

**GARMENT WORKER DIARIES**

**BANGLADESH**

**WORKING ON TWO FRONTS:**

**GENDER RELATIONS AND FACTORY CONDITIONS**



**GARMENT WORKER DIARIES**

A STUDY OF GARMENT WORKERS'  
LIVES AND WAGES IN BANGLADESH,  
CAMBODIA, AND INDIA.

[www.workerdiaries.org](http://www.workerdiaries.org)

**C&A Foundation**



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# Acknowledgments

Microfinance Opportunities would like to thank C&A Foundation for their support and guidance during this project. The team at Fashion Revolution—especially Sarah Ditty and Heather Knight—have worked tirelessly to support the dissemination of our garment workers’ stories.

The efforts of the research team at BRAC have been invaluable. We would like to thank Waliza Farhana, Faiza Farah Tuba, and Mohammed Anwar Hossain for their outstanding management of data collection operations. We would also like to thank BRAC’s field officers and data entry team for their countless hours of work.

MFO would like to give photo credit to NYU Stern BHR whose photograph was used on the front cover of this report. The photo is titled “Apparel Factory in Dhaka” and can be accessed here: <http://bit.ly/2oWkZEH>.

MFO would also like to extend our sincere thanks to the 182 garment workers in Bangladesh who have volunteered to participate in this study. In spite of their busy schedules and many obligations, they continue to meet with our researchers every week to share the intimate details of their lives with the hope that their stories will improve the lives of garment workers throughout Bangladesh.

# Introduction

**A thin, grey mist spreads throughout the morning air in Akran, a small neighborhood in the manufacturing suburb of Savar, just outside of the city of Dhaka.**

It winds its way through the streets, climbing buildings, depositing tiny dewdrops on windows, leaving faint wet splotches on the awnings that cover nearby market stalls. The mist presses onward to the outskirts of town until it reaches a residential area full of large, single-story stone dwellings.

These dwellings, divided into many separate units, hold small communities of Bangladeshi families. As the mist disperses and the morning's sunbeams reach the homes, the inhabitants stir. They awaken and begin their morning routines: adults wash and dress themselves, cooking breakfast as the children prepare themselves for school. After their morning rituals, adults and older children make their way to agricultural fields, brick factories, and local bazars to try to earn a living, while multitudes of other workers, like Fatema and Halima, make their way to nearby garment factories.

Fatema and Halima politely greet each other on the main road to the Samair neighborhood, about a 30-minute walk away, where both women work at the same factory. After exchanging pleasantries, they begin their trek to their workplace, merging into crowds of workers as they walk towards the factory gates.

Fatema and Halima are two of the roughly four million garment workers employed in the ready-made garment (RMG) sector, Bangladesh's largest export industry. They are also two of the 182 Bangladeshi women who have volunteered to participate in the Garment Worker Diaries, a yearlong project capturing data on the lives of garment workers.

Each week, a team of field researchers from BRAC—a development organization dedicated to empowering people living in poverty and the world's large non-government organization—visits participating workers to ask detailed questions about

their earnings and expenditures, working conditions, daily schedule, physical well-being, and major events that happened in their lives. Analyzing the data across weeks allows us to connect seemingly unrelated events to develop a holistic understanding of the economic realities that participants face.

### **AN INTRODUCTION TO THE GARMENT WORKER DIARIES**

The Garment Worker Diaries is a yearlong research project led by Microfinance Opportunities in collaboration with Fashion Revolution and supported by C&A Foundation. We are collecting data on the lives of approximately 540 garment workers, evenly divided between Bangladesh, Cambodia, and India. The project utilizes the Financial Diaries methodology, a panel survey methodology that collects data on respondents' economic activity on a weekly basis.

To recruit garment workers, MFO and its partners identified major administrative units within these countries—like cities, districts, and provinces—that had high concentrations of garment factories and randomly selected garment workers from within those units. MFO applied screening criteria in order to increase the likelihood of having a stable sample for the yearlong project. This included excluding workers younger than 18, part-time workers, and women who expressed interest in moving locations or factories.

The stories of Fatema and Halima include weekly data from the first full week of August 2016 to the middle of December 2016. Their experiences are much like those of other participants in the study: they have similar demographic profiles; they face similar working conditions; and they have similar economic behaviors. Fatema and Halima also represent two different sub-samples of the Bangladesh respondents. Fatema is indicative of the women who are economically active—she spends the money she earns on rent and other items for her home, and she uses financial services like loans when she is in need—while Halima, who hands her earnings to her husband each month, represents the experience of women with little economic autonomy.

### **A NOTE ON CURRENCY CONVERSION**

On April 10th, 2017, one U.S. dollar equated to about 80 Bangladeshi taka; one British Pound equated to about 100 taka; and one Euro equated to about 85 taka.

# Who Are Fatema and Halima?

**Fatema is 23 years old and has limited formal education, having only completed primary school.**

She lives with her husband, 35-year-old Hasan, and the couple's two sons: Ismail and Jahid, ages seven and five respectively. She works as a helper in the factory, meaning that she supports the machine operators in completing their assignments. Hasan works as a day laborer.

Halima is 31 years old and never received formal education; she can read some but can only write her name. She lives with her husband, Abul, who is 37 years old and their four children: sons Anik, Bappi, and Dev and their daughter Amina. Halima works as a helper in the same factory as Fatema, while Abul works as a day laborer. Her sons Anik and Bappi, ages 17 and 10 respectively, also work in garment factories. Dev and Amina, ages five and seven, are too young to work right now.

Both women live in similar housing conditions—small, single-story, apartment-style homes. Fatema's home has no separate rooms apart from the main living and sleeping area, while Halima's home has its own private kitchen and bathroom in addition to the living area. Both homes are sparsely furnished. Both women own one fan and one mobile phone, and Halima's family owns a television. Neither family owns chairs, tables, nor wardrobes. Instead, they pile their belongings in bags, stacking them along the sides of the room. Each household has regular access to grid electricity and draws its water from a private tubewell.

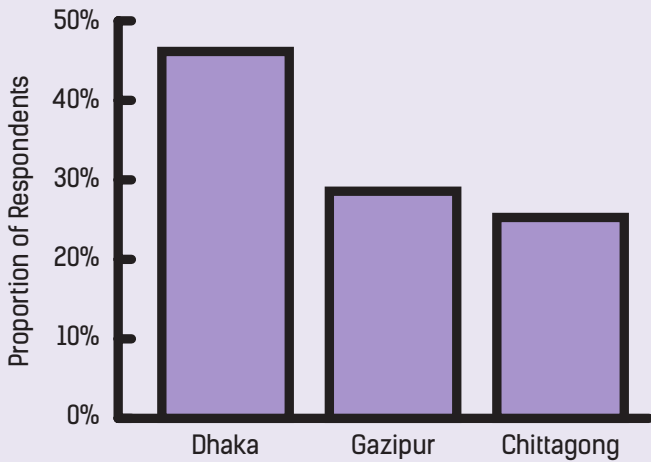
Since Fatema and Halima work in the same factory, their workdays follow a similar schedule. They wake up around 7:00am and take a few minutes to freshen up and prepare their children for the day. Then, they will each trek 30 minutes to work, being sure to arrive promptly before their 8:00am shifts. They will work an average of 10 hours as helpers—an entry-level position where the worker assists machine operators in completing their work assignments. Typically, this work involves repetitive tasks such

as folding cloth, cutting excess fabric from finished garments, and packing and storing completed products. Around noon, they each receive a one-hour lunch break before working another four to six hours and then returning home. Once home, they spend two to three hours performing household chores and looking after their children before taking an hour or two before bed to relax. Each woman will head to bed around midnight, exhausted.

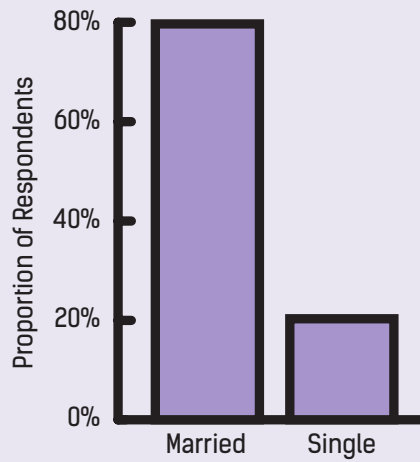
**DATA INSIGHTS: SAMPLE DEMOGRAPHICS**

The average age of garment workers in our sample is 27 years old. The workers live in three districts: Chittagong, Dhaka, and Gazipur. Four-fifths of the sample are married, and the remainder are either single, widowed, or separated. Most respondents have received some formal education with about 33 percent having completed their primary education and another 19 percent having completed their junior-secondary education. However, 15 percent of workers reported either being illiterate or able to only read and write their names. Most respondents live with their family members, and the median household size is four people. The most common factory designation was mid-level machine operator, followed by helper. Workers with an "Other" designation typically operated machinery but had different levels of experience than those listed below.

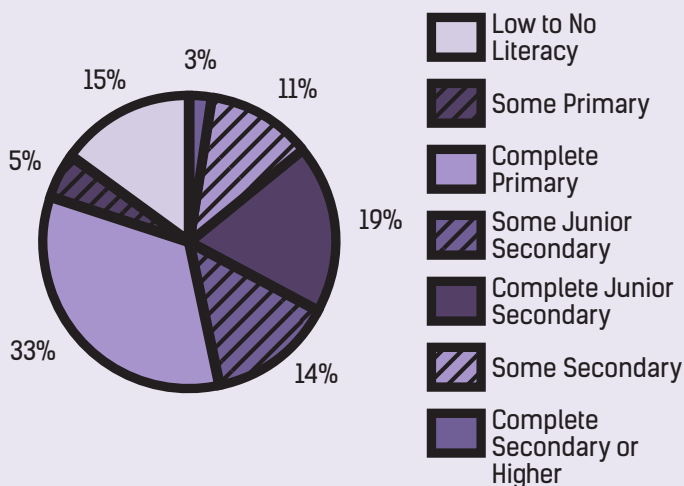
**Figure 1: Distribution of Respondents across Districts**



