WASHING WONDERS

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S2 SUPPLEMENT

The cost of your clean clothes

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Tandra Khan's family of four has no single way of doing laundry. She handwashes everyday soft garments and underclothes, gets domestic help with heavier items such as bedsheets, curtains and blankets, and uses her washing machine when time is short or clothes need to dry sooner.

Laundry is a routine household chore, but its cost goes beyond detergent, water and electricity. Buying a washing machine requires an initial investment, while handwashing takes time and effort. Paid laundry services offer another option, each with a different price. So, what does a load of laundry really cost?

A washing machine's first expense comes before the first wash. A local appliance manufacturer's website lists a semi-automatic model at Tk 12,500, an automatic top-loader at Tk 24,500 and a front-loader at Tk 54,990. These are examples from one manufacturer, not market averages, and the machines offer different levels of convenience.

For primary school teacher Mehenika Moon, that convenience matters. Finding time to handwash clothes alongside work is difficult, so her husband usually handles the laundry. The machine makes the task easier to manage and she considers it worth the expense.

But the purchase price should also be counted towards each wash. Consider a four-person household washing three loads a week, or around 13 a month. If a front-loader costing Tk54,990 lasts five to eight years, its purchase price works out at roughly Tk44–71 per wash. This estimate assumes regular use over that period; the actual cost depends on the machine's lifespan and how often it is used.

Detergent adds another regular expense. An online shopping platform lists a 1,020ml bottle of liquid detergent for front-loading machines at Tk400. The manufacturer's regional dosing guidance recommends 60ml for an ordinary load and 90ml for heavily soiled clothes. At that price, detergent costs around Tk24–35 per wash. The amount varies by product and how dirty the clothes are.

Tandra prefers handwashing some garments because she feels it gives her better control over water and detergent use. Her household uses around two kilograms of washing powder a month across different washing methods, so it would be misleading to attribute the entire amount to machine washing. Her experience also does not establish that handwashing always uses less water.

IT professional Safwan Ahmed used to spend weekends handwashing his clothes, with heavy jeans particularly difficult to wash and dry. He recently switched to a small top-loading machine to save time and effort, although he shares Tandra's concern about water consumption.

The running cost of a machine depends on its water and electricity use. For an eight-kilogram front-loader, the manufacturer's specifications list 48 litres of water and 0.54 kilowatt-hours of electricity per cycle. Based on published residential electricity rates from Dhaka Power Distribution Company, electricity costs roughly Tk3–8 per wash. At Dhaka WASA's published residential rate, the basic water charge for 48 litres is less than Tk1.


PHOTO: MARZIA ZAHAN MOMO

Actual consumption varies by programme and load. Water may not appear separately on shared apartment bills, and the interviewees did not measure their handwashing water use, making a direct comparison difficult.

Drying clothes presents another challenge. Gulshan Ara, a homemaker and home-food entrepreneur, says handwashing and wringing clothes can be tiring when balconies are small and sunlight is limited. A machine's spin cycle removes much of the water, making clothes easier to hang up, although they still need time to dry. For her, reducing the effort and mess of dripping clothes is part of the machine's value.

For the illustrative front-loader, the estimated cost of ownership, detergent, electricity and basic water charges comes to roughly Tk 70–115 per wash. For 13 loads a month, that is around Tk 900–1,500, or Tk 11,000–18,000 a year. The estimate excludes repairs, maintenance and other possible charges. It is a modelled example, not an average household bill.

Even with a machine at home, some clothes need a different approach. Gulshan handwashes delicate or colour-sensitive garments. Banker Debika Roy does the same with her beloved saris, which she enjoys wearing to work. She puts everyday clothes in the machine but washes her saris gently with a mild liquid detergent suited to the fabric.

For those without a washing machine, paid services offer an alternative. At Dhaka University's Shamsunnahar Hall, resident Prapti books YOUR Laundry through the Your Campus app. She reports paying Tk 50 for one wash or Tk 200 for five, bringing the cost down to Tk 40 per wash with the package. Paying per use removes the need for an upfront investment, making it practical for students in shared accommodation.

A Dhaka-based commercial laundry service advertises washing and drying at Tk 99 per kilogram, or Tk 495 for five kilograms, before applicable collection fees. Unlike booking a campus machine, this is a staffed service, so the prices are not directly comparable.

Then there is the labour behind handwashing. Asia Begum, a domestic worker on Dhaka's northern outskirts, says she earns Tk 100 an hour for an agreed task. Heavy laundry is particularly tiring, she says, and she feels insufficiently compensated. Without knowing how long a load takes, it is impossible to calculate a reliable per-load labour cost. Her experience, however, highlights the work that disappears when handwashing is treated as free.

Tandra's routine offers no universal answer. A machine requires an initial investment and regular running costs. Handwashing demands time and effort, while paid services come with their own charges. The balance depends on the household, the garments and the work involved. The cheapest option on paper does not always mean the lowest cost in practice.

Breaking down the expense of a 5kg laundry load

Cost by washing method

One 5 kg load, five washing methods; costs are indicative rather than directly comparable.

Washing method	Estimated cost	Cost breakdown
Handwashing at home	Tk 10–25	Detergent and water. Personal labour is excluded.
Domestic help	Tk 60–125	Laundry assistance: Tk 50–100, depending on the area and the arrangement. Detergent and water: Tk 10–25.
Own washing machine	Tk 70–115	Machine ownership: Tk 44–71, based on 13 washes a month over 5–8 years. Detergent: Tk 24–35. Electricity: Tk 3–8. Water: below Tk 1.
Campus laundry	Tk 40–50	Single-wash or package rate.
Commercial laundry	Tk 495	Tk 99 per kg × 5 kg; includes washing and drying.

Cost of one machine wash

Cost component	Estimated cost
Machine ownership	Tk 44–71
Detergent	Tk 24–35
Electricity	Tk 3–8
Water	Below Tk 1
Estimated total	Tk 70–115

This model assumes 13 washes a month over five to eight years and excludes maintenance.

Note

These are illustrative estimates for a 5 kg load rather than market averages: handwashing excludes personal labour, domestic-help costs vary by time, task and arrangement so no fixed estimate is given, machine ownership assumes 13 washes a month over five to eight years with maintenance excluded, campus laundry assumes a 5 kg load is permitted, and commercial laundry includes drying and may carry additional charges.


ILLUSTRATION: MAGNIFIC

Sources: Walton, DPDC, Dhaka WASA, Surf Excel, YOUR Campus, Opulent Laundry and field interviews. Data compiled in 2026.