

COVID-19 & Women's Empowerment: A Rapid Analysis of the Bangladesh Ready Made Garment Sector

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The study team recognizes that the findings, including any errors and omissions contained within this report, are its own.

- **Joyanta Roy, Study team leader**

Acronym and Abbreviation

BGMEA	Bangladesh Garments Manufacturer Exporters Association
BRAC	Bangladesh Rural Advance Committee
CBSG	Capacity Building Service Group
CB	Capacity Building
FGD	Focus Group Discussion
GAA	Girls Advocacy Alliance
KII	Key Informants Interview
NGO	Non-Government Organisation
TU	Trade Union
US	United States

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Executive Summary

In September 2020, AWAJ Foundation under Girls Advocacy Alliance Project commissioned a rapid impact assessment of how COVID-19 has affected women's economic empowerment in the ready-made garment (RMG) industry in Bangladesh. While other studies have been conducted capturing much of the ongoing economic impacts of the pandemic on garment sectors including in Bangladesh, this assessment seeks to identify gaps from a programmatic and intervention perspective. Inclusive of this, the overall condition of women empowerment issue in the RMG sector during this post COVID, has been a critical consideration of the study. The objective of this study is to inform Plan International Bangladesh's programmatic and advocacy work in the RMG sector. This executive summary provides highlights and key findings from the full report.

In the context of an impending global recession, closure of physical stores and a reduction in online clothing sales, retailers and brands are taking an enormous hit to their bottom line. However, the pandemic has crystalized the distinction between international brands and their supplier factories, who generally operate on paper-thin margins and have far less access to capital. Even more extreme is the burden on workers who survive on less than a quarter of the living wage and who are rarely able to save, not less prepare for unforeseen circumstances.¹

While media reports have highlighted the vulnerability of the RMG sector to the crisis, much of the existing challenges facing workers are existing vulnerabilities exacerbated and deepened by the crisis and not particularly. For example, our survey finds that 52% of workers interviewed said they were currently in debt.

The survival of the Bangladesh readymade garment industry and the four million workers who fuel it is disproportionately reliant on the conduct of brands. Rampant cancellations, delayed payments for already shipped goods, pushing for discounts, violations of terms and conditions demonstrated how unstable so-called 'sustainability' and responsible sourcing is in times of crisis.

The actions of brands throughout this crisis and failure to meet their legal and ethical responsibilities with little repercussions demonstrates the power balance that has long persisted in the industry and demonstrates the inequality at the heart of it. As BGMEA president, Ms. Rubana Huq stated in her interview with us, "Buyers had the perfect opportunity to prove their responsibility and commitment but they, sadly, took a different turn to save their own skin."²

¹<https://www.workersrights.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/Abandoned-Penn-State-WRC-Report-March-27-2020.pdf>

² Interview with Rubana Huq, BGMEA

Government interventions such as financial schemes were welcome and necessary. However, they didn't go nearly far enough to mitigate the worst impacts of the pandemic for workers. For example, the initial stimulus packages failed to reach subcontractors or ensure the payment of workers' wages. Relatedly, the weakness of social protection supports is apparent. Our survey finds that just 10% of workers received funding support throughout the pandemic, with less than half of these receiving funds from the government programmes. Poor design and lack of consultation with affected groups appears to have hindered the effectiveness of these interventions significantly.

Multiple interventions from trade unions, NGOs and advocacy groups mushroomed in order to address the crisis, however efforts were often piecemeal in the context of such deep humanitarian needs and uncoordinated among actors, limiting their effectiveness as long-term solutions.

Our survey was conducted in late September, at a time when many workers had resumed their jobs or left the industry. Yet, 32% of those surveyed say that they have experienced a loss of income due to COVID-19. The average loss of income stands at 53% when compared with their earnings last year. The impact of this is significant and accounts for the significant debt that they have accrued and the concerns that they express about supporting their families. While worker income has reduced, costs associated with the pandemic such as transport costs and safety equipment has risen. Our data finds that's a worrying number of workers have cut back on food and education costs in order to meet these costs within a reduced income.

Pregnant workers who have long been susceptible to firing and discrimination have been among the worst affected of the pandemic, with a spike in the rise of firings. Other worrying by-products of the crisis including an increase in union-busting and a rise in gender-based violence at home and in the workplace.

The Bangladesh economy is reportedly in recovery and the industry is seeing a resumption of orders. While our findings are that workers (at least in the factories spoken to for this particular study) are less fearful of losing their jobs, the lasting economic impact for female workers in terms of the debts accrued and vulnerabilities made remains significant and needs to be urgently addressed.

Due to the global pandemic, worker intensive industrial sector will change its operational approach in the medium and long run. Industrial automation is getting popular to the low-end worker dependent factories. The RMG industry in Bangladesh is entirely dependent on the low cost semi-skilled workforce the risk of massive joblessness is probable. Initiative for taking skill development programs for the general worker is a high need.

Many retrenched workers are changing their professions just to making their end meets. It's also reported by the workers that, finding no work, many of them are being involved in risky and illegal occupation, resulting further social insecurity.

Chapter-1: Introduction, Methodology and Implementation

1.1 Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic has pushed the global economy into potentially the worst recession since the great depression and has left a wide-ranging impact on the Bangladesh Ready Made Garment sector. Studies and anecdotal evidence have demonstrated that nearly one million workers either lost their jobs or underwent suspension without pay.³ Female workers, who make up some 60-65% of the garment workforce in Bangladesh, are being disproportionately impacted by the pandemic, facing employment and salary losses, an increased burden of unpaid care work, and a heightened risk of gender-based violence. The economic shock caused by the pandemic across the global garment sector and the ensuing massive layoffs will further contribute to the exacerbation of these already existing disparities. The multi-dimensional effect of this pandemic on the lives and economic empowerment of women workers has not yet been explored which is the focus of this study.

AWAJ Foundation under the Girls Advocacy Alliance (GAA) project supported by Plan International commissioned this rapid impact assessment of COVID-19 on women workers' economic empowerment in the Ready-Made Garment sector in mid-September 2020.

AWAJ has already acknowledged the far-reaching impact of COVID-19 on women workers while there is little empirical evidence available to demonstrate key and urgent challenges and effectively inform both program and advocacy interventions. The available literature focuses on industry-related analyses and national gender analyses, which mention RMG workers but do not explicitly focus on them.

1.2 Objective of the study

The broad objective this rapid assessment study is to know to what extent COVID-19 affected women's economic empowerment through the RMG factories in Bangladesh, while the specific objectives are to know the impact of COVID-19 on

- Women's employment, working hours, income (and savings)
- Access to social protection (e.g. insurance, pension, benefits, overtime and other additional wages)
- Access to healthcare, especially maternal, childcare, and sexual and reproductive health
- Women's safety and health in the workplace
- Women's voice and representation in the workplace

In addition, this study is intended to inform which of the existing or planned women's empowerment initiatives in factories have been sustained, scaled back or cancelled as a result

³ Pen State Center on Global Workers' Rights, Abandoned? The impact of COVID-19 on the workers and businesses at the bottom of global garment supply chain, 27 March 2020

of COVID-19; how the different stakeholders responded to challenges to women's economic empowerment in the COVID-19 affected RMG sector and what are key gaps and opportunities that program and advocacy interventions can focus on.

