most attention to. In the second of those two blogs, 23% of workers told us that holiday leave terms are what they pay the most attention to. Following that, 25% of respondents said that what they are most afraid of regarding dismissal is being penalized for taking holiday leave. A respondent in this survey confirmed those types of fears by answering: “If they are granted leave in case of sickness and emergency. If the application for leave not granted then if the worker gets laid off for being absent from work or if they get treated with misbehavior.”

“We should talk about how much important it is to have better environment for the day care centre for our babies at the garments and if they can be developed.”

Health

Although respondents seem least interested in being asked health-related questions, we have included these types of questions in our weekly surveys. The high number of health questions we ask could be one reason why workers do not think this is a topic which needs more coverage.

Still, a few garment workers wanted to talk about their own health as well as their family’s: “I along with my husband am suffering from a long term disease. So I want to talk about increasing our medical allowances.” And some want to be able to discuss their children’s health more: “You can ask about the precautions for children to be safe from covid.”

General

While the general category comprised the 3rd-most mentions among key topics, we’ll end with it as a way to reflect on what the GWD initiative means to respondents.

Some of the responses to “Are there any topics or questions that you would want us to ask you about?” were questions about the project itself. For example: “What is our exact benefit from all this questionnaire?” Other answers were statements of praise for the project. Here is one of the best quotes: “I want this project to go on because many people like me will be benefitted from this and also the world will know more about our story.” And other answers were recitations of what the respondent had learned, such as “I have learnt how to keep track of my transactions from here.” These types of responses thus being hard to categorize, we assigned any references the project itself to the General category.

As some of the final quotes we’ll paste below suggest, at least a few of the respondents have expectations that the project has the power to improve their lives. This is a vital finding, and an assumption we feel compelled to encourage. However, it truly is up to other stakeholders to make the necessary moves using the data the workers are supplying. The project on its own does have the power...
to improve workers’ financial skills and hopefully to also boost their feeling of self-empowerment. But the data need to be disseminated widely and effectively for meaningful change to occur.

Regardless, we think that it will be a good idea to continue seeking workers’ feedback on both the project itself and on the questions they are being asked. We might also want to devise methods to relay project successes to them so that they understand how and when their data are being used by stakeholders.

“I think I want to know more about this project and learn more about it. And want my colleagues to know about it more. So if there were surveys about that, that would be helpful.”

“The workers have been benefitted from this project. However, if the owner of the garment factory and other stakeholders use this data to increase workers’ salary then it would have been better. Right now their salary is very low. They can hardly live their day-to-day life with this little amount of money.”

“We are lagging behind in case of the financial aspects comparing to other countries. How can we develop more, we can talk about it.”

“It is a very good project as it helps me financially and I can tell everyone about my work.”