
The Mapped in Bangladesh (MiB) project of Centre for Entrepreneurship Development (CED) of Brac University (BracU), has organized a webinar on September 30, 2020 titled as "Covid-19 Experience: Workers’ Perspective" based on the findings of the recently conducted rapid survey on Ready Made Garment (RMG) workers in Bangladesh titled "The Impacts of Covid-19 on the Lives of Workers in the Garment Industry". The Rapid Survey is being carried out in collaboration with Centre for Entrepreneurship Development (CED) and Brac James P. Grant School of Public Health (JPGSH) of Brac University and the Subir and Malini Chowdhury Center for Bangladesh Studies at the University of California, Berkeley.

The rapid survey was conducted on the garment workers in order to understand how they have been impacted during the pandemic. In this study, workers from the RMG sector who are particularly vulnerable to even a transitory shock to the sector was given focused and as part of the survey, 1,057 garment workers were communicated through phone calls between June 30 and July 13, 2020.

Dr. Sanchita Banerjee Saxena, Executive Director, Institute for South Asia Studies, and Director, Subir and Malini Chowdhury Center for Bangladesh Studies, University of California at Berkeley presented the findings of the rapid survey at the webinar.

The study showed that in 2020, the garment industry accounted for 82% of Bangladesh’s exports and 11% of its GDP. Based on export earnings data, USD 4.6 billion was lost during March-May. But the gap had almost vanished by June demonstrating hope for a recovery of the sector.

As per key the findings of the survey, 82% of workers said the income they had in April/May 2020 was less than the income in February 2020 and at the time of the survey, 52% of the respondents said that they saved less than what they saved in February, the pre-COVID-19 period. 77% respondents (80% of women and 72% of men) said it was difficult to feed everyone in their household. 69% of workers ate less of meat, fish and eggs in May compared to February, but 40% ate more pulses (lentils, chickpeas, etc.), and 74% ate about the same amount of rice and wheat in the same period.

When asked how they have coped during this period, 60% of workers (65% women and 55% men) said they do not save or use their savings to pay for food; 92% (90% of women and 96% of men) said they reduce other expenses.

Among the surveyed 1,057 garment workers who participated in the phone survey, 906 workers who were still employed in February 2020, 140 reported that their current employer was laying off workers since March 2020 after the pandemic broke out in Bangladesh. The average number of laid off workers, as reported by the respondents, was 232. 70% of the workers said they are very worried or somewhat worried about workers in their factory who lost their job or might lose their job because of the pandemic.

87% respondents said their factory has introduced new precautions against the Coronavirus, including giving workers new protective equipment (91%), encouraging more hygiene measures (77%), sending workers with symptoms home (66%), and encouraging distance between workers (75%). However, 59% still feel that they are somewhat likely or very likely to get infected by the virus in their factory, whereas only 29% think they will contract it in their
homes. 54% of women and 45% of men would not be able to isolate at home if they contracted the virus. 90% said they did not receive any support from the government during this pandemic. Expectations that workers have from the government include: cash support (70%), health care facilities (58%), job security (53%), and food rations (45%). The study also recommended to address the needs of creating more opportunity for mobility between various positions in the factory, particularly for women.

Dr. Atonu Rabbani, Associate Professor, Department of Economics, University of Dhaka & Associate Scientist, BRAC James P Grant School of Public Health, BRAC University commented that it is trickier to get lay off data from workers as factory would be more appropriate to collect data. He also explained different angels for the interpretation of the collected data.

The discussants of the webinar have made a number of comments regarding this rapid survey and all hoped that the effective preventive measures will be taken to address various economical, safety and security and health related issues of the workers.

Begum Monnujan Sufian, MP, Honorable State Minister, Ministry of Labour and Employment (MoLE), Government of the People's Republic of Bangladesh, who was present as the Chief Guest at the webinar welcomed the collaboration of two universities for undertaking the research initiative with emphasis on workers. She depicted various steps and initiatives that the Government has taken to open the garment factories keeping the welfare of the workers in mind including implementing the government declared stimulus packages for the RMG sector, forming crisis committees, providing telemedicine services to workers, formulating health safety guide for workers with cooperation of ILO and so on.

Professor Dr. Wahiduddin Mahmud, Economist and Former Advisor, Caretaker Government of the People's Republic of Bangladesh said the factories of RMG sector in Bangladesh are born to export which makes the situation of the country very unique as large part of the factories of Bangladesh garments sector do export. Thus, the way the shocks have been absorbed by the garments sector of Bangladesh are different than the other parts of the world. As this sector has the highest concentration of workers it should be seen that how to balance the public hygiene as much as possible.

Dr. Rubana Huq, President, Bangladesh Garment Manufacturers and Exporters Association (BGMEA) said Brands have to be made responsible for the unwanted and the adversities that Bangladesh faced due to the Covid-19 outbreak. She mentioned that the industry took necessary initiatives to open the factories gradually as per the demand of the economy and she also thanked the Prime Minister for announcing the stimulus package using which workers have been paid through digital payments. She called for a collaboration of all group to address the existing gap of the sector.

Ms. Taslima Akhter, Activist and Coordinator, Bangladesh Garment Workers Solidarity said that the workers were the most vulnerable during this Covid-19 pandemic. They are also in constant fear of laying off from their jobs. So she requested the government and the factory owners to take their responsibilities for the workers.

Professor Dr. Rahim B. Talukdar, Team Leader, MiB and Adviser, CED-BRACU, the chair of the webinar in his concluding remarks thanked everyone to attend the webinar. Mr. Syed Hasibuddin Hussain, Project Manager, MiB, CED-BRACU moderated the event.