1.3 Approach and Methodology

CBSG adopted a combination of qualitative and quantitative techniques, supplementing and complementing each other to gather information from stakeholders of RMG and GAA project. In line with the methodology suggested in the ToR, CBSG further fine-tuned it in consultation with AWAJ Foundation.

The study began with the review of available secondary literature, followed by collecting primary data. The secondary information was used to identify the unexplored areas and compare with the findings.

In the quantitative part of the study we used semi-structures questionnaires, while considering the COVID-19 situation we only want to carry out Key Informant Interview (KII) for qualitative part.

1.4 Desk Review

The review includes published research, newspaper articles and seminar/conference proceedings. We have confined our search between January 2020 to date.

We ran the search with some specific key words and compile them for producing combined report. Some of the sample key words could be "RMG sector AND Bangladesh", "COVID AND RMG" "Women AND RMG", "COVID AND unemployment", "clothing brand AND COVID" etc. The exercise provides us current state and areas to be explored through the primary data of the anticipated study.

1.5 Data Collection Methods

Semi-structured Interview with Workers

In-person interviews with workers maintaining social distances and interviewers and respondents wearing masks were conducted. Altogether 115 workers from four factories were interviewed. They included – 66 workers (male 16, female 50) from champion factories; and 49 workers (male 16, female 33) from standard factories (non-champion).

Focus Group Discussions (FGD) with Workers

With limited number of female respondents' maximum (6 persons). In total 4 FGDs were conducted in four factories with female respondents.

Key Informants Interviews

With the representative of multi-stakeholders such as RMG owners/management, Trade Union leaders, Buyers, NGO/INGO representatives, Journalists and so on. In total, 20 key informant interviews were conducted out of planned 20 interviews.

Tools design

The study tools were jointly developed by CBSG and AWAJ team. The tools were later pre-tested in a factory setting before implementation

Sampling technique and Sample size

A combination of judgement and purposive sampling was adopted for the rapid analysis. Distribution of study respondents by methods of investigation is delineated in the table below:

Methods	Champion Factories	Standard Factories	Total
Semi structured Interviews	66 (M-16; F-50)	49 (M-16; F-33)	115
Focus Group Discussions	12 – two sessions	12 – two sessions	24 in four sessions
Key Informants Interviews	Multi-stakeholders		20

1.6 Implementation

The study began with an inception meeting on Zoom platform with the AWAJ top management team and the CBSG research team members on September 12, 2020. The meeting finalized an implementation plan and identified role of respective organisation. Following the inception meeting AWAJ Foundation named the following factories for the study.

Champion factories:

- Hoplun Apparels Limited
- Natural Denims Limited

Standard Factories:

- Aboni knitwear Limited
- Aukutex Limited

1.7 Data collection

Data collection began on September 18 and continued till September 29, 2020. Two separate



data collection teams were assigned – one for the workers' interviews (semi-structured interviews and FGD), and another for key informants' interviews. Each team was comprised of two female staff and two male staff. Moreover, CBSG's research director and a senior coordinator-maintained communication with factories and AWAJ Foundation. In collecting all data, consent was taken

from the respondents and recorded.

1.8 Data triangulation

A number of qualitative (KII and FGD) and quantitative (Semi Structured Interview) methods were adopted to derive information and data required for the rapid assessment. These methods complemented and supplemented the rigor and authenticity of the assessment results. Results of desk review, FGD, KII and semi-structured interview have been used for comparative analysis and triangulated these data sources to draw assessment conclusions.

1.9 Limitations

The short timeline was the main impediments of the study. Health and safety precautions connected to COVID-19 prevented us reaching out respondents for in-person discussions. In fact, the research team had less than three weeks for the entire process from study design to reporting. In such a short period, the study team managed to conduct 115 semi-structured interviews out of a planned 120.

1.10 Data analysis and reporting

We analyzed quantitative and qualitative data separately and produced this report based on both qualitative and quantitative findings. During analysis we took into account multiple disaggregation units such as gender, type of factory, level of workers etc. All qualitative data was recorded and transcribed. For analyzing qualitative data, we used Nvivo and quantitative data was analyzed using STATA and Excel. The final report is the combination of both qualitative and quantitative facts.

1.11 Organisation of the report

The report starts with an Executive Summary that presents summary findings followed four chapters. These are: Chapter 1 which includes an introduction, the study objective, methodology, implementation and limitations, Chapter 2 which presents an overview of COVID-19 and the Ready-Made Garment Sector; Chapter 3 which presents findings and analysis; Chapter 4 the way forward.

Chapter-2: COVID-19 and the Ready-Made Garment Sector

2.1 Overview

Bangladesh earns about US \$35 billion annually from garment exports, mainly to the United States and Europe. The industry is the world's second largest after China's. In 2020, the industry accounted for 11% of the country's GDP and 82% of its exports.⁴ There are approximately 2,000 suppliers in Bangladesh and 4,000 factories (many suppliers own multiple factories).⁵

The COVID-19 pandemic made the early part of 2020 one of the most economically devastating years in the more than forty-year history of the Bangladesh RMG sector. From January 2020, factories were forced to shut down production as orders reduced and came to a halt.

With the pandemic leading to the closure of stores across consumer markets such as Europe and the United States in March, April and May, as well as drops in online sales, prominent clothing brands made use of force majeure clauses in their contracts with suppliers in Bangladesh and other production countries to cancel and refuse to pay for committed and in-production orders.⁶

According to the BGMEA⁷, excluding the goods that were scheduled to go to multiple buyers, 1149 factories reported export cancellation/ suspension from international buyers. As a majority of RMG factories paused most or all production, more than one million garment workers were fired or temporarily suspended as a result of order cancellations and the failure of buyers to pay for these cancellations with a vast majority sent home without severance pay or partial wages that the law entitles them to.⁸

International brands such as JC Penney also left suppliers in Bangladesh with huge liabilities.⁹ Cancelled and reduced orders have cost the RMG industry an estimated US\$3 billion.¹⁰ Overall production of the entire RMG industry has lost has been reduced by roughly

⁴<https://cleanclothes.org/file-repository/underpaid-in-the-pandemic.pdf/view>

⁵<https://www.workersrights.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/Abandoned-Penn-State-WRC-Report-March-27-2020.pdf>

⁶<https://www.workersrights.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/Abandoned-Penn-State-WRC-Report-March-27-2020.pdf>

⁷ BGMEA interview with Rubana Huq

⁸<https://www.workersrights.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/Abandoned-Penn-State-WRC-Report-March-27-2020.pdf>

⁹ Interview with Rubana Huq, BGMEA

¹⁰<https://atmos.earth/payup-bangladesh-factory-worker-socialcampaign/?fbclid=IwAR3i93VDduKgHE85Nd1QN45C71zLRZj-ze4eDD0qfMXVI0rR8fV7nTfglLg>

40%¹¹ contributing to considerable economic hardship among the country's estimated 4.4 million workers¹², of which more than 60% are female.¹³ The industry supports a further 40 million people (approximately 25% of the country's population) indirectly, many of whom are women home-based garment workers – a particularly vulnerable and low paid workforce.¹⁴

The economic and health impacts have impacted workers, particularly female workers and their families considerably and will be discussed in the coming sections of this report.