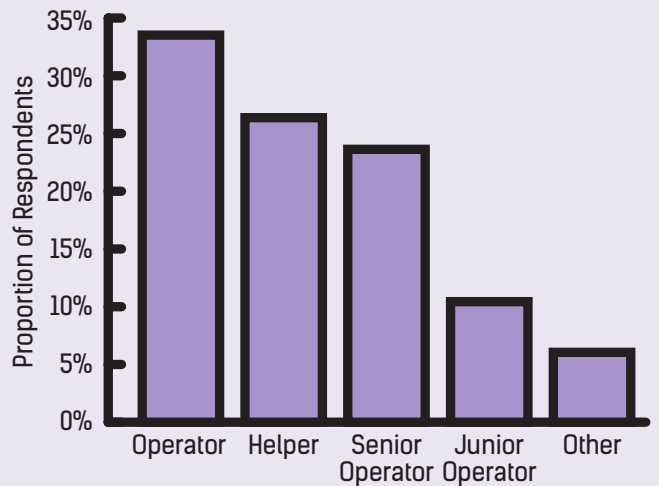
**Figure 2: Respondents' Marital Status**



**Figure 3: Respondents' Education**



**Figure 4: Respondents' Designations**





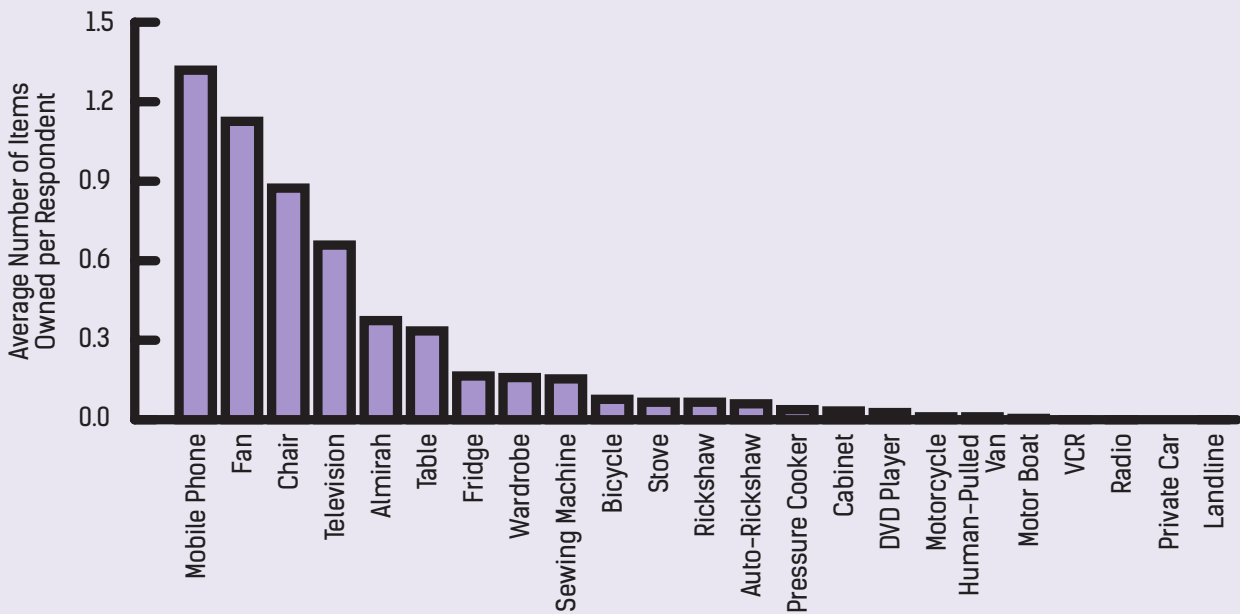
**DATA INSIGHTS: HOUSING CONDITIONS AND ASSET OWNERSHIP**

The typical Bangladeshi garment worker in our study lives in single-story apartment-style dwellings similar to Fatema and Halima’s homes, or they live in small single-story, freestanding homes that are close together. Each of these housing types typically contains only one room: a living and sleeping area, similar to what Fatema has. Most workers do not have their own private kitchen or bathroom. Instead, they share communal cooking and bathing areas with their neighbors. Respondents have somewhat regular access to grid electricity, and they most commonly receive their water either through a private tubewell or directly from a faucet.

Similar to Fatema and Halima, most respondents have fans and mobile phones with every respondent owning at least one, on average. While owning televisions is also fairly common among workers, they are less likely to own a television than they are to own a mobile phone.



Figure 5: Respondents’ Assets



Fatema and Halima’s workdays vary tremendously from their off-days. For example, both women use their off-days to catch up on sleep, receiving about an extra 30 minutes, on average. They also spend an extra 30 to 60 minutes grooming and cleaning themselves, a luxury they normally do not have time for on workdays. They spend more time conducting household chores, talking with friends, and in Halima’s case, watching television. Fatema typically does not have as much leisure time as Halima, whose children are slightly older and can contribute more towards household chores. Fatema also dedicates some of her off-day to conducting prayers and attending religious

meetings. As their days wind down, both women cook dinner for their families and enjoy another hour or two of relaxation before falling asleep.

Figure 6: Fatema's Daily Schedule

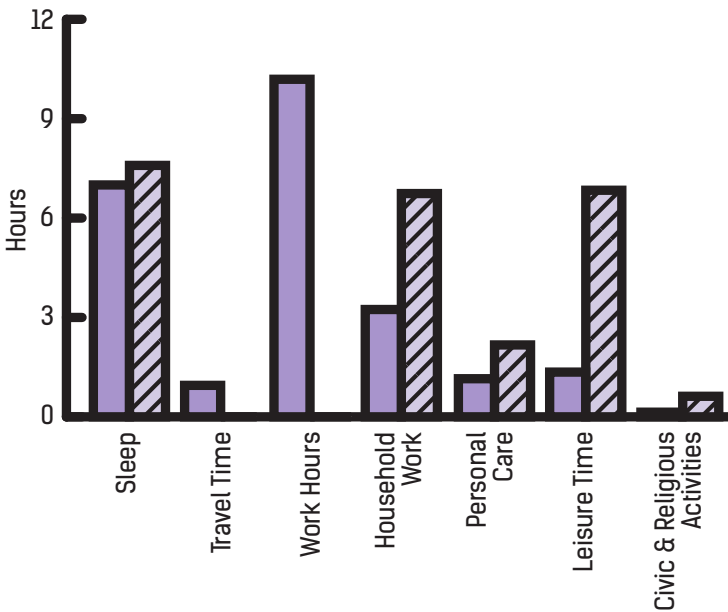
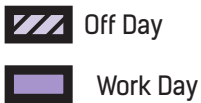
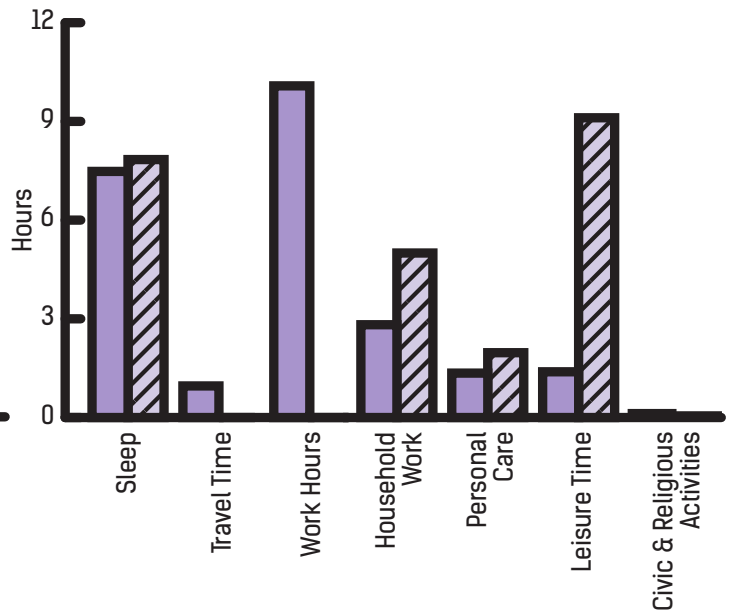


Figure 7: Halima's Daily Schedule



\*Note: The total average number of hours in these figures adds up to greater than 24 for two reasons. First, respondents are asked for how long they slept, and because not all respondents sleep right at midnight, these figures will sometimes include hours from the previous day. This will increase the total average number of hours. Second, we ask our enumerators to collect information in 15-minute increments, rounding up to the nearest figure. This can result in slight over-estimation of time spent on each category.

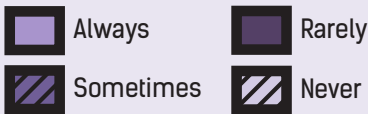
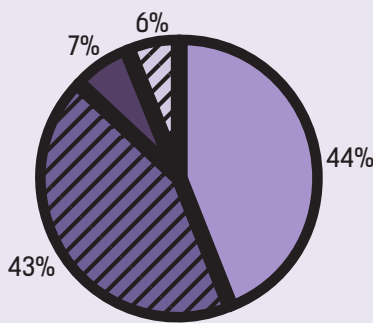
Although both Fatema and Halima work long hours at the factory, they are generally satisfied with their working conditions. Both women feel safe inside their factory some of the time. Their factory has easily accessible and well-marked emergency exits, but it does not have an automatic fire detection system, relying instead on a manual system where workers sound alarms themselves. Neither woman is concerned about chemical smells, floating dust, nor airborne pollutants in the factory. However, both admit that their employer discriminates against workers, stating that gender and pregnancy are influential factors that determine whether their employer hires or fires a worker. They also admit to experiencing verbal abuse while at work. In one particular week in mid-November, Fatema described a week of abuse where her supervisor verbally insulted her each day, all while working a 98-hour workweek.

Despite these conditions, neither woman has joined their factory's union. Halima fears retribution from her employer who might fire her, and Fatema says that she has never been asked to join, so she has not. However, that does not mean that they do not stand up for themselves when the need arises. In one instance in mid-August, their factory manager had delayed their salary payment by almost a week, so the factory workers, including Fatema and Halima, went on strike. They stopped working for six hours, resuming their duties that night after their manager paid them.

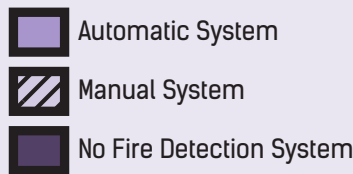
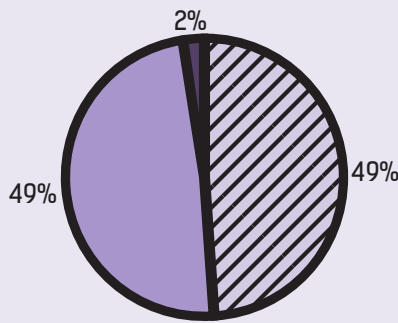
**DATA INSIGHTS: WORKING CONDITIONS**

Only 44 percent of workers reported feeling safe in their factories all the time, while six percent reported that they never felt safe. Workers reported 54 injuries in their factories so far. Most workers' factories have well-marked emergency exits, although there is a varying level of confidence in workers' abilities to use these exits to escape harm. Four fires have broken out in the study so far, and 40 percent of workers reported seeing a fire break out in their current factories at some point during their employment. While most workers' factories are equipped with some type of fire detection system, there is an even divide between whether these systems are manual or automatic.

