

# Facade of workers’ safety beginning to show cracks during the pandemic

Seven years ago, many global retailers boldly declared that, “it would no longer be business as usual.” While many joined efforts to monitor factories for structural violations, most have also continued to pursue a sourcing strategy that forces suppliers to continuously produce products faster and cheaper.

**SANCHITA BANERJEE SAXENA**

MORE than seven years after the Rana Plaza disaster in 2013, issues related to fire, electrical and structural safety in hundreds of the nation’s garment factories have improved from before. For example, according to the Bangladesh Accord on Fire and Building Safety’s website, 84 percent of factories under the Accord have corrected their outstanding structural issues. Covid-19, however, has put a spotlight on just how “safe” workers really are. While building structures have been made safer over the years, the larger structure of the global supply chain was intentionally left intact. Inherent inequities endemic in all layers of this complex network have left workers vulnerable, and their livelihoods have become even more precarious under this current global pandemic.

A new report released by The Subir and Malini Chowdhury Center for Bangladesh Studies at the University of California, Berkeley in collaboration with the James P Grant School of Public Health (JPGSPH) and the Centre for Entrepreneurship Development (CED) at BRAC University finds that, based on export earning data, the garment industry lost USD 4.6 billion between March and May this year. Bangladesh, like many other export oriented countries, is part of an unbalanced global system, characterised by contracts that tilt the terms of business in favour of global brands and legal loopholes that can be used to cancel orders, refuse payments and demand discounts. This unequal distribution of power is difficult for suppliers during the best of times, and even more devastating during these unprecedented times.

Seven years ago, many global retailers boldly declared that, “it would no longer be business as usual.” While many joined efforts to monitor factories for structural violations, most have also continued to pursue a sourcing strategy that forces suppliers to continuously produce products faster and cheaper. Many studies show that this business model, characterised by hyper-flexibility and limited transparency, contributes to increased incidents of sexual harassment and gender-based violence and to overall declines in the mental and physical health of workers. When we say workers are now safer, we really have to question what we mean by “safety.” In my mind, these factors certainly do not contribute to any sense of security, especially for female workers.

After much confusion early on in the pandemic between the government and factories about whether workers should return to work or not, this report finds that more than 87 percent of workers said their factories have introduced new precautions to prevent the spread of the coronavirus. Despite the various measures in place, however, whether workers feel “safe” is questionable, since almost 60 percent of workers fear that they are somewhat likely or very likely to get infected by the virus in their factory. The practicality of instituting measures to limit the transmission of a contagious virus is difficult, and probably even impossible, in high-density factory settings. More than half of workers would not be able to isolate at home if they contracted the virus, even though 66 percent said that their factory would send workers home if they show symptoms. If factories are going to continue their operations during this crisis, there needs to be certain contingency plans in place for



workers who become sick, including providing places to isolate, health care provisions, financial support, and job security.

It is difficult for workers to be “protected from harm,” when they are forced into practices that

negatively impact their health. We know that salary levels for garment workers have never been adequate for them to support their families, meet their required caloric needs, and accumulate savings. According to the Institute of Nutrition and Food Science at the University of Dhaka, a worker must spend at least Tk 3,270 per month on a variety of foods to meet their caloric needs; they found, however, that workers really have the ability to spend only about Tk 1,110 a month. And this was during normal times. In our survey, we found that in April, when salaries hit their lowest point, female garment workers received only Tk 5,742 and male workers only Tk 7,739 for that month. Those in helper positions in factories (82 percent who are women) received only Tk 5,170 in April. Thus, it is not surprising then that 77 percent of workers in this report said that it was difficult to feed everyone in their household. Sixty-nine percent of workers ate less protein rich foods like meat, fish and eggs in May compared to February, while 40 percent ate more pulses, like lentils and chickpeas during this time. I think it is high time to revisit the idea of a living wage.

Protection from other “non-desirable outcomes” is impossible when workers are unable to save or are forced to reduce expenses in other areas, just to meet their very basic needs. A 2018 study by the Centre for Policy Dialogue (CPD) found that 45 percent of garment workers are unable to save anything from their earnings. When asked how they have coped during this recent crisis, 60 percent of workers said they don’t save or have used their savings to pay for food and an overwhelming 92 percent said they had to reduce other expenses. Not being able to save or cutting costs in

other essential areas, like healthcare, puts workers at even greater risk of not being able to mitigate future economic or health crises.