2.2 Timeline: COVID-19 and the Ready-Made Garment Sector

January 2020: With several cities China in lockdown following the initial outbreaks of COVID-19, Chinese raw materials such as fabric needed by producers in Bangladesh are impacted by shipment delays, cancellations and a hike in prices.

March 2020: Bangladesh confirms its first positive case of COVID-19. Suppliers garment suppliers report that 'a lot' to 'most' of their nearly completed or entirely completed orders have been cancelled by their buyers. When orders were canceled, 72.1% of buyers refused to pay for raw materials (fabric, etc.) already purchased by the supplier, and 91.3% of buyers refused to pay for the cut-make-trim cost (production cost) of the supplier.¹⁵ The Bangladesh Garment Manufacturers and Exporters Association (BGMEA) called for international buyers to fulfil their contractual obligations.¹⁶ The government of Bangladesh imposed a nationwide lockdown on March 26, and the garments sector was closed for nearly three months, reopening only gradually. The government announced a stimulus package for sectors, including the RMG industry. However, factories announcing layoffs did not qualify and the many small and medium-sized enterprises that worked as subcontractors for big factories so much of these funds fail to reach workers.

April 2020: The government of Bangladesh announces new financial packages worth US\$8bn to help industries and service sectors to overcome the impact of COVID-19 with US \$2.3 billion set aside for small and medium enterprises. However, these loans fail to set conditions around ensuring workers' wages are paid.¹⁷ The Pay-up campaign initiated by US advocacy group, Remake, used on social media to get the factories and the workers their owed money begins

¹¹<https://atmos.earth/payup-bangladesh-factory-worker-social-campaign/?fbclid=IwAR3i93VDduKgHE85Nd1QN45C71zLRZj-ze4eDD0qfMXVI0rR8fV7nTfgllg>

¹²<https://COVID19.business-humanrights.org/en/tracker/bangladesh/>

¹³https://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---asia/---ro-bangkok/---ilo-dhaka/documents/publication/wcms_754669.pdf

¹⁴<https://COVID19.business-humanrights.org/en/tracker/bangladesh/>

¹⁵<https://www.workersrights.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/Abandoned-Penn-State-WRC-Report-March-27-2020.pdf>

¹⁶<https://COVID19.business-humanrights.org/en/tracker/bangladesh/>

¹⁷<https://cleanclothes.org/file-repository/underpaid-in-the-pandemic.pdf/view>

to gain traction after launching in late March. The campaign succeeds in securing commitments from major brands such as H&M, Zara/Inditex, Target (USA), PVH Corporation, and French brand Kiabi.¹⁸ After weeks of lockdown and cancelled orders resulting in suspended work at most of the industry's factories, most garment factories started to reopen from 26 April with a reduced number of workers. More than 120 brands, manufacturers, and worker organisations, among others, 103 endorsed the International Labour Organisation's COVID-19 Action Plan for the Garment Industry ("Call to Action") to engage with financial institutions, governments, and other donors to support garment manufacturers during the economic disruption of the pandemic and to protect garment workers' income, health, and employment.

May 2020: Factories continue to resume production with a limited number of workers and are asked to comply with government health regulations. The country's shutdown is extended until 16 May 2020 after lack of clarity about whether garment factories ought to close resulting in insecurity and hardship for workers travelling back and forth to their villages in absence of public transport.¹⁹ BGMEA calls for a blacklisting of specific buyers whose debts to suppliers remaining outstanding.²⁰

June 2020: Confirmed COVID-19 cases exceed 100,000 in Bangladesh.²¹

July 2020: Bangladesh's coronavirus cases have surpassed 200,000 and deaths reached 2,581. Bangladesh makes wearing of masks mandatory for all.²²

August 2020: COVID-19 cases in Bangladesh exceed 300,000 with nearly 4,100 deaths.²³

September 2020: The government announced it would pay 3,000 BDT per month to a worker for three months under the scheme, backed by the European Union and Germany, who together paid €113 million. The scheme is welcomed by activists amid concerns about it not reaching informal workers which make up the majority of the sector.²⁴ PayUp Fashion in movement is launched as an offshoot of the pay-up campaign which has by now recouped US \$22 billion in owed payments to factories and workers globally. The new movement details seven actions for brands and consumers.²⁵

¹⁸<https://atmos.earth/payup-bangladesh-factory-worker-social-campaign/?fbclid=IwAR3i93VDduKgHE85Nd1QN45C71zLRZj-ze4eDD0qfMXVI0rR8fV7nTfgllg>

¹⁹<https://cleanclothes.org/file-repository/underpaid-in-the-pandemic.pdf/view>

²⁰<https://www.reuters.com/article/us-health-coronavirus-bangladesh-workers/western-fashion-brands-that-exploit-bangladesh-suppliers-face-blacklisting-idUSKBN2332AH>

²¹<https://betterwork.org/where-we-work/bangladesh/>

²²<https://betterwork.org/where-we-work/bangladesh/>

²³<https://betterwork.org/where-we-work/bangladesh/>

²⁴<https://www.thedailystar.net/business/news/govt-plans-handouts-the-laid-1958265>

²⁵<https://payupfashion.com/>

October 2020: It is reported that the country's export earnings in the July-September period of the current financial year shows growth when compared to the same period last year, in spite of the pandemic. This is credited with being connected to Bangladesh receiving orders shifted from China and the recovery in the European economy.²⁶ Bangladesh now reports (October 12, 2020) more than 379,738 confirmed COVID-19 infections and 5,555 deaths.²⁷

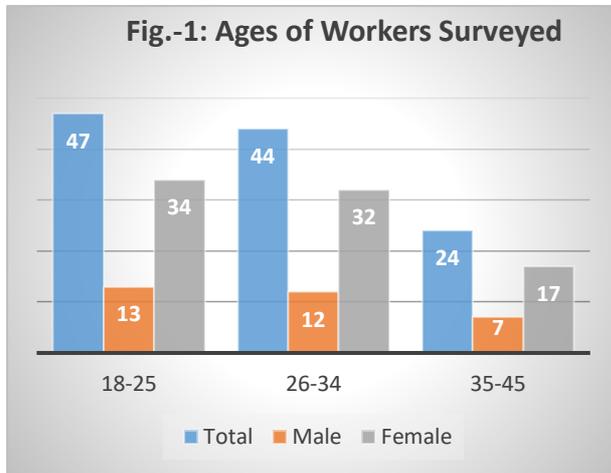
²⁶<https://www.newagebd.net/article/118108/exports-grow-by-258pc-in-july-sept>

²⁷<https://www.sfchronicle.com/news/article/Bangladesh-economy-shows-early-signs-of-pandemic-15576915.php>

Chapter-3: Findings and Analysis

3.1 Demographic Findings

The research approach for this study focused primarily on female workers, given that women workers dominate the sector.²⁸ Of the 115 workers interviewed, 28% (32 interviewees) were men. The average age of respondents was 28 years old with interviewees ranging in age from 18 to 45 years old.