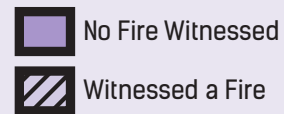
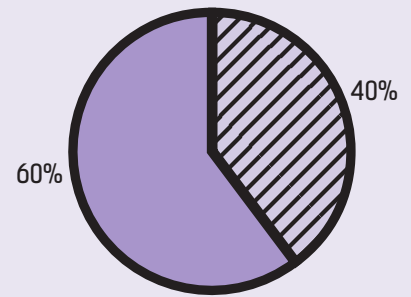
**Figure 8: How Safe Workers Feel Inside their Factories**



**Figure 9: Fire Detection Systems**

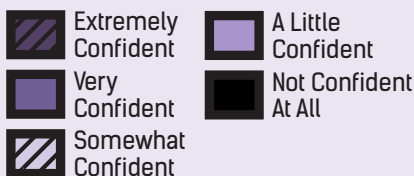
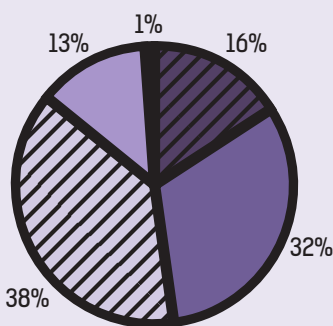


**Figure 10: Fires Seen in Factory**

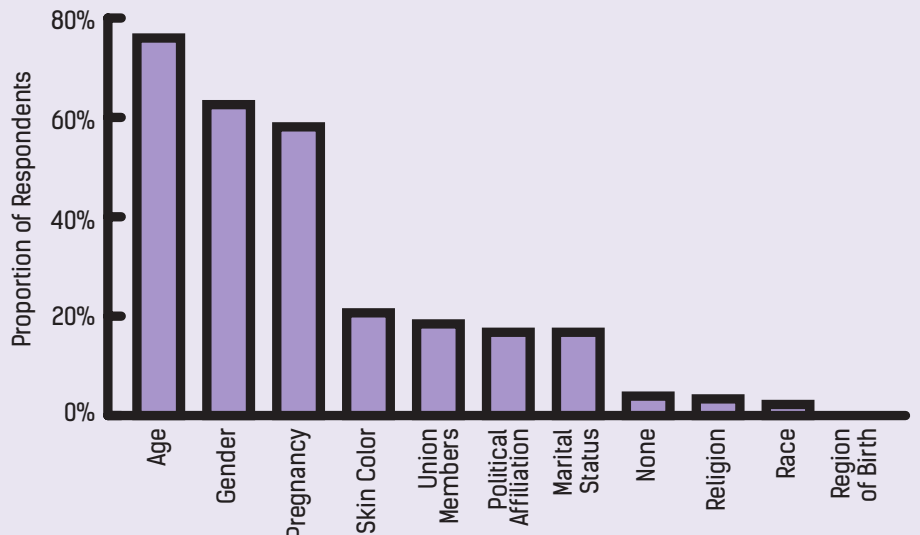


Workers reported that discrimination was often involved in the hiring and firing of other workers in their factories. The most commonly reported type of discrimination was age-based discrimination, and discrimination based on gender and whether a woman is pregnant were common too. Workers reported 369 instances of either experiencing or witnessing harassment in the factory. The most commonly reported type of harassment was verbal. Most workers in the study are not part of a union, although the reasons vary as to why. Some have no unions in their factories, while others see no benefit to joining a union or fear repercussions, like losing their jobs.

**Figure 11: Confidence in Using Emergency Exits**



**Figure 12: Types of Discrimination in Factories**



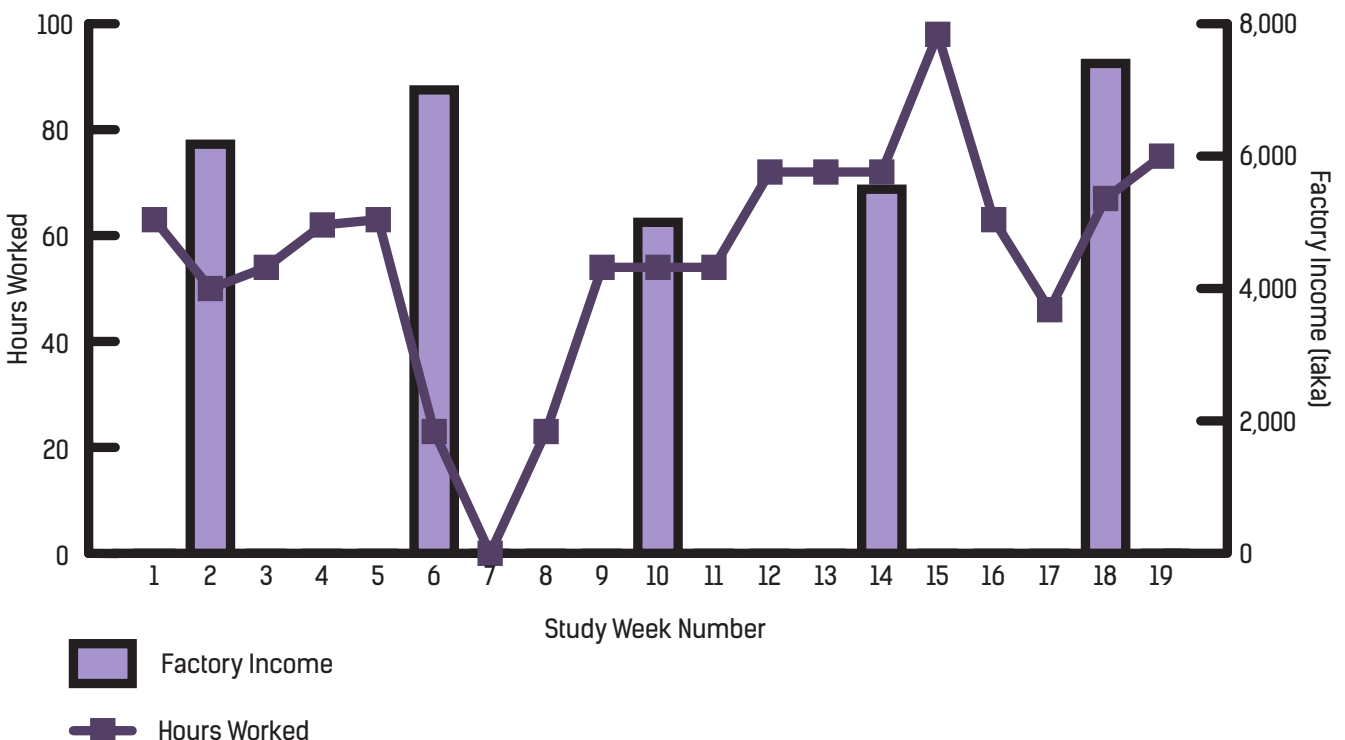
# Comparing Their Stories

**Despite living in similar conditions and working in similar roles, the data reveal differences in each woman's level of economic autonomy. While their levels of autonomy differ, both face harsh economic realities.**

## Fatema

Fatema worked an average of 56 hours each week, and she earned an average of 26 taka per hour, slightly more than the 25 taka per hour minimum wage for garment workers in Bangladesh. While Fatema's average hours are under the legal maximum of 60 hours per week, she worked more than the maximum in half of the weeks we interviewed her. This peaked in mid-November during Week 15 when she worked a total of 98 hours.

**Figure 13: Fatema's Factory Hours and Income**



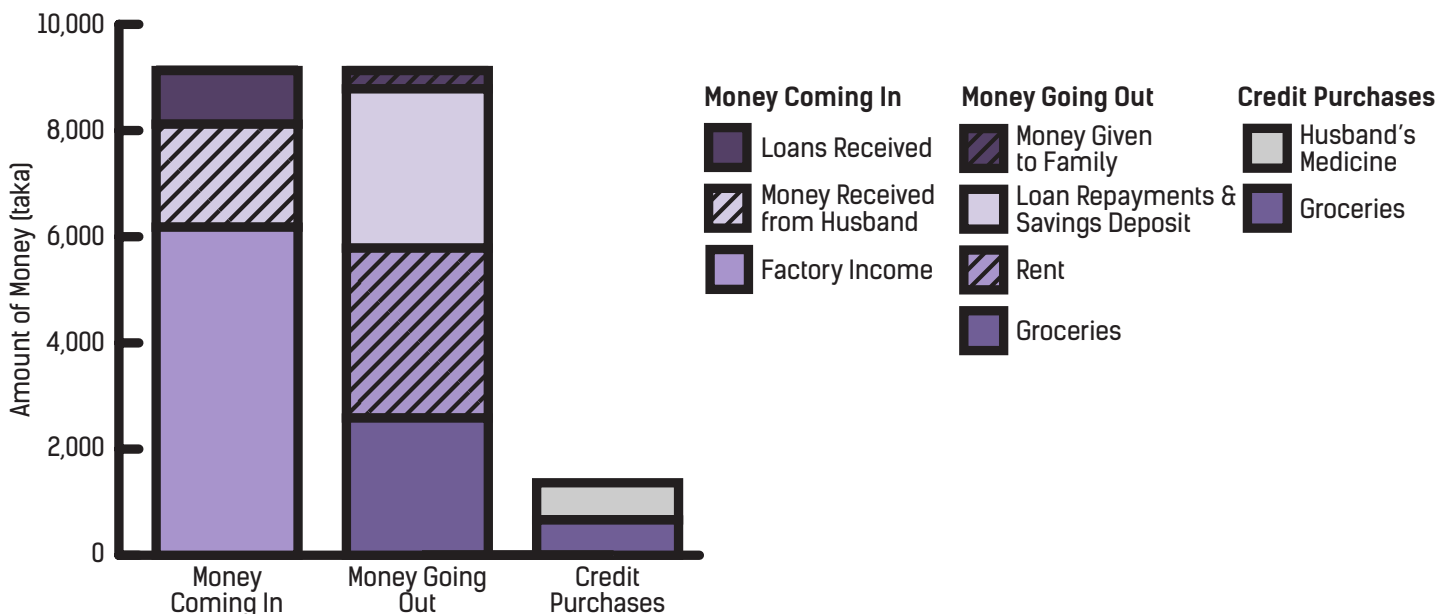


Fatema’s pay reflected her volatile hours, but regardless of the amount, she faced meaningful economic hardships. For instance, Fatema received 6,180 taka in August. The next week, she paid her landlord 3,200 taka for one and one-half months of rent and utilities. Apart from rent, Fatema had other regular payments that she had to make, including a 2,000-taka loan repayment to BRAC and a 500-taka savings deposit into a BRAC savings account.<sup>1</sup> Her two expenses and the savings deposit used almost all her earnings for the month.

