



COVID-19 IMPACT ON SELECTED RMG FACTORIES AND WAY FORWARD

The Daily Star in association with Manusher Jonno Foundation (MJF) organised an online discussion titled "COVID-19 Impact on selected RMG factories and way forward" on October 4, 2020. Here we publish a summary of the discussion. Speakers' serial is maintained as per the flow of the discussion



SHAHEEN ANAM
Executive Director,
Manusher Jonno
Foundation

All associations and people who are working at the grassroots level for the rights of workers want to see workers in better conditions, whether that be at the workplace or outside of it.

The mental suffering due to job losses, that is widespread during this time, is not given due importance. The workers should also be compensated for the reduced wages they had received. Factories which are setting good examples by maintaining proper health facilities, paying workers timely, and setting up sexual harassment committees, should be highlighted to promote good practices. There should be more focus on sexual and reproductive health issues.



TANJIM FERDOUS
National Consultant,
United Nations in
Bangladesh and
Moderator of the session

The RMG sector has played a key role in developing Bangladesh's economy. In more than 4,600 factories around the country, approximately 42 lakh workers are currently employed, with 70 percent of these workers being women. A study was jointly conducted by Manusher Jonno Foundation, Awaj Foundation and Karmojibi Nari, which evaluated the workers' economic state during the pandemic, their safety at the workplace and at home, and their job security.



MAHFUZA ANAM
Editor and Publisher,
The Daily Star

During the fiscal year 2019-20, the RMG sector contributed USD 28 billion to Bangladesh's economy. This constituted 83 percent of overall exports. Around four crore Bangladeshis are either direct or indirect beneficiaries of this sector. This means that the RMG sector is central to the economic progression of our country. Thus, the publication and promotion of RMG-related matters in the media are very important.



SHOMA DATTA
Program Manager,
Manusher Jonno
Foundation

We have tried to make a rapid assessment of workers' health, safety and security at the workplace and at home during the COVID-19 pandemic. We were able to include 430 workers in our sample assessment, of which 330 were female and the rest were male. Together, they constituted 25 percent of total participants in the project. We were able to speak to 22 different factory management associations and 22 trade union leaders. We collected data from 21 factories, running our programme from March to June 2020. We partnered with Karmojibi Nari and Awaj Foundation.

85.7 percent of respondents said that they had suffered from symptoms of the virus (chills, sneezing, fever). All respondents who had suffered from such symptoms, stated that they had not visited a doctor. When questioned further, 87.1 percent of the same group of workers (with symptoms) said that they had been given five to seven days of compulsory leave from their respective workplaces. There have been no claims of workers being fired because of this.

80.4 percent of workers, from the same study, stated that they had received masks from the workplace. 95 percent of workers agreed saying that their factories had provided workers with the required information. Factory management, in general, provided doctors but 41.6 percent of workers said that they were dissatisfied with treatment facilities.

99.8 percent of workers stated that they had received their salaries for the months of March and April. But, out of the 430 respondents, nobody received their full salary.

26 percent of workers were on one meal a day, and 73 percent of them said that they, at times, had to deal with food shortages. Only eight percent of the workers reported receiving some sort of food relief, but not on a regular basis.

17 percent of female workers were classified as victims of domestic violence. 31.8 percent of the workers said that they were subject to sexual harassment at the workplace. Only 7.4 percent got some sort of remedy. Among them, 62.2 percent were unresolved cases and 30.4 percent received

some sort of counselling; only one case was taken to court.



BANASREE MITRA NEOGI
Gender Advisor,
Manusher Jonno
Foundation

It is clearly revealed in the study that COVID-19 has already impacted RMG workers, especially female workers. The overall impact on both physical and mental health has resulted in the loss of employment and increase in domestic violence. Undoubtedly, this pandemic may have long lasting effects on female workers, especially through economic hardships, inability to pay for children's educational costs, food insecurity, etc. So, all relevant stakeholders should reconsider the health and overall wellbeing needs of the workers.



PROFESSOR DR. MOHAMMAD MAINUL ISLAM
Chairman, Department
of Population Sciences,
University of Dhaka

When assessing the situation of workers, it is important to note their age and marital status. The ages of garments workers usually range from 18 to 40 years.

Most RMG workers did not feel the need to get tested during this pandemic even though they had suffered from symptoms. If many workers are in fact suffering from COVID-19, the consequences of such a situation should be assessed.

