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COVID-19 Crisis Implications for the RMG Sector: Trade Union Responses

A Rapid Study

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ABBREVIATIONS

BGMEA	Bangladesh Garments Manufacturers and Exporters Association
BKMEA	Bangladesh Knitwear Manufacturers and Exporters Association
BTGWL	Bangladesh Textile & Garment Workers League
CGWR	Centre for Global Workers' Rights
DIFE	Department of Inspection for Factories and Establishment
IBC	International Bangladesh Council
IGU	Industry Global Union
ILO	International Labor Organization
MFS	Mobile Financial Services
MoLE	Ministry of Labour and Employment
NSSS	National Social Security Strategy
PPE	Personal Protective Equipment
RMG	Readymade Garment
RRR	Rapid Research Response
SBGSKF	Shadhin Bangla Garment Sramik Karmachari Federation
TCC	Tripartite Consultative Council
TU	Trade Union
UFGH	United Federation of Garments Workers
WRC	Worker Rights Consortium

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“In Bangladesh, workers are cheap. Factory owners will get help from the government and from international communities, so they need to keep the workers alive during this time. If they can keep the workers alive now, they can earn money and success in the near future.”

“RMG workers make a big contribution to the national economy. As citizens they have rights. Therefore, if factory owners don’t fulfil their obligations in this time of disaster then the Government will have to take the responsibility of the workers.”

1. BACKGROUND

Bangladesh is the world’s second largest Readymade Garment (RMG) exporter, after China. 81% of the country’s exports are from the RMG sector, and the textile and apparel sector contributes around 20% to Bangladesh’s GDP. As a result of the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic in other countries, orders to the RMG sector began to get cancelled earlier in 2020. Data from Bangladesh Garments Manufacturers and Exporters Association (BGMEA) shows that \$3.18 billion worth of orders were cancelled from 1150 factories from mid-March till 29 April 2020, affecting approximately 2.28 million workers leading to many workers being sent home without pay (Kelly, 2020; UNB, 2020).

The country is not new to disasters or major humanitarian crises; but the COVID-19 pandemic is a crisis of a completely different magnitude and one that will require a response of unprecedented scale. While many countries have made good starts in deploying stimulus packages, Bangladesh has been slower to react. The Prime Minister initially announced an emergency stimulus package of \$600 million (equivalent to 0.2% of GDP) on 25 March, which on 4 April was enhanced significantly to \$8.5 billion (equivalent to 2.5% of GDP) (Islam & Divadkar, 2020).

While some of the trade unions have asked for a shutdown of the factories from the beginning, others collaborated with government bodies and BGMEA to ensure that the factories remain opened and people were given protection, safe working conditions and protection of their jobs and salaries.

There are also reports that more than one million workers have lost their jobs, workers have not been given severance pay or even regular pay. According to a report published by Penn State University’s Centre for Global Workers’ Rights (CGWR) and the Worker Rights Consortium (WRC), more than one

million garment workers in Bangladesh have already been fired or furloughed or temporarily suspended from work, as a result of order cancellations and the failure of buyers to pay for those cancellations. Among the factories surveyed in the report, 98.1% of buyers refused to contribute to the cost of paying partial wages to furloughed workers, required by law, and 72.4% of furloughed workers were sent home without pay. Meanwhile, 97.3% of buyers refused to contribute to the severance pay expenses of dismissed workers, also a legal entitlement in Bangladesh. It found that four out of five workers were dismissed without their severance pay (Ovi, 2020).

In the following weeks, various factories closed while others remained open. Workers left their workplaces during the general holidays declared in late March but tried to return during the first week of April and again during the last week of the month. Many factories have been continuing with retrenchments, layoffs, and delays in wage payments, leading to ongoing protests. From 27 April, factories have been gradually reopening, and the workers who left for their home districts are rushing back to the factories they worked in.