This put her in a difficult position the following week. Hasan became ill and needed treatment, but after spending her salary on her other obligations, Fatema could not afford the 700-taka medicine that he needed. Thankfully, she had developed a strong business-relationship with a shopkeeper nearby, Anwar, from whom she would normally purchase household goods. He had the medicine that she needed and was willing to provide it to her on credit since it was an emergency. While Hasan recovered, Fatema’s financial situation had worsened. She had no cash from her salary left, meaning she needed a source of money to pay for basic household needs.

She received the cash in the form of a 1,000-taka loan from her neighbor. She used half to make a partial repayment to Anwar for the medicine and the remainder to purchase groceries for her family. These purchases provided Fatema with the basics for this week, but she would still need more money to ensure that she had enough food for the rest of the month. Fortunately, with Hasan back to work, he could provide her with money to help cover the household’s expenses. In total, he provided her with 1,940 taka.

**Figure 14: Fatema’s August Summary**



<sup>1</sup> BRAC’s microfinance programme offers a range of financial services to poor and low-income households nationwide that include credit, savings, and microinsurance. They also provide access to mobile money service - bKash, financial literacy training, and additional finance options for households faced with health- or weather-related emergencies. In Fatema’s case, she received a loan from BRAC, and as part of her repayment plan, she agreed to make small deposits into a savings account. Future interviews will try to learn what she plans on using her savings for.

Fatema used the money to purchase groceries, both in cash and on credit, from Anwar. Fatema also had enough money left over from the loan and Hasan's cash transfers that she could hand a little money back to Hasan and give Ismail some spending money. By the end of the month, she had almost no cash left.

### DATA INSIGHTS: MINIMUM WAGE AND WORKING HOURS

Almost three-quarters of the Bangladeshi workers in our study receive an average hourly wage above the 25 taka per hour minimum. In 75 percent of the weeks collected so far, respondents have worked overtime, and in almost 50 percent of the weeks collected so far, respondents have worked more than 60 hours per week.

Figure 15: Workers Receiving Minimum Wage

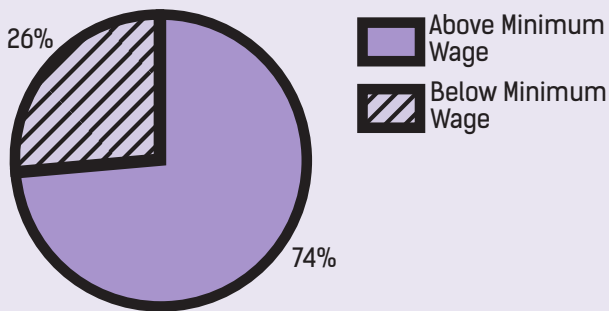
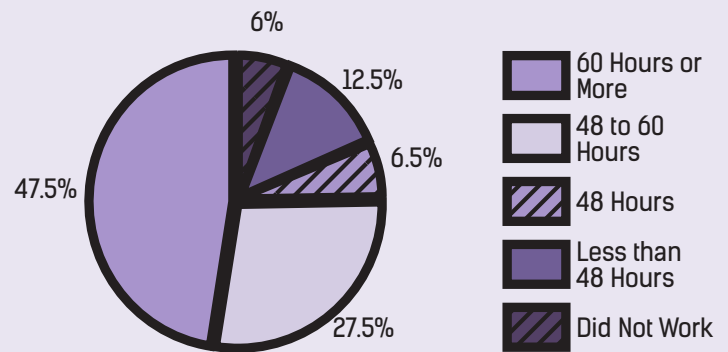


Figure 16: Length of Workweeks



Towards the end of August, Fatema's factory was preparing for the upcoming Eid holiday. The workers were going to receive time off, but they still had to meet the orders that would be due during the holiday, so Fatema and her co-workers had to work several weeks of overtime. For the long hours, she received a larger salary in September: 7,000 taka. However, she quickly spent this money as she did in August. She owed 2,400 taka to her landlord for rent and utilities and another 2,000 taka to Anwar for her previous months' credit purchases. Typically, Fatema would also have to make her loan repayment and savings deposit to BRAC, but she knew that if she paid them, then she would not be able to afford the groceries she needed before Eid. She decided to hold off on the BRAC payments and purchased groceries instead. She also visited Anwar's shop and acquired a new dress and four kilograms of beef on credit for her Eid feast.

After failing to make her BRAC payments on time, Fatema received a visitor: her loan officer. He explained to her the importance of paying on time and asked to receive the money shortly so that Fatema would not default on her payments. With money in short supply, Fatema financed her loan repayment by taking on a different debt: she received a 2,500-taka loan from her neighbor and gave the money to her loan officer for the repayment and savings deposit.

## DATA INSIGHTS: HOUSEHOLD PURCHASES

As a whole, our workers have a similar spending profile as Fatema. Workers spend the most per week, on average, on food purchases, but rent payments are a close second. When looking at per transaction spending, we see that rent payments are by far the most expensive. The second most expensive type of purchase per transaction, household items, is roughly one-fifth the size of a rent payment for the average worker in our study. Food purchases were the cheapest item, costing only 71 taka per purchase.

Figure 17: Average Household Spending per Week

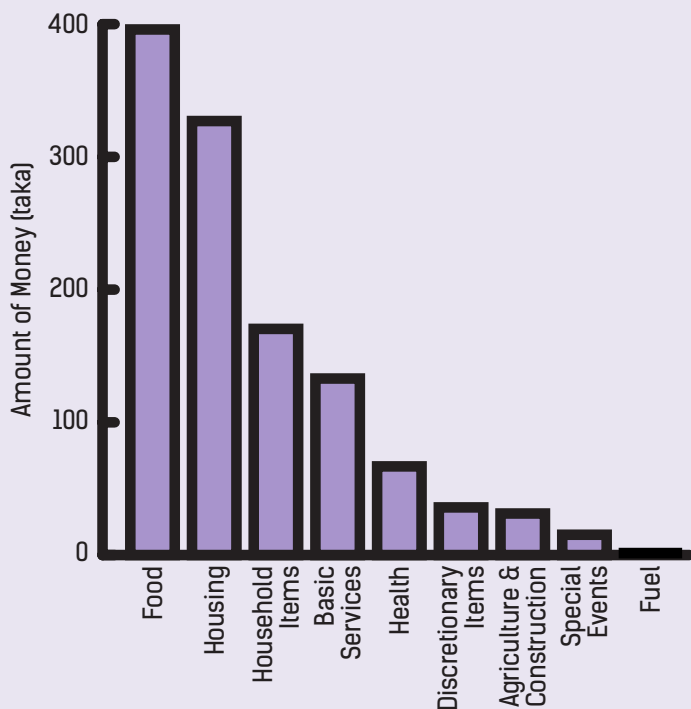
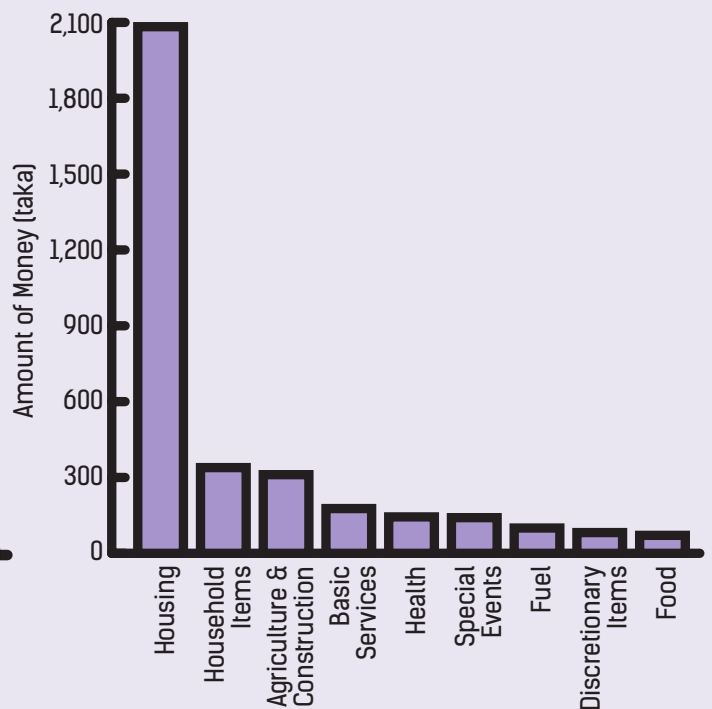


