

GARMENT WORKER DIARIES

A THOUSAND CUTS: RESULTS FROM INDIA

Usha is a 32-year-old married mother of three and a nine-year veteran of India's garment industry.

She is one of 180 female garment workers in the city of Bangalore participating in the Garment Worker Diaries, a yearlong project collecting data on the lives of garment workers in Bangladesh, Cambodia, and India. As part of the project, a team of field researchers visits Usha, and the other participants, each week to ask detailed questions about her earnings and expenditures, working conditions, daily schedule, physical well-being, and major events that happened in her life.

The data so far show that Usha is well-off compared to garment workers in Bangladesh, Cambodia, and within neighboring states in India.

The lives of our Bangladesh respondents are detailed in the report "Working on Two Fronts: Gender Relations and Factory Conditions" while insight about workers in Cambodia can be found in "Scraping By: Sokhaeng's Story," both of which are available at www.workerdiaries.org. The data show that Usha, and the women in the Bangalore sample, are more likely to receive the minimum wage, work fewer hours, and generally have better living conditions than workers in the other two countries.

Our sample of workers in Bangalore is not representative of workers in India generally. Among other major differences, men rather than women dominate the garment sector in northern India and there are notable variations in the living and working conditions between states and cities. For instance, female workers in the state of Tamil Nadu, Karnataka's neighbor to the east, is famous for the Sumangali scheme, a modern form of indentured servitude ripe with serious human and labor rights issues.

She works an average of eight hours per day, six days per week in a factory on the outskirts of the city of Bangalore. She earns a gross salary of about 7,000 rupees a month—the legal minimum wage based on 48 hour-weeks throughout the month—but has about 1,000 rupees in deductions for a state-run health insurance program and pension fund. Her work hours and pay reflect those of other workers participating in the Garment Worker Diaries in Bangalore. In 89 percent of the weeks covered by the study, the participants worked 48 hours or less. In addition, 94 percent of the participants in the study reported earning the minimum wage or more.

Figure 1: Length of Workweeks

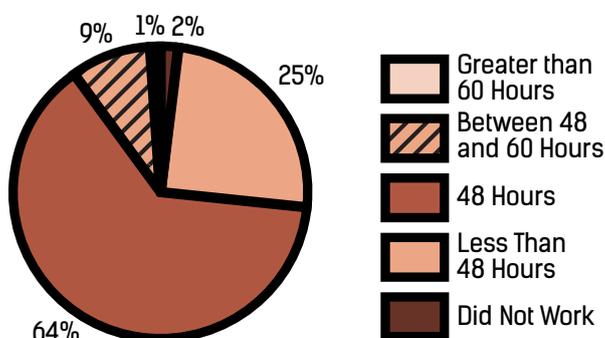
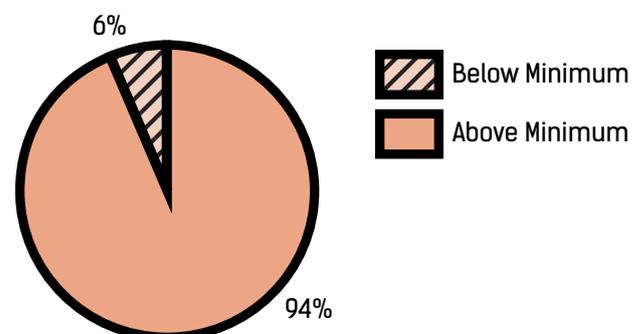


Figure 2: Workers Receiving Minimum Wage



Usha's factory is relatively safe, with an on-site clinic and clearly marked exits. Again, this reflects the general experience of workers participating in the project in Bangalore. For example, few workers reported instances when the emergency exits in their factories were locked. But this is not Usha's whole story. Weekly data collected during the project show that Usha and women like her face meaningful issues in the workplace. More than half reported having concerns about air pollutants and just under half reported having concerns about chemical smells.

Figure 3: Frequency of Emergency Exits being Locked in Respondents' Factories

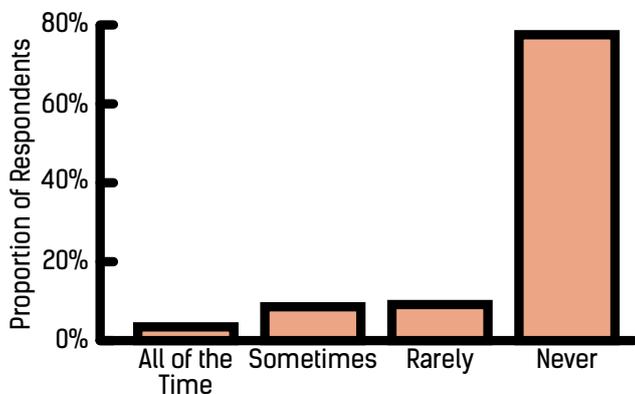
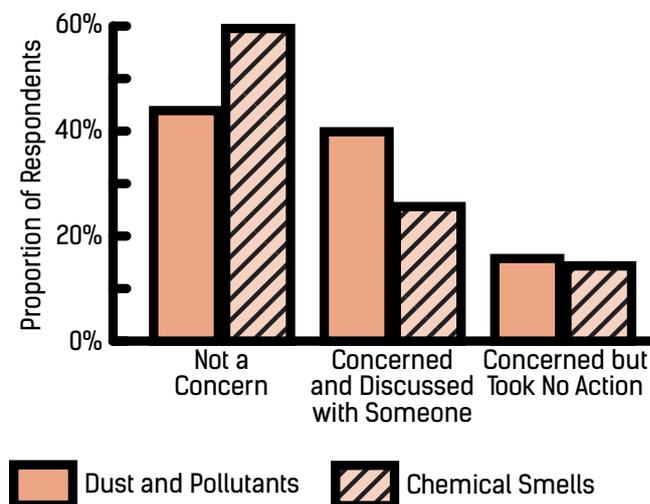


Figure 4: Respondents' Concerns about Airborne Pollutants and Smells



Furthermore, on average, workers reported being directly harassed or observing harassment of a co-worker by their supervisors about once every two weeks. Most often, this harassment came in the form of yelling and insults or forcing workers to do something outside their job description, like increasing their production quota. There were also numerous cases where respondents saw an interaction between a colleague and supervisor that made them uncomfortable, and there were 13 instances where a male supervisor touched a worker in a way she thought was inappropriate.

The women also reported little room for career advancement. This was particularly galling for Usha. Her supervisors consider her one of the most experienced workers in the factory, allowing her to perform different kinds of tasks everyday rather than just one. However, Usha's supervisors have told her repeatedly that a woman such as her, with so little education, cannot hope to be promoted despite her quality work so she continues to labor over a sewing machine each day. Even with the variety of tasks she has, she is developing chronic back pain.

Usha is committed to giving her children a good education because of her experience. The data show that in July 2016 she paid out 5,000 rupees in school fees for her children, just over a third of the combined salaries she and her husband earned that month.

Thus, while Usha lives well in comparison to many garment workers, she still faces meaningful injustices. Harassment is a chronic problem for her and women like her. She has no prospects for advancement. She must fund her children's education if they are not to face the same dearth of prospects as she does. Furthermore, she perceives little benefit from the state health insurance and retirement programs she is forced to contribute to every month. The health insurance program has complicated rules for use and she will not be able to access the retirement fund for many years. As far as she is concerned, the deductions are money lost.

Without the chance to demand improvements in her station, is Usha facing the idiomatic "death by a thousand cuts"?

* On April 18th, 2017, one U.S. dollar equated to about 65 Indian rupees; one British Pound equated to about 80 rupees; and one Euro equated to about 68 rupees.