

The apparel workers are in the highest vulnerability due to COVID-19: a study on the Bangladesh Apparel Industry

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Abstract –The pandemic COVID-19 affects the global economy which can be called a cause for the labor market and economic crisis. The study has been conducted to understand the impact of COVID-19 on apparel workers. The relevant academic literature publication, reports, newspapers, webpages, have been used for data collection. The study has found that the apparel workers in Bangladesh Garments Industry are in the highest vulnerability situation due to the COVID-19. Due to the shortage of raw materials, the factory owners have to close down the factory. Moreover, global brands and retailers canceled production orders and deferred the payment. As a result, the apparel workers have to go back to their house without any payment. Moreover, during the lockdown, a few factories continue their production without ensuring safety. So, the study has found that the apparel workers in Bangladesh are in the most vulnerable situation. Some of them do not have a job while some of them have to continue the work in a risky environment. A few initiatives have been taken by different stakeholders which seems not effective to the workers.

Keywords –COVID-19; Apparel/ RMG Industry; Apparel Workers; Occupational Health and Safety; Bangladesh

JEL CLASSIFICATIONS: J63, J71, J81, J83.

INTRODUCTION

“In 2008, the world presented a united front to address the consequences of the global financial crisis, and the worst was averted. We need that kind of leadership and resolve now.”

–Guy Ryder, director-general of the ILO. [1]

The pandemic COVID-19 has spread all over the world. This virus can contaminate people easily. Due to this, countries have been closed down every activity and shopping for anything but necessity commodities. The COVID-19 outbreak is one of the worst global pandemics for decades [2]. The International Labour Organization (ILO) predicted around 24.7 million jobs will be disappeared due to COVID-19 [1]. Like the other developed and developing countries, Bangladesh is also one of them who will be affected higher than anyone. Bangladesh apparel industry is the highest affected industry due to this epidemic, where the majority of the workers are women working

without any job security. As almost all over the world is in lockdown, there is no income turnover to the brands and buyers of the apparel industry. These financial losses at the buyers and brands lead to the order cancellation from the suppliers. It was calculated that around 6 billion orders have been canceled [3]. This order cancellation impacted on the Ready-made garments (RMG) workers. The workers didn't get their legal wages.

In the normal situation, they have to work on low wages as well as in an unsafe, unhealthy, and unsanitary working environment. Fire accident at the Tazreen Fashions in 2012; Rana Plaza factory collapse in 2013, a factory fire in Pakistan's Karachi city in 2012, another factory fire at New Delhi, India, in 2016, etc. [4]. These are examples of industrial accidents where all the victims were the workers of those factories. The fashion industry has evolved in this way which makes it hard for the workers to lead a normal life.

And, in COVID-19, the RMG workers are the most affected as usual.

OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

The primary objective of the study is to find out the impact of COVID-19 on apparel manufacturing workers. The secondary objectives of this study are the following discussion: To find out the initiatives taken by different stakeholders in Bangladesh to protect the workers' lives and rights; and to write down a few future strategies to minimize the impact of this kind of pandemic in the future.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The study had been done to find out the answers to the following questions: (1) How the COVID-19 has affected on the apparel manufacturing workers?; and (2) What types of initiatives have already taken by different stakeholders at the apparel manufacturing industry to protect the workers' lives and rights?

LITERATURE REVIEW

Coronavirus disease (COVID-19) is a new infectious disease caused by a new virus. The impact of this virus has spread globally [5]. It has been predicted that COVID-19 may create another financial crisis like 2008 which was named 'Child's Play' [6], [7].

Not only a single economic sector has been affected due to the COVID-19, the whole global economic sectors i.e. mining, transportation, leisure and hospitality chains, airlines, the luxury goods sector, etc. have been shaken by this pandemic [8], [9]. Among the most ostentatious economic sectors, the apparel industry is one of the highest vulnerably affected sectors [10]. It can be explained by two causes. The primary reason can be China which is the main source destination of the apparel industry. The secondary reason is the spread of proliferate COVID-19 in almost all of the countries of the world.