Figure 18: Average Household Spending per Transaction

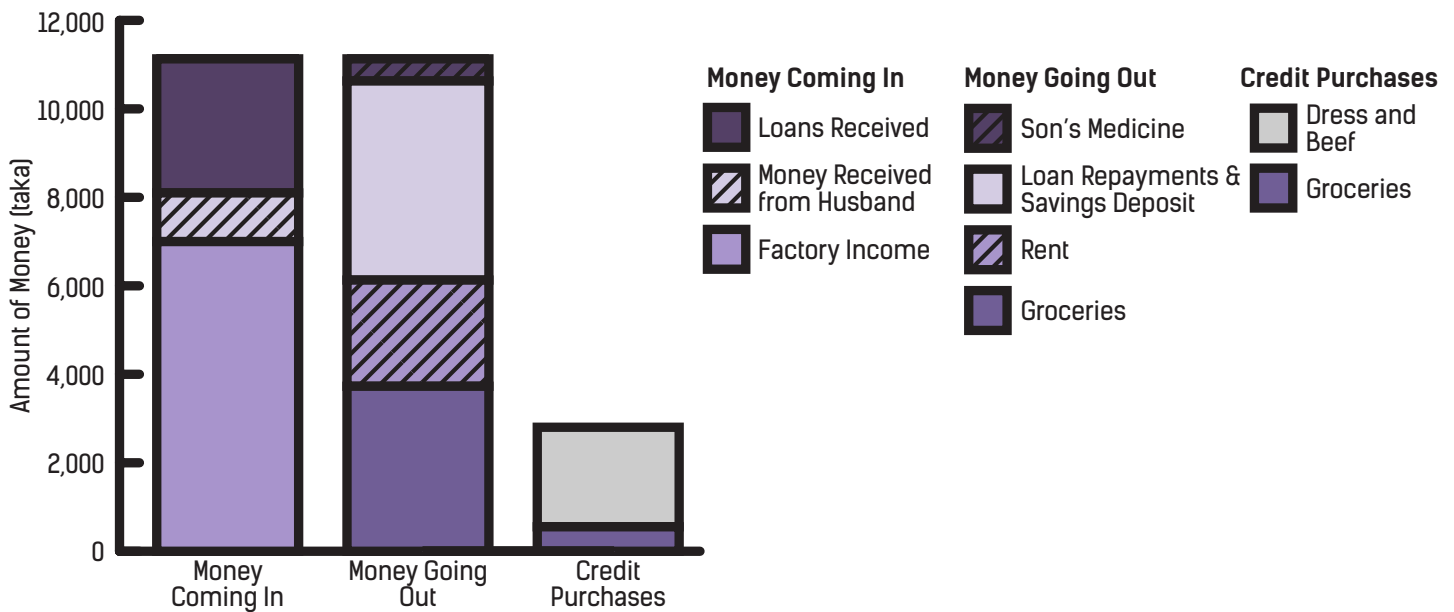


In Figure 17, we see that workers spend an average of about 300 taka per week on “Housing,” which includes both rent and utility bills. However, it should be noted that this figure includes data from workers who do not make rent payments—about one-third of the sample has not paid rent in the study so far. These workers’ data drive down the average weekly spending on housing since they do not spend money on this. Similarly, in Figure 18, because the “Housing” category includes utility bill payments, which are smaller than rent payments, the average amount spent per “Housing” transaction is smaller than the average rent payment. If we exclude utility bill payments, we see that the average size per rent payment is actually 2,575 taka, while the average utility bill payment is only 332 taka.

This situation worsened in the following week when Fatema received a call while at work: Jahid had an accident and had injured himself. Fatema requested time off, but her supervisor refused to grant it before seeing the injured boy to verify that Fatema was telling the truth. After seeing the injured Jahid, Fatema’s supervisor granted her leave for the rest of the week.

She quickly travelled to her neighbor’s home and asked for another 500-taka loan, which the neighbor agreed to provide. She immediately used this to purchase medicine that would help her son. While she had averted the crisis, she now owed her neighbor 3,000 taka, and she continued to purchase items from Anwar on credit. Hasan provided Fatema with 1,100 taka to help purchase more items as well, but by the end of month, she had spent it all.

**Figure 19: Fatema’s September Summary**

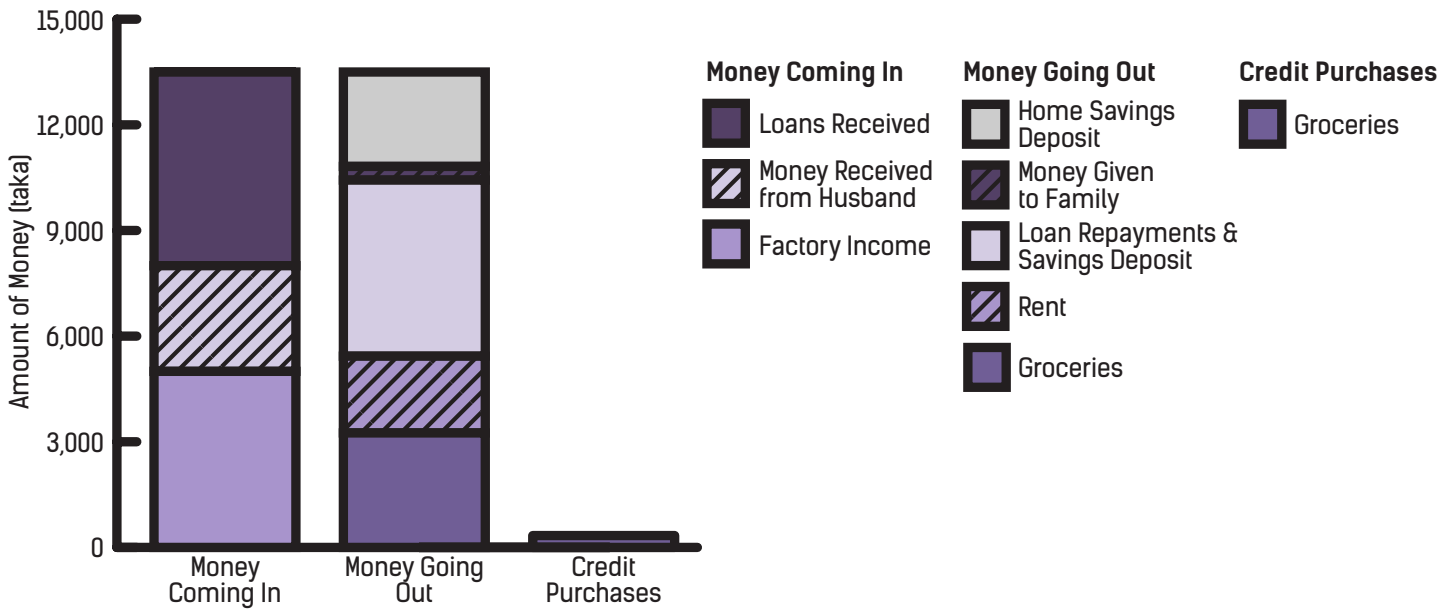


Fatema’s October salary was smaller than her previous ones because of the holiday and her time off caring for Jahid: she received only 5,000 taka for the month. Although her income was smaller, her usual bills were due. On the same day that she received her salary, she paid 2,180 taka for rent and utilities; 2,000 taka to a lender in Netrakona from whom Hasan had borrowed money; and 500 taka to her neighbor to help pay down her debt. These payments nearly depleted her salary, and Fatema still had more payments to make.

The following day, Fatema visited her neighbors and sought 5,500 taka in loans. They provided her with the money, and she quickly used it to make her loan repayment and savings deposit to BRAC. With the remaining money, Fatema traveled to Anwar’s shop and purchased food and household items with a mix of cash and credit. Fatema also received 3,000 taka from Hasan. While she made a few more purchases for household necessities, Fatema was able to deposit most of this sum into her home savings knowing she would need to use it soon.

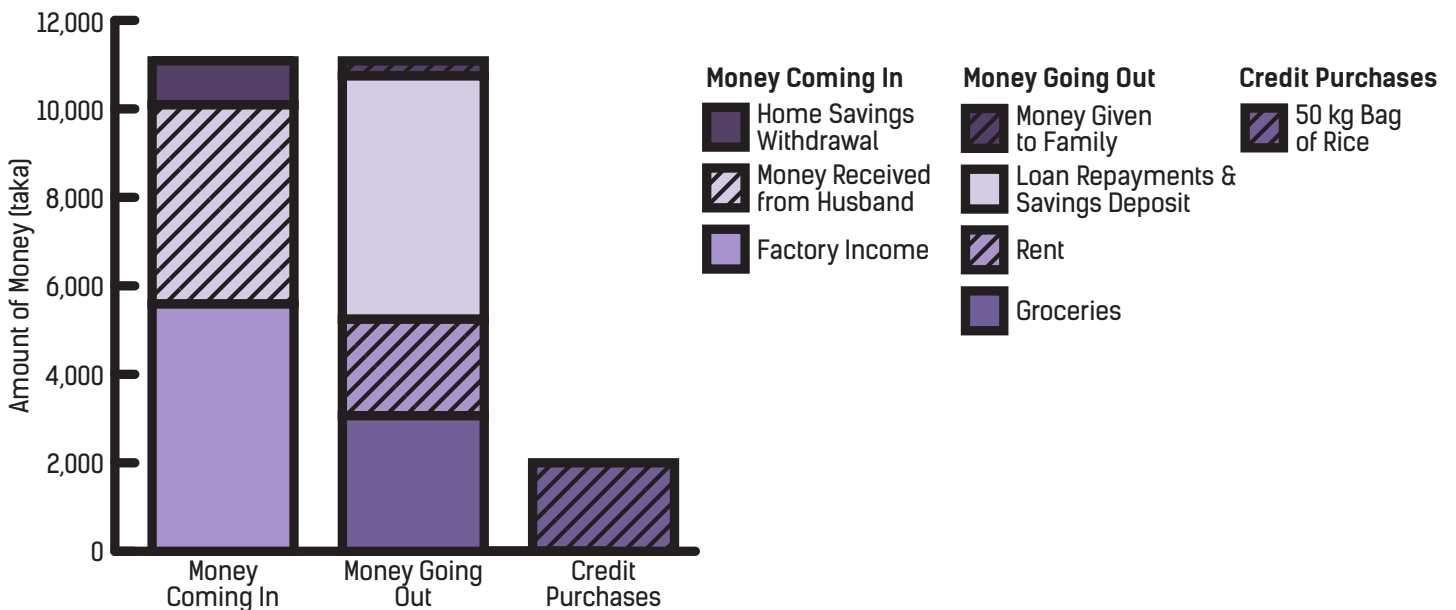


**Figure 20: Fatema’s October Summary**



In November, Fatema received a 5,500 taka from her employer. She purchased a few food items to feed her family for the week. Afterwards, she made a withdrawal from her home savings and used her remaining salary to pay her usual set of bills: 2,180 taka for rent and utilities; 2,000 taka to BRAC for a loan repayment; and 500 taka to BRAC for a savings deposit. She also used the money to repay 1,000 taka to Anwar, and while at his shop, she acquired a 50-kilogram bag of rice on credit. Using money that she received from Hasan, she also paid 2,000 taka to the lender in Netrakona.