An article in *The Daily Star* from September 9, 2020, finds that Bangladesh has the fewest social protection initiatives in the Asia Pacific region, according to a United Nations position report: “The organisation broke down “social protection” into eight categories... According to the report, Bangladesh is only providing income support, or social assistance. The report iterates the necessity of preventing job losses and providing social protection to those rendered unemployed.” In our survey, 90 percent of workers said they did not receive any support from the government during this pandemic. The lack of universal social provisions for all, but particularly for those who work in an industry that has been the engine of economic growth for the country over the last four decades, is not only shocking, but highly irresponsible. According to the Clean Clothes Campaign, “The severity of this crisis could have been averted if living wages had been paid, and social protection mechanisms had been implemented.”

By all definitions, garment workers are not safer now, especially under this current crisis, compared to seven years ago. This pandemic offers us an opportunity to think about the gross inequalities that are present at all layers of the global supply chain and re-examine the factors that prevent constructing work environments that are truly safe, in the fullest definition of the word.

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## Unpredictable disaster risks overlapping with Covid-19 and poverty in Kurigram



KAZI AMDADUL HOQUE

ACCORDING to data from the Household Income and Expenditure Survey (HIES) 2016, which was reported on in 2019, the poverty levels have been sky high in Kurigram over the last ten years. Earlier this year, a report from *The Business Standard* said that Kurigram’s poverty level was 70.8 percent. The district is densely populated, with a total of 17,25,509 poverty-stricken people.

A trip to Kurigram this year reminded me of the Bhatiyali songs of Abbasuddin Ahmed. These songs by the revered folk singer were an outcome of the many journeys he made on the rivers of North Bengal. At the time, Kurigram was recognised for its economic activities, much of which were done through its river ports, particularly Chilmari.

During my visit, while crossing the Dharla and Teesta river, I noticed that the river bed was visible and the water reservoir was not working, showing the dire need for dredging—the lack of which has led to continuous floods in the poverty stricken Kurigram district. Upon reaching Chilmari, I hopped on a boat on the Jamuna River and headed towards the islands (chars) where Friendship runs its many projects. The journey is amazing, and the islands in the distance are truly a wonderful sight. However, once you reach the islands, you realise that each of them are major crisis zones in reality.

In the wake of Covid-19, due to increased health hazards as well as floods, the people in the chars had their mobility severely restricted. In fact, the flood situation worsened to such an extent in mid-July that

the Brahmaputra, Dharla and Dudhkumar rivers were flowing above the danger level, leading to a scarcity of basic amenities for those living in poverty. According to a report by *The Daily Star* from mid-July, “more than three lakh flood-affected people in 400 villages of 56 unions in nine upazilas are living in misery as they face an acute shortage of food, pure water and toilet facilities.”

As a result, people in the chars couldn’t find work—60 to 70 percent of these people are day labourers; very few are land owners. None of these workers could tend to crops or go fishing due to the rising water levels. I learned that around March and April, they went into lockdown and the markets were also no longer accessible. With their mobility restricted, whatever savings they had were exhausted. While they were struggling to earn a living due to the pandemic, natural disasters like floods continued to add to their miseries—char dwellers lost their assets and were forced to take loans at the same time. Livestock such as cows, goats, ducks and chickens are to low-income families what fixed deposits are to us urban dwellers—selling them off is no simple decision to take. Additionally, their loans are also mostly taken from unregistered money lenders who charge the borrowers a 100 to 200 percent interest rate.

When flood waters are rising, a lot of char dwellers stay back to protect their livestock—even if they are neck or waist-deep in water, they build raised platforms in their homes to stay protected. Why do they do it? For the simple fact that the cow or the goat is a crucial resource for their families. Finding a shelter that will also protect their livestock is not always possible. In these trying times, Friendship had built some raised plains that can house 20-25 homes, as well as 100-200 families. It’s an environment friendly

intervention, where a lot of people gather. Some people also seek shelter in the local schools, whereas others take refuge in the embankments. The challenge, however, lies in moving with livestock—a big boat is necessary for this, which is often too expensive.

There are a few measures that can be taken by NGOs and INGOs to eliminate the risks associated with floods in low-lying lands in

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Kurigram. The first thing that can be done is funding the boat fares—paying Tk 500 to boatmen could easily be done by the government or NGO run local initiatives operating there. Funding the rescues and shift to shelters is a better option than just providing them with relief. Other problems

include staying at home to look after the elderly or the sick. As a result, they are cut off from access to medication and other essentials. If a boat can deliver these basic resources, this could drastically bring down the likelihoods of disease. The government livestock department’s vaccination team could also provide services that will benefit them in managing their assets.