Due to the COVID-19, the Chinese Government instructed factory shutdowns across most of the country's provinces from January 2020. As a result, the whole supply chain of a few industries i.e. automobile, energy, steel, textile, coal, agriculture, and electronic devices including mobile, etc. have been affected. Among the most affected industry, the apparel industry is one of the highest. As China has stooped the production, the other apparel manufacturing countries like Bangladesh, India, Sri Lanka, South Africa, Myanmar, etc. apparel industry has shaken. For example, Bangladesh export more than 50 per cent of

apparel raw materials from China, and about 40 per cent of the machinery and spare parts for this industry [11]. The production factories have to stop production for the shortage of raw materials. Conferring to a survey, around 93 per cent of Bangladesh apparel producers reported that they faced a delay in raw material shipments during this pandemic [12]. As a result, the factories have to close down and the workers got a tremble. Another quaver, the workers got when the brands and retailers started to cancel the production order. A recent study result shows that about 23.4 per cent of suppliers indicated that lots of existing orders had been canceled while another 22.3 per cent of the suppliers marked "most" in respect of orders cancellation. The report also shows that around 5.9 per cent supplier declared that all of their in-process orders got cancel [12]. These two things due to the COVID-19 affected the apparel workers most.

A survey result found that about 72.4 per cent of manufacturers in Bangladesh were unable to provide their workers with some income when furloughed. Around 80.4 per cent of the Bangladeshi suppliers stated that they were incapable to provide compensation to the workers when order cancellations resulted in worker dismissals [12]. The Managing Director of Denim Expert Limited, Mr. Mostafiz Uddin assumed that a few apparel workers might get job losses due to the COVID-19 [13]. The Asian Development Bank (ADB) expected that about 894,930 workers would be unemployed in Bangladesh due to the COVID-19 [11]. According to the Bangladesh Garment Manufacturers and Exporters Association (BGMEA), above 70 factories were closed during the last year and 1,200 in the past four years, due to the factory remediation initiatives after the Rana Plaza collapse taken by the brands and buyers, which accounted for firing more than 50,000 workers [11]. So, the apparel workers are those who are the ultimate affected by any major incident in the apparel industry.

This is not a new scenario. Without any kind of accident, their normal working environment is unhealthy and unsafe. The RMG workers are frequently affected by various types of diseases due to the unhealthy workplace conditions and the dust produced from raw materials [14], [15]. Furthermore, the RMG workers don't get the salary when they are on sick leave [16]. Similar to the employees of other sectors, the RMG workers have the right to work in a safe working environment as well as get the benefits. The working condition for the RMG workers is not healthy which has talked previously so many times [15], [17]–[20].

Compared to the other countries i.e. India, Cambodia, China, Thailand, Sri Lanka, the Bangladesh RMG workers' vulnerability is highly reported [16].

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Data Collection Strategy:

To understand the impact of COVID-19 on the apparel workers in Bangladesh, the secondary information has been used. The previous literature review, newspapers, and industry reports have been used to compile this study.

For the data collection, online media has been searched regularly from February 2020 to April 2020 for collecting the stories relating to the COVID-19 effect on the apparel workers. The main reason for using the newspaper information is there is not still enough information available in the similar research field, except the form of newspaper [4]. Moreover, the newspaper information is supportive to develop the theoretical postulates [31]. For the Western media outlets - Google News searching strategy has been used. And, for the local newspapers i.e. Prothom Alo, Financial Express, Dhaka Tribune, etc. have been regularly viewed. The local newspapers have been selected based on the popularity among the Bangladeshi people. Another reason is that these newspapers are written in English. A total of 100 news has been gathered. After the initial screening, the relevant stories have been stored as PDFs at the analytical software.

Data Analysis:

For the data analysis, NVivo qualitative data analysis software has been used. Through this software, the data has been coded. After completing the coding, a software-generated report has been found. This report supports writing down the section headers i.e. the impact on the workers, the initiatives have been taken, or what can be done in the future to ensure the workers' rights, etc. All the collected newspaper information and the interview information have been used for the analysis.