1.1 RESEARCH OBJECTIVES AND METHODOLOGY

As part of Brac Institute of Governance and Development (BIGD)’s [Rapid Research Response to COVID-19](#) initiative this study attempted to understand the impact of the COVID-19 crisis on the readymade garments industry and its workers, majority of whom are women, through the lens of the trade union leaders and to identify the role of the TUs in negotiating the rights of the workers with different industry actors during the crisis.

During this unforeseen national crisis of the Corona Pandemic, research can provide useful and credible insights to policymakers as well as practitioners on how to control the pandemic effectively while minimizing its socioeconomic impact. Rapid research is needed because the situation is fast-evolving and the crisis is escalating. Accordingly, BIGD has embarked on the Rapid Research Response (RRR) to COVID-19 with a special focus on the lives and livelihoods of the poor and vulnerable people. Principles of rapidity, reliability and relevance were followed to ensure

quality research was produced to be able to shed light on the immediate issues facing the country.

In-depth qualitative interviews with 20 TU leaders were conducted for this study—10 female and 10 male members from plant-based unions and national federations of different political affiliations. In addition, secondary data was collected from research reports, newspapers, and other printed and digital sources.

2. TU ASSESSMENT OF COVID-19 CRISIS AND FACTORY OWNERS' ROLE

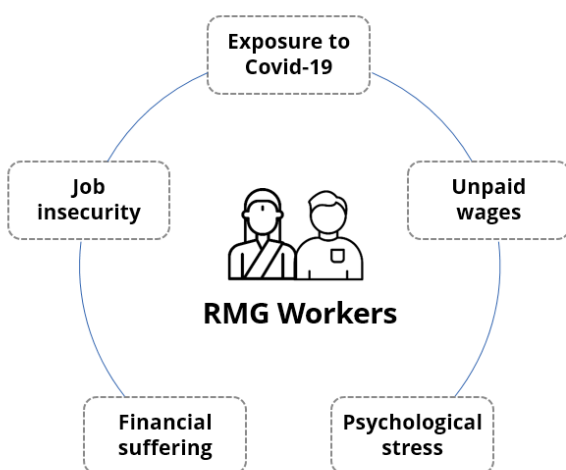
Trade Union leaders expressed their frustration in the initiatives taken by factory owners and their associations to deal with workers' entitlements and welfare in the COVID-19 period. The general feeling was that owners were not giving priority to workers' well-being or benefit but were prioritising their own interests in terms of profits and sustainability. There was a feeling that owners were not willing to take any responsibility for workers but wanted to pass on all obligations to the government. This is discussed in more detail below.

2.1 FACTORY CLOSURES

There was a noticeable gap between the trade unionists' expectations from factory owners and the reality, especially surrounding the issue of factory closures. There was a general expectation that factories would be closed to minimise the health risks to the workers during the pandemic, but respondents stated that most owners were not committed to complying with the government declared 'general holidays.' Many feared that some owners had, in

fact, taken advantage of the lack of clarity about who should give the instructions for closure and who should remain closed, to keep factories running. The BGMEA could only encourage, not compel, factories to close once the Government had declared a general holiday from the 26th of March onwards. While declaring the holiday it was stated that export oriented industries could be kept open, if need be. DIFE also declared on March 27th and April 1st that the factories producing PPE and which had "running" purchase orders could be kept open (Huq R. , 2020).

Figure 1. Trade Union Perceptions of Risks for RMG workers



2.2 EXPOSURE OF RMG WORKERS TO CORONAVIRUS INFECTION CONTAMINATION

The Trade Unions pointed out the lack of responsible behaviour amongst most factory owners regarding implementing and enforcing operational health and safety measures specific to the COVID-19 pandemic. This exposed workers to risks of infection and contagion. The rules for using face masks and hand gloves were not strictly enforced everywhere. Not all factories provided adequate hand sanitizers and hand wash facilities for workers. In many factories, workers continued to work in densely arranged environments, ignoring the three feet distance rule. Some of the women trade unionists felt that the

health risks for women workers were greater. The trade union leaders are aware that most workers live and travel in an environment where they are always subject to contacting coronavirus infected people. These workers may become a source of transmission in factories. As stated by one of the respondents

“Workers’ health and wellbeing are at high risk. Workers’ homes are very crowded and unhygienic regardless of whether they live in urban slums or in their hometown in rural areas. They are also unaware of proper hygiene practices to reduce the coronavirus infection risk.”