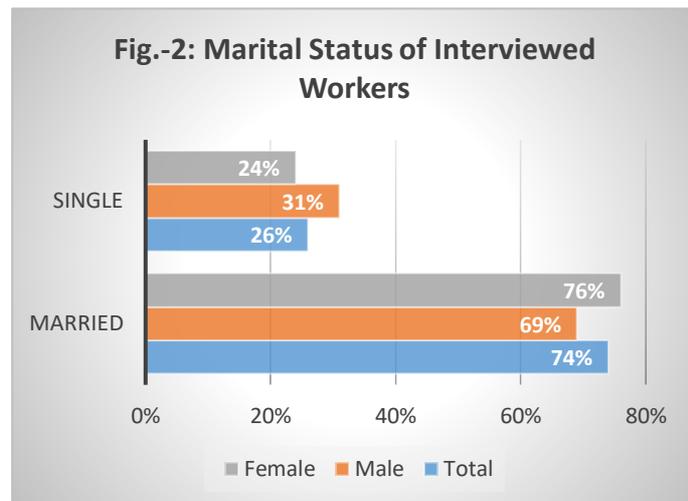


Across the RMG sector, education levels are split, 52% of those interviewed had completed primary school, with 30% going on to secondary school. 11% of those who went on to secondary school completed it

at the highest levels with 1% going on to third level education.

In line with other demographic surveys of RMG workers²⁹ the vast majority of those surveyed (74%) were married. About 69% of the male respondents were married. 76% of the female respondents were married. 89% of those surveyed were pregnant or had children.

It has long been established that female RMG workers in particular, work not only to support themselves and their children but to support their families and communities. Previous studies have found that more than half of women's salaries go towards supporting family members in rural areas.³⁰



Our survey finds that 80% of those surveyed have at least one adult male such as a husband or brother depending on them financially. 74% of them are supporting an adult female family

²⁸<https://COVID19.business-humanrights.org/en/tracker/bangladesh/>

²⁹https://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---asia/---ro-bangkok/---ilo-dhaka/documents/publication/wcms_754669.pdf

³⁰ https://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---asia/---ro-bangkok/---ilo-dhaka/documents/publication/wcms_754669.pdf

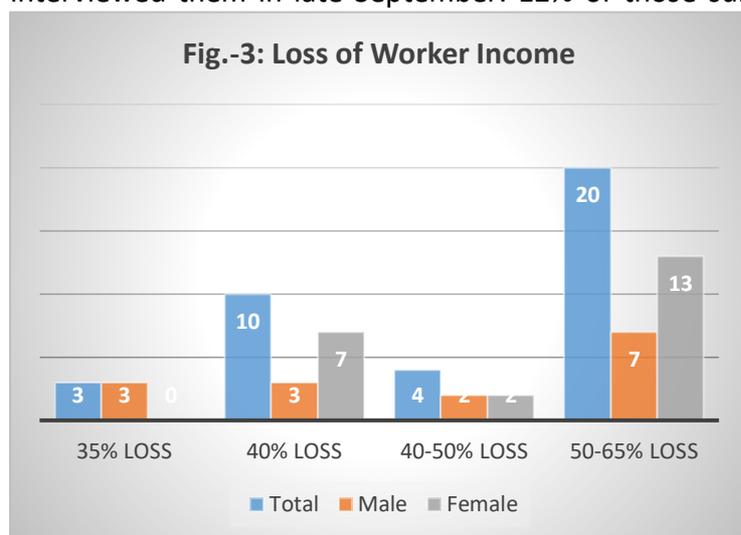
member such as a mother, mother in law or sister. The adult dependents are on top of the children they are supporting in the vast majority of cases.

3.2 Income and the impact of COVID-19 on worker earnings

In September 2018, the Bangladesh government moved to raise the monthly minimum wage for garment workers - for the first time in five years - to Tk 8,000 (US\$94), up from the previous 5,300 BDT (US\$62). However, this still falls significantly short of the estimated living wage which is 48,280 BDT (US\$569) per month.³¹ Prior to the pandemic, RMG workers were earning an average income of 8,500 BDT (the equivalent of US\$100) per month.³² It has been estimated that the wage gap for the months of March to May including (Eid bonuses) was around US\$501 million.³³

About 32% of those surveyed have experienced a loss of income due to COVID-19 compared to the same period of time in 2019. The average loss of income stands at 53%.

While the majority of the workers spoken to for this study had resumed work by the time, we interviewed them in late September. 12% of those surveyed have been retrenched. Fig 3



shows the slight decrease between champion factories (members of the Girls Advocacy Alliance project) and others in terms of worker retrenchment through the pandemic. In many cases, workers who were retrenched returned to their villages outside of Dhaka.

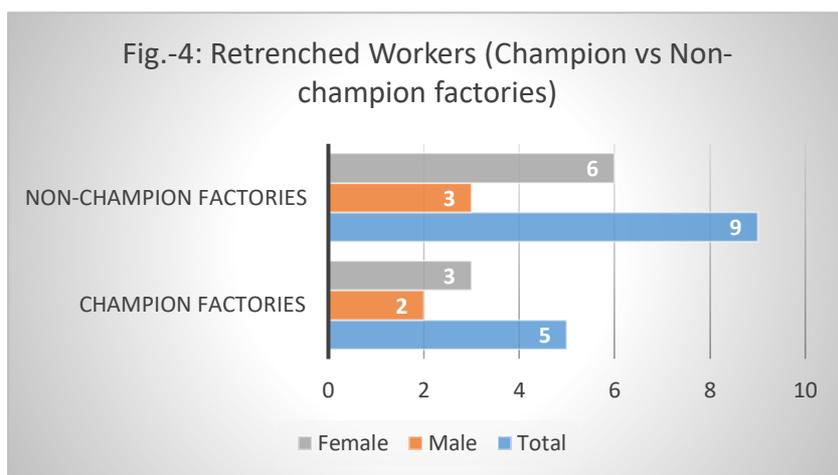
Interviews with workers and others demonstrated the relationship between

retrenchment and increased economic hardship. Of those retrenched, they are supporting themselves on past savings (20%) borrowing from friends and family (40%) or changing their occupation (40%). Encouragingly, 94% of those interviewed said that they are no longer fearful of losing their job. This may be representative of the four factories focused on for this study.