FINDINGS

How the COVID-19 impact on the apparel workers:

The factory owners did not pay the salary to the workers. They replied that they did not get the payment from the buyers and retailers. As a result, the workers are now passing their days in a divesting

situation. The workers have started to protest on the road for their daily wages. At first, they do not have any kind of personal protection except a face mask with a few people. Secondly, they do not maintain any kind of social distance. They usually live in overcrowded conditions without access to basic sanitation as well as face financial barriers to access the health system.

As a result, they became the most vulnerable people who may get to infect by this disease easily.

At the starting period of lockdown in Bangladesh, the factory owners decided to close down the factory. But after a few days, the factories started to reopen. As a result, the workers started to come back to Dhaka, the central hub for apparel manufacturing factories, amid the government-imposed shutdown [21]. The other things have been found through communicating with the workers that they were issued leave without pay. That means during the lockdown situation, they will not get any payment. Moreover, there is a possibility of layoffs and job suspensions. The ADB assumed that in Bangladesh, being one of the largest apparel producers, 894,930 workers would be unemployed [11]. As a result, the workers were virtually forced to start protestation breaking the order of Government to be lockdown. It has been seen that a group of workers is staging a sit-in protest in front of an owner's house demanding their due wages [22].

In Bangladesh, the treatment facility is not so up to the mark. For instance, a total of 500 ICU beds are available in Bangladesh for nearly 170 million people [5]. So, the most affluent people of Bangladesh cannot get treatment during the COVID-19. Then, it raises the question of how Bangladesh will handle the huge amount of RMG workers if they continue to protest and get infected by the COVID-19.

Moreover, thousands of workers have returned to work on 26 April 2020 in factories amid a nationwide lockdown in place until 5 May 2020. [23]. This issue may raise the fears of an increase in the spread of the contagion. When the country is in lockdown, at least 1,000 factories were scheduled to continue the production in Dhaka and other places including the port city of Chittagong, the main hub for the Bangladesh Garment industry [24]. BGMEA's vice president Mohammad Hatem. "We have to accept coronavirus as part of life. If we don't open factories, there will be an economic crisis,"[25].

With the low wages, the workers don't have any capacity to save money for the future. As a result, they become very helpless right now. No one thinks for the

workers as well as their family who are mainly dependent on the workers' income. Mr. Mofazzal Hosain, a garment worker who earns \$115 a month. He said "The fear of coronavirus is there. But I am now more worried about losing my job, wages, and benefits." [25]. A Labour rights leader, Ms. Kalpona Akter, has compared the COVID-19 with the Rana Plaza disaster accident in 2013 and said: "Its impact could be worse than Rana Plaza"[25].

What are the initiatives have been taken to support the workers:

In response to this emergency period of COVID-19, different kinds of initiatives have been seen to take by different stakeholders. Bangladesh Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina affirmed a stimulus package of BDT 5,000 crore (EUR 5.3 billion) for export-oriented industries, including the apparel industry. The amount can avail from the package at 2 per cent interest for up to three months to pay the workers' salaries [26]. HSBC Bank plc, a global financial institution, prolonged its support to the Bangladesh garment sector by offering a short-term loan of up to one year, with a principal moratorium for four months [27]. The amount can be used to support payroll bills and utility payments. Bangladesh's Government also takes another initiative to reschedule the defaulted loans amounting to BDT 502 billion (\$US 6 billion) [11]. Among the defaulter, the apparel business is the highest in number and amount.

DISCUSSION

Bangladesh RMG workers are the most affected employees rather than the other employees in Bangladesh. During the lockdown, when everyone is in the house, the apparel workers have to and fro. When the Government declared the lockdown, the workers were advised to go back to their house. After a few days of the lockdown declaration, the government declared that the apparel factories can continue their production during the lockdown maintaining protection [28]. The workers had to come back again to their workplace. Sometimes, they could not find transportation while they started to walk in fear of losing their job [29]. On the other hand, factory owners claimed they have asked only the workers who are residing near to factories to get back to work [29]. So, they are at risk of contaminated with the COVID-19 virus. Moreover, where they live is not that standard to maintain any social distance which is the only current way to save from COVID-19.