2.3 PAYMENT OF WAGES

Although factory owners and their associations were credited for convincing the Government to provide a stimulus package to support them for the payment of workers’ wages, some of the respondents doubted if the factories even needed this support. They questioned why factory owners were not able to pay the wages on their own, as part of their responsibility as employers, in view of the fact that the sector had been functioning for 40 years and making significant profits.

While a few factories had realised the extent of the pandemic and its implications and had ceased production after disbursing workers’ wages in advance, most had closed down without clearing the wages for the month of March. It also became gradually clear that some of the factories had overdue payments from earlier months. Workers, however, hardly had any spare money. As explained by one of the Unionists

“After paying rent and utility bills, and transferring an amount to extended family members, workers only had enough money to last them for 10 days at most, forcing them to live on credit. Their factories had closed down from the last week of the month (26 March) without clearing due wages. This increased their hardship to a great extent.”

Most factories used to pay their workers’ wages by the 7th of the following month. The TU leaders reported that some factory owners were not taking steps to pay their workers’ wages within the stipulated time. Some factories paid less than the full amount of March and deducted their wages for the lockdown period. Some factories which had overdue wages closed their factories without making

any payment to workers. However the respondents mentioned that the wage disputes were not same for all workers but varied according to size and status of the establishment. One of the trade unionists mentioned

“...those who are working in small factories are most vulnerable. The owners of these factories have already shut down without giving worker’s salary and there is no assurance from the owners’ side regarding when they will be getting their salary.”

In the case of wage payments too, the respondents felt women were more vulnerable. As mentioned by a male unionist *“...both men and women workers are at risk but women are at greater risk regarding their wages since they do not want to raise their voices as men do, out of fear and self-honor.”*

As mentioned by one of the trade unionists, it was to collect their previous dues that workers were having to crowd at the factory gates for the payment of their wages, thereby creating health risks for themselves and others during the lock-down period.

2.4 TERMINATION AND LAYOFFS

The Union leaders were highly critical of the retrenchments and layoffs conducted by many factories, against Government and BGMEA instructions. Moreover, one of the conditions stated that the stimulus package would not be available for factories that were laying off workers. There was a feeling that neither BGMEA nor DIFE was effectively monitoring and following up on the instructions given to factory owners. As stated by one of the leaders

“BGMEA declared that workers should receive their wages and no workers should be laid-off now. However, I don’t see any implementation of such a declaration. I don’t know whether BGMEA monitors the implementation of their instructions”.

One of the questions raised was whether or not layoffs were a strategy for factory owners to be able to hire back workers at lower wages.

Not all buyers have cancelled orders. A lot of buyers have promised all kinds of support. Despite this, they are laying off workers. Because then, they will be able

to pay workers only half their basic salary. They are using order cancellations as an excuse to terminate workers.

Some factories were also terminating workers with five or more years work experience without providing any compensation, allegedly to avoid giving entitlements of service benefits, forcing workers to sign on blank papers and return their ID cards.

One of the TU leaders described the job insecurity situation as follows

“Factories are safeguarding their interests by declaring layoff, because of which the workers will be affected the most. In this scenario, workers will receive only half of their salary and house rent within the 45 days of the announcement and the payment will decrease over time; after 45 days it would amount to one fourth of the basic salary. However, before factories announced layoffs, their workers should have received full wage as they had worked for the full month in March. Workers even do not know whether or not they will get their jobs back in future as the factories are not giving any assurance of this matter.”

Respondents mentioned that the factories which are non-compliant, work for non-brand buyers and operate as subcontractors are now at high risk of stopping operations. They pointed out that during this crisis period, workers who have less than one year of experience or who are contractual are affected the most. Workers who are working in small factories working as subcontractors for a large company are also suffering more than others.