³¹<https://COVID19.business-humanrights.org/en/tracker/bangladesh/>

³² https://workerdiaries.org/gwdiaries/bangladesh/story_html5.html

³³ Clean clothes campaign- get confirmation



One of the notable findings of this study is that 90% of workers surveyed said they did not receive any additional income support throughout the pandemic in spite of the various government and employer social protection systems introduced (discussed in

further detail later in the section on Interventions and Responses from Various Actors). Of the 10% that did receive funding support, the main sources of extra money were from the government, trade unions and local philanthropists.

In the midst of the loss of income, workers have had to cut back spending in vital areas such as education. Particularly concerning is that 27% of workers surveyed said that they have decreased their expenditure on food which aligns with other studies which have found that food insecurity among **garment workers' children** is high.³⁴ Workers have also been forced to shift their spending in order to mitigate the pandemic's effects with 98% of those surveyed say they are now spending more on safety precautions. Under lockdown, during the closure of the public transportation system workers had to bear the burden of excessive transportation cost with more than half now reporting that they are spending more on transport. Our interviews found that safety concerns also increased with workers fearful of having their money and possessions stolen.³⁵

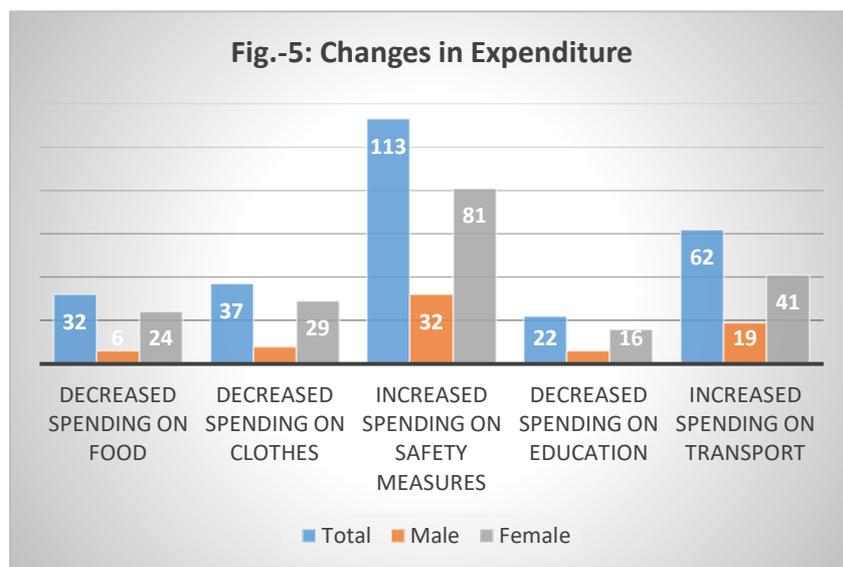
Tuomo Poutiainen, Country Director, ILO

Not only workers, but employers in the industrial sectors fell victim to COVID-19. The RMG workers were affected severely in absence of any social protection system in place. The major challenge is now to retain the workforce in a responsible way. Till now, many initiatives to support the RMG workers are not functioning well because the distribution and payment mechanisms haven't been established. Practicing decent work guidelines by suppliers, brands, government and other facilitating actors in a collaborative manner is needed to overcome the challenges of COVID-19.

³⁴<https://workerdiaries.org/health-checkup-on-garment-workers/>

³⁵Interviews- unclear who

The knock-on effect of losing their jobs is not limited to loss of income for workers. Workers also lost some of their regular job benefits including transportation facilities, food assistance,

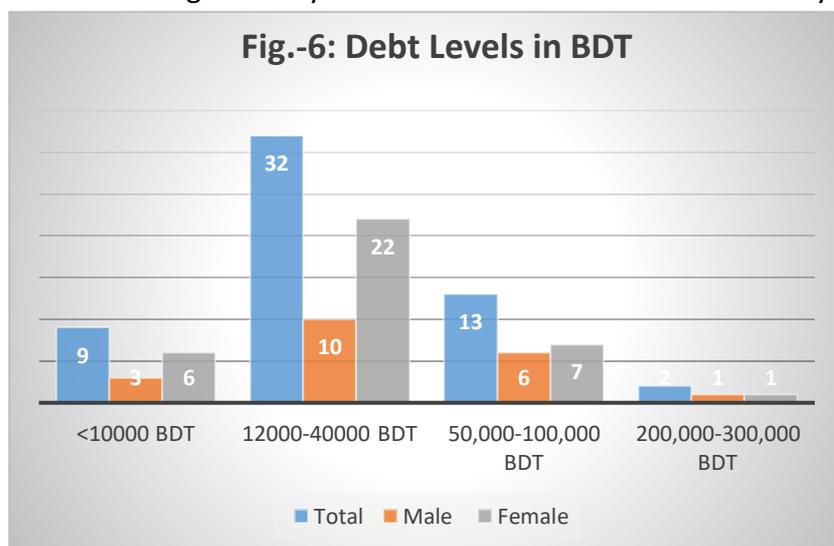


day-care centres for their children and clothes provided for wearing during the Eid festival. 43% of workers said they experienced financial struggles throughout COVID-19 with only minor number of workers citing other challenges such as illness, transport and mental health strains indicating that money

concerns have been front and centre of their stress during this period.

High levels of debt among workers predate COVID-19, with helpers and lower paid roles in the factory more likely to have higher debt levels.³⁶

However, COVID-19 has exacerbated this significantly. 52% of workers interviewed said they were currently in debt. The debt range varies greatly from 2000 (US\$24) to 300,000 BDT (US\$3,535) but the majority of debt levels centre between 12,000 BDT and 40,000 BDT (US\$142-US\$472) which is a concerning level given that it means that the average debt in the most conservative of cases is at least one month's salary.



48% of female workers had debt and 63% of male workers surveyed had debt. The increase in the number of male workers with debt may be connected to the low sample of the male workers.

³⁶https://workerdiaries.org/gwdiaries/bangladesh/story_html5.html

3.3 Trade Unions and Worker Representation

One of the most concerning by-products of the pandemics has been the worrying reports from Bangladesh and other garment producing countries of the crisis being used as a pretext for union busting³⁷ with unionised workers being explicitly targeted for dismissal.

Out of four factories under the study three factories had at least one trade union or participation committee. About 23% of the workers interviewed were trade union members. Of the trade union members, 22% were male.

80% of those who weren't trade union members said they didn't see the need in becoming a member indicating a lack of interest or valuing of trade union work among non-members.