Though the factory owners ensure the health safety for the workers, health experts have cast doubt on the owners' pledge to ensuring safety [30]. As a result, the workers are in the highest vulnerability in COVID-19.

Bangladesh's government took a few essential steps for protecting the largest economic sector in Bangladesh. But, there is no substantial initiative that has been seen only for the welfare of the workers. The stimulus package of the Bangladesh government of BDT 5,000 crore has taken to pay the worker's salary with an interest rate of 2 per cent. So, ultimately there is no possibility that the factory owners will take the loan and pay the workers' salary. Besides these, no labor union took a single initiative to support the workers. Bangladesh Garment Manufacturers and Exporters Association (BGMEA), being the apex trade union, demanded to the brands and retailers not to cancel the orders so that the factory owners can give the workers' salary. On the other hand, the brands and retailers canceled the orders using a force majeure clause in their contracts. Every stakeholder blamed each other to pay the wages and refused the responsibility.

The whole supply chain of the apparel industry has indeed affected due to COVID-19. It's not only the apparel industry, but it's also almost all the economic sectors. It's also right that the COVID-19 will be stopped once. But, the workers will have to face a huge struggle to regain financial capability once. So, it's very emergency for the stakeholders of this sector to make a sustainable strategy for the welfare of the workers.

CONCLUSION

The COVID-19 has shaken the global economy. Nobody can predict the situation just because nobody has the idea of the duration of the corona pandemic on the globe. It is right that the scientist can control the COVID-19 pandemic like the previous epidemic, but the impact of it will remain. Due to the epidemic, the whole apparel supply chain may get change. But, whatever happens in the apparel sector, the workers are the most suffering group. So, it's high time to think for the future right now how we can support the most divesting workers in the apparel industry. It's not the only situation at the apparel workers, almost all daily workers face a similar situation and don't get any support from anybody. Hence, it needs to think strategically following a multi-stakeholder involvement for the welfare of the workers so that they won't

face a similar situation in the future financial crisis due to any kind of epidemic or economic crisis [4]. Since the majority of the data for this study has been collected by a Qualitative analysis procedure, therefore, the next research can focus on the quantitative analysis focused on how the sudden pandemic i.e. the Rana Plaza collapse or COVID-19, creates distinctive health vulnerabilities for RMG workers.

RECOMMENDATION

COVID-19 is a pandemic which attacked almost all countries of the world so far. Among all the economic sectors, the apparel industry is one of the most affected sectors. The retail shops are closed with having no income which leads to the order cancellation to the apparel manufacturing suppliers. As a result, the workers have fallen in a divesting situation. They don't get their legal salary as well as any support from any stakeholders. They have to pass a single day with a sorrowful life. So, it's required to think for the workers at least because it's the question of their survival. The government can enforce the law that no factories can be closed/ laid off without paying the worker's dues. Even, if any emergency arises for factory closure, the factory has to ensure the wages to the workers until the situation recovers as well as no workers can be terminated. The brands and buyers may support the workers by continuing the order and make the payment in due time. The financial institution may support the sector by issuing loans and other financial supports. Moreover, a multi-stakeholder initiative involving brands and retailers, employers, Governments, trade unions, and other associated stakeholders, is in an emergency.

RESEARCH IMPLICATION

There is a dearth of literature on the Apparel workers' health vulnerability during the COVID-19. Therefore, this study aims to identify the current condition of the workers in the Bangladesh RMG industry during the COVID-19 situation. Now, it becomes essential to take supportive actions so that the workers do not need to face the similar difficulties during the future pandemic or financial crisis. The study suggests a few recommendations which may be supportive of the policymakers. Moreover, there are a few lessons that can be supportive to the business organizations, Government to learn and make the necessary planning for the future adjustment.

RESEARCH LIMITATION

There is a dearth of literature on the Apparel workers' health vulnerability during the COVID-19. This study did not include enough research articles published on the apparel workers' conditions during the COVID-19 pandemic. Only a few reports and newspaper contains lots of information. The study did not contain any primary data as the time of writing this study is the peak time of COVID-19 in Bangladesh.

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