More research needs to be done in factories around the country. A matter of concern seems to be the fact that we do not have access to up-to-date studies. The situation of the RMG sector changed after June 2020, and so, we need to find out exactly where changes took place. Surveys are needed, on a large scale. Factory workers need to be provided with

RECOMMENDATIONS

- RMG industry has been important in furthering women's empowerment in the lower-income households; this is crucial to reduce poverty
- Strong coordination among employers, trade unions, government and development partners is essential to promote stronger gender equality from the social and economic perspectives
- Employment in the garments sector has not only contributed to the livelihoods of workers but has had a significant contribution in improving workers' children's lives. Job insecurity/job loss however has had multiple effects. The government stimulus package should be ensured for every worker.
- Compensate workers for the reduced wages
- Urgently criminalise sexual harassment at workplace to promote and protect the rights of all workers, especially female workers
- Promote good practices by highlighting factories which are maintaining proper health facilities, paying workers timely, and setting up sexual harassment committees
- Provide workers with better medical facilities at workplaces along with washable and re-usable gowns and masks
- Allow short, paid leaves to workers advised to stay home by doctors
- Implement free testing services in factories to identify the number of infected workers
- Provide isolation camps
- Create a database of workers who have lost jobs to employ them in future
- Ensure workplace safety by forming and activating anti-sexual harassment committee (ASHC) and other committees
- Analyse the need for unemployment insurance and schemes for workers in the formal economy

the required equipment (masks, etc). Most Bangladeshis do not feel the need to wear masks even though COVID-19 is still present in the country. The health and safety of workers of the RMG sector need to be assured.

We must think of the infected workers. Goal 3 of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) deals with good health and well-being. SDG 3.7 states the following: "By 2030 ensure universal access to sexual and reproductive health care services, including for family planning, information and education, and the integration of reproductive health into national strategies and programs." This particular objective should be linked directly to the well-being of our RMG workers, as it would help them immensely in the coming days.



DR DABIR UDDIN AHMED
Chief Executive Officer,
Centre for Woman
and Child Health
(CWCH)

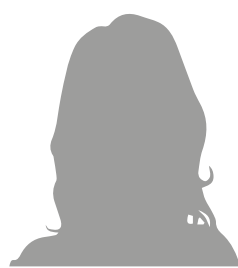
Workers in the RMG sector do not always wear masks, and some do not change their masks for weeks. Our suggestion to factory owners is that masks should be changed every day. One disposable mask should be provided to each worker once he, or she, begins a new working day. We would also like to suggest that workers be provided with washable and re-usable gowns (like aprons) which may be used for protection. The RMG sector is built around clothing and it would not be impossible to provide workers with such gowns.

We are quick to criticise workers for re-

joining work, while carrying symptoms of COVID-19. However, we must note that most RMG workers would not be paid if they did not go to work. Even 10 to 12 days of non-payment would make it tough for such workers to make ends meet. I believe that workers who are advised to stay home by doctors should be supported by their factory management, and be allowed a short leave, albeit with pay.

Even if workers with symptoms or coronavirus stay home, they might infect one of their family members. Recent trends in Bangladesh show that almost all family members of a household are being infected when even one member catches the virus. It may help garments factories if they look to establish temporary isolation areas for workers who are suffering from the virus (or suffering from symptoms).

Many workers are also going through mental breakdowns due to this pandemic. However, most do not seem to relay how they feel to their factory management, as they fear being dismissed from work. Job security for RMG workers is thus very important.



JESMIN SHILA
Operator, Creative
Wool Wear Ltd.

Both my husband and I are currently unemployed and we are struggling. We have been unable to pay rent for the past few months. There is an occupational health safety committee inside our factory. The workers are conscious of their health. When the factories were shut down, we were given some money from our salaries but not the full amount. New factories are not recruiting workers since they claim to have plenty of workers already.

We have faced harassment, discrimination, and verbal abuse at our workplaces in the past. But such incidents have seen a decrease with the formation of a committee in association with Manusher Jonno Foundation. After the committee was formed, major changes were incorporated. We also have the opportunity to share updates from our workplace with Karmojibi Nari once a week.

against women. We are trying to prevent such acts by setting up anti-harassment committees inside the factories.



NAZMA AKTER
Founder and Executive
Director, Awaj
Foundation

Almost all workers are back in factories, so there is little space for social distancing. There are also no free testing services. Free testing services would have allowed the factories to identify the number of infected workers.

The government, owners, international buyers and foreign governments need to ensure a fair price. However, foreign buyers come to Bangladesh for cheap labour and low prices. The liabilities of buyers, government, owners, and trade unions need to be transparent.

There is no law to prevent gender-based violence and harassment in the workplace; there are only guidelines by the High Court. Factories quite often do not bother to follow the guidelines since they are not part of the law, therefore formulating a law in this regard is crucial.

Bangladesh government should also ratify the ILO Convention 190. Social Security Protection or unemployed allowance opportunities in the garments sector should be made available.



SUNZIDA SULTANA
Executive Director
(In-charge), Karmojibi
Nari

Our country does not have a proper system to battle COVID-19. Since there might be a second wave of COVID-19, the government should be prepared this time around to provide free treatment and free testing. Places with a high concentration of workers should have isolation camps as well as job safety and security for the workers.