The sudden arrival of Covid-19 has also brought a stop to educational activities for almost six to seven months now, resulting in school dropouts of the children living in the fringes of Kurigram. A report from *The Daily Star* this month said that erosion by the Brahmaputra, Dharla and Teesta rivers have resulted in the collapse of at least 10 government primary schools in different char areas under four upazilas of Kurigram. Additionally, the health burden of Covid-19 and waterborne diseases also keep children away from school. The absence of education leads to children exploring employment opportunities with their families. If their parents are doing agricultural labour such as fishing, the child is most likely to follow suit with the hopes of bringing in greater income for the household. As a result, the engagement with economic opportunities becomes so dominant for the child that there is little scope of returning to education.


In the absence of proper income, television and internet access and affordability is not something that is present in these areas, thus depriving children of the remote education that is available countrywide. Simply put, they are now victims of a long-term crisis—there is no saying how many adults will gain back their access to job markets and how many children will return to school. Many of them have incurred asset losses and are also burdened with loans. For the children who are missing out on education, there is likely


to be a major gap in their learning process that will impede their progress.

Despite living in a country that is experiencing technological advancements, these marginalised communities are lagging behind. What is evident in North Bengal is that poverty and natural disasters, coupled with Covid-19, has increased their struggles tenfold. While the disease burden has increased, other things that are expected to rise are the population, as well as malnutrition. Since mortality and morbidity always puts the economy under pressure and reduces working capacity, the strengths and abilities of workers are compromised in the wake of a widespread disease. The inability to afford treatment further exacerbates the problem, which contributes to loss of motivation to work, which in turn hinders their skills from growing. What is needed is interventions that target communities, areas and families. Simply providing relief or funding alone will not solve the problem.

A way forward for Kurigram would be the inclusion of context specific interventions as well as an enabling environment where children can go back to school. In addition to that, some region specific designs need to be tailored in order to provide free services, such as free boats for transportation as well as shipping, in order to increase market accessibility for workers living in the fringes. Other services that can be introduced to them would be interest free loans. Moreover, there’s an immediate need to address the losses these people have incurred so that we can design a comprehensive solution that mitigates the problems arising from poverty, Covid-19 and natural disasters such as floods and cyclones.

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 **QUOTABLE Quote**



**IMMANUEL KANT**  
(1724-1804)  
German philosopher.

*Experience without theory is blind, but theory without experience is mere intellectual play.*

**CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH**

**ACROSS**

1 Uncertain state  
6 Flag feature  
10 Be of use  
11 Caller's need  
12 Rich cake  
13 Corduroy feature  
14 Crocus cousin  
15 Jimmy's successor  
16 Plop down  
17 Atlantic catch  
18 "You betcha!"  
19 Led  
22 Talk drunkenly  
23 Winter wear  
26 Became more exciting  
29 Upper limit  
32 Ammo for a Red

**DOWN**

1 Toward midnight  
2 White keys  
3 Kind of bliss  
4 Drill parts  
5 Flamenco cry  
6 Tibia's place  
7 Right now  
8 Protractor

Ryder  
33 Ruby of films  
34 Can't stand  
36 Sunset site  
37 Hunting goddess  
38 Bamboo eater  
39 Collectible car  
40 Kind of wave  
41 Casual tops  
42 Doesn't budge

measure  
9 Oboe parts  
11 Catalog choices  
15 Retina part  
17 Appealing to brainiacs  
20 "Well, that's obvious!"  
21 "The Raven" writer  
24 Book extras  
25 Mardi Gras, e.g.  
27 Crunch targets  
28 Potpourri pieces  
29 West Pointer  
30 Tolerate  
31 Full moon, for one  
35 Some bills  
36 "Hold on!"  
38 Score amts.


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**YESTERDAY'S ANSWERS**

S	T	E	P	S	C	A	S	E	S
P	A	N	I	C	A	P	A	C	E
O	L	D	C	H	E	S	T	N	U
T	I	E	O	V	A	T	A	D	O
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R	O	A	D	F	E	E			
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E	D	S	E	L	O	T	T	E	R

**BEETLE BAILEY** BY MORT WALKER



**BABY BLUES** BY KIRKMAN & SCOTT