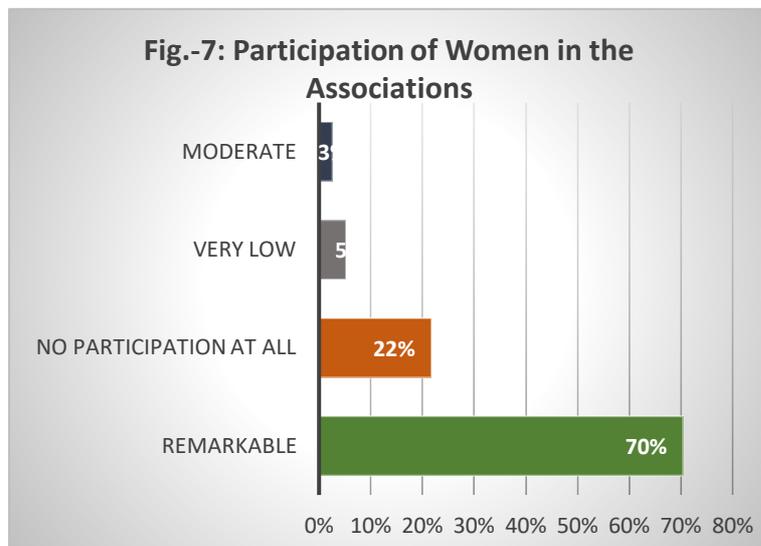
Just 20% of workers interviewed said they were aware of the trade unions and workers' participation committees taking action in their factory over the COVID period. Workers were aware of trade union activities primarily including raising issues with management and awareness raising on the virus, but also lesser awareness of efforts in financial aid, food assistance and health and safety.

TU representatives say:

Industry faces huge communication and coordination gap between Owner, BGMEA, Trade Union and Government. Uncoordinated directives left poor workers in miserable conditions that affected their livelihoods, thus the workers' rights at minimum level were violated. For instance, day care centers and breast feed corners are not functional yet in October 2020, equitable distribution of workload is not maintained – as a consequence work load of individual workers increased but not the over-time.

³⁷<https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2020/aug/07/COVID-led-to-brutal-crackdown-on-garment-workers-rights-says-report>

We looked at the participation of women workers in the associations and trade unions to gauge a sense of the role they play. A good number of respondents across champion and non-



champion factories observed remarkable participation of women in various kinds of associations’ negotiation process. There is no significant difference in participation of women in the associations between champion & non-champion factories.

22% of respondents said they don’t see any role of women in the negotiation process which is

very concerning considering the vast majority of workers are female and demonstrates a clear need for increased female participation and leadership at association/trade union level.

3.4 Interventions and Responses from Various Actors

International Brands: Much of the deepest challenges for RMG workers in the midst of the pandemic have derived from the actions of international brands. In the early months of the pandemic, 98.1% of buyers refused to contribute to the cost of paying the partial wages to furloughed workers that the law requires. 97.3% of buyers refused to contribute to severance pay expenses of dismissed workers, also a legal entitlement in Bangladesh. These actions were taken in violation of Bangladeshi law and in spite of ‘responsible exit’ policies held by many brands.³⁸

The Government of Bangladesh: While the government moved quickly to set up low interest loans for factories, many factories were ineligible due to their low levels of exporting and among those who were, they found the banking conditions around the loans such as six-month repayment schedules to be prohibitive.³⁹

Bangladesh Garment Manufacturers and Exporters Association (BGMEA): BGMEA communicated with the government early in the pandemic and encouraged the development of the loan schemes and also requested health and safety guidelines for factory operations. They set up a virtual forum to share the impact of order cancellations and mitigate the losses and set up support systems for their member factories. They set up a lab, testing workers for COVID-19 and partnered with Maya to provide free mental and physical health services to

³⁸<https://www.workersrights.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/Abandoned-Penn-State-WRC-Report-March-27-2020.pdf>

³⁹ Factory interviews

workers. According to our interview with BGMEA President, Ms. Rubana Huq, they are planning to launch an initiative to creating more opportunities for women workers in management positions in the factories.⁴⁰

Trade Unions: Factory-level trade unions led initiatives to raise awareness of COVID-19 and also provided food and health and hygiene materials. National and factory level trade unions led collective bargaining efforts in order to secure gains for workers including 100% Eid bonuses and 65% salary for the layoff period (although they campaigned for 100% of salaries to be paid).

NGOs: While countless international groups engaged in advocacy efforts focused on brands including Clean Clothes Campaign, Workers' Rights Consortium, Remake, Business and Human Rights Resource Centre and others, local NGOs focused on basic provisions of workers. For example, AWAJ Foundation distributed 10,000 packages with food and health materials for workers who lost their jobs.

The International Labour Organisation (ILO) and others: The ILO convened 120 brands, manufacturers, and worker organisations to engage with financial institutions, governments, and other donors to support garment manufacturers during the economic disruption of the pandemic and to protect garment workers' income, health, and employment. The Call to Action, was regarded as a positive first step, it was criticized for not being comprehensive enough and lacking in accountability measures to hold brands responsible for the workers in their supply chain.⁴¹

International Donors: The EU and Germany agreed to provide €113 million in grants to support the government's funding scheme for factories. However, this scheme gives attention only to formal sector workers. 87 percent of the country's workforce lies outside the formal sector. A second stimulus package extended to the informal sector lacked any conditionality to pay workers' wages.

Factories: Various employers led their own initiatives such as the champion factories (members of the Girls Advocacy Alliance project) provided workers with masks and soaps. Factories have had to invest heavily to ensure COVID protective work environment including setting up disinfectant tunnel, splitting the entry and exit time, changing floor layout, establishing hand washing zone and separated dining facilities.⁴² Employers also restructured workplaces in order to accommodate social distancing and implementing safety provisions such as disinfectant tunnels, handwashing facilities and revised seating arrangements, and dining setup. The champion factories have set up and paid for testing facilities for the workers and staffs who experience COVID 19 symptoms in partnership with hospitals.

⁴⁰ Interview with Rubana Huq, BGMEA

⁴¹<https://cleanclothes.org/file-repository/underpaid-in-the-pandemic.pdf/view>

⁴²Citation needed

3.5 Managing COVID 19 in the workplace

While factories are now reopened, reduced orders as well as factories adhering to distancing measures has contributed significantly to the loss of worker income and increased worker job

The Bangladesh Garment Manufacturers and Exporters Association (BGMEA) response to COVID 19 health and safety

After nearly one month, BGMEA reopened the industry, in the midst of a lot of criticism and skepticism about factories re-opening. Prior opening to factories, BGMEA developed health guidelines and a protocol for its member factories in consultation with the Ministry of Health of the Bangladesh Government, ILO and WHO. BGMEA made random unannounced audits of factories to assess whether protocols are in place.