2.5 FALLING INTO POVERTY

Since the closing of factories on 24th March, many workers have lived in financial hardship. Many of them are insolvent as they did not receive their salaries on time. Many workers did not have enough money for food and other expenses. However, they are having to pay house rent and other utility bills regularly. They were trying to collect relief from different places because they were excluded from the government’s relief coverage. Local government representatives felt that RMG workers are migrants and not “original inhabitants” or voters in that area and therefore not entitled to relief.

2.6 MENTAL STRESS: THE PSYCHOLOGICAL BURDEN OF PANDEMIC

The TU leaders observed that the COVID-19 pandemic was also causing anxiety and stress among the RMG workers. They could not observe the various health and safety restrictions on mobility since they need to work to earn an income. Financial and job insecurity were causing mental stress. This led them to take health risks to try and secure their salaries. As mentioned by one of the union leaders “...due to uncertainty about wage, some workers came out to the streets to protest, which placed them at risk of further health hazard during the pandemic situation.

Another cause of stress was the social stigma associated with transmission of coronavirus that the RMG workers are subject to. Landlords, neighbours and village authorities felt that these workers were potential carriers of the virus. As described by one of the respondents

“Many garment workers who were struggling to survive in Dhaka city went back to their hometowns. But the people in their hometowns did not allow them in as they had come from Dhaka city, fearing potential risk of the coronavirus. So, neither can they survive in the city, nor can they get shelter in their own homes. The workers are now floating here and there.”

A trade union leader observed that a specific aspect of stress affecting women is domestic violence. He explained it as following,

“...a worker’s lifestyle is different from others. Workers need to stay outside their homes for the whole day, only to return at night to sleep. Now, they are staying home most of the time, which increases the risk of domestic violence – and mostly women are having to face this problem.”

3. ROLE OF TRADE UNIONS IN DEALING WITH THE COVID-19 FALL-OUT: STRUGGLES AND NEGOTIATIONS

TUs played an active role in negotiating with owners, associations, and the government to ensure payment of workers' wages and job security. Furthermore, union leaders were active advocates for the COVID-19 related health and safety of RMG workers. They spread awareness about safety and hygienic practices, distributing hand sanitizers, gloves, and even provided food assistance until social distancing measures were enforced. After the lockdown, a few of them also practiced digital activism, utilising technology to connect with and advise the workers. TUs also supported DIFE by collecting information on the number of closed factories, layoffs or retrenchments, amount of due wages, and the number of infections among the workers. Some respondents also mentioned how they collaborated with the industry police and local government leaders to enforce lockdown measures and ensure wage payments. This is discussed in more detail below.

3.1 RAISING AWARENESS

Most of the TU leaders interviewed were involved in awareness raising activities to inform workers about the health risks of COVID-19 and precautions to take. This involved TV talk shows, public meetings, and also handing out leaflets in front of factory gates (by the more junior activists). A few unions such as Garments Workers Solidarity and Green Bangla Garments Workers Federation raised funds to hand out masks and hand sanitisers along with leaflets. However raising of awareness about health and safety was felt to be insufficient as it is not feasible to maintain social distancing in factories.

Interestingly many of the respondents mentioned that they used various digital apps to stay in contact with workers and who also used these to contact them and even video call them. These included Messenger, Imo, and Facebook. One of the leaders even mentioned that he had held a video conference to talk to a group of workers. A national leader mentioned that she was going to upload a video to her Facebook account to inform and encourage workers to open MFS accounts to receive their wages.

3.2 PROVIDING FOOD ASSISTANCE

Towards the beginning of the crisis a number of Trade Union leaders and organisers raised funds and distributed food among the workers. Once various areas were "locked down" the local organisers would distribute food within their areas, although this was insufficient compared to the needs.