We have been trying to form a committee for the prevention of sexual harassment in all the factories. There must be proper monitoring of the High Court verdict being implemented. The government should also take steps to ratify ILO 190.



MAHEEN SULTAN
Team Leader, Shojag
Coalition; Member,
Naripokkho and Lead
Researcher, Centre for
Gender and Social
Transformation, BRAC
Institute of Governance
and Development
(BIGD)

In our research with Shojag Coalition and Christian Aid, we found that 67 percent of the workers are living in fear of losing their job. These workers are falling into a state of indebtedness, which is a severe health risk.

Even though health safety measures are maintained inside many factories, no such precautions are taken during the workers' commute between their homes and their workplaces. These measures should be followed everywhere, not only inside the factories.

It is not acceptable for a middle-income country like Bangladesh to have a garment sector with so many employees outside of social protection coverage. Both informal and formal sectors need to be brought under this coverage. The trade unions should strengthen their roles in job security and follow up on whether the terms of incentive packages are being complied with or not. Civil society and trade unions play an important role in following up with whether the rules of law in laying off individuals are being obeyed or not and whether salaries are being paid properly.



DR. KHONDAKER GOLAM MOAZZEM
Research Director,
Centre for Policy
Dialogue (CPD)

The guidelines followed by the factories to prevent the spread of COVID-19 have not been enough. This could have been due to a problem at the factory level or at the community level. Although the ILO or DIFE guidelines were very extensive, there might be loopholes within them which require attention. Work should be done at the local community level to prevent and treat COVID-19.

The workers are also facing an economic threat. There have been reports of workers not being able to find work after being laid off. We need to have a proper database to keep track of such workers along with data to find out the rate of unemployment amongst them due to COVID-19. There needs to be collaboration between the government associations and brand buyers

to provide employment security of the workers. Job insecurity will further impact their economic and financial security and may also cause malnutrition.



MAMINUL ISLAM
General Manager (HR
Admin & Compliance),
AJ Group

We have incorporated all the necessary COVID-19 prevention measures in our factory such as hand washing stations and temperature testing of all our workers. We are also counselling the workers through a PA system and regularly making them aware of the necessary precautions. Apart from that, we are also advising them to undertake these measures at their homes as well.

Our doctors advise the workers on the type of diet which can keep their immune system strong. Our corporate office monitors our action on behalf of the buyers when it comes to the maintenance guidelines we are following in the factories.

We also have to send daily updates back to our corporate office letting them know about the steps that are being followed.



GEORGE FALLER
Chief Technical Adviser,
Improving Working
Condition in the
Ready-made Garment
Sector in Bangladesh
Programme (Phase II),
ILO Bangladesh

According to data, 86 percent workers did not follow up with testing or other medical actions. This could be due to the fear of their job or income security being affected. There also seems to be a lack of capacity of the factories to provide sufficient tests to their workers.

A lot of work needs to be done in the enterprise clinics to upgrade the services that they can provide to the workers in the factories. We are looking into the problems and accordingly designing programmes which would address and strengthen the enterprise clinics.

COVID-19 has highlighted to everybody in the RMG industry and other industries that there is a big need for unemployment insurance and schemes for the workers in the formal economy.



DR. NAZNEEN AHMED
Senior Research Fellow,
Bangladesh Institute of
Development Studies

A lot of people consider verbal abuse to be a necessity in instilling discipline in their workers. This mindset needs to change. Since the owners of the factories are usually not in close or immediate contact with the workers, this sense of change needs to come about among managers and supervisors.

At the start of this pandemic, we saw many orders getting cancelled which resulted in a lot of workers losing their jobs. Starting from July, we have seen an upsurge of these old orders once more. We have particularly observed an increase in the export of knits. But the increase in orders has not been uniform. There are factories that still have not received any new orders and hence they are unable to start their operations. In some factories, people have lost their jobs, while in others, there is a need for new employees. Hence, we need to have proper data regarding the exact number of people that have lost their jobs to be able to connect them to other available positions. The government needs to create a database for this.

In terms of sexual harassment, most cases go unreported. Our study showed that only three percent of the sexual harassment cases were reported. We must incorporate safer strategies for lodging complaints to improve this and create an environment where the workers feel comfortable to report cases of harassment.



MUHAMMAD ABDUL MANNAN, MP
Honourable Minister,
Ministry of Planning

We want the best for our workers but due to some inbuilt issues, our efforts can sometimes be unsuccessful. BBS has conducted surveys on the socio-economic impacts of COVID-19 and coping policies over telephone calls among 1,000 people. The survey responses are currently being analysed. This work has been limited to the lower 20 percent since the government aid allocated for this industry is meant for the lower levels.