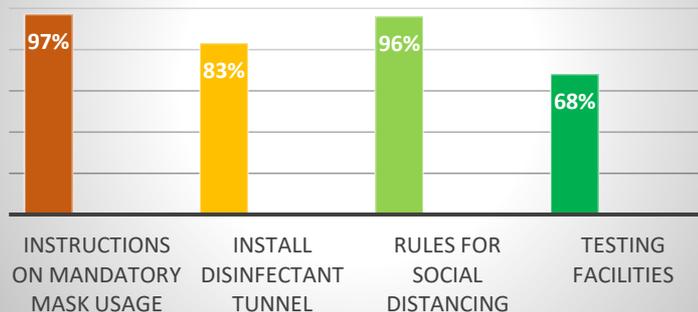
security as factories have had to operate with less workforce.⁴³

While it has been cited that worker awareness of COVID is low, our survey finds that workers are largely aware of the primary COVID-19 symptoms including fever, cough, sore throat and challenges with breathing

which may be connected to the visibility campaigns led by factories and trade unions.

Almost all of the workers that we spoke to (98%) had noticed an increase in safety precautions in their workplace. See Fig 8 below, however there was less clarity around the actions taken by factories when workers had become sick with COVID-19. 41% of workers said their unwell colleagues had received sick pay with salary with 54% of workers saying their factory took no action (37%) or they didn't know if their factory had taken any action (17%)

Fig.-8: Safety Initiatives Noted by Workers in Factories



3.6 Gender

The pandemic has greatly deepened some of the gender-based challenges that have long afflicted the RMG sector. The COVID-19 lockdown has disproportionately impacted women and exacerbated gender-based disparities between women, men, girls and boys in terms of access to information, resources to cope with the pandemic and socio-economic issues.

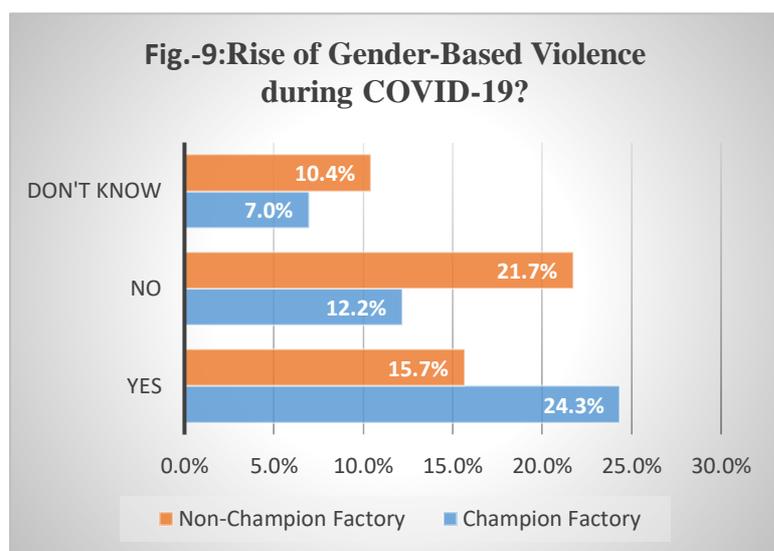
⁴³ Factory interviews

Violence against women has also been on the rise in Bangladesh and elsewhere amid the pandemic. It has been calculated that in champion factories more respondents agreed that there has been a rise context while in non-champion factories there was less agreement. In champion factories the rate of prevention and awareness- raising activities on gender-based-violence against women is comparatively higher than the non-champion factories which may account for this. See fig below.

Ms. Shammin Sultana, Gender Specialist, ILO,

The work environment for women has worsened in the RMG sector during COVID-19, in particular maternity care, day care and breast-feeding facilities. Gender-based violence is in on the increase both at factory and at home. Th representation of women in factories is poor in supervisory positions. There needs to a concerted effort by government, owners and workers representatives to improve working conditions of women in the RMG sector.

Pregnant RMG workers risking their health by working excessively or withstanding discomfort to avoid losing their job has long been a cause for concern in the sector.⁴⁴ However the pandemic has made the position of pregnant workers even more precarious.



Just 2% of the workers surveyed for this study were pregnant and the low number may account for the worrying rise in the number of pregnant women sacked reported by trade unions and NGOs under what they say is the pretext of the pandemic. Pregnant workers are entitled to get 16 weeks paid leave⁴⁵ making them desirable candidates to remove in the context of a reduced labour

force. It is difficult to determine where workers are being coerced to resign and the number of cases are unknown. However, Sommolito Garment Sramik Federation have since May, 2020 filed 50 lawsuits on behalf of sacked pregnant workers. In some of these cases,

⁴⁴https://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---asia/---ro-bangkok/---ilo-dhaka/documents/publication/wcms_754669.pdf

⁴⁵ Interviews

companies had taken workers’ identification cards and forced them to resign, while others simply refused to pay women their maternity benefits.⁴⁶

Pregnant workers are of course particularly vulnerable in the context of less expenditure on food as outlined earlier.

Female RMG workers who have lost their jobs or are also losing the food assistance benefits for them and their children leading to greater risk of malnutrition and health challenges, in addition to more economic hardship as they are forced to spend more on food (or else consume less).

The absence of day care facilities during factory closure has also added to the strain for working mothers in need of childcare.⁴⁷



An increase in gender-based violence in factories is also being reported connected to the lack of social auditing conducted by brands due to COVID-19 concerns.⁴⁸ Furthermore, the pandemic has also contributed to increased reports of gender-based violence in the home connected to the financial and other stresses. Our interviews have also indicated that the reduction of the transportation facilities caused by

the pandemic has led to female workers travelling on public buses and experiencing security challenges in addition to verbal and sexual harassment. Eight percent of our survey respondents reported experiencing violence since the pandemic took hold. See Fig.9 for details. Just 13% of worker respondents were aware of any gender-based violence measures in the workplace indicating that there is a need to increase interventions in this area.

⁴⁶ <https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2020/jul/09/we-are-on-our-own-bangladeshs-pregnant-garment-workers-face-the-sack>

⁴⁷ Interviews

⁴⁸ <https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2020/jul/09/we-are-on-our-own-bangladeshs-pregnant-garment-workers-face-the-sack>

Chapter-4: Discussion and Recommendations

4.1 The Way Forward & Areas for Programmatic Intervention

By October 2020, Bangladesh had reported more than 350,000 confirmed coronavirus infections and 4,823 deaths. Reports on the number of workers are said to be very low⁴⁹, however this is uncertain due to lack of testing available. The COVID-19 pandemic has pushed women garment workers in a more vulnerable situation compared to their male counterparts.

While the industry is in recovery, BGMEA reports that the price of garments is on a steady decline with COVID 19 further escalating the situation. Since factories are now hungry for orders after being away from business for few months and due to decline in global demand, a perfect situation is prevailing in the market to slash the price further and exploit factories and workers further. In September 2020 the price of apparel in the international market declined by 5.23% compared to the same period in 2019.⁵⁰

While the industry's bottom line may just about survive the pandemic, worker welfare and the economic empowerment of female RMG workers has experienced a significant setback, the ramifications workers and their families may feel for years if not fully addressed.