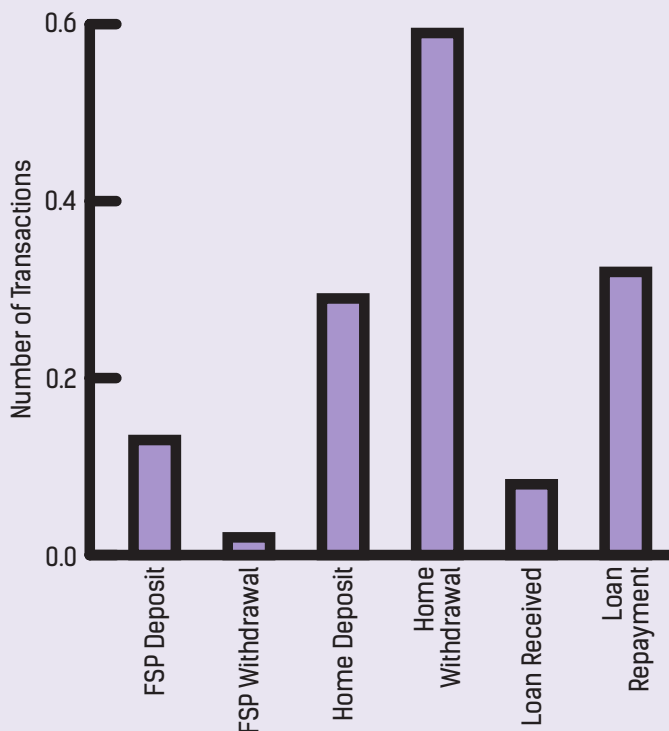
**Figure 21: Fatema’s November Summary**



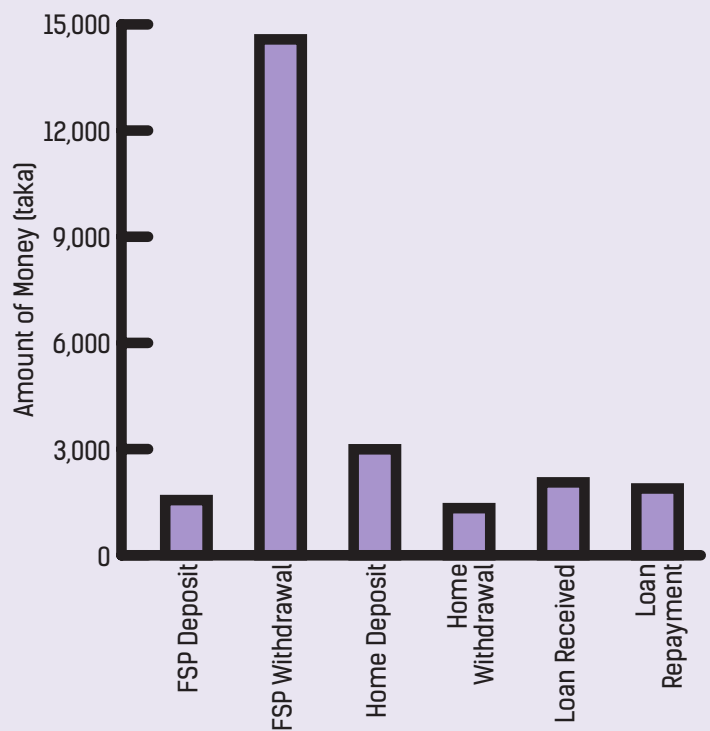
## DATA INSIGHTS: SAVINGS ACCOUNTS AND LOANS

Garment workers, like Fatema, used savings accounts and loans somewhat often. On average, workers received a loan once every three months, and they deposited money into a non-home savings account (e.g. bank account, savings group, cooperative, etc.) once every two months. They also made deposits into home savings a little over once every three weeks, on average. Typically, workers made larger deposits into their home savings than into their other savings accounts. And while workers made home savings withdrawals more often than they used other tools, these withdrawals tended to be smaller, on average, than other types of financial transactions.

**Figure 22: Average Number of Financial Transactions per Week\***



**Figure 23: Average Size of Financial Transactions**



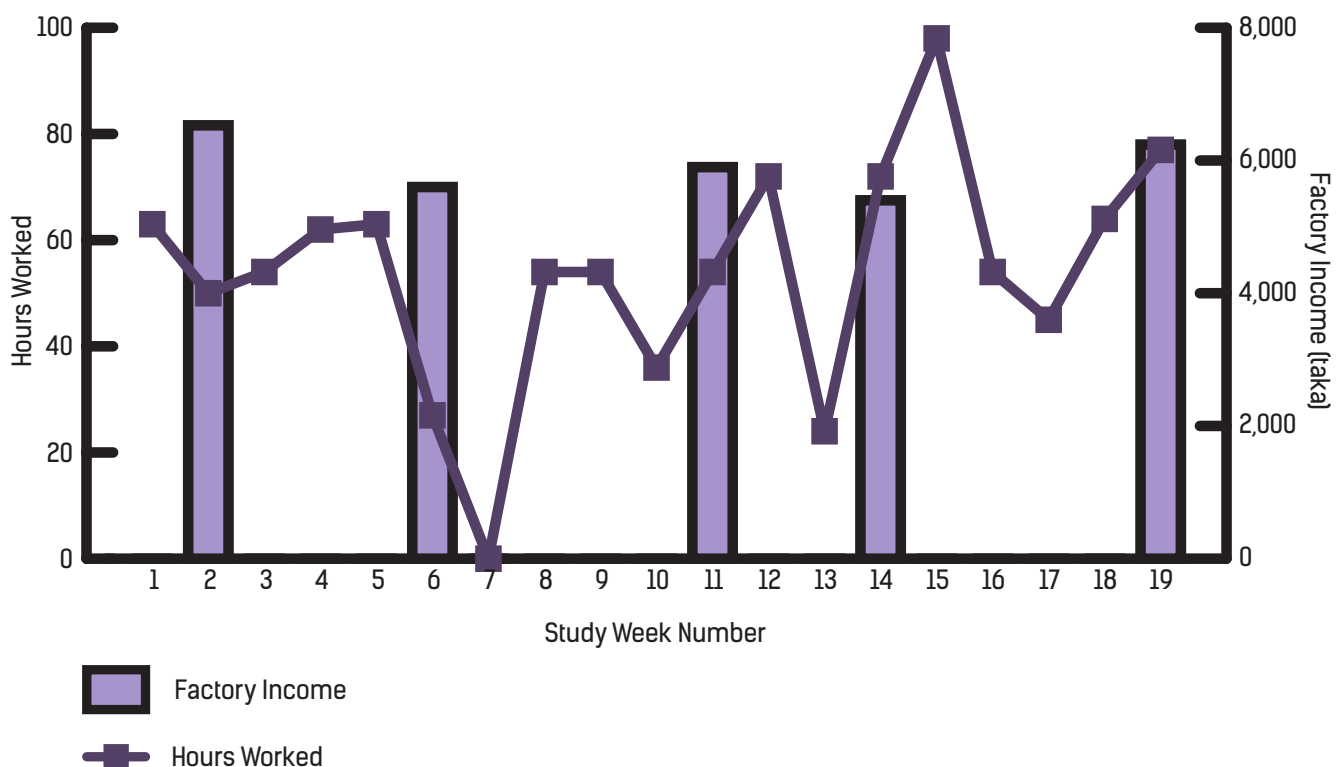
\*Note: For reference, 0.2 transactions per week equates to one transaction per five weeks; 0.4 transactions per week equates to one transaction per two and one-half weeks; and so on.

In total, Hasan provided Fatema with 4,500 taka over the course of the month. Fatema used most of this money to purchase household needs, such as food, soap, and airtime. Fatema also handed some of it to Ismail and Jahid, as well as giving a bit back to Hasan. Fatema received a 90-taka allowance from the factory for working overtime one week. She used it, along with some of the money she received from Hasan, to make a 500-taka repayment to her neighbor. She and Hasan used the remaining money to purchase more food for the family.

## Halima

Halima worked a similar schedule to Fatema, averaging 54 hours per week from August through mid-December. Unlike Fatema though, Halima earned less per hour—on average, she received 24 taka per hour, below the legal minimum wage of 25 taka per hour. As with Fatema, Halima also often worked over 60 hours, doing so in almost half of the weeks in this period. Again, this peaked in mid-November when she too worked 98 hours in one week.

**Figure 24: Halima's Factory Hours and Income**



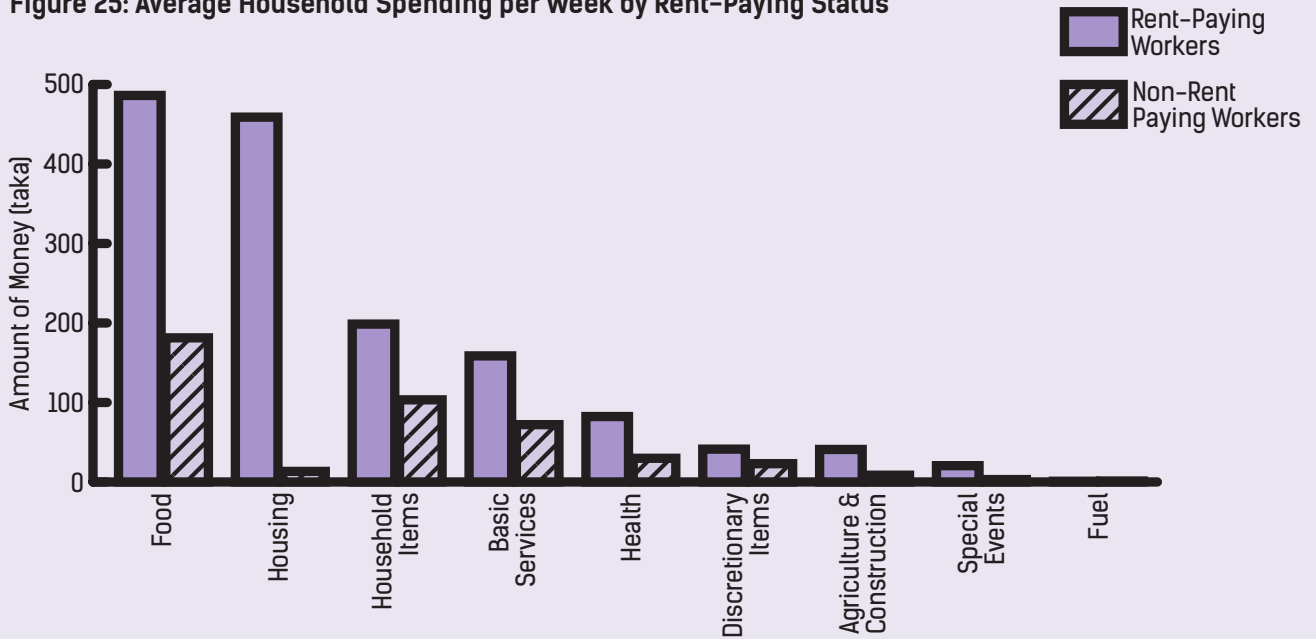
Despite earning a similar amount to Fatema, Halima exercised far less control over her earnings. For instance, Fatema made an average of 16 household purchases per week, while Halima made an average of one to two household purchases per week. Such few transactions suggest that Halima had little to no responsibility for purchasing basic household necessities. Halima's husband, Abul, was most likely the one who would purchase household necessities and manage the household's money. However, just because Halima was not in charge of her household's finances did not mean she was an idle actor.