3.3 PROTESTS, LOBBYING AND NEGOTIATIONS ON BEHALF OF WORKERS FOR SALARIES AND JOB SECURITY

Trade union leaders carried out protests, lobbying and negotiations on behalf of workers for salaries and job security using various strategies and in various combinations according to their organisational mandates, level of mobilisation and also depending on the individual's roles

All of the union leaders interviewed had received phone calls and requests from workers who had lost their jobs through layoff or retrenchments, for help to regain their jobs. Some of those interviewed were even engaged in the protests with workers in front of the factory gates to demand payment of wages. Organisers were instructed to accompany the demonstrating workers in their own areas. For example on the 11th of April 2020 the respondent from the Garment Workers Trade Union Centre went to Narayanganj where he was able to reclaim jobs of 500 workers.

Most of the union leaders tried to ensure that workers would be paid their full wages before the factories closed by negotiating with the owners and in some cases had even been able to obtain guarantees in writing. Most of the unions had taken part in negotiations with owners at the factory or company level. In some cases a number of unions had come together to negotiate with a number of factories. The Secretary, Gazipur District, Shadhin Bangla Garment Sramik Karmachari Federation (SBGSKF) mentioned that four or five unions came together to deal with retrenchments in fifteen to twenty factories in Gazipur and had been successful.

A number of trade unions had sent letters to BGMEA (United Federation of Garments Workers (UFGW) and Master Trainers and Bangladesh Sromik Shangati) asking that workers not be retrenched, that they should be given at least one month's salary and that factories should be closed in the emergency period. Bangladesh Textile & Garment Workers League (BTGWL)'s demand was that workers' salaries for the full period should be paid. The President, Bangladesh Sramik Sanghati was in touch with BGMEA, BKMEA, DIFE and MoLE and made the point that as the workers were making such an important contribution to the Bangladesh economy and as citizens they had the right to support from the State:

"RMG workers make a big contribution to the national economy. As citizens they have rights. Therefore if factory owners don't fulfil their obligations in this time of disaster then the Government will have to take the responsibility of the workers."

As mentioned by several of the trade unionists, in general they would try to work with local administration, police, DIFE and BGMEA/BKMEA to resolve issues. Trade unions would follow various procedures to deal with violations of labour rights such as reporting incidences in writing to owners with copies to the Police, DIFE and BGMEA. Then DIFE would call upon the owner, BGMEA, and workers' representatives to resolve the issue or ask BGMEA mediate the issue. If the issue was not resolved, then workers would file a general diary entry (complaint) with the local police station and file a case with the Labour Court.

However it was felt by a respondent that the most effective tool was to "gherao" the DIFE or Labour Ministry, the owner's residence and BGMEA. "TU and workers prefer an on the spot solution. They do not want to go to court". TUs and workers can also report incidences to buyers.

"Reporting violation of labour rights tarnishes the image of the country. We do not want to do this. But when we fail to solve the issue locally, they report to buyers. In case of reporting buyers, the owners pay the full dues (100%) to workers or return jobs".

There is also recourse to international trade union bodies. There are three representatives of Industry Global Union (IGU) in Bangladesh. They form the International Bangladesh Council (IBC) on workers'

rights and protection of these rights. IBC consists of 38 federations including 17 RMG related TUs. IGU has a general framework agreement with a number of buyers. When there is any violation of labour rights in any listed buyer's supply factory, the issue is reported to IGU by any interested TU or workers. IGU forms a committee consisting of TU leader, buyer representative, owner representative, and IGU representatives. This committee looks into the matter and resolves it through involvement of all stakeholders.

However one of the trade unionists interviewed felt that that greater unity within unions would have made their position stronger "Raising strong voice together works as effective mechanism which is missing at current situation".

3.4 MIXED VIEWS ON FACTORY CLOSURE

Most of the respondents knew about the discussions at national level about whether factories should stay open or be closed during the Covid-19 closure. They were aware of the meeting called by MoLE and the State Minister on March 22 where it had been decided that factories would stay open. However some of the unions such as President, Bangladesh Sramik Sanghati, Vice President, Bangladesh Bosra o Poshak Shilpa Sramik League had strongly demanded that factories should be closed and workers' salaries should be paid.

The Government declared holidays for all government and private offices. It did not say that people would not be paid. On one hand it is a lockdown and everyone should stay home. On the other had factory workers should go to work. Then it is as if there are two policies in the same country. That is not right. The Government has to take responsibility for everyone.

Out of the twenty TU leaders interviewed, three felt that factories should remain open. One of them felt that factories should remain open to provide wages to the workers so that they can provide for their families. He felt that owners, local administration, and BGMEA members wanted to keep factories open. If they could not open the factories they would either retrench or layoff workers whereas "if a factory is open 5000 workers will have jobs"

Another person in favour of keeping factories open felt that factories should not be fully closed and was

for a shift system with fewer workers for each shift with adequate health and safety precautions. He also argued that if factories were to open the government burden of relief or aid for industries and workers would be reduced, workers livelihoods would be ensured and the economy would stay functional.

3.5 SUPPORTING THE WORK OF DIFE

MoLE and Department of Inspection for Factories and Establishment (DIFE) issued a notice on 15 April that if the wages were not paid by the 16th, alongside legal action, the licences of the concerned factories would not be renewed in the next financial year. One of the respondents mentioned that the trade unions had decided that they would provide information to DIFE such as on the number of factories that had closed, how many had laid off their workers, how many workers had been retrenched, how much wages were due and how many workers were affected by Corona.

Next 21st April Trade Union leaders will provide data to DIFE on how many factories were closed, how many laid off their workers. How many workers were retrenched, how many persons had how many months of unpaid wages, how many workers are being affected by Corona.

One of the Federation Unionists felt that the government should take strict action against those factories that were trying to stay open for fear of losing orders. They would have to pay fines or have legal action taken against them because they did not realise what a serious situation the present pandemic was and that Bangladesh as a poor country did not have the health facilities to be able to cope with the spread of the disease.

Another central committee leader was of the opinion that the word “closure” should not be used as it would give the employers the scope not to pay workers. Rather the word “holiday” was more strategic. Until the Government would declare the holiday over, the factories would remain closed and factory owners would have to provide wages.

3.6 COPING WITH THE MID-LOCKDOWN CONFUSION ON OPENING OF FACTORIES

The confusion about factories reopening on April 4th 2020 brought out the limitations and potentials for

trade union action. While the trade union leaders could highlight the sufferings of the workers who were made to return to work and then sent away again due to conflicts of interest between owners, their associations and government agencies, they were not able to prevent or mitigate the crisis.

Workers started to come back around April 4th (expecting the closure to end on the 5th of April) as some of the employers had asked the workers to join and also to collect their wages. However considering the continuing public health risks there was an extension of closure till 11 April by BGMEA and BKMEA (Atik, 2020), later extended again till 14 April (Dhaka Tribune, 2020).

The BGMEA president explained to Ekattor news that members (factories) were facing internal pressure to keep production running to satisfy buyers and pay salaries (Huq R. , 2020). This was also mentioned by several of the unionists. One of the female unionists mentioned the following:

..... “Owners are calling workers to factories and sending them back. Workers received messages and phone calls from factory officials that if they do not join factories on 5th April, they will lose jobs. Despite health and physical hazards, workers returned Dhaka for securing jobs.”

The result was that a huge number of workers tried to return to their factories to save their jobs and also to collect their wages. All of the trade unionists were very critical of what happened and the suffering caused. As one of the respondents mentioned “But they had to because they had to save their own lives. If the factories are open then they have to come – because they are more scared of losing their jobs than they are of losing their lives”. As public transport was not available many walked or took whatever transport they could find, spending a great deal of time and money to return. However once the media started reporting on their return there was an outcry that this would represent a threat to public health and safety at a time of lockdown and that the workers too would be exposed to the virus if they rejoined work. The order was then given by Government that no one should be allowed into Dhaka and the factories should remain closed. The closure was then extended till April 14 2020. The workers then had to either return home to their villages or try and find shelter in their work lodgings. As mentioned above their landlords were not welcoming and their families and neighbours in the villages were not welcoming either.

As analysed by the respondents, the problem was that the declaration of holidays for the country did not make clear that it would apply to the RMG sector and BGMEA/BKMEA did not declare closure. Although the BGMEA president urged all factory owners to shut down factories till 4 April 2020, excluding those which were producing PPEs, it has consistently maintained that it could not declare a closure of factories because it does not have the mandate to do so (Mirdha, 2020). The owners were expecting DIFE or MoLE to make a declaration. When the Government declared a general closure of public holiday it was stated that export oriented industries can be kept open if need be. DIFE also

declared on March 27th and April 1st that the factories producing PPE and which have running purchase orders could be kept open (Huq R. , 2020). This led to a situation where the government and employers were blaming each other for the workers coming to work and having to be turned away again. As one of the leaders mentioned *“The factory owners, BGMEA and the government are all equally to blame - the government by not including workers when making announcements for public/private sector and the BGMEA and owners for not ensuring factory closures. They have dehumanized the workers.”*

4. ADJUSTING TO MOBILISING DIGITALLY

The research on implications of the COVID-19 Crisis for the RMG Sector: Trade Union Responses brought out an interesting dimension related to mobilisation and internet/digital technology use. Many of the respondents mentioned that trade union leaders and activists were having trouble organising and mobilising as they usually do because of the present restrictions on movement. They are used to taking decisions in meetings, interacting with each other and workers face-to-face, having meetings with owners and managers and protesting on the street. As one of them stated

“The overall situation is very new and unfavourable for trade union leaders. Mostly the way trade unions work is very traditional and on the front lines. The main weapon of the trade union is coming out on the roads to raise their voices and place their demands. Now, as our organization is closed and we are in lockdown the union is unable to organize anything and take any action oriented initiatives right now”.

Others mentioned that the local trade union offices were closed and the workers were scattered which is why trade union activists were “not on the ground” i.e. they could not go out because of the lockdown. Basic unions inside different garment industries are inactive. As the lockdown happened suddenly one of the respondents felt that trade unions were not prepared for what happened and “trade union didn’t take quick decisions at that moment for the workers”. Another leader complained *“in fact unless we can go out we can’t do anything. When the situation improves we will be able to go out. Then we will be able to take action”.*

While some of the trade union leaders found the physical restrictions to movements and meetings overwhelming, others were able to find their ways around this by using phones, video calls and conferencing, social media and imo, both to keep in touch with workers as well as to reach out to other stakeholders. A number of federations and unions have continued releasing press releases, statements and charters of demands. Facebook accounts of some of the associations and leaders are also very active with many followers, both inside and outside the trade union movement. And many of the leaders have been visible on TV, quoted in the international press and present at government level discussions. Also a number of the leaders have direct access to government officials, political leaders and BGMEA representatives, to be able to communicate their views.

5. CONCLUSION

In conclusion we can see that trade unions are active at all levels, from national level to factory level. While the Corona Virus pandemic has made it more difficult to organise and communicate because of barriers to mobility and the dispersion of workers unionists have made the most of cell phones and digital technology. However not all were as good at using digital technology and some had to be content to keep note of problems which would need to be addressed when things returned to normal as they were not, or could not, venture out. Other field level unionists however, had to go and stand with workers in their protests at the factory gates, as workers were driven to desperation because of non-payment of wages.

Trade union workers would seem to have good access to government representatives, the industrial police, local government members, Labour Directorate and DIFE. The National Level leaders were able to access national figures such as Ministers, State Ministers, high up people in BGMEA, ILO and the media. The leaders at different levels each have good networks at their different levels.

However in spite of their access and influence the various unions have been struggling to influence the provisions around health and safety in the workplace. Although the desired goal of keeping factories closed during the pandemic while ensuring job security for all with full wages during the closure was clear, its implementation was not possible with the unions having to speak out continuously in whatever forums they could get against the factory closures, forced layoffs and non-payment of wages. Regarding the payment of wages through the stimulus package of the Government, although there was no clear role for trade unions, they have taken up the cause of ensuring smooth transfer of salaries to bank accounts or MFS to the workers. However they do not have a clear picture of how many workers have in-fact been paid under this scheme and how much money has been disbursed.

Observations show that the media has been an important ally for the trade unions where they have been given space to express their views, through

interviews or talk show. This has permitted them to bring their voices to the national level, place their demands to government agencies and associations of buyers such as BGMEA and BKMEA and demand accountability of both State and Employers.

Finally while the trade unions do not seem to have had the strength or the influence to be able to ensure health and safety for workers in the workplace, payment of wages and safeguarding of jobs, in the time of a pandemic, they have been successful in ensuring that these issues have been kept at the forefront of public attention. Government agencies and employers' associations such as the BGMEA and BKMEA have been made to answer for their actions (or lack of them) and corrective action has been taken in some cases. As concluded by one of the trade unionists

“Trade union are not that strong enough to negotiate at this moment and go for action. Currently we are observing the matters and monitoring all sorts of mismanagement and communicating with our workers. Also trade union is working in small group and taking small initiative separately, which have no visible impact at this moment but they are active”.

6. CHALLENGES TO BE ADDRESSED AND RECOMMENDATIONS

6.1 INSTITUTIONAL STRENGTHENING OF TU'S ROLE IN SAFEGUARDING WORKERS' RIGHTS IN CRISIS SITUATIONS.

As trade unions cannot hold protests and rallies at this moment, they need to change their protest platform and make it more digital. As the current situation is not favourable to do physical meeting, trade unions can take several steps to continue their activities like to organize a webinar/virtual meeting to address problems faced by the workers and develop action program together. This is an area of expertise that will need to be developed for all trade unionists to be able to communicate and organise in all sorts of situations. Trade union leaders also mentioned that there is a trust deficit between trade union leaders and members and between trade unions. Therefore more transparent relations need to be developed and accountability to workers ensured, to enhance credibility.

- Reinforce relations between union membership and leadership by strengthening accountability mechanisms between them to enhance trust-building, thereby further enhancing the credibility and acceptance of the leadership;
- Strengthen solidarity and unity among TUs using the urgency of the present COVID-19 crisis to address the priority health and livelihood concerns of workers; and
- Enhance TU role in monitoring and documentation of the implementation of various government provisions, such as the present financial stimulus package.
- Develop the skills of TU members to use digital platforms to strengthen communications and outreach of TUs with workers and with each other.

- Activate the Tripartite Consultative Council (TCC) for the RMG sector (established in March 2017 with workers', employers', and government's representation). It can facilitate coordination and decision-making during the present crisis by bringing together the relevant stakeholders;

6.2 SUSTAINABLE LIVELIHOODS PROTECTION

The dependency of the RMG sector on external support to afford workers' wages and during this crisis has highlighted the need to institutionalise reforms to meet unpredictable shocks in future. In order to do so, the following is recommended:

- Development of workers' database for all regular and probationary workers at all small, medium, and large factories, accessible by associations and government agencies;
- Review and reactivation of the Bangladesh Labour Welfare Foundation which was formed in 2010, in accordance with the Article 234 of the Labour Act, 2006 (Amended 2018), so that it can cater to the needs of workers in emergencies, such as the COVID-19 pandemic; and
- Establishment and maintenance of minimum standards for social protection following the International Labour Organization (ILO) standards, including unemployment, employment injury, and medical insurances. It should include all stakeholders and be a part of the National Social Security Strategy (NSSS).

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This research is a part of the [Rapid Research Response to COVID-19](#) project which aims to generate rapid and actionable research-based insights to policy and program actors, on the socioeconomic impact the COVID-19 pandemic on our lives, focusing on the poor and vulnerable population of Bangladesh.



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