Areas in which programmatic interventions are needed include the following:

- Increased COVID-19 testing in factories and auditing of safety measures.
- Continued mechanism for wage support to all workers during the crisis including the mobilization of international financial resources to address current needs and debt levels. There have been various calls for a relief fund for workers for brands and factory owners to contribute to.⁵¹ Worker debt levels are significant and short-term interventions in order to help them reduce the debt in a practical sense in addition to reduction financial-related stresses and mental health strains are greatly needed.
- The need for social security mechanisms, such as unemployment insurance schemes or guarantee has long persisted in the RMG sector and has been highlighted in the context of the pandemic.
- Increasing mechanisms to ensure worker voice such as protecting trade unions, increase collective bargaining and factory unionization rates. The role of worker representation and social dialogue has become more vital than ever in this period. Trade unions have helped to bring about gains for workers including the payment of full Eid bonuses throughout the pandemic. However, the reports of union busting are concerning and these violations need to be halted immediately. The lack of worker

⁴⁹ Factory interviews

⁵⁰ Interview with Rubana Huq, BGMEA

⁵¹<https://COVID19.business-humanrights.org/en/tracker/bangladesh/>

awareness or interest in trade unions found in our survey is worth further exploration in order to ensure greater understanding of where it derives from.

- Greater access to finance and support funds for factories that meet their needs and allow them greater financial agility would ensure better safety standards and greater ability to pay workers.
- Pregnant workers and workers with children have been particularly vulnerable during the pandemic demonstrating the need for programmes to pay particular attention to their needs and ensure greater protection. Relatedly, the reliance on the workplace for childcare also warrants further exploration.
- More mechanisms to hold brands accountable, particularly in revising their purchasing practices to ensure proper social and environmental sustainability but also in their supplier relationships to hold them to their orders. Brand behavior has had an enormous knock-on effect in terms of worker well-being. Not only in terms of order cancellation but also the demanding of high discounts and delayed payments. As factories continue to operate with a reduced workforce (estimated to be 10% less)⁵² and can no longer handle multiple concurrent orders, there are reports that individual workers are coming under increased pressure in an already pressurized workplace. The placing of brand orders in good lead times is more important than ever in order to ensure less pressure on production and lead to challenges such as excessive working hours or more pressure on individual workers for the given time given less ability to pay for overtime.
- The shift in worker spending and reduction of expenditure on food in workers who are already malnutrition is likely to have significant health impacts and indicates a key area for intervention for health-focused programmes.
- The rise in gender-based violence both in the factory and homes and elsewhere including public transport is cause for concern and safety interventions are needed in addition to greater advocacy on what has long been an endemic challenge in this industry.
- Factory should resume its transportation facilities for the workers. Female workers often face harassment in riding on public transportation furthermore workers have to spend a significant amount of money for their transportation purpose.
- Many research studies have been commissioned for capturing the scenario of RMG sector since the pandemic started but in uncoordinated way. Collaborative and coordinated move will benefit the RMG industry and its workers to pursue any policy advocacy initiatives through evidence-based approach.
- Due to the global pandemic worker intensive industrial sector will change its operational approach in medium and long run. Industrial automation is getting popular to the low-end worker dependent factories. The RMG industry in Bangladesh

⁵² Factory interviews

is entirely dependent on the low cost semi-skilled workforce the risk of massive joblessness is probable. Initiative for taking skill development programs for the general worker is a high need.

- Many retrenched workers are changing their professions just to making their end meets. Its also reported by the workers that, finding no work many of then are involving in risky and illegal occupation and resulting further social insecurity.

4.2 Feedback from Key Industry Stakeholders & Areas for Further Study

On Monday, October 19th, our study findings were presented to more than 70 stakeholders including factories, workers, trade unions, civil society and others. They engaged with our findings and gave their own feedback on the areas affecting women workers throughout the pandemic.

The gender issues captured by our findings resonated greatly with stakeholders.

“This was our fear from the gender perspective that the defeminisation of the workforce. From pre-COVID situation, we know that gender-based violence, sexual and reproductive health, maternity facilities, all needed to be improved but now know that it’s worse,” said Shammin Sultana, ILO programme officer and gender specialist. “

“Women’s care burden needs to be thought about. How much of the care burden has increased? We know that child care facilities aren’t there. How can we work so that pregnant workers can keep on working?”

While acknowledging that many of the key gender-based challenges facing women workers pre-date the pandemic, stakeholders cited that the current crisis has highlighted the need for increased maternity rights. For example, a longer maternity leave was called for in order to alleviate the childcare burden and plight of pregnant workers.

The rise in gender-based violence that our study document is part of a broader endemic challenge of violence, harassment and rape culture which has long been a characteristic of the RMG sector. In the weeks since this study was conducted, public discourse and outrage on this issue has increased connected to reports of gang rape and assault.⁵³ There is a need for a comprehensive study on the drivers of this and how they can be mitigated including looking at transport and mobility, an issue which gravely threatens worker safety. The need for ratification of ILO convention C190⁵⁴ against violence and harassment in the world of work was cited as one much-needed measure that can help.

Speakers also spoke of the need for greater worker representation such as increased trade unions and anti-harassment committees. Representatives of the trade union movement called for the government to request anti-harassment committees so it’s not only trade unions calling for these changes.

While factory representatives spoke of the various health and safety measures that they have invested in in order to address the pandemic and noted the low numbers of workers testing

⁵³ <https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2020/oct/19/to-tackle-sexual-violence-in-bangladesh-the-culture-of-victim-blaming-must-end>

⁵⁴ https://www.ilo.org/dyn/normlex/en/f?p=NORMLEXPUB:12100:0::NO::P12100_ILO_CODE:C190

positive in their facilities, concerns were expressed by trade unions and workers about low levels of hand sanitising and proper protocols in some factories. Increasing safety protocols across the industry, with DIFE and others leading auditing of the various measures was cited as a short-term need.

The lack of social distancing on public transport was also raised as a concern. Trade union representatives called for workers to be provided with free health and safety materials in order to alleviate their cost increases connected to them.

Factory representatives confirmed our study findings that the loans from the government proved insufficient in terms of relieving the financial strains they face. Short repayment timelines and not covering the wages of factory staff were cited as key limitations.

With lower levels of orders in addition to lower levels of overtime, concerns still mount for the future of the industry and workers' economic outlook in this new context. Industry stakeholders called upon buyers to continue to place orders in order to keep work in the sector afloat.

Our study was limited in scope and timeline and paves the way for future in-depth studies including women's advancement into supervisory roles which remains low. There is a need to explore the barriers to women's advancement within the sector and work towards their removal.

Speakers talked of the psychological impact on workers like others given the enormity of the pandemic and the challenges of the strain it has brought on mental health very broadly which is another area that deserves further examination.

Future waves of the virus and its likely impact on worker health as well as the broader industry should lockdowns in Europe, the US and others impact order levels was also cited as a key concern.

Greater collaboration between stakeholders is cited as a key takeaway from this research to address the various needs and challenges. Without a joint initiative from government, factories, civil society and trade unions, support systems for workers will remain inadequate and the worst impacts of the pandemic will be insurmountable for them.