Halima reported very few transactions during the start of the study in August. She made a small home savings withdrawal of 60 taka and used a small amount of it each night to hire a rickshaw ride home from the factory each night that she worked. On Thursday, after striking with her colleagues, she received her salary for 6,530 taka, purchased almost 2,000-taka worth of groceries, and paid 250 taka for her electric and cable bills.

## DATA INSIGHTS: COMPARING RENT-PAYING AND NON-RENT PAYING WORKERS

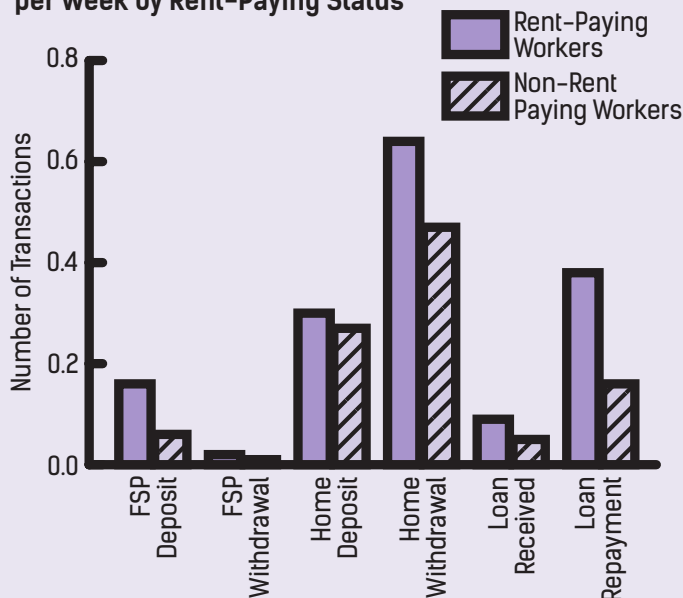
The power of the Financial Diaries data is the ability to reveal different economic behaviors over time across a sample. For our Bangladeshi workers, the clearest differences in economic behavior were between workers who pay rent and those who do not. Non-rent paying workers conducted about half as many transactions per week and spent less money per week than rent-paying workers did.

**Figure 25: Average Household Spending per Week by Rent-Paying Status**

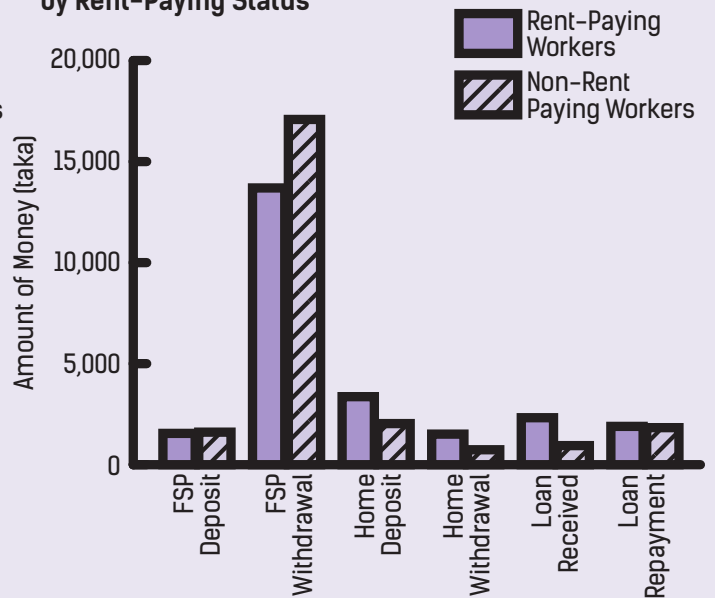


There were also differences in how these groups used financial tools, like savings and loans. Rent-paying workers made greater use of loans than non-rent paying workers did, and the average size of these loans was greater as well. Rent-paying workers made deposits into a non-home savings account more frequently, and while the size of these deposits was similar for both groups, rent-paying workers made larger home deposits, on average, than non-rent paying workers did.

**Figure 26: Average Number of Financial Transactions per Week by Rent-Paying Status**



**Figure 27: Average Size of Financial Transactions by Rent-Paying Status**





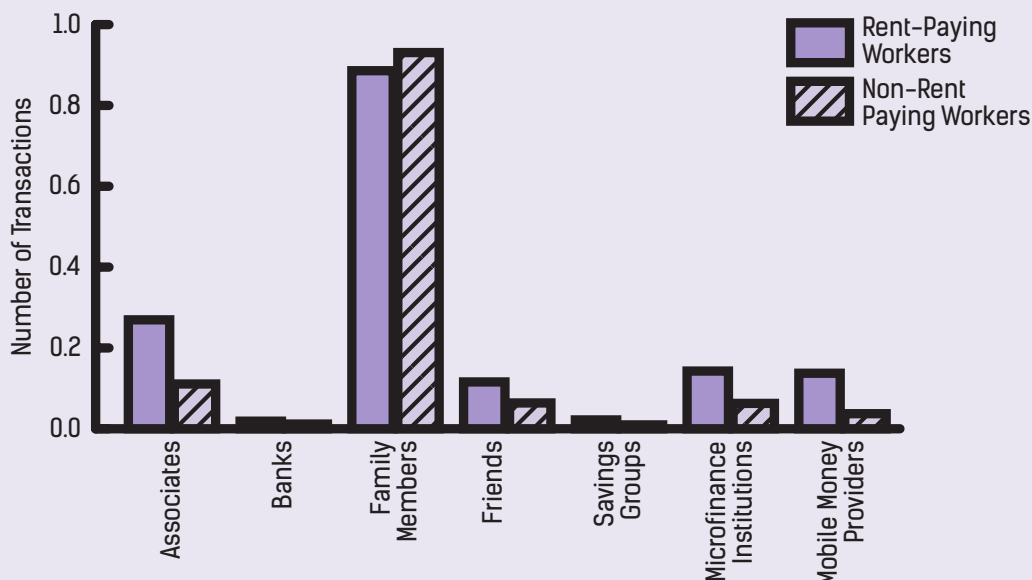
Halima had very few transactions during the rest of the month. Instead of regularly purchasing household goods and paying for emergencies like Fatema did, Halima purchased the intermittent cosmetic or recreational item, and she would occasionally hire a rickshaw to take her to and from the factory. Aside from this, she made no large grocery purchases and made no use of financial tools like savings or loans. There were four instances in this month when she gave small sums of money to Anik, Bappi, or Amina. After all these expenses, Halima had 3,635 taka, which she deposited into her home savings.

On the Monday before she expected to receive her September paycheck, Halima became ill and needed to visit a doctor. She withdrew 210 taka from the money she had saved the previous week and purchased medicine for 100 taka. She then gave out another 100 taka to her children. On the following Sunday, she made her usual walk to work and received her salary for 5,600 taka. She used the last 10 taka from her withdrawal to transport herself home. Once there, she deposited 600 taka into her home savings and handed the remaining 5,000 taka to Abul.

## DATA INSIGHTS: FINANCIAL NETWORKS

Garment workers in Bangladesh generally rely on informal networks when using financial tools. However, they do use formal financial service providers (FSPs) on occasion. Rent-paying workers, though, are more likely to interact with formal FSPs than non-rent paying workers are. In fact, rent-paying workers generally interacted with non-family networks more often than non-rent paying workers did, and in turn, non-rent paying workers were more likely to interact with family members. This difference implies that rent-paying workers are more likely to look for financial assistance—loans, cash transfers, savings tools, etc.—outside of their household, while non-rent paying workers have a greater dependency on family members when looking for financial assistance.

Figure 28: Financial Network Use by Rent-Paying Status



Over the course of the next four weeks, Halima conducted few transactions. Her only major expenses during this time were for hiring a rickshaw to and from work, which she purchased with money she received from Abul.

On the Saturday before receiving her October paycheck, Halima became ill again. She started experiencing severe pain in her waist and needed to see a doctor. She requested leave from her factory for Saturday and Sunday due to the pain. Abul brought Halima to the hospital where she received treatment. Unlike her previous illness, when Halima used her savings to finance her medical payments, Abul covered all her expenses. After receiving treatment, her pain subsided, and she returned to work on Monday.

During the next week, Halima received 20 taka from Abul, which she used to transport herself home from work twice. On Thursday, she received her October salary for 5,900 taka. She immediately handed 5,800 taka to Abul, and with the remaining 100 taka, she repaid a shopkeeper for some basic household items that she had purchased on credit earlier in the week. In the following week, Halima received a 20-taka loan repayment from one of her co-workers to whom she had previously loaned money; she then immediately dispersed this money to her sons, Anik and Bappi, and to her daughter, Amina. For the rest of October, Halima made no purchases.

In the week just before Halima received her November salary, her youngest son, Dev, broke his hand. Halima immediately requested time off for work, knowing that she would need to care for her son during his recovery. Halima and Abul brought Dev to the hospital where he met with a doctor who attended to his hand. Abul paid the hospital for the services that it provided, and Halima returned home with her son, helping him recover for the remainder of the week.

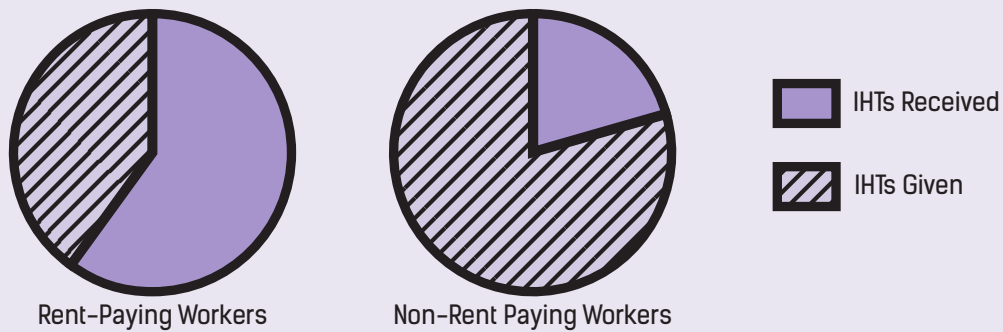
The rest of November and early December were also economically bare for Halima. She received 5,400 taka from the factory and immediately handed over the entire amount to Abul. In the following weeks, Halima continued to make few transactions. She received another 20 taka from Abul so that she could hire a rickshaw home on two different nights, but otherwise had no transactions to report throughout the middle of November. In the last week of the month, Halima received a small allowance of 95 taka from her supervisor. After receiving this money, she purchased a few recreational items, like betel nuts and tobacco, before handing the remainder over to her sons and daughter.

**DATA INSIGHTS: INTRA-HOUSEHOLD TRANSFERS**

Intra-household transfers (IHTs) are transfers of cash that one household member makes to another household member. Fatema and Halima used these transfers differently.

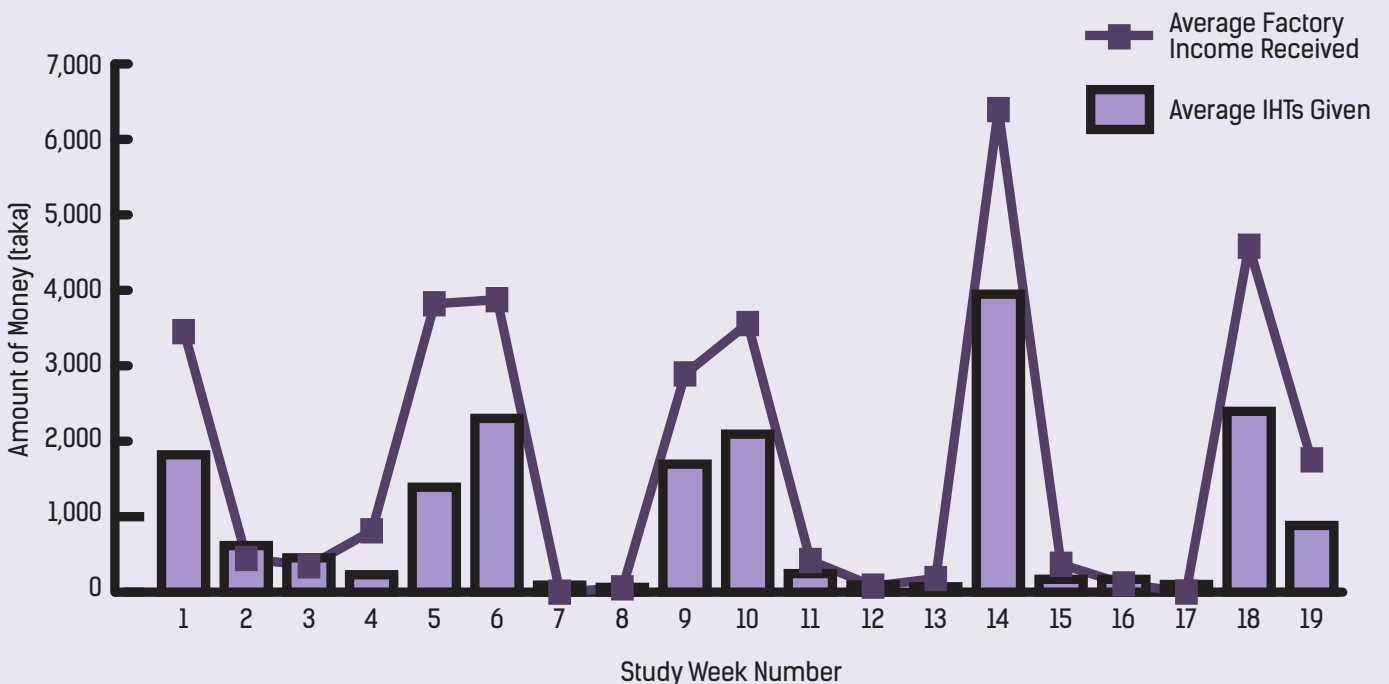
Fatema occasionally provided money to her husband or sons. Hasan also shared some of his earnings with her to help contribute towards the household, but neither Fatema nor Hasan ever transferred his or her entire salary to the other person. Halima was the opposite—she regularly transferred most, if not all, of her salary to Abul and only occasionally received transfers in return. These different behaviors summarize another difference between rent-paying and non-rent paying workers in Bangladesh. Rent-paying workers are more likely to receive more money than they give out, while the reverse is true for the non-rent paying workers. Non-rent paying workers also give larger IHTs, on average, to “heads” of the household, such as parents, husbands, and in-laws.

**Figure 29: Flow of Intra-Household Transfers by Rent-Paying Status**



The large IHTs that non-rent paying workers give to other household members are generally timed with salary payments, suggesting that non-rent paying respondents are handing over large portions of their earnings to their household’s head. This behavior does not hold true for rent-paying workers.

**Figure 30: Intra-Household Transfers Given and Factory Income Received for Non-Rent Paying Workers**



# Working on Two Fronts

**Fatema and Halima's stories are playing out against the backdrop of a society with slowly changing gender relations and an industry that is sluggishly improving working conditions and pay.**

Bangladesh has a long history of patriarchal family structures that often leave women with little to no economic freedoms. Such family structures are much more prevalent in rural areas of Bangladesh where women do not have many employment opportunities.<sup>2</sup> However, the rise of the ready-made garment (RMG) industry in Bangladesh has increased the economic freedoms of women working in the industry. Earning a regular wage and interacting with a larger social network outside of the home have empowered women to take on greater economic roles within their households.<sup>3</sup> Fatema is one example of this from our project. While these women are breaking the traditional gender mold, they are facing new challenges brought by their economic freedom: navigating monthly rent payments, medical emergencies, and financial obligations all while keeping their families fed with only a paltry income.

However, these freedoms have not reached all women in the RMG sector. Halima, who seems to live in a more traditional family, hands her money to Abul each month so that he can manage the household's finances. The data suggest that Abul appears to care for his family, but Halima has no real say over how the money she earns is spent.

When Fatema and Halima go to work, they enter another environment that is also undergoing change, albeit slowly. As their stories show, working conditions are poor. Workers labor for long hours for little pay while being verbally abused by supervisors. In addition, Bangladesh is notorious for poor safety conditions that lead to building

<sup>2</sup> Anderson, Siwan and Mukesh Eswaran (2005): "What Determines Female Autonomy? Evidence from Bangladesh", Department of Economics, University of British Columbia.

<sup>3</sup> Karim, Lamia (2014): "Analyzing Women's Empowerment: Microfinance and Garment Labor in Bangladesh", The Fletcher Forum of World Affairs, Vol. 38:2 Summer 2014.

collapses and fires. The results of deferred safety improvements have been catastrophic with the worst in recent years being the Tazreen and Rana Plaza disasters which left 1,300 garment workers dead. Following these events, enormous pressure from a variety of stakeholders forced the Bangladeshi government and multi-national clothing brands to address the safety conditions inside factories.

This push to increase the transparency and quality of working conditions has the potential to affect the lives of Fatema and Halima positively. For instance, in 2014, inspectors from the Accord on Fire and Building Safety (the Accord) visited Fatema and Halima's factory. The inspectors found that Fatema and Halima's employer had been regularly subjecting them to unsafe conditions. Supervisors were storing materials in the emergency exits, making them difficult for workers to access. Exits were not a safe distance away from work areas, meaning that workers might face harm if a fire broke out. Hazardous and flammable materials were sitting in the work area instead of being stored in separate, fire-resistant rooms, and loose electrical wires were uncovered on wet and dirty floors. Even worse, the factory's columns were over-loaded, and the building had two extra stories at the top making it structurally unstable. Inspectors provided the factory owner with a list of changes that he needed to make. He has made some improvements in the past three years, but progress has been slow, and workers remain exposed to unsafe conditions.

Inspections like this one are part of a broad but gradual attempt to improve conditions in Bangladesh's factories. The government and other local stakeholders developed the National Tripartite Plan of Action on Fire Safety and Structural Integrity, which sought to pass new legislation protecting workers' rights and safety, improve government oversight, and conduct numerous activities aimed at inspecting factories' conditions. The government has passed few reforms since the initial response. As of 2015, the government had only implemented plans to address seven of the 25 goals outlined in the National Tripartite Plan of Action.<sup>4</sup>

For their part, clothing brands signed onto the Accord and the Alliance for Bangladesh Workers' Safety (the Alliance). Both groups have committed to inspecting their signatories' factories and improving safety conditions by requiring their factories to implement corrective action plans (CAPs) that address identified fire, electrical, and structural hazards. Unfortunately, factories have not made much progress after being inspected by the Accord or Alliance. The Accord reports that almost 85 percent of the factories it has inspected are behind schedule on completing their CAPs, and the

<sup>4</sup> Khan, Mohd Raisul Islam; Wichterich, Christa (2015): "Safety and labour conditions: The accord and the national tripartite plan of action for the garment industry of Bangladesh", Global Labour University Working Paper, No. 38

Alliance reports that only six percent of the factories it has inspected have completed their CAPs. One cause of the delays is limited funding going towards repairs.<sup>5</sup>

While stakeholders work on improving safety conditions, other issues continue to plague workers. In December 2016, thousands of workers in Ashulia, many without access to a union at their factory, went on strike to protest rising food and housing costs and low wages that left workers unable to afford these necessities.<sup>6</sup> The strike lasted one week before factory and government leaders temporarily shut down all factories and deployed police. Hundreds of workers were fired in the following weeks, and numerous protest and union leaders were arrested.<sup>7</sup> The government remained unmoved by the protests—representatives said that they would not consider increasing the minimum wage until the next wage review, scheduled by law to take place in 2018.

Meanwhile, as these dynamics play out, unnecessary economic hardships will continue to burden Fatema and Halima.

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5 Both the Accord's and the Alliance's signatories have agreed to provide funding towards repairs, and other international organizations, such as the International Finance Corporation (IFC), USAID's Development Credit Authority (DCA), and the Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA), have also agreed to provide financial support. However, a 2016 report by the IFC found that, at that time, the total remaining costs for repairs was estimated at 635 million U.S. dollars, and even with increased financing from the previously mentioned international organizations, there was still a financing gap of 448 million U.S. dollars.

6 Human Rights Watch estimated that several thousand workers, hailing from about 20 different factories, participated in the strikes. Relying on its local sources, Human Rights Watch also concluded that many of these factories did not have worker unions.

7 Human Rights Watch estimates that roughly 1,500 workers in Ashulia were fired following the strikes, and at least 34 union and strike leaders have been arrested on arbitrary charges since the strikes ended.



This report was authored by Conor Gallagher and supported by Guy Stuart and Eric Noggle. For more information about the Garment Worker Diaries or the Financial Diaries methodology, please email [enquiries@mfopps.org](mailto:enquiries@mfopps